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2013

Why is English Literature? Language and Letters for the Twenty-First Century

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Recommended Citation

Bonfiglio, Thomas P. *Why Is English Literature? Language and Letters for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

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Why Is English Literature?

▶ Language and Letters for the
Twenty-First Century

Thomas Paul Bonfiglio

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Introduction

Tu connais Tolstoï ? Oui, j'ai pris un cours de français.

Kennst du Tolstoi? Ja, ich habe einen Deutschkurs genommen.

Conosci Tolstoj? Sì, ho preso un corso d'Italiano.

Ulisoma Tolstoy? Ndiyo, nilijifunza Kiswahili.

What are these sentences attempting to do? Something impossible. They are attempting to transculturate the following dialogue I recently heard while passing by two American undergraduates:

- ▶ Y'know, like, Tolstoy?
- ▶ Yeah, I took English.

Why is this utterance intelligible and transparent in English but absurd in other languages? Had I interrupted and said, "Excuse me, but that was not an English course; it was a literature course," my words would have elicited utter befuddlement. The United States is, to the best of my knowledge, the only nation that uses the name of its majority language as a trope for world literature; other nations do not use the name of the national language in this context. In Italy, for instance, *italiano* does not evoke world literature and the entire apparatus of textual interpretation. "English" has colonized the space of literary studies, and faculty who teach in departments of allophone (non-English) literatures and cultures continually have to educate the public, and other academics as well, that the

degrees they grant are not “in a language,” but in the literature, culture, and linguistics mediated through language (just as is the English degree), and that the major is not simply a vehicle for developing language skills. The operative American formulae are: English = literature; French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, etc. = languages. This hegemony of English is, however, no natural given; it is contingent and can be historicized. It is a product of twentieth-century American ideologies.

From its beginnings in 1883 up to World War I, the Modern Language Association of America (MLA) represented the modern languages and their literatures in relative parity. The MLA did not configure one national tradition in an exceptional manner; it did not present one tradition as “literature” and the others as “(foreign) languages.” English did not indicate literature any more than did French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish, Latin, or Greek. In the booksellers’ advertisements in the *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)*, there were very few advertisements for literature in translation before 1925, and it was self-evident that, for instance, Molière was read in French just as Shakespeare was read in English.

The use of the term “literature” to indicate aesthetic writings was unknown until the nineteenth century; literature was simply a synonym for literacy, knowledge gained through reading. Thus one does not find universities listing majors in literature until the end of the nineteenth century. In the United States, literature moved from indicating lexical learning in general to indicating aesthetic writings published in the English language, regardless of their national origin. This operated as a double metonymy; first, the aesthetic moved from a permutation of literature to occupy the space of literature itself, and then the subset of literature called “English” rose to colonize the entire semantic field. Also, the elliptical use of the term English to indicate English literature was not present in the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*. It arose in the early twentieth century.

Beginning in the renaissance, aesthetic writings were first subsumed under the category of grammar (*grammatica*) and then under philology, terms that were not separated from knowledge itself. Their cognitive medium was language, a term that, along with grammar and philology, has undergone radical semantic reduction and degradation in the United States. The renaissance study of grammar was “the formation of a truly human consciousness, open in all directions, across the historico-critical comprehension of the cultural tradition” (Garin 1975). And philology

existed at the center of the nineteenth-century Humboldtian university; for Humboldt, language was epistemology itself. Philology included subjects “from the philosophy of language, hermeneutics, and criticism to geography, history, chronology, numismatics, and archaeology” (Rüegg 1992).

In American higher education at the turn of the twentieth century, one sees an operationally multilingual population of faculty and students, with Latin and Greek yielding space to the modern languages. Literature courses in translation, hitherto unknown, begin slowly to emerge. English studies were generally late to enter the academy; English courses consisted mainly in language instruction, and there were commonly more courses offered in allophone literatures than in English. The resistance to the acceptance of English as a bona fide subject was due to the skepticism surrounding studies in the student’s first language; it was believed that the relation was too subjective and familiar to elicit balanced reflection. Literature signified supranationally at that time, generally not requiring the qualifier “comparative.” Thus literature departments and English departments were then often separate.

Very powerful antilabor, anti-immigration, xenophobic, mercantile, militarist, and technocratic ideologies arose in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. This was the larger historical environment that would come to envelop the scholarship and pedagogy of language and literature in that period. There arose an environment of opposition to foreign languages and cultures and a radical movement to replace them with the language and culture of American English. This was the first “English only” movement that configured the foreigner as a threat to American language and the stability of American capitalism. This was a major climate change, a new ecosystem, in which language and literature would develop separately.

The histories of the MLA and PMLA reveal a choreographic coordination with these ideologies. The organization was not at all exempt from the influences of US foreign policy, the enormous effects of the world wars, the xenophobic and antilabor movements, the increasingly technocratic orientation of the country, and the waxing anglocentrism in American culture. While there was certainly no outright xenophobia in the MLA, the movements of the organization came to synchronize with the massive influence of the cultural milieu surrounding it. The ideologies slowly informed the taxonomies of literature and language in

American colleges and universities. A unique coincidence of contingencies acted to stage that configuration and performance.

During World War II and the subsequent cold war era, both Harvard University and the MLA itself issued highly influential documents configuring English study as an exercise in civic democracy and “foreign languages” as tools that “have chiefly to do with a student’s growth in his own speech, not in the foreign speech” (President and Fellows of Harvard College 1950). This was further articulated at government levels. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 insisted on training in “modern foreign languages,” which were also configured as skills in the service of English. This was, however, infused with anxieties about becoming operational in a language other than English: one could become immersed in the other culture and transformed by it. The engagement had to remain prophylactic. One used the other language as a tool for penetration and withdrawal, a collecting of information that maintains the values of the viewer. The United States emerged from WWII dominant in technology and the natural sciences and became the source of a monopolistic world language. The country became “devoutly monolingual” (Sterniak 2008), articulating the hegemony of an imperial lingua franca.

The first bookseller’s advertisement in the *PMLA* to separate the modern languages into the distinct fields of “foreign” and “English” appeared in 1941; the first advertisement to use the category “modern language” to the exclusion of English appeared in 1948, the same year that witnessed the first use of “English” as a trope for world literature. The word “foreign” first appeared in a *PMLA* article title in 1949. Common and transparent locutions such as “foreign language majors,” “language PhDs,” and so on, did not appear in the *PMLA* until after WWII. For the first ninety years of its existence, the *PMLA* regularly published articles written in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish, at times combining four languages in one volume. This stopped in 1974, when the journal printed its last articles in a “foreign language.”

Excepting the present study, there has been no book-length analysis of the history of literary studies in the United States cognizant of the ideological forces that marginalized “the languages” and presented “English” as the forum for the study of literature. The histories of the study of literature in the United States have, in the main, performed the ideological separation without reflection. Even the publications advocating the value of allophone literary studies perform the discourse and use

the terms that continue the inequality, empower English studies, and disempower “the languages.”

A particularly myopic retrospective is offered by Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987), and Graff and Warner, *The Origins of Literary Studies in America* (1989). Also, The PMLA’s own retrospectives of 1983 and 2000 reveal optical habits that color the historical periods under investigation and backread contemporary narratives into the past. The gravity of the recent culture wars over, for instance, poststructuralism, canonization, and postcolonialism caused these retrospectives to invent turning points obscuring the real forces that anglicized literature and segregated language from literary studies.

This inquiry demonstrates that the academy has never been immune to the comfortable, confident, and often ingenuous monolingualism of American culture. While the discourse of literary studies in the United States now resounds with proclamations of the transnational and transcultural in a heightened global awareness, the continual hegemony of English is itself a symptom of the very global blindness and imperial arrogance that the transnational turn in literary studies claims to want to challenge. The solution is to return literary studies to its roots in philology and the fascination of linguistic, cognitive, and cultural difference. Literature needs to resonate again comparatively and multilingually, and perhaps comparative literature as a discipline should be the emissary of this transformation and lead the national literatures far beyond the reactive binary of “English and the languages.” Reinfused with the multilingual, it should help us reimagine literary studies and hence the humanities for the present age by returning them, paradoxically, to their roots in language. Comp lit is not English.