

Further Thoughts on the Evaluation of Research in the Humanities (A Very Personal View)

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The paper "The Evaluation of Research" produced by the Board of the AIA (Associazione Italiana di Anglistica) and published in *The Messenger* in Spring 2009 (vol. 18.1) will hopefully encourage other national boards to consider this very urgent issue. In the meantime, I would like to offer a very personal view based mainly on the impression that the situation that the AIA describes – and the many complaints our Italian colleagues voice – are just the tip of the iceberg of our growing discomfort with the bureaucratisation of research in the humanities and, in particular, in English Studies.¹ Our frantic academic life-style has perhaps for too long prevented us from considering why and how we are producing research; the launching of ERIH (the European Reference Index for the Humanities) may well be the catalyst we need to rethink our task.

1. Rethinking journal lists

I basically agree with the criticism poured by the AIA on ERIH and I believe it was about time someone started voicing a truth that few dare acknowledge: English Studies is built on a hierarchical structure that privileges research produced in English-speaking universities and published in English. Just check any English Studies bibliography and see how many of the items included are published outside the UK or the USA (Canada and Australia, too) and in languages other than English. To be fair, apart from the strait-laced gatekeeping generated by the current system of peer reviewing of the many major international journals that the AIA boldly denounces, there is another potent factor at work locally in non-English speaking nations that contributes to the persistence of hierarchy: a reluctance to quote sources produced by local scholars, whether in English or in other languages. Instead of promoting local work of quality, translating quotations if necessary, we all tend to use the *same* Anglo-American secondary sources and in this way contribute to increasing their (supposed) impact. No wonder ERIH's classification of journals shows a marked bias towards those published in the UK and the USA. And rightly so.

The AIA's main concern, however, is not just this subtle international discrimination. The main matter their paper deals with is actually the possible (mis)use by national boards of ERIH's journal

classification lists for the assessment of individual humanities researchers. Their well-grounded complaint is clear enough. ERIH stresses that their lists are just informative and refer exclusively to the journals; accordingly, ERIH notes that essays of quality can be found in any of them. Nevertheless, we all know that in practice the lists will be eventually used to assess the (unread) work of individual researchers. Databases have been used so far for similar purposes but what is blatant and perhaps even perverse in the current trends shaping research assessment is that quality is being evaluated on the basis of the publications' *quantification*, and not of their actual *content*. The Spanish evaluation agency ANECA, for instance, requires candidates for accreditation² to enclose with their CV the first and the last pages of their journal articles, accompanied by impact indexes and other similar information. The voluntary assessment exercises we pass every six years do not even require that we send the photocopied pages – a summary is enough. Given this situation, no doubt due to the high amount of candidates that overworked committees must assess, it's no wonder that classification journal lists are being welcomed (by evaluators, of course, rather than by researchers). Yet, as a Literature specialist, I can't help thinking that this is equivalent to judging the book by its covers (or, probably even worse, by its publishers).

It might seem that a solution to this quandary would be simply rejecting assessment to focus instead on research, odd as this may sound. Tenured scholars with a solid trajectory but whose research is done in fields poorly reflected by ERIH (or other lists and databases) face in many cases deep professional crises as they struggle to follow their chosen career path *and* to adapt to the often conservative assessment demands of their national boards. I happen to know a few who have finally decided to carry on with their work on an individual basis – which can be done in the humanities, certainly not in the sciences – publish whatever and wherever they prefer and do without the (little) money that assessment may bring in rather than submit to what they regard as an unfair system. This form of inner exile is, of course, the privilege of those already tenured, but it might grow if the demands of the assessment boards become a way of policing research

rather than of acknowledging the effort it takes to produce it.

Our current research assessment methods are generating other worrying side-effects which, again, suggest that assessment is becoming a hindrance rather than an encouragement to do research in the humanities. Clare Brant, winner of the 2008 ESSE book award for Literature with her excellent *Eighteenth Century Letters and British Culture* (2006), commented in issue 17.2 of *The Messenger* that "Two Research Assessment Exercises took place while I laboured on my book. For both, I had to divert attention to short projects I could complete in the allotted time." (19) If assessment interrupts research which might yield very good results in the long term, diverting, as we can see, the researcher's attention, then, what good indeed is assessment? Even worse, as Brant's comment implies, scholars in the humanities are beginning to distinguish between proper research carried out over long years, as this field requires, and hurried work completed at short notice to fulfil the immediate requirements of assessment (for *productivity*, rather than quality).

Beyond its effects on individual researchers, the "product collocation scenario" as the AIA calls it, or the bureaucratisation of research, as I call it, has also at least two pernicious effects on European English Studies journals. Suppose you are an enthusiastic scholar determined to launch a new journal because you believe that the map of knowledge shows a glaring gap. Amazingly, despite our limitations in time and funding this happens quite often, which is why, as the AIA notes, no journal database or list can ever be really complete. Just consider: who will want to publish in your newfangled, unrated journal (that is, except 'rogue' or self-exiled scholars, tenured or not)? Any scholar seeking to publish an essay will, logically, first check the ERIH list and aim at the highest-ranking journal – within his/her possibilities, of course. These top journals will have an ever-growing waiting list, while the new or the minor journals will languish, receiving just the left-overs of the A- and B-ranked journals. This, of course, is already happening as part of the academic pecking order but it will certainly be reinforced by ERIH (and by the current national research assessment methods).

The second pernicious effect refers to the ESSE journal database. Dr. Fritz Neumann and all the ESSE members who collaborated with him in its launching were seeking to offer not just a list or a map of the current English Studies journals in Europe but also a *tool* for building a truly European space for English Studies. The idea behind this – at least, the idea I

personally support – is that in the long run the phrase 'international publication' will cease to mean a publication in a UK or USA journal to mean a publication in a European journal of *any* nationality. Just as national journal lists, such as the one run by the Spanish English Studies association AEDEAN, may help scholars to place their work locally, the ESSE database may help European English Studies scholars to circulate their work internationally. It should also give visibility to the European English Studies journals published in countries other than the UK (and the USA) and, generally, increase the internationalisation – therefore, also the quality – of *any* of them. Yet, while the ESSE journal database aims at the consolidation of this ideally convergent European framework for research in English Studies, ERIH, I will insist, only consolidates its hierarchisation. Why, indeed, in view of ERIH, would a British scholar want to publish in, say, a Czech journal of English Studies? Perhaps even worse, why would a Czech scholar want to publish in an English Studies journal from Spain? Unless, of course, they were rated A or B, which, as the AIA explains, would be quite exceptional.

2. Reading journals essays in the internet age

Let's forget assessment for a while to consider why we publish in journals and how we read them. Let's get down to basics: an academic journal is a periodical publication that focuses on a topic and publishes essays related to it, filtered by an editorial board and/or peer-reviewed. It is supposed to be read regularly by subscribers and its point is to keep them updated on the topic of their interest. I wonder, though, how many individual subscribers are left in comparison to institutional ones due both to lack of time to read complete journal issues regularly and lack of money to afford the often impossibly expensive subscriptions. My guess is fewer and fewer. I do not believe I am alone in Europe in having become a *poacher* rather than a *reader* of journals. I assume that, like me, many colleagues download the essays of their choice either from the databases to which their universities subscribe or from the internet, paying for them – very reluctantly! – only when they are not available for free. For us journals are becoming just platforms for the publication of essays: their ranking is irrelevant as long as they offer motivating, *available* essays.

Here it's necessary to introduce a little meditation on journal circulation and distribution, and on the meaning of the word 'obscure' as used in the sentence 'her essay was published in an obscure Spanish journal.' The internet has already taught us

that the meaning of 'obscure local band' changed radically after the appearance of *My Space* and the revolution it started in the popular music world. ERIH, however, seems to be a product of the pre-internet age. Recently, a colleague from the English Department of the Universitat de Barcelona shared with me his doubts as to the use of publishing the journal *BELLS* (*Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies*). "Who reads *BELLS*?", he wondered, unable to picture readers with a copy in their hands other than the authors. *BELLS* (unrated by ERIH, by the way) is, nonetheless, since 2003 when it went on-line, one of those journals which make research available for free (it's very modestly funded with department money, that is, public money). Being indexed in the MLA, chances are its essays will be found just two mouse clicks further away by those who seek them, which is not always the case with ERIH's A-ranking journals. On-line visibility doesn't always mean on-line availability and my (possibly wild) guess is that younger scholars, used to seeing the net as a vast cost-free resource, might well choose to quote from free, available quality sources rather than pay for work published in A-ranking journals whose quality is not always guaranteed, as even ERIH points out.

Just as *My Space* and the widespread, free peer-to-peer sharing of music digital files (MP3) have complicated the survival of record companies despite the efforts of governments to contain piracy, similar academic internet environments and the soon-to-come ebook reader era *might* unleash a general crisis of the academic industries which could even lead to the eventual disappearance of journals. Musicians have discovered that they can publish their music on-line as soon as it is recorded without the intervention of any record company and 'rogue' humanities scholars might also find in self-publication an interesting option. Unlike musicians, who will have to play more concerts to make up for money lost due to dwindling record sales, we are backed by a salary and, anyway, only a few of us make money out of their publications (out of books, not journals). Many humanities scholars already have personal websites where essays previously published on paper in journals or in collective books have been made available, while doctoral thesis in any field are being now published in the internet as soon as they are submitted. Technology, in short, already allows us to establish networks of scholars connected by similar interests that might choose to share their work online for free as soon as it is written. This is a vision that might irk many but it is, nonetheless, a feasible scenario. And if it has not

happened yet, this is because *where* we publish has a strange priority over *what* we publish.

3. Some final thoughts

It would be, of course, next to impossible to assess self-published academic work. To many this may sound like pure anarchy: academic work downgraded to the level of blogs. It seems quite clear, though, that journal publication operates on lines in urgent need of revision that even ERIH's work highlights. I am *not* calling here for an end to peer-reviewing, journal publication and research assessment, not at all: they are *basic* to our task. But I am indeed calling, as the AIA does in their paper, for a re-assessment of their current workings, bearing in mind not only the dissatisfaction that many English Studies scholars feel about them but also current and future technological changes whose depth is barely understood today. In its current stage, research assessment verifies our access to certain lines of distribution within English Studies, which might soon radically change anyway, but not the *content* or *quality* of our research. And as a Literature teacher I know very well that this little something called reputation, a word never used in assessment research, is never easy to gauge, much less to quantify in detail.

My impression is that this current hierarchisation of research, of which ERIH is just a sample, is generating a *disillusioned* academic atmosphere in the humanities; the system of rewarding achievement simply does not fit the perception we have of our own methods and work. All scholars need some form of acknowledgement as our egos, which are our main support, are frail and much more so in the humanities, since we are cannot be motivated by our society's scant expectations about our work, if indeed our society cares at all. Yet, humanities scholars are being assessed with tools that show a radical misunderstanding of how and why we work, and we suffer for that from an anxiety unknown to our peers in other fields.

As regards English Studies scholars born and working outside the British Isles, we run the risk of becoming *less* rather than more visible both at a European and at a local level. I often feel schizophrenic, as publishing in Spanish about English Studies makes me invisible in the eyes of my European colleagues while publishing in English makes me invisible for my Spanish colleagues and, well, hardly visible for my European peers anyway. I also feel, but that must be my own insecurity, that we are automatically ranked second to any native English-speaking scholar or those based in Britain.

(or the USA). ERIH's lists only increase that impression. This needn't be so at all, as, for instance, the field of Spanish Studies shows.

We need to be assessed for obvious reasons. I have no doubt about this, as too many have abused the academic system for too long, but we must find a way to be assessed generically, as regards *all* our activities as humanities scholars and not only research. In Spain and, I assume, also in most European countries, research, teaching and management activities are periodically assessed but this is done *separately* which, in my view, makes it impossible to excel in any of them. I would be in favour, rather, of giving a periodical account of *all* our activities to the corresponding board, making comprehensive self-assessment and career coherence essential instead of the increasing quantification of just a selection of our activities.

As for ERIH, it is, in a way, both redundant and extremely dangerous. Redundant, because part of

being a specialist in a field is knowing which publications enjoy a high reputation in it, an ability which also allows one to judge the work of researchers in the same field. And dangerous because it can be used too dogmatically for assessment by national boards, as the AIA and I myself have argued. As an informative instrument, ERIH does have an enormous potential but then it must always be understood as a *descriptive* – never *prescriptive* – instrument. The AIA's complaint fails to stress, perhaps, an equally important point: in its urge to describe the vast field of the Humanities ERIH has distorted it beyond recognition by forgetting about its many subdivisions. You might be surprised after all this discussion to discover that the current 2008 list of journals (to be replaced by the end of 2009) includes lists for 'Linguistics' and for 'Literature' but not for 'English Studies'. And if we do not exist for ERIH (or not yet), complex and varied as we are, why should ERIH matter?

NOTES

1. I am a specialist in English Literature and Cultural Studies and I am fully aware that the argumentation offered here might not apply at all to the area of English Language and Linguistics. In my view, although we all produce science in the sense of knowledge, the methods differ widely, which surely explains the increasing divergence of these two main areas within English Studies.
2. This is an aptitude certification compulsory to obtain temporary work contracts or tenured positions in Spanish universities, which are mostly public.

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