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Englishness and English Studies

Balz Engler

I am approaching my topic with some trepidation, for several reasons. My external perspective may offer me views closed to those inside, but it also makes other things invisible to me. I am aware of entering areas that have as yet not been comprehensively mapped, but of which there are quite a number of excellent local plans. Finally, I am aware of excluding certain crucial aspects of my topic, like the role of the United States. But then this is meant as a preliminary sketch, focusing attention, raising questions, suggesting possibilities.

By 'English' I mean originating from England (the need to define suggests a problem already). I shall first look at the notion of 'Englishness' as a defining feature of the subject. I shall then discuss the way the subject was institutionalised in various parts of the world, because the moment of institutionalisation tends to be crucial for the development of an academic discipline. And I shall finally suggest what the history of English studies may mean to us as scholars and teachers in the field.

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Anthony D. Smith, in his study of *National Identity* (1991), lists as fundamental the following features of a nation:¹ a historic territory, or homeland; common myths and historical memories; a common, mass public culture; common legal rights and duties for all members; and a common economy with territorial mobility for members (14). As is common in discussing national identity Smith focuses on shared features. These, however, should be, but all too often aren't, defined in terms of difference; and it is of particular interest, as we shall see, against which Other such definition takes place.

It is immediately apparent that not all the factors mentioned apply in the case of England; many are shared with the United Kingdom (for example the legal and economic factors, as represented by institutions like Parliament and the monarchy). Under these circumstances two features that Smith associates with an 'ethnic' conception of nation, become important for us: that it is 'first and foremost a

community of common descent' (11), and that 'vernacular culture, usually languages and customs' (12) plays a central role. But again at least one feature, considered crucial, language,² is problematic.[end of 335]

English, in a variety of forms, is spoken all over the world. Where it has become people's mother tongue, this is usually due to their country once having been conquered by the English, or having been a British colony, a part of the Empire.³ Even more people speak English as a second language; largely in its American variety it has become the *lingua franca* of the globe.⁴ English, in other words, is no longer an English language (Brennan 48).

Speaking about an English national culture is problematic for different reasons. Nationhood as such does not seem to be a well-defined concept in many respects; but its definition has been much debated since the 1980's. Especially in England there have been many studies of its problems; Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) for many marks a kind of founding moment; Homi K. Bhabha's collection *Nation and Narration* (1990) put the issue on the map of literary studies. And Anthony Smith's book, the one I quoted, was published in 1991, and is in its fourth edition in as many years (cf. also Hill and Hughes 1995). Events in the Third World and the revival of ethnic nationalism in former Yugoslavia are not a sufficient explanation for this preoccupation. Rather a kind of stock-taking, a repositioning seems to be going on in England.

There have been even more publications on English nationhood. It is surely a mark of a topic having become mainstream (we remember this from Theory in the early Eighties) that introductions and textbooks for undergraduates begin to be published. In our case there is now *Writing Englishness, 1900-1950: An Introductory Sourcebook on National Identity* (1995), a collection of texts that also offers extensive bibliographies. In these publications the term 'national' tends to be used not as a euphemism for 'nationalist', but as something entirely positive. This can go as far as in the Spring 1996 issue of *Critical Quarterly*, where Colin McCabe discusses what he calls, without any embarrassed quotation marks, 'the quality of national life' (2), and warns that 'we should not lightly give up the task of defining and constructing a national culture' (6).

This seems to indicate that in Britain, and especially among the English, the sense of being a nation, or at least, of being a nation like other nations, is something that is only gradually being constructed; disparate elements that have been associated with it by various groups, are gradually put

together to form a consistent auto-stereotype: the long continuity and flexibility of institutions, empiricism, the countryside of lanes and hedges, the ability to arrive at compromise in a principled manner, individualism, respect for one's fellow beings, but also narratives of working-class traditions, and a heroic history, including the privileging of a pre-imperial Elizabethan age, when a [end of 336] sense of nationhood seemed to be less problematic, a great tradition in literature, etc., etc., or as David Gervais suggests, a shared nostalgia.

The need to create this sense of nationhood is no doubt due politically to changing relations to the Continent, institutionalised and radicalised by membership in the European Union, economically to globalisation – phenomena that are causing stress elsewhere as well. Things have not been made easier by the fact that nationhood is so often discussed in terms of the Third World, of imperialism and post-colonialism, where it may be conceived as subversive, as liberating. The problems of imperialism and post-colonialism are also crucial to English nationhood, but in an entirely different manner – not least in the presence of British citizens (or is the term still 'subjects'?) from the former colonies on English soil.

English nationhood is special. In saying something about it, I cannot be comprehensive. Rather, I should like to concentrate on two specific features. David Jenkins, the famous bishop of Durham, in *The British: Their Identity and their Religion* (1975) quotes a passage on St Paul's from a 1966 Penguin book on London architecture:

Here once and for all the principle of English freedom has been given spiritual form; license and variety in the parts, conforming not by order but from free will... Compromise was his by nature, and in a sense far deeper than our present recourse to lowest common denominators. So each bay is both Gothic and classical, vigorously discrete and subordinate at the same time to the whole mass ... The dome is an utter repose which transcends passion instead of ignoring it... It is a stupendous, encompassing achievement of balanced feeling and maturity and one that has come to the top again and again in this funny-shaped island just off Europe; Shakespeare's last plays but also what England seems to have called out of people like Handel and T.S. Eliot. It is hard not to sound like a bad Churchillian parody, but in fact this is why we fought the war. (Nairn 18f.)

What is said here with a portion of embarrassed self-consciousness is, according to Jenkins 'true and expresses

what many English people would believe to the core of their being.' (1). But he quotes the passage for two other reasons. First, it does not take into account that the Scots and the Welsh also fought in the War; and, secondly, it defines the features of St. Paul's as distinctively English, whereas, as Jenkins points out, 'independence with a strong public sense and 'the repose which transcends passion without ignoring it', are surely universal qualities of human maturity.' (2) [end of 337]

The first observation illustrates the traditional identification of England with the whole island, most memorably described perhaps in Gaunt's speech in *Richard II*, a notion that is defensive, as Gillian Beer has pointed out (269-71). It illustrates the characteristic uncertainty of many English today where exactly their nation is located, whether it is little England or Britain; England (more so in some political quarters than in others) is vaguely taken to stand for the whole, and to subsume other parts of Britain. Not long ago when you asked English people whether the National Theatre in London was England's or Britain's, they would hesitate for a moment, because they had never thought of the question; answers would be tentative and often conflicting. The addition of the epithet 'Royal' has since disposed of the problem.⁵

An explanation of this English uncertainty about the location of one's nation is suggested by Jenkins' second observation, that a generally human attribute is declared to be a distinctively national one. One of the elements that go into the making of a sense of English nationhood is the historical memory of the Empire, no matter whether it is celebrated or repressed. An empire is precisely based on such a claim to universality,⁶ the claim to a view of the world that is more rational, more humane, and, in any case, more universally valid than that of others. In my experience this attitude can be found, to different degrees, both with people who have never been able to accept that the Empire has ceased to exist, and those with impeccable anti-imperialist credentials.

Empire and nation, however, as we all know, do not go together easily. The differences that serve to define them are of entirely different kinds. Those feeling responsible for an empire are bound to see themselves as being placed above other peoples; and they are only faced with one opposite: the others that they control. Nations, by contrast, tend to define themselves by horizontal differentiation: They exist not above or below others, but beside each other.⁷ The struggle for nationhood is always one to be accepted as equal.

This conflict between vertical and horizontal differentiation, I should claim, creates tensions that subvert attempts to formulate a comfortable sense of English nationhood, one that would make it easy to find a secure place beside other European nations. This tension means that the same feature may look entirely different from different perspectives. Viewed in a vertical perspective, it means that the English generously offer what is their own to the world, viewed in the horizontal one that others take it away from them.

The claim I have made concerning these tensions could be tested in many areas. One that is of particular interest to me, but which I cannot deal [end of 338] with here, is the role of Shakespeare as a cultural icon in England and in the world.⁸ Just as a coda to this first part I should like to quote a recent statement by Prince Charles, which acquires quite a specific meaning in the light of what I have said: 'Shakespeare [. . .] is not just our poet, but the world's. Yet his roots are ours, his language is ours, his culture ours'.⁹

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Having problematised the notion of Englishness, I now want to turn to the study of English literature. The study of national literature, in its beginnings, has often been associated with nationalist movements. The rise of German literature in the eighteenth century, for example, was predicated on the explicit rejection of French models (with the help of English ones), and the introduction of its study at university on the nationalist feelings following the defeat of the German states by Napoleon in the early nineteenth century.¹⁰ (And I am sure that similar accounts could be given for many other countries.)

The study of English literature in England, on the other hand, was introduced under entirely different circumstances. It was also introduced astonishingly late. Indeed, it has been claimed that English literature as a subject of study was not first introduced in England at all. I should like to review three such cases, which may be familiar to you: Scotland, India, and Germany. I shall then turn, in as much brevity, to England, in order to highlight these differences.

In Scotland, as Robert Crawford has shown, the study of English literature was introduced in the course of the eighteenth century, in the attempt, after the political Union between Scotland and England in 1707, to improve the opportunities of the Scots (or North Britons as they sometimes called themselves) in an emerging Britain. This purpose was served by Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, the teaching of Classical and English Literature, but Scottish literature only to the extent that it was in correct English.¹¹ English English, as used by certain classic writers, was

accepted as a model for British English, and as such was no longer identified with England, but with Britain.

In India the study of English literature, as Gauri Viswanathan has shown, became part of the curriculum in the 1820's. It served 'the imperial mission of educating and civilising colonial subjects in the literature and thought of England' (2). Elsewhere the task of disseminating value, tradition and authority was fulfilled by religious institutions, by the churches at home, by missionaries in the other colonies; but in India two factors made this difficult: the continuing existence of a learned class, and the policy of religious [end of 339] neutrality pursued by the East Indian Company. Viswanathan makes it clear that the introduction of English was the result of complex tensions between various institutions (10).¹² The missionaries, in particular, were worried that India was being used as a testing ground for secularist educational policies that might be used in England. Viswanathan also indicates that the teaching of English literature was introduced to correct the negative view of the English created by the behaviour of the colonial masters.

In Germany, for which we have the impressive account by Finkenstaedt, it was the practical need for teachers of English in secondary education that was instrumental in the creation of the first chairs in English in the 1870's (incidentally, the first habilitation in English took place in Zurich, in 1851 (Finkenstaedt 54)); and the teaching of English at school of course reflected the powerful position of Britain in politics and trade. But there were also ideological reasons. There was a sense of being related to the English, of sharing common Germanic origins.¹³ Beginning with Herder in the second half of the eighteenth century, origins were taken to be crucial for the development of cultures.

This sense of a shared heritage made it possible for the Germans to believe that they had their share in Shakespeare; he was not only English; he was the genius of the Germanic north. The nationalist absurdities, which are so often quoted,¹⁴ have to be seen in the context of the First World War. It is not surprising either that the English taught, even to prospective school teachers, was heavily philological, putting considerable emphasis on the oldest texts available, those that documented the shared origins most impressively.

In summary, we might say that in Scotland English was introduced for creating Britishness, in India for inculcating the values of the country making it part of its empire, in Germany to promote good relations with England, and to celebrate the shared origins and the shared character with a fraternal people.

In England the situation was very much different, not least because instruction in English literature also meant instruction in one's mother tongue. Its history is complex, and, as particularly Tillyard in his account of Cambridge English shows, it is also full of those coincidences that only in retrospect acquire meaning.¹⁵

English literature as an independent subject of study appeared late in England. In a complicated history of creating courses, especially at city universities, of founding chairs and reforming degrees, two convenient dates are often chosen to mark the beginnings, the foundation of Schools of English at Oxford in 1893, and at Cambridge in 1917; the difference in dates had, as [end of 340] we shall see, important consequences for the way they were institutionalised. In both universities, it was the power and resistance of Classical studies that held up the introduction of English as an independent subject, put briefly, the fear that English literature would be too easy a subject, one that could not be properly examined.

This may, at least partly, also have been due to the history of teaching courses in English literature. English literature, when it was first introduced, was taught for *social* purposes. Literature was used, in Matthew Arnold's sense, as 'an agent of social enlightenment' (Baldick 58). It offered education in cultural matters to sections of the population to whom it had been inaccessible before; 'extension teaching, and women's colleges' (Baldick 72) were important factors in it. And the rhetoric of teaching English literature after the First World War, as articulated in the Newbolt Report, was still, though not exclusively, based on saving high culture in an age of mass civilisation.

Both the way in which English had to be established against the Classics, and its social purpose show that it did not at first serve national purposes. It did not, as elsewhere, serve self-definition against other nations. In England, as in India, the institutionalisation of English was based on what I have called vertical, this time social, differentiation.

However, the types of English introduced at Oxford and at Cambridge were strikingly different from each other, one characterised by its traditionally heavier emphasis on medieval literature, the other by its emphasis on literature as a both moral and life-giving force. Between 1893 and 1917 events had changed considerably the role of teaching English literature at university. These events concerned the relations between England and Germany.

Relations between England and Germany were traditionally close, not only among the members of the Royal families. In England, like in Germany, the common origins of the English and the Germans were taken for granted.¹⁶ By the

mid-nineteenth century these origins had come to be seen almost entirely in terms of race (Banton 25). It is difficult to realise how common and how powerful such views were,¹⁷ after two world wars in which the two countries fought each other, and after the utter discredit of racial theories.

The English would understand themselves and their characteristic virtues as having descended from the Angles and the Saxons, virtues that were usually highlighted in stories about the struggle against the seemingly non-Germanic, French-speaking Normans. In literature such ideas were supported by historical romances, beginning with Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820).¹⁸ [end of 341]

German philosophy, criticism and culture were much admired by authors like Coleridge, G.H. Lewes, and George Eliot (Ashton). But it was Carlyle who (in his lectures of 1837) insisted

that the glories of English or Anglo-Saxon culture were basically Teutonic [...]. He pointed out that 'valour' and 'intellect' were the most striking characteristics of the German 'race,' the race that, in his view, encompassed all of Northern Europe. He argued that the spread of English culture around the globe demonstrated the superiority of Teutonic virtues, and suggested that 'the breed has been in some cases even improved by crossing and transplanting, as in the instances of the English and Americans'. (Kaplan 242-3)

It was Germany's aspirations to build its own empire, and the clashes to which this led that made relationships between the countries turn sour. The Continental origins of the Germanic tribes that had settled in England were no longer stressed. Instead, the term 'Anglo-Saxon'¹⁹ came to refer exclusively to the superior civilisation of the English-speaking countries on the two sides of the Atlantic (Anderson 1981). Kipling's imperialist poem 'The White Man's Burden' of 1899, for example, is clearly addressed to the United States in this spirit (Oppel II, 79). In the First World War, finally, all ties with Germany based on shared origins were broken. In propaganda, the Germans were turned into barbarian aliens, into Huns.

The institutionalisation of English at Oxford in the 1890's took place before these changes had taken their full effect. Early English writing, whose language showed the ties with Germanic origins most clearly, and the philological method, for which nineteenth-century German scholarship was rightly famous, could therefore still play an important role; it was the type of English whose achievement is magnificently represented by the *OED* (1883ff.; Potter

180).²⁰ It was a type of English that, as I have indicated, did not serve any national cause.

At Cambridge, on the other hand, nationalist rhetoric played an important role in the foundation of the School of English. The counter-image of what German scholarship stood for sharpened the definition of the subject. Arthur Quiller-Couch, in an essay published in 1918, both acknowledged and rejected German influence, when he blamed the Germans for the neglect of English literature in English schools.

I do not say, nor do I believe for a moment, in spite of a long malignity now unmasked, the Germans have *of set purpose* treated English [end of 342] literature as a thing of the past or imposed that illusion upon our schools, with design to prove that this particular glory of our birth and state is a dead possession of a decadent race. My whole argument is rather that they have set up this illusion, and industriously, because they could not help it; because the illusion is in them: because this lovely and living art which they can never practise nor even see as an art, to them is, has been, must be for ever, a dead science - a *hortus siccus*; to be tabulated, not to be planted or watered (314).

Basil Willey spoke of the need to throw off the 'alien yoke of Teutonic philology' (Baldick 87); and E.M.W. Tillyard reports in *The Muse Unchained* that the Germans almost managed to prevent the introduction of the new type of English. Two German dons, Breul and Braunholtz, as Tillyard calls them,

imported Germans [...] dictated for a long time the nature of modern language, including English, study at Cambridge. They had no aptitude for imaginative literature and no intention of favouring examinations that eluded their reach. [...] Together they made a formidable pair, capable of resisting any moderate effort to make philology yield to literature; and I guess that they would have prevented any fundamental change, but for the 1914-18 war (29).

It was during and after the First World War that horizontal differentiation, between nations, first played a role in defining the subject, that English became nationalist. But, as Baldick has shown, its social mission continued to be seen as crucial. The tension between horizontal and vertical differentiation, which I have described as characteristic of English nationhood, became inscribed in the subject. The influential Newbolt Report on *The Teaching of English in England* of 1921 documents these conflicting positions. To

give just one example: As Baldick observes, Newbolt significantly misquotes Matthew Arnold in his introduction. Where Arnold had thought that culture 'seeks to do away with classes' Newbolt believed that it would *unite* them (Baldick 95) – against whom? And considering the context in which we usually read Arnold it may also be useful to remind ourselves that Arnold firmly argued from a perspective that we should call 'comparative literature' today.

The Newbolt Report is, of course, restricted to the teaching of English. But it also takes for granted, in traditional fashion, the superior, if not universal value of English literature. These conflicting impulses continue in F.R. Leavis; [end of 343] as Francis Mulhern has pointed out, in studies like *Revaluation* and *The Great Tradition* "English[...] is both exclusive, socially and morally, and *universalising*, systematically offered as the instance of a 'human norm'. ' (262)

It is not surprising that recent historical accounts of English studies in England have taken the Newbolt Report as a kind of founding moment. As they have often been conceived as polemical interventions in contemporary debate, they question both its social and its nationalist rhetoric, but are also locked into the framework set by it.²¹

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In spite of such attempts, English has remained a discipline that takes strangely little interest in its own history. Whereas introductory courses in anthropology often start with a sketch of how the discipline has arrived at the point where it finds itself, courses in English tend to begin with general critical or theoretical principles and the discussion of canonical texts. The history of the discipline, where it is not looked at polemically, is at best seen as a kind of mildly useful adjunct. Perhaps this is the inheritance of the 'New Criticism', the anti-historicist paradigm which was so powerful when the study of English literature, after having been institutionalised, became fully accepted in the canon of academic disciplines.²²

But I am generalising as I precisely shouldn't. What I have tried to suggest is that in different countries, under different circumstances, at different moments, English was made to serve different purposes, and was therefore also institutionalised differently, depending on local economic conditions, the political situation (I am thinking of Continental Europe after the Second World War), the distribution of global power (the rise of the Pax Americana), the task assigned to English in the university system.

If we want to understand the practices we follow (and be able to change them in a reasonable manner), we have to form an understanding of the institutions that have shaped

them. And we can do this best if we can compare the history of the institution in which we work ourselves with others and *their* histories. This highlights, for example, how important the connection between medieval literature and historical linguistics is in the German-speaking universities, or the role of Civilisation is in France, and it calls for explanations.

But this kind of comparative study does not only sharpen our perception. It also shows us that various institutions are intricately linked with each other, and that energies do not only move in the expected directions. The brilliance, wisdom and originality of British critics has made them a powerful influence on the Continent. Yet it can be shown—I have tried to give one [end of 344] striking example—that certain influences have worked in the opposite direction as well. And these international connections become more lively when we study the institutionalisation of English in various countries on the Continent and elsewhere in the world.

This again takes me back to where I started. The area covered by the study of English literature has even more uncertain borders than those of Englishness. They depend on its different and changing conceptualisations (simply literature in English, 'post-empire', as it were? the literature of Britain? the literature of England?). These borders thus also reflect the uncertain construction of English nationhood at a particular moment.

In other words, if we want to understand our own practices, what we need is an international history of English studies, a history that juxtaposes and thus makes visible various institutionalisations, a history that also shows the intricate, but often neglected links between them. The moment for taking up such a project is both difficult and promising: Difficult, because we lack reliable master-narratives that we can impose on the historical material: we may have to invent one. Promising, because in most countries the discipline is still so young that the social memory of its beginnings is still alive.

Notes

1 He defines a nation as 'a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members' (14).

2 In Homi K. Bhabha's collection *Nation and Narration* this is routinely the case.

3 The exceptions are England, Scotland, and the Philippines.

4 American English has even, since the Second World War, started to colour the language of those who speak English as their mother tongue.

5 Another issue concerns national anthems. The Welsh have one, the Scots have their own patriotic songs, the English only have 'God save the Queen', which they share with the other nations on British soil.

6 As in our field Frank Kermode has perhaps most memorably shown in his essay on *The Classic*.

7 Even though they may define distinctive features as being better at something than others.

8 One recent observation: In England there is a new insistence on Shakespeare's language, verse speaking etc., while, at the same time, elsewhere Shakespeare is increasingly viewed as a dramatist whose plays do not depend on language. Cp. Karin Beier's *Sommernachtstraum* in Germany.

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9 As quoted on the cover of a leaflet for the London Globe Corporate Club.

10 The most recent study of academic German by Klaus Weimar, urbane and detailed as it is, unfortunately restricts itself entirely to what was going on inside the universities.

11 The first professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres was appointed in Edinburgh in 1762: Hugh Blair whose *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783) became very influential well into the nineteenth century (incidentally also in the United States).

12 'between the East India Company and the English [sic] Parliament, between Parliament and missionaries, between the East India Company and the Indian elite classes' (10).

13 The term 'Germanistik' covered both for a long time. At Basel university, run according to the German system, and rather conservative, the Germanisches Seminar was divided into a Deutsches and an Englischches Seminar only in 1937.

14 For example the claim that Shakespeare should be formally made over to Germany if Germany won the First World War.

15 It has also been in many respects well studied; I am thinking of books like those by Potter, Tillyard, Palmer, Baldick, Doyle, etc.

16 Already in 1605 an author had claimed that 'Englishmen are descended of German race' Richard Verstegan, *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence* (1605), quoted by Banton (16).

17 When Hitler could not believe that the English would go to war against the Germans, he just showed how hopelessly he was behind.

18 Further examples: Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last of the Barons* (1843), *Harold: the Last of the Saxon Kings* (1848), and Kingsley's *Hereward, last of the English* (1866).

19 'Anglo-Saxon' in an ethnological sense is first recorded in the *OED* for 1858.

20 In 1854 the German Max Müller had been appointed to a chair in philology.

21 I am thinking in particular of studies by Terence Hawkes and Brian Doyle.

22 This is quite different, for example, with Cultural Studies, which, probably because of its early association with Marxist criticism, has a clear awareness of its own.

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