

CAMBRIDGE SEMINAR ON CONTEMPORARY BRITISH WRITING

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Thursday 14 July, the last working day of the Cambridge Seminar, which this year celebrated its 20th anniversary, opened with George Steiner's lecture "Tunnels", whose enigmatic title had kept participants wondering over the previous few days -no doubt part of the author's intention. In a long historical sweep, from Chaucer to Ian McEwan, Steiner mounted a full-fledged attack on what he sees as the utter insularity of English literature in the 20th century, especially late 20th-century English fiction: it is, in his own words, "minimalistic in essence ... very small beer". In former historical periods, he claimed, this had not been the case; English writers had turned to Europe for inspiration, models, ideas. Names such as Milton, Dryden, Pope, the Romantic poets — inspired by the revolution we commemorated on the very day of Steiner's lecture— were cited as evidence. In addition, Irish literature written in English was deemed "profoundly European" by Steiner precisely because of its "anti-English passion" — witness Wilde, Joyce, Beckett. He even admitted to some exceptions among late 20th-century fiction writers —Le Carré, Ian McEwan, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, D.M. Thomas. But on the whole, England has not known "that central immensity of what this century has been like", that is, national defeat, occupation, torture, resistance, collaboration. Besides, it has hardly known two of the central phenomena of 20th-century Europe: messianic Marxism and the Cold War. In Steiner's view, this has led to a diminution of creativity in England and to a divorce between literature and philosophy unknown in Europe. The Channel Tunnel is, to Steiner, the perfect metaphor for English isolation at the close of the 20th-century: a miracle of engineering, appropriately celebrated by the French and other Europeans, but in terms of England, virtually non-existent, a dark hole rather than a tunnel, covered by silence. Steiner rounded off his lecture by reference to one of the few English newspaper articles devoted to the Tunnel, which apparently was concerned about the possibility that the Tunnel might lead to French rats reaching England and infecting this up to now rabies-free nation, thus putting an unsought-for, unwilling end to its isolation from European history. In terms of literature, Steiner argued that English insularity will only begin to break down when fiction writers in particular begin to try to come to terms with the bankruptcy of their country, which he dates back to World War II. Such a collapse from world power is, according to Steiner, what should breed a rich, profound fiction able to put English literature in touch with Europe once again. He, for one, does not see this happening at the moment.

Steiner's lecture was, as ever, provocative and controversial. Peppered with anecdotes as it was, and addressing a non-English (conference team excepted), largely European audience (34 out of the 56 participants were European, of whom 17 were Eastern European), the lecture struck an emotional chord of identification grounded in the participants' personal memories of English aloofness and reserve. Yet his thesis was also soundly challenged from some European and non-European quarters. Did he mean to say that the "central immensity" of European history in this century was justified or even necessary in order to breed 'great' literature? What did he mean by 'Europe'? Not surprisingly, given his own background, he seemed to be restricting the term to a handful of Central/Eastern European countries. Wasn't the Irish literature he had described as "profoundly European" because it was "anti-English" also deeply 'anti-Irish' in certain ways? In his 'grand narrative' of English literature, what place would he give to literatures written in English in other parts of the world, or even within England by non-English writers, literatures that have been called 'post-colonial'? These were some of the questions asked of Steiner at the end of his lecture; unfortunately, discussion was not as lively as it might have been, owing, it was generally felt, to the speaker's unwillingness to engage fully with the points raised by the audience.

Coming as it did practically at the end of the Seminar, Steiner's thesis was also, I felt, deeply questioned by what had gone before. In terms of fiction, Steiner's main concern, the readings by and discussions with the younger generation of authors — including Ian McEwan, but also such as Jim Crace, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Louis de Bernières, Graham Swift, Rose Tremain and Marina Warner — raised such issues as the politics of novel-writing in English, the impact of 'magic realism' on late 20th-century English fiction, colonialism and post-colonialism, the revision of history through storytelling, feminism, identity and multiculturalism, and, yes, the current bankrupt state of England. Such issues, if not (or not always) given the metaphysical turn Steiner favours, surely do not bespeak the insularity of English fiction writers, but rather the extent to which the preoccupations of at least the younger generation are deeply embedded in European and indeed world-wide concerns. In particular, it is, as has often been noted, through a critical engagement with the past, with English history, that many of these novelists are attempting to make their contribution to late 20th-century literature. There surely is a profound difference, indeed a chasm, between these writers and, for instance, P.D. James, also a guest speaker at the Seminar and a representative of an older, certainly insular brand of Englishness. But there is also a wide gap between what P.D. James stands for and other fiction writers, not of the younger generation, who nevertheless share many of their concerns — A.S. Byatt, Margaret Drabble and Doris Lessing were three cases in point at the Seminar. Indeed, arguably, the interest in revising history through fiction may be traced back to the work of John Fowles, whose presence as guest speaker at the Seminar was regrettably prevented by ill health.

As an academic with a special interest in Shakespeare, Irish writing and literary theory, I was keen to hear Terence Hawkes's "*Coriolanus* for Breakfast" (another intriguing title!) and Terry Eagleton's "Oscar Wilde, Irishman". Hawkes's was, as always, a superb delivery of a clearly-organized, dense lecture, a magnificent prologue to the RSC production of *Coriolanus* that participants were taken to see at Stratford. Hawkes began by claiming that *Coriolanus* is a thoroughly political play, "the most English of Shakespeare's plays", one that charts the simultaneous emergence of the bourgeois

(unique, autonomous) subject and of a distinctive sense of England as a moated, well-guarded, unique nation. Starting off from the play's concern with names and naming and with the body and bodily functions (above all, the 'fable of the belly' told at the start of the play and the protagonist's name, *Coriolanus*), he sought to demonstrate once more that the definition of Englishness as a unique, separate essence is no more than a fiction invented "for the consumption of foreigners" —like the 'full English breakfast'!— especially from within the ranks of academe by figures such as F.R. Leavis, "the Coriolanus of English Studies", proclaiming like Shakespeare's hero "I banish you".

The reception of Hawkes's lecture was very warm. Questions abounded, many of them from academics concerned with the role of Eng. Lit. today —are we, as teachers of English literature, open to the charge of being, like the Roman patricians in the play, no more than redundant 'bellies'? Hawkes was willing to engage in discussion both formally and during coffee-break. Looking back on his lecture from the vantage point of Steiner's contribution later on in the Seminar, one was struck, I think, by the greater subtlety of Hawkes's arguments, as well as by the fact that Steiner seemed to be unaware of the 'rewriting' task being carried out not only by fiction writers, but also by at least some academics within English Studies.

Eagleton's "Oscar Wilde, Irishman" centred on his play *Saint Oscar*, produced by Field Day in 1989. As is well known, Eagleton has of late embraced 'Irishness' in a move that has been described, with some justification in my view, as that of a "frustrated English revolutionar[y]" taking refuge behind the "'grand narrative' of Irish history as promulgated in the Irish nationalist tradition"¹ and frontally opposing the markedly revisionist strand in recent Irish historiography and literary studies. Indeed, although when questioned Eagleton admitted to the difficulty of totalizing Irish history and literature, his lecture undoubtedly tended in that direction. Sometimes the slips were embarrassingly obvious. Most of his references were to authors such as Synge, Yeats and Wilde himself, representatives of one particular (Anglo-Irish) tradition within Irish history and literature which Eagleton repeatedly identified with Irish history and literature as a whole. Field Day was presented as an exemplary Irish initiative, with a veil being drawn, even when the question was raised, on the controversy over the cultural politics of the company, its allegedly exclusivist nationalist stance. *In the Name of the Father* (1994) was described as a film that sought to cater to the taste of a British and North-American audience by reducing a political problem to the purely personal terms of a father-son relationship —a statement that blithely obscured the deeply political, cultural and literary resonances of such a relationship within an Irish context, resonances that were surely at the root of Sheridan's film. Eagleton had some interesting points to make, mostly about language and identity under colonialism, but all in all his contribution sounded disappointingly like that of a deeply disillusioned man.

Other guest speakers included poets (Lavinia Greenlaw, Andrew Motion, Peter Porter), academics-*cum*-writers (Malcolm Bradbury, David Lodge), playwrights (David Edgar, Charlotte Keatley, Arnold Wesker) and biographers (Richard Holmes, Michael Holroyd). In all cases, ample time was allowed for discussion after the reading(s), an

1.- Bruce Stewart, "Punch-Drunk at Oxbridge", *Irish Studies Review* 7, 1994, pp. 31-35.

opportunity that was never disregarded by participants. The debate after Wesker's superb reading of one of his plays for solo women's voices, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* (1987), was particularly heated, as Wesker preceded the reading by an introduction in which he took to task academic reactions to his work while he himself carried out a kind of 'academic' dissection of his plays, prescriptively laying out a series of categories that critics ought to pay attention to when analyzing them.

Participants were, in many cases, as remarkable as the guest speakers themselves. Creative writers abounded, with very distinguished names including the Romanian poet Ana Blandiana, the Japanese novelist Minako Oba and the Slovenian poet Tomaz Salamun, as well as younger talents such as Victor Pelevin, a Russian fiction writer, and Haresh Sharma, a playwright from Singapore. The Seminar also caters for the business side, with participants including a sizeable contingent of publishers, translators, editors and journalists, especially from the former Eastern block countries. Academics accounted for the rest of the participants, with many of them straddling the categories of writers and/or translators as well. The debate on "English Round the World", organized by participants, was extremely lively, centring on the recurrent issues of identity, colonialism and post-colonialism. Some (especially Italian) participants voiced the view that they would have no qualms about English becoming the sole world-language; their identity, they claimed, was fragmentary in a post-modern sense and did not depend on the survival of their (Italian) language or even separate cultural tradition. Their perspective clashed with that of a Croatian participant who claimed that abdication of one's language and cultural tradition for the sake of an extraneous, dominant one always led to a position of relative cultural and even political disadvantage. The debate became tense at this point, particularly because of what some considered the surprising presence as participant at the Seminar of a representative of the new Yugoslavia—who admittedly kept a very low profile throughout.

The 20th Cambridge Seminar was, undoubtedly, a success, in terms of organization, atmosphere and the quality of its content. Thanks must go, above all, to the efficient organizing team formed by Christopher Bigsby, Damian Grant, Harriet Harvey Wood (who is retiring this year) and Jane Donaldson. The warm, friendly, lively atmosphere that was created right from the start was due in equal share to the team and to the participants themselves. The farewell dinner and closing party were memorable occasions. It was, all participants agreed, a truly privileged ten days.