

Britain, Germany and Switzerland – a cultural perspective

Some days ago, at an auction, an US-American edition of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* fetched £ 10'000. There was also a German first edition on offer, but it didn't receive any offers at all.

Now one might interpret that as a sound decision. Or one might interpret that as a sign that even *aficionados* of a cultural Anglo-Saxon phenomenon are not very interested in the German part of this phenomenon.

On a more serious note, one might consider the fate of the *Institute of Germanic Studies* in London. The Institute belongs to the University of London and is a centre for all Advanced Studies in German literature and language for the whole of Britain. It is situated in a huge Edwardian building, near to the British Museum, on five floors, with an astonishing library, where you can find treasures of German-speaking literature. For instance, the Institute is in possession of a copy of a play by German play-writer August Friedrich von Kotzebue from the beginning of the 19th century, with original handwritten comments by K. L. Sand, a student who killed Kotzebue in 1819, in an early example of individual terrorism against a repressive state and its representatives. The Institute also has an almost complete collection of contemporary fiction from the former German Democratic Republic, because in the 1970s and early 1980s, there was a fierce competition between the two German states, and so both of them provided the Institute with lots of books for free. And the library stocks – or at least it stocked some years ago – about 200 magazines from the field of literature and culture, an incredible range from the important to the obscure.

Founded in 1949, the Institute has now ceased to exist. Rather, it has been incorporated into the Institute of Romance studies. Officially, the process is called a merger and the new institute will run under the joint name of Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies. But the hierarchy inside the Institute is very clear. Studies in French and Hispanic literature and cultural studies will be the top priority, and German studies will have to try desperately to cling to all they can. The building itself will be sold, and the library has to be transferred to the Senate house, the main site of the University of London; an astonishing

building from the 1930s in a bafflingly totalitarian style which was the prototype for the sinister Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen-eighty-four*.

The loss of the Institute of Germanic studies is just a further result of a cash-strapped university. It is not quite surprising. In general, the study of German literature and culture in the UK is in retreat. So is, on a much higher level, the study of French culture, only partly countered by a modest upsurge in Spanish studies.

On the other hand, the influence of Anglo-American culture in Germany is still rising. Let me give you some figures: Every year, roughly 100 books in German, be it fiction or non-fiction, are translated into English. But roughly 20'000 English and American books are translated into German, year in, year out. So for every German book translated into English, 200 books are translated from the English into German.

The situation concerning literature is very similar. Every year, 14'000 books of English fiction are published. But only 3 percent of it, or 420 books, are translations from other languages than English, and a third of it from the French. German fiction which is translated into English can be counted on the fingers of two or maybe three hands.

Obviously these figures are reflected in the bestseller lists. Now the German bestseller lists are astonishingly cosmopolitan: The most recent one lists on the first 20 positions 1 Spanish, 1 Italian, 1 French, 1 Arabic, 1 Brazilian, 2 Dutch and even 7 German-speaking books. Not astonishingly, the most important single language is English: 7 out of 20 titles are English-speaking books. In other European countries, for instance in Spain, the percentage is even higher.

7 out of 20 books: That is not too overwhelming, one would think. After all, there are a few English-speakers more than German-speakers. But you will get the proper perspective, if you look at the other side, namely bestseller lists in England and America. The *New York Times* lists no translations from any foreign language on its first 20 positions, as does the *Sunday Times*, and on a list of all books, be it fiction or non-fiction, sold by

Amazon, the internet bookseller, the first translated book emerges on position 61: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *100 years of Solitude*, a book which was originally published in 1967.

Now at the moment, in an appropriate coincidence, Swiss TV and BBC Prime, the BBC programme for all the poor souls overseas, transmit for the umpteenth time *Fawlty Towers*, the immortal comedy by John Cleese and Conny Booth. You might remember one of the more famous episodes, when Basil Fawlty encounters some German guests and reacts with the threatening advice to himself: «Don't mention the war».

But we have to mention the war. In fact, we have to mention both wars. World War I cut through the illusion of a common heritage, symbolised in the name of the Royal Family, Hanover. Once upon a time, it is true, Anglo-Saxon cultures were bracketed together and opposed to French culture. Madame de Staël, for instance, a famous French intellectual of Swiss origin, tried at the beginning of the 19th century, to breach the dominance of French culture and politics over continental Europe by promoting German and English culture, establishing an opposition between Northern versus Southern cultures. But one should not exaggerate the real connection between England and Germany during the 19th century. In any case, the connection was regionally very different, in Northern Germany much stronger than in the South. Hamburg, for instance, still has the strongest ties to England.

And different writers would react very differently to England. Heinrich Heine, in his English fragments from 1827, castigated London for its materialism and its mad rat race. Theodor Fontane, on the other hand, was, 30 years later, full of praise, although the emphasis was shifting towards rural Scotland. In the second half of the 19th century, economic and political competition increased in a world which started to get globalised. One of the most famous exports to England, Karl Marx, studied English society only to see in perspective what lay in store for Germany, and to change it radically.

That there were blood relatives on the British and German throne barely concealed the fierce competition between the two nations. World War I shattered all illusions. And World War II transformed it into a fundamental clash of values. Catastrophic and traumatic as the war was, it created some new connections. There was an influx of religious

and political refugees into Britain. It was, with the title of a book which I find slightly odd: *Hitler's gift to Britain*. Numerous scientists, writers, philosophers and artists found a new home. It was a give and take. They fused two different traditions, accommodating their gift to Britain. Isaiah Berlin, the philosopher, became the quintessential English gentleman, and Nicolas Pevsner found new qualities in somewhat pragmatic English architecture.

And it was a German-speaking philosopher, Karl Popper, who systematically constructed a dichotomy, an unrelenting opposition between different philosophical and political approaches, the one he identified with an Anglo-American, flexible, pragmatic approach, and the other he castigated as the systematic, rigid, closed attitude of the German philosophical tradition.

Now I don't buy this dichotomy and I don't want to dwell too long on history. Just to stress once more that it created new conditions for a new relationship.

A certain cosmopolitanism of German culture is one of the more encouraging results of the defeat of Nazism. After the second World War, Germany and German culture had to start afresh, half on its own, and half coerced by the occupying powers. There is sometimes the notion of a void, a zero in which Germany was. That is slightly misleading, but without any doubt, German culture was wide open to influences from the USA and Great Britain. This ranges from the theatre where the works of Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee and Harold Pinter became dominant, with a delay of several years, to more basic matters, for instance the introduction of paperbacks and rotation printing in the famous rororo, rowohlts rotations romane. Sometimes this influence was not accepted without a fight: Crime novels and comics encountered heavy resistance from conservative-minded teachers and pedagogues.

The breakthrough, I think, came from a slightly different area, namely from pop music. Rock'n'roll started as an US-import, but from the early sixties, *The Shadows* and *The Beatles*, to the mid-eighties, it was English Rhythm&Blues, Beat, Rock and Pop which dominated German, indeed continental music. Another import was football. Remember

1966? True, football as well as most other sports goes further back, to the end of the 19th century. But between WWI and WWII, German football favoured an elaborate style, augmented by players from Middle Europe. After WWII, Germany adopted a more robust English style. It culminated in the so-called miracle of Berne from 1954. 1966 was just a blip, and afterwards came Gary Linekers quip: «Football is a game of two teams and at the end, Germany wins».

But football, surely, is not quite culture. Indeed. Take Nick Hornby. In 1993, I proposed a translation of his seminal *Fever Pitch* to several German publishers. They all declined because they thought a book about a North Londoner football club too parochial. It needed Hornby's next bestseller, *High Fidelity*, about pop music, that he was translated into German, and *Fever Pitch* was translated several years later, as a strange first novel by a successful and popular author.

In the last twenty years, everything has changed again. English definitively has become the *Lingua Franca*, mainly because of the new information technologies and the internet. This is fine as far as it goes, but it becomes tedious when English expressions are transplanted into German without any necessity. One of my boogie words is *event*. There are several German words for it, Ereignis, Veranstaltung, or more specific ones, but everything becomes, in German, *ein Event*, even *ein Kulturevent*. There is some magic thinking behind this: If you devour the English word, than you think you're taking on the strength and the prestige of English itself.

Some years ago, Dutch-English publicist Ian Buruma wrote a book about the relationship between England and the rest of Western Europe. The English original from 1999 was called *Voltaire's Coconuts or Anglomania in Europe*. The title quotes a French philosopher and this quote is explained at length in the book. The German translation is *Anglomania. Europas englischer Traum* (Anglomania, or Europe's English dream). So Voltaire has disappeared completely from the title, strengthening the one-sidedness of the relation.

Every half-decent book in English is translated into German. Sometimes, there are strange preferences: Rosamunde Pilcher is one of the most relished authors, with her rose-tinted

views of Scotland. On the other hand, there is Freddy Frinton, and his short sketch *Dinner for one*, which is transmitted every New years eve on several German, Austrian and Swiss TV-stations; in the meantime, in English newspapers there recurs every year an article about the strange phenomenon of *Dinner for one* in Germany.

But the transfer between cultures makes clear different perspectives, even in small details. Take just one example. I once translated a crime novel by Patricia Hall, a writer from Yorkshire. She wrote about a City called Bradfield which is fairly recognisable as Bradford. In one of her novels, a figure, soon to be murdered, travels from London to Bradfield, changing trains at Leeds where another train takes the (and I quote) «sharp climb up to Bradfield. The railway to Bradfield, he had always thought, was a triumph of optimism over common sense. The Victorian engineers had been undeterred by geography or geology, and had taken their tracks up precipitous slopes by way of cuttings and tunnels which might have made an alpinist blink.» (Up to the) «brow of a hill, where no self-respecting railway had any right to be». (end quote) Taking my task as a translator seriously, I wanted to see what I had to describe, so my partner and I travelled the same route. So we changed trains in Leeds, waiting and waiting for the steep climb to come. True, we passed through some cuttings, but we couldn't find any precipitous slopes, only to arrive in Bradford without having much to blink. Even for me, having grown up in the plains of Switzerland, this wasn't much of an ascend, the less so for my partner who was born in a somewhat remote valley in the South-Westerly part of Switzerland, having, during wintertime, to use skis to go to school, and where precipitous slopes really are slopes

Nevertheless I decided to translate the passage literally: «steile Hänge, die selbst einen Alpinisten zum Staunen brachten», and so I'm guilty of having perpetuated an exaggerated picture of some slopes in Yorkshire, having as my excuse only the fact, that is it not such details which form the European image of Great Britain. The author, alas, was not best pleased and maintained stubbornly that the slope was very steep indeed.

The picture is not quite clear-cut. There are different aims what one tries to get out of Anglo-American culture. On the one side, there is the cutting edge of youth culture. On the other side, a nostalgic view of Britain with all its peculiarities, red double-deckers busses,

phone boxes, Chelsea flower show and Lady Di. On the one side, neo-liberalism with its cutthroat competition, privatisation, flexible working conditions, welfare to work and all that. Or, on the contrary, a classical liberalism which still finds a personal ID a shocking intrusion into the liberty of every citizen.

So you are looking at contradictory aims. This is no great surprise. The English nation or the German nation is not a monolithic block. You will know, being part of a multi-national project, how diverse nations are and how old-fashioned concepts of nation-states and nationhood ought to be.

Nevertheless: The centre of gravity is the English-speaking world. The flow between the cultures is fairly one-sided. But there exist still astonishing remnants. Did you know, but not many people know that, that *Doc Martens*, the famous shoe, is a German invention? Doktor Klaus Maertens produced shortly after the war a pair of shoes out of old tyres, which provided him with a soft cushion. With a colleague, he started a commercial production of the shoes, and in 1960 he sold a licence to an English company, which started by losing the Umlaut and invented *Doc Martens AirWair*.

Coming back to literature, the picture looks more bleakly. In 2000, the aforementioned *Institute* organised a series of lectures by younger English writers about their relationship with German literature. The results were very erudite, but somewhat obscure: One writer dealt with Paul Fleming, a baroque poet, another one with Jean Paul, a writer on the threshold between classicism and romanticism, and the most recent author mentioned was Paul Celan who died in 1968.

There are some glaring omissions in the knowledge of German authors. Peter Weiss became an overnight sensation with his play about *Marat/Sade* which was filmed by Peter Brook. But his subsequent works were barely registered. *Aesthetics of resistance*, one of the monumental German books of the post-war-period, written between 1972 and 1980, is not yet published in England. Indeed, I can't think of many contemporary German authors having much success in England. The most recent one might be Patrick Süskind with *The Perfume*, originally published in 1985. Around the year 2000, there was some modest in-

terest in the work of Otto Klemperer, but that's history and World War II, and there is modest success for the late lamented W. G. Sebald, but that's mainly because he lived in England and sometimes wrote about it.

Let me add, in brackets, that the situation for Swiss literature is even more difficult. My prime example is still an article some years ago in the *Guardian* about new German-speaking literature in which the author mentioned several newish German and Austrian writers, but only one Swiss writer as an insider tip: Robert Walser. Now Robert Walser is a very fine writer indeed, but he wrote in the 1910s to the 1930s [and died, completely forgotten, in 1956]. To present him as the only important Swiss German writer of recent times is somewhat sobering, for both sides.

Is it, then, a question of quality? Not really. True, there have been some sub-standard attempts of aping Anglo-American literature. Five or six or seven years ago, Germany discovered its own pop literature. One of its protagonists created the expression *Generation Golf* – Golf not as in playing on a green field, but as in the brand name of a German car manufacturer. The term *fun society* made some headlines in the media. The fun was a fairly sad affair, and in any case the fun has mostly stopped and so has the literature depicting it.

True, there are even some sub-standard attempts of doing a German or a Swiss Nick Hornby. It is furthermore true that English writers do humour, soap operas and crime, both in books and on TV, better than German ones. But contemporary German literature has its own qualities. There are from the sixties to the eighties the imposing projects of Peter Weiss, Uwe Johnson, Günter Herburger, Christa Wolf, each in their own way bringing political subjects into a sweeping narrative, using different advanced literary techniques. And there are, from the eighties onwards, two strands of younger writers. The one, with a slightly grotesque attitude and style, in the tradition of Günter Grass, is represented by, for instance, Michael Kumpfmüller. Robert Menasse, Urs Widmer. And the other one are finely tuned and crafted psychological chamber pieces. I will give some Swiss examples: Klaus Merz, Ruth Schweikert, Peter Stamm, Thomas Hürlimann, Markus Werner.

Most of them are not yet translated into English. So who is to blame and what can be done? Obviously, the insular look of Britons concerning foreign languages doesn't help. But I would be content, if translations were more frequent and the few were more frequently reviewed and pushed in the media. In this respect, the English media are lazy. Correction: Most of the English media are lazy, namely the broadsheets, mainstream ones. I don't think that *Newsnight* reviews many books of foreign origin, and I don't think it ever reviewed a book translated from the German – fiction, I mean, not a controversial historical book about the allied bombing of German cities.

On the other hand, there are literary magazines. *London Review of Books*, *Times Literary Magazine*, are unparalleled in Germany. They regularly review books translated from the German, sometimes even books only published in their original language. They review these books regularly, but not very often. But then, as I stressed frequently before: not many books are translated and not many translations are published.

So what is to be done? The market, obviously, doesn't work. The English cultural industry, left to its insular tendencies and American bias, doesn't work. There is a small initiative by German, Austrian and Swiss cultural organisations in Britain, called *New books in German*. It consists of a description of recent books from the German-speaking countries and a translation into English of a short piece of every book presented. The translations are subsidised by the cultural organisations and the magazine is sent to English publishers to entice them to commission a proper translation.

It is a laudable enterprise, but it provides only the proverbial drop in a bucket. So we need more help, more self-help. What about tapping into universities, even colleges and schools, starting workshops for translations, providing grants not only for sample translations but for whole books? There is much to do; let's start.

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