

Literacy and Departments of Language and Literature

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AS A MEMBER OF THE MLA EXECUTIVE Council, I participated in the discussions that led to this conference and felt moved by my colleagues and their sense of urgency, particularly as expressed by Rosemarie Scullion and Sylvia Molloy. At the time of our council meetings, however, I was thinking mostly about staffing issues and the various reports and resolutions related to the use of graduate student and non-tenure-stream labor—some of them useful, some of them not very useful at all. And there I felt a real sense of urgency—and I remember thinking that there might be a way these issues converged.

I thought, for example, that if students could be persuaded to see literature courses taught in translation by my colleagues in the foreign language and literature departments as possible choices in satisfying the general education literature requirement, then fewer students would be coming to English and I would be able to cut sections of courses taught by part-time or adjunct faculty members—courses with titles like *Short Story in Context*, *Introduction to Poetry*, *Women and Literature*, *Literature and the Contemporary*, courses that could easily be taught by specialists in the foreign language departments using texts in translation. This would bring a larger number and broader range of undergraduates to the foreign language and literature departments, it would remind students that literatures are available to them in translation, and it would make a small dent in the large number of adjunct faculty members in English.

That students do not elect literature courses offering French, German, or Italian fiction in

translation is as much a matter of how we administer these requirements as it is evidence of students' determined choice. When they look for literature courses, students by default will turn to English in the catalog. They don't think to look under *S* for Slavic or *H* for Hispanic. Or students say to their advisers, "I need a literature course on Tuesday and Thursday at 9:00," and their advisers turn to English in the catalog. Still, excellent lower-division courses, using the national literatures in translation, are offered by other departments.

As part of my preparation for the conference, I met with the chairs of the foreign language departments at my university. I was curious what areas of our relations they would want to highlight for review. (I should add that there is no formal structure that would have us meet regularly. There is a humanities council—the chairs of all the humanities departments—but it rarely meets and has proven to work best only in times of crisis. The Committee of Foreign Language and Literature Department Chairs meets regularly. It is possible that I will be invited more regularly to those meetings—that we might see ourselves more specifically as departments of language and literature.)

The quick conclusion at the meeting was that we should develop a regular procedure for cross-listing courses between English and the other departments. This would bring their courses to students' attention; I hope, in fact, that it will mean that I will need to offer fewer lower-division literature courses (and have a smaller adjunct faculty). And this kind of cross-listing may make it easier for all of us to imagine that we are not in competition for students and therefore easier to design courses that can turn more freely to literature in translation—so that a thematically or generically organized literature class in the English department (or even a period course) could turn more quickly to include work in transla-

tion—something we now do rarely and with a sense that we are poaching.

We survey our majors every year in the spring. Among the questions we ask are questions about what is missing from the curriculum. Every year our students ask for single-author courses, courses in Joyce, Faulkner, Woolf, or Wharton. This year, for the first time, a very significant number asked for courses in Latin American and Russian literature. As it stands, these courses are available to students but not as electives in service of the major. If we were to cross-list upper-division courses as well, students would have the option of including these courses as part of their formal preparation as literature majors. And this could work both ways—we could, in fact, see more majors from the foreign language departments in our upper-division courses.

And, finally, we talked about possible certificate programs in literature. I doubt we would rename this a Certificate in Comparative Literature, since that assumes a program of study I don't know that we can or should revive. It may be the case, however, that while film studies, cultural studies, and women's studies include literature, literature is not necessarily at their center; perhaps there is a reason on our campus to find a new context for literary study.

And so I suppose the best way to represent myself on this panel is as an English department chair, thinking as English departments do—that they are at the center of the universe of languages and literatures, not quite sure what is happening around them, confident that they have everyone's best interests in mind, and seeing the other departments as possible solutions to problems at home. In preparing for this conference, I read through several years of the *ADFL Bulletin*, where English is most often represented as an imperial power—big, rich, powerful; blind, intransigent, self-interested—annexing the world's literature, then film, then culture itself as its domain.

I would like to think about the language and literature departments as departments, and as departments related to other departments through

the peculiar lines of authority and accountability defined within colleges. I will use my own department and university as a case in point. My guess is that we are relatively typical. Where we are not, I hope the differences too will help to prompt discussion. My argument is that the best way to imagine the possible relation between English and foreign languages in the academy is to imagine the possible relations between departments. We are not, after all, imperial powers. We have no armies, we have little budget that we actually control; when we clash it has been over who gets to teach a particular novel in translation; when we collaborate it is often to overcome bizarre administrative barriers to team teaching or to cross-listing courses. I know that the origins of English studies (and American studies and Latin American studies and Russian studies, to name a few) were linked to the project of the nation and were funded, at least in part, in service of the nation; still, I can't see the strategic advantage of mapping local politics to global politics if our topic is the relation between English and foreign languages *in the academy*.

If anyone had asked me six months ago, I would have said that the relations between English and foreign language faculties on my campus are deep, regular, and highly articulated. When I arrived at the University of Pittsburgh in 1975, there was a comparative literature program that offered a certificate to majors in English or the other language and literature departments. It was very much tied to a particular faculty member and to an NEH grant; when the faculty member retired and the grant money dried up, the program died. In its place, however, other faculty members have developed several very innovative and successful interdisciplinary programs: women's studies, film studies, cultural studies, Latin American studies, medieval and Renaissance studies, Atlantic studies, urban studies, and, on the horizon, global studies; in English, we have a program in children's literature and we have developed a joint major with Africana studies. If anything, I

would have said, we are spreading ourselves too thin, we are too promiscuous in our relations, we have too many partners.

All these programs bring together teachers and students from the various language and literature departments. The curricula—and the extracurricula of lectures, colloquia, and publications—all have developed common points of reference in relation to histories, theories, texts, and pedagogies. As an administrative achievement, I think it is safe to say that several of these programs would not exist and would not thrive without having been underwritten by the English department and its faculty. That is, the English department provides faculty members, space, and staff support. The directors of several of these programs are, or have been, members of the English department faculty. In the large programs closest to our interest—women's studies, film studies, cultural studies—the greatest percentage of courses are taught by members of the English department. In film studies, for example, which offers a major, eighty percent of the major courses taken by graduating seniors are in English; English provides the student advising.

And this is, of course, as it should be. We are a very large faculty compared to the other departments, and so we can afford to lend people to the programs. And it is very much in the interests of individual professors to teach in these programs—the courses serve their research agendas; faculty members greatly value the opportunity to be in regular conversation with students and colleagues from across campus.

Still, ours is a peculiar accounting system. When a senior faculty member teaches in cultural studies (and it is often the senior faculty members who are in demand), the dean gives me at the most \$3,000 to hire a part-time or adjunct faculty member to take his or her place in the English department curriculum. I trade a very significant scholar and teacher, and a significant salary, for a part-time faculty member who will teach an introductory-level course in film, composition, or literature.

Two recent MLA reports—the 1997 “Final Report of the MLA Committee on Professional Employment” and the 1998 “Report of the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Staffing”—both argued that in order to address the increased use of non-tenure-stream instructors in introductory and general education courses, tenured or tenure-stream (T/TS) faculty members must commit to teaching courses in the lower division of the curriculum. In the academic year 2001–02, the English department at the University of Pittsburgh had 851 majors. In the same year, only 25% of all our courses were taught by T/TS professors (below the national average for English departments, 30.7%). It has occurred to me more than once that the growth of these important areas of interdisciplinary cooperation in language and literature has been at the expense of the introductory, general education courses in English and underwritten by my department's willing cultivation of a relatively underpaid and underprivileged body of adjuncts. For an English department chair, staffing is a pressing issue, perhaps the most pressing issue on a chair's desk. And on many campuses, certainly on mine, staffing pressures are compounded by increased enrollments. I know that it often appears as though English departments are doing everything they can to attract students, but I don't believe this to be the case. We get no bonuses for increasing the number of majors (ours increased by 55% in the last two years) or for increasing the numbers of sections we teach; these numbers are a problem—more than an annoyance, an ethical problem and, increasingly, a problem defined as one between labor and management.

If I were to follow the recommendations of the MLA reports, if I were to raise the percentage of T/TS faculty in the lower division (or, for that matter, in the upper division), perhaps the first route I would have to take would be to no longer sign off on faculty teaching in interdisciplinary programs. These programs, I would have to say, are a luxury we can no longer afford.

Let me be clear. I have no intention of doing this or of denying faculty members access to our newly developed interdisciplinary programs. I want to illustrate, though, the degree to which interdisciplinary programs in language and literature are underwritten by English, at least on my campus, and to suggest some of the costs.

I would have said, then, that there was considerable cooperation between the language and literature departments on my campus, and that the joint projects were largely successful—at least at the level of program development and faculty and student satisfaction. I was very interested, however, to read the accounts of the development of one area of interdisciplinary activity, cultural studies, as reported in the Winter 2002 *ADFL Bulletin*, particularly as it included questions of language and literacy. Cultural studies as an area of scholarly concern brings popular culture and everyday language to the table. And, in doing so, it troubles the order of language and literature. Let me briefly outline the arguments in articles by Russell Berman, professor of German studies and comparative literature at Stanford, and Michael Holquist, professor of comparative literature at Yale. Berman argues the following:

Languages are embedded in culture and are born in culture, but the critical discourse of cultural studies has paid scant attention to the intersection of language and culture. Surprisingly perhaps, it appears that much of the cultural studies movement ignores linguistic multiplicity. This may reflect either a theoretical blind spot, that is, an assumption of language as fundamentally transparent, or a disciplinary predisposition to select primarily anglophone material. Is cultural studies ultimately as much an English-only project as American studies always had been? (5)

He argues that foreign language scholars are better prepared and better positioned for the project of cultural studies:

Teaching foreign languages implies a direct and special engagement with the material of

the other culture—its language—which indicates how close the foreign language field is tied de facto to the project of cultural studies. In other words, the historical advantage of foreign language curricula, the institutionalized inclusion of culture as a topic of inquiry, has to be opened up to the wider discussion of culture in literary scholarship. (6)

And he concludes:

The transformation of the discussion of culture has implications for curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional structure, as well as for research. It is urgent that foreign language departments build on their historical advantage [. . .] in order to strengthen their positions within the university [. . .]. (7)

I would have taken this as a fact—that cultural studies has changed curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional structures, and that it has strengthened the position of foreign language departments within the university. I suppose that the question that remains concerns the position of language in cultural studies. This is the issue taken up by Holquist. He too raises the question of declining enrollments in foreign language departments (with the exception of Spanish). He argues that while cultural studies fits easily into the traditional structures of teaching in English (the Shakespeare course is more popular than ever),

[t]he situation looks quite different in language departments, where teachers of foreign language feel less like successful imperialists than they do like beleaguered natives [. . .]. That is to say, the turn to cultural studies has been no less marked in foreign language departments than in English departments, but this move carries with it a danger to their academic missions that teachers of English are spared. As the number of students enrolled in German studies or French studies grows, the role of the German language or the French language in such programs is diminished. We may be keeping up our enrollments, but there is a danger that by doing so we have jettisoned our main task. (16)

He asks us to remember philology, the philology of Kant, Wolf, and Humboldt, because its aim was to “remember language” (19). And he concludes:

Remembering languages in all their specificity and difference is the most effective way to expose students to a world in which tectonic shifts in politics, economics, and culture are indeed producing radical new effects, while at the same time making them aware that we still have not shaken off the need to order the world in signs, a need that is as old as history itself. (19)

I was surprised and taken by this line of argument—partly because it had such a familiar ring to it. It is often forgotten—and often forgotten by English departments—that English departments, too, are departments of language and literature. The imperative for language instruction is there historically—the teaching of writing was part of the original charge to English in the formation of the university in the United States—and it continues today in the public imagination and in the almost universal requirement for writing instruction in the freshman year and, increasingly, in courses across the curriculum in the later years. It has been my impression that foreign language departments see language instruction in the introductory curriculum as a problem and as undesirable work while asserting at the same time that close attention to language practices in almost every other setting is absolutely central to scholarship and pedagogy. To the degree that this is correct, English and foreign language departments share contradictory structures of value.

Holquist’s eloquent statement echoes the terms by which composition programs have tried to define (and to explain) themselves in English departments. On the one hand, in the face of the pressure to study literature, someone else’s writing, composition programs remind students (and their teachers) that the important problems of language and writing reside in their writing too—problems concerning identity, authority, gender, class, representation, standard-

ization, and knowledge. Composition courses, at their best, provide the occasion for students to “[remember] languages in all their specificity and difference” by turning attention to language in use and language in context, including the context of the students’ writing in relation to the linguistic values and the language projects valued in a university. On the other hand, composition programs are struggling against the pressure (from the culture, generally, but also from various parts of the institution) to mount courses that are prevocational and instrumental, to teach a simplified writing by forgetting language.

Wlad Godzich alludes to this pressure in his introduction to *The Culture of Literacy*:

The new writing programs, lacking either tradition or intellectual legitimation, sought to gain acceptance, and thus a legitimacy of sorts, by becoming responsive to what their practitioners saw as society needs, and what were in fact the impulses provided by these market forces. In the spirit of the “New Vocationalism,” these programs took to defining literacy as the mastery of specific codes of linguistic usage defined by the career objectives of the students. Their ascendancy [. . .] was an indication that the traditional programs in English and in the other literatures had somehow failed, or, at the very least, could no longer be relied upon to ensure the literacy of students. (12)

And he says, “The literacy programs that already exist evince a profound distrust of interpretation and other critical functions in relation to language, and proclaim mastery and competence as their goals” (14).

Godzich is quick to generalize about composition courses and composition programs, without demonstrating any knowledge of the particulars. I have spent much of my career working with undergraduate writing programs, and I have a great respect for the attempts to create introductory courses committed to presenting “interpretation and other critical functions in relation to language.” This is difficult work, important and not without risk, as indicated, for

example, by the controversy surrounding the freshman course at the University of Texas and the effects it had on various careers. It is true that more and more undergraduate composition programs are being developed outside English departments (and so outside any accountability to literature—whatever that term might mean locally), and it is true that English departments are developing writing tracks in the major, and there is great pressure and temptation to make these largely vocational. On some campuses, these newly defined tracks in the major are seeking connections to ESL and to translation programs. I would say that Godzich is correct, then, in his assessment of the forces running through and around composition in the university. He is wrong, however, in assuming that the “vast bulk” of these programs are blindly complicit (5).

One of the most encouraging developments in English has been a renewed sense of a possible coherence between the lower division and the upper division and between composition and literature, as the project of cultural studies has allowed professionals to articulate a common set of concerns. There are undergraduate programs in English departments where students are learning about writing in history and in culture by studying the effects (and consequences) of history and culture in the work of recognized authors, but also and at the same time in students’ own sentences in paragraphs, in their own poems, stories, or essays. Those responsible for writing programs have a long and substantial record of efforts to manage, promote, and theorize an attention to students’ language that is critical and reflective. That is, to use Holquist’s terms, within the broad and contested array of composition courses and composition programs, there are those working primarily to “expose students to a world in which tectonic shifts in politics, economics, and culture are indeed producing radical new effects, while at the same time making them aware that we still have not shaken off the need to order the world in signs, a need that is as old as history itself” (19). It has been important to ex-

press these goals and to train new teachers and to develop curricula with those goals in mind.

Holquist, I know, was not speaking only of lower-level language instruction, but then neither am I. I find it impossible to think about the upper-division or more advanced areas of study without thinking at the same time of the lower division, of general education, and of the role of language study generally in an undergraduate education. As a professional, and as a department chair, I have been unwilling to think of the lower division, or of general education courses, as separate from the central concerns of English. In her paper at the April conference, Claire Kramsch expressed the hope that foreign language programs and composition programs might find a new route to imagining their shared interests and projects. If this is to happen within our current departmental structures, it will come through the arguments a new alliance might make concerning the necessary conjunction of language and literature—in pedagogy, curriculum, and scholarship. (Outside our current departmental structures, one could imagine a comprehensive department of language, as there are now literature departments defined without regard for national language boundaries.) There are surprising (or perhaps not-so-surprising) points of commonality to be found in the literature on composition pedagogy and the literature on the teaching and learning of foreign languages. It is, in fact, interesting to note that much of the work in composition, including efforts to imagine the genre of student writing and to imagine the trajectories of student learning, have drawn on research in second-language learning. Without a full sense of its sources, composition teachers and scholars speak regularly of L1 interference, of interlanguages, of the necessity and logic of error; they speak of students writing in a university setting as students who have crossed boundaries, who work in contact zones; the pedagogy makes much use of dialogue, practice, imitation, and translation. If you look to the composition journals, Mary Louise Pratt would certainly rank in the top ten in citations. In

relation to an imagined standard of academic discourse, students are figured as either a Richard Rodriguez or a Gloria Anzaldúa, depending on the language politics of the writer or teacher.

Frankly, I don't quite know where to go with this observation beyond noting the connections. At the conference, Claire Kramersch suggested, for example, that English and foreign language departments could combine efforts to improve resources directed at teacher training. I am trying to think of something bolder, and Kramersch (and her colleagues) provide the terms for this. In his article "Reconciling the Language-Literature Split through Literacy," Richard Kern draws on the important work of Kramersch, Widdowson, Swaffar, Arens, Mueller, Berman, Jurask, and Byrnes to argue for a literacy-based curriculum in foreign languages. In such a curriculum, he says, reading and writing are defined not "as peripheral support skills but as a crucial hub where language, culture, and thought converge." The study of language would provide the occasion to "create, interpret, and reflect on discourse in order to better understand how meanings are made and received, both in their own culture and in a foreign culture" (22). There will, of course, be different levels of engagement at different levels of the curriculum, but the introductory course is not different in its commitment to remembering language in a critical and cultural context. Kern says, "[W]e still want to teach students to do things with words, but we also want them to reflect on how things are done in their native language and culture as compared with the ways they are done in the new language and culture" (23). And he says, "The point is not just to give students something to talk about for the sake of practicing language but also to engage them in the thoughtful and creative act of making connections among grammar, discourse, and meaning; between language and content; between language and culture; between another culture and their own" (24).

This has been the project of composition, at its best, for the last four decades. It is remark-

able to see the degree of shared language and mission. And, at its best, composition has been necessarily situated in English departments and in productive (if difficult) conversation with literature, film, linguistics, and cultural studies.

To shape change, to do something as departments of language and literature that we cannot yet quite imagine, will require us to remember language. This was certainly a thread in the lectures and discussions throughout the MLA "Conference on the Relation between English and Foreign Languages in the Academy." Since I can't help but think as a department chair, I wonder if the lower-division language courses Kern proposes could serve to satisfy the almost universal composition requirement. Perhaps. I think everyone will benefit by bringing the foreign language and literature departments more fully into the requirement structure of general education.

But there are larger issues at stake here: the coherence of the curricula in languages and literatures, and the values we bring to our teaching and scholarship. While I am not confident that the problems of staffing language courses and meeting the demands of composition requirements can be solved by an interdisciplinary effort, it certainly might be useful to join forces in imagining how to solve the conceptual and (local) political problems of teaching and valuing language and literacy in relation to literature.

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