A Shared Fate or a Common Destiny?

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ROBERT BURNS, AN ASTUTE STUDENT OF human nature, wryly observes in his poem "To a Louse": "O wad some Pow'r the giftie gi'e us / To see oursels as others see us." What we may learn is not always palatable. It is no secret that, in the eyes of many of our colleagues in disciplines outside language and literature, English too often appears as a bewilderingly undisciplined discipline—irresistibly drawn to the latest fashionable theory, riven by tiresome factionalism, and shamelessly encroaching on the disciplinary territory of others. The view from within is not always rosy either, on the evidence of satirists such as David Lodge in *Small World* and Frederick Crews in *Postmodern Pooh*. In our own eyes, of course, we are stable, responsible, hard-working, and absolutely central to the humanities. It is our colleagues in foreign language departments, we sometimes insist, who are the fractious and feckless ones, and who give the humanities a bad name. But these, our closest colleagues, see us—institutionally, if not individually—as arrogant and imperialistic, and ill content to tend our own gardens, as Voltaire urged. The heart of the matter is that we deem ourselves qualified to teach and to write about works of literature in translation, sometimes without adequate knowledge of the language, culture, or relevant literary tradition. Moreover, in many institutions, world literature is the exclusive—and zealously guarded—province of the English department. How can we reconcile this disciplinary imperialism, not to mention our suspicions about the effectiveness of often balkanized foreign language departments, with the fact that for more than thirty years the most influential theorists have been French, German, and Russian (Auerbach, Bakhtin, Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault, Habermas, Iser, Jakobson, Kristeva, et al.) and that, for the most part, we read them in translation too? Occasionally, of course, English faculty members have been the translators.

Whatever makes it so difficult for us to find common cause with our colleagues in foreign language departments, current trends in higher education—the growing enthusiasm for accountability measures, the advent of the University of Phoenix and other for-profit entities, the erosion of state support—should by now have alerted us: it is high time we acknowledged our shared values and began to act in ways that will give us a better chance of enjoying a common destiny rather than suffering a shared fate. The truth is that a really strong English department cannot exist in an intellectual vacuum; it needs to be able to draw on the resources of an equally strong foreign language department or departments. Any threat to the one should be regarded with alarm by the other. Yet the well-documented problems of foreign language enrollment seem to have stirred remarkably little interest or anxiety in English circles. After all, we say, is not English still one of the largest majors in most colleges and universities? Perhaps, but such complacency is both unwarranted and dangerous. The problems of English may be different from those of foreign language departments, but they do exist; and in some cases they may be linked. So even those of us who feel comfortably ensconced in large and flourishing English departments would be foolish to assume that we can forever enjoy a splendid and unchanging academic isolation. Let me offer by way of example one sobering piece of evidence from my own institution that highlights one of the ways in which our fates are intertwined. In 1985, speech and theater separated from English and became a small independent department. More recently, theater joined music in a new department of performance studies,

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X61142 Published online by Cambridge University Press

leaving speech by itself. Meanwhile, in 1993, our undergraduate majors peaked at just over 700 and have now shrunk to some 600, still a comfortable number for a tenure-track faculty of 50. The speech major, however, has grown rapidly and has overtaken English, reaching 800, while journalism has swelled to over 900. What is going on, one might ask? Though it is tempting to dismiss this shift as evidence of a new pragmatism among students, one factor cannot be ignored: we offer only a BA degree for which a foreign language is a requirement, whereas speech is adding and journalism already offers the BS degree that has no such requirement. So it would appear that the future of the English major is in some measure directly tied to student anxiety about—even antipathy toward—continued foreign language study. Not only are students increasingly reluctant to major in the commonly taught languages such as French, German, and Russian, they are even reluctant to embrace the distressingly modest language requirements of the BA degree when a more palatable alternative exists. The shift from English to journalism and speech is not, of course, without its benefits for a department whose faculty did not grow as fast as the multiple demands on it for core-curriculum and other courses, but the apparent reasons for the shift are troubling. A similar, albeit more damaging, change beset the modern and classical languages department in 1995 when an independent major in international studies was created that offered some of the cachet of a foreign language major without the necessity of demonstrating equivalent language competence. Now international studies can claim far more majors than modern and classical languages. Only Spanish is flourishing to any degree, if primarily at the lower-division level—a state of affairs common around the country and one that threatens to further destabilize other languages. Should the understandable ambitions of many Spanish programs to form independent departments be fulfilled, what kind of future will there be for French, German, Russian, and other lesser-taught languages?

Pertinent here is the comprehensive study by Bettina Huber, "Characteristics of College and University Foreign Language Programs," that drew on a database compiled by the MLA. It showed that there are four organizational structures under which foreign language teaching takes place: divisions (English, foreign languages, and other disciplines, which account for 26% of all units); joint programs (e.g., English and foreign languages account for 20%); multilingual programs (e.g., French, German, Russian equal 45%); and multiple language departments (separate departments for single languages or language groups, e.g., Romance languages, equal 10%). What is most striking in these data is that the organizational structure assumed to be normative by those of us who attended elite private or large state universities—category four, multiple language departments—in fact represents the smallest percentage. By far the most prevalent organizational structure is the multilingual department—the familiar all-purpose foreign language department. Even in doctoral institutions (Carnegie I and II), some fifty percent of the departments are multilingual in structure. The numerous ways in which languages are conjoined in a single department are thus as often a function of local history and administrative convenience (foreign languages at Iowa State, Purdue, and Washington State) as of linguistic affinity (Romance languages at Michigan; Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian studies at City University of New York; Spanish and classics at UC, Davis; Romance and classical languages at Michigan State; French and classics at South Carolina; Germanic languages at Illinois). Note also that the existence of separate English and foreign language departments is hardly universal. If we combine categories one and two (divisions and joint programs), we can see that English and foreign languages appear to be housed in the same unit in 46% of all cases. (Admittedly, the divisional structure is characteristic of community colleges.) In the current fiscal environment, then, we can expect to see cate-

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gory four shrink as vulnerable foreign language departments are merged. Some years ago, the Scandinavian department at the University of Minnesota—then one of only four in the country—merged with German. Not a major loss, some would say, since the languages are still being taught. Nonetheless, on the evidence available online, some language programs are increasingly hollow shells of their former selves, often with more temporary or adjunct than tenure-track faculty members and sometimes without a major. Given the traditional antipathy of English and foreign language departments for one another, any merger of these two departments—a structure hitherto characteristic of nondoctoral and smaller liberal arts colleges—would of course prove difficult and traumatic. But we cannot assume that we are invulnerable, and such mergers have occurred. Peter Hoff and Mary Pinkerton provide a graphic account of the stresses that can be involved when English and foreign languages at the University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, were forced to merge in 1993. In England, despite the fact that higher education is expanding very rapidly, there are still other victims of change. The *Times Higher Education Supplement* reports that the University of Essex is cutting its undergraduate degree in mathematics. Peter Saunders, professor of applied mathematics at King's College, London, commented, "This is a worrying trend. New universities in particular have merged maths departments with other departments. As mathematicians retire, they tend not to be replaced" (Sanders).

Today the boundaries between English and foreign language departments, never impermeable, have been increasingly eroded. We have already noted the long-standing claims on world literature and the penchant among scholars of English and American literature for European critics and theorists. Now the globalization of literature is more than a trend—it is the new reality and it is fundamentally changing our perspective and putting into question sacrosanct categories and boundaries. We have long managed to maintain, quite unself-consciously, the distinction between English and American literature, despite such troublesome cases as T. S. Eliot and Henry James (both of whom became British citizens) and Lafcadio Hearn (British-born, but who lived in and wrote about New Orleans and became a Japanese citizen). Samuel Beckett, who wrote in French as well as English, was, it had to be admitted, sui generis. However, the fundamental interdependence of English and European literature has always been acknowledged outside the academy. We know, for example, that among the earliest and most important influences on James Joyce were the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen and the German Gerhart Hauptmann, whose *Michael Kramer* Joyce translated (see also "A Painful Case," in Joyce's *Dubliners*, where the character James Duffy reads Nietzsche and Wordsworth). Katherine Mansfield's debt to Chekhov is well known, but her wider debt to Russian literature is movingly acknowledged in the letter she wrote to Constance Garnett in 1921: "As I laid down my copy of *War and Peace* tonight I knew I could no longer refrain from thanking you for the whole other world that you have revealed to us through those marvellous translations from the Russian [. . .]. These books have changed our lives, no less!" (176). The current situation in literature takes us beyond mere influence. If writers with backgrounds as diverse as those of Kazuo Ishiguro (Japan), Salman Rushdie (India), and W. G. Sebald (Germany) can claim, in any sense, to be English novelists, the much vaunted "Englishness" of the English novel has entirely disappeared.

In most English and foreign language departments, of course, the major has been substantially restructured over the years, with traditional periods understandably de-emphasized, the canon expanded or abandoned, and cultural studies, film studies, and postcolonial literatures enhanced. Have we, then, reached the point at which the designation *English department* has become meaningless except as a cover term for a cluster of familiar teaching and research practices? Is the barrier between foreign language

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X61142 Published online by Cambridge University Press

departments and English now more psychological than substantive? More than twenty years ago, Paul Hunter, in "Facing the Eighties," addressed one facet of the problem and declared flatly: "English departments do not, anymore, if they ever did, represent a single discipline; instead they are gathering places for a variety of disciplines more or less centered on a body of subject matter, English and American (and sometimes Canadian and Australian) literature and language. The disciplines of philology, criticism, historiography, aesthetics, rhetoric, and linguistics are central to our operation" (5). And once we expanded our domain beyond literature into what Murray Krieger, in the same special issue, called "the undifferentiated realm of writing (*écriture*)," then "[i]t is difficult to justify the department of English Literature as an entity when we no longer can break off a separable subject for it, either singly or in groups" (28).

Since it cannot be said that either English or foreign language departments have been resistant to internal curricular and structural change, the long-term trends are especially disturbing. Indeed, critics from the National Association of Scholars lament what they label "fragmentation" within the major, at least in top liberal arts colleges, and perceive it as a possible contributing factor in the decline of the major (Balch and Brasor 8). Let us consider some of the data. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* recently reported that "[t]he number of majors [in English] has declined significantly since 1970, dropping 23 percent to 49,708 in 1998, the latest year for which numbers are available" (Bartlett). While no favorable construction can be given to these data, they are misleading because they measure from a historic high. In fact, analysis of the data available from the National Center for Educational Statistics suggests that the fundamental problem is the failure of English to maintain "market share" in the burgeoning higher education market of the last thirty years. Compounding the problem is the precipitous decline in the popularity of secondary education as a career, particularly since, in many states, English education majors became English majors. Ironically, these phenomena are not unrelated to the increased opportunities available to women (two-thirds of English majors), who have migrated in large numbers from English into psychology within liberal arts, and out of liberal arts into business and biomedical sciences. In 1967, there were 42,433 baccalaureate degrees awarded in English, constituting 7.5% of all baccalaureates awarded. By 1997, the numbers had grown to 48,512, but the market share had shrunk to a mere 4.1% of all baccalaureates granted. Yet participation in higher education increased dramatically, and the largest segment of the increase was, not surprisingly, among women. Business was the big winner, with 230% growth, and education was a major loser, with fewer degrees in 1997 (115,409) than 1967 (122,386). The slippage in education overlaps with the four-year period (1993–97) in which English majors declined ("Earned Degrees"). Had we maintained a proportionate share of the increasing numbers entering higher education in the last thirty years, we should have well over 100,000 English majors by now. So we have no reason to feel self-satisfied.

The data from foreign language programs are even more worrisome. A study by Richard Brod and Elizabeth Welles measured total undergraduate and graduate registration by language in 1990, 1995, and 1998. Their research showed enrollments dropping very significantly in French, German, and Russian from 1990 to 1998. In Russian, undergraduate enrollment declined 48% and graduate 43%; in German, both undergraduate and graduate enrollment declined 32%; in French, undergraduate enrollment decreased 26% and graduate 32%. Only Spanish showed any increase: undergraduate enrollment grew 19.6%, though graduate enrollment grew a mere 4%. In their study of what makes a foreign language department "successful," David Goldberg and Elizabeth Welles looked at whether majors were increasing, stable, or decreasing. In Russian, 53.7% of all departments and 67.9% of

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X61142 Published online by Cambridge University Press

PhD-granting departments admitted that majors were decreasing; in German, the numbers were 38.8% and 40.4%; in French, they were 36.3% and 33.3%; even in Spanish, 19.5% of all departments and 22% of PhD-granting departments admitted that majors were decreasing.

In the best interests of all parties, some form of collaboration between English and foreign language departments seems eminently sensible, if not inevitable. Of course, we need to distinguish between genuine faculty-driven collaboration and administratively mandated change. But we also need to encourage the former if we are to avoid the latter. We should not assume that collaboration is a sign of weakness or that it will lead inexorably to decline and demise. It is rather a sign of maturity and strength. By collaboration, I envisage some or all of the following: shared responsibility for core curriculum courses; team-taught courses (e.g., in world literature, European Romanticism, the novel, etc.); joint curriculum development in target areas (e.g., film); required foreign language course work for English majors and vice versa; and substantive foreign language requirements in graduate programs. In order to foster such collaboration, we need to create bridges between departments. An undergraduate, as well as the more typical graduate, program in comparative literature would work well because it could provide a programmatic rationale for requiring knowledge of other languages; a minor in international studies within the foreign language department might serve a similar purpose, as would programs in linguistics or translation. Well-integrated foreign-language-across-the-curriculum (FLAC) programs (such as those at Saint Olaf College and the State University of New York, Binghamton) might even be coordinated with the kind of writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) programs in place at many institutions. If English and foreign language departments both work to recruit some faculty members with overlapping qualifications (a degree in comparative literature, an English doctorate, and a French undergraduate major), it will also become easier to engage in the kind of collaborative activities that help nurture mutual respect.

At Texas A&M University, we can point to a number of modest efforts that are bearing fruit. The first move that we made in 1990 was to agree to loosen the English department's exclusive grip on the two-semester sequence in world literature—it is now cross-listed and regularly taught by faculty members from both departments. While this change eased staffing problems for English (world literature was rarely the first choice among service courses), it was also intended to signal our willingness to work with the modern and classical languages department. We followed the same pattern with science fiction and, most recently, with a course titled Literature and the Other Arts. Next, we encouraged faculty members to propose cross-departmental team-teaching assignments—honors courses, senior seminars, and graduate seminars. We have never offered more than two or three of these a year, but such courses have proven excellent ways of extending the knowledge base of faculty members and building the kind of camaraderie that can lead to joint research projects. A few years ago we also developed an undergraduate minor in comparative literature and now, thanks to the joint efforts of our two departments, we have won approval from the Texas Coordinating Board for an MA in comparative literature. Among other benefits this degree program will have is the alleviation of the developmental asymmetry between English (which offers both the MA and PhD) and modern and classical languages, which currently lacks any graduate program in French, German, Italian, and Russian. Yet at our campus in Santa Chiara, Italy, faculty members from both departments have taught during the summer and spring semesters. It certainly helps that we have at least four faculty members in English who are reasonably fluent in Italian. English departments are of course increasingly international. More than 20% of our current

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X61142 Published online by Cambridge University Press

graduate students are international—from Albania, China, the Czech Republic, Greece, Korea, and Yugoslavia—and we have visiting scholars from China, Egypt, and Japan. Their interests are by no means confined to the canonical figures in English and American literature.

Only enlightened self-interest, then—a commitment by departments to work together and act professionally—can ensure that the academic world of the mid–twenty-first century will be worth entering. We are the guardians at the gate, and we must remember the adage "Physician, heal thyself!" In his copy of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, the English novelist Theodore Powys inscribed the now well-known stanza 73 of Edward FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*:

> Ah Love! Could thou and I with fate conspire
> To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire
> Would we not shatter it to bits—and then
> Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire.

We may never "grasp [the] sorry scheme of things entire," but we must not lose sight of the continuing need to "re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire."

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https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X61142 Published online by Cambridge University Press