Text - Culture - Reception

Cross-cultural Aspects of English Studies

edited by

RÜDIGER AHRENS and HEINZ ANTOR



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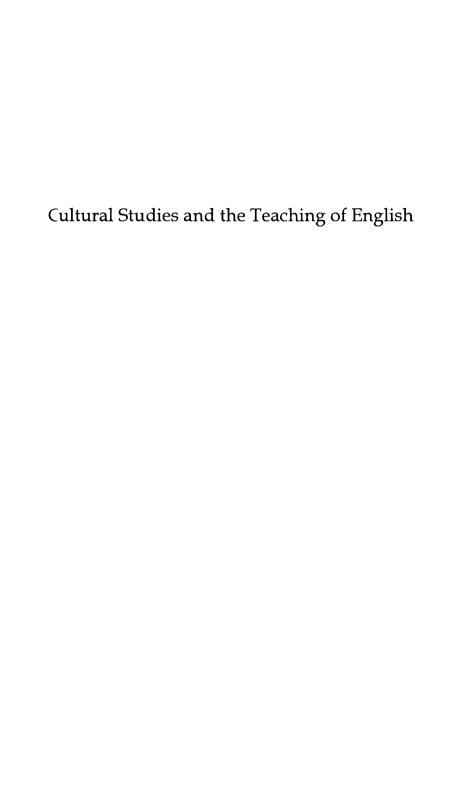
CONTENTS

Preface	V
Contents	VII
I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION	
Rüdiger Ahrens, Würzburg The International Development of English and Cross-cultural Competence	3
II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS	
Heinz Antor, Würzburg Ethical Plurivocity, or: The Pleasures and Rewards of Reading	27
Norbert Greiner, Heidelberg Translation and Cultural Alterity: Some Remarks about an All Too Obvious Relationship	47
Jürgen Klein, Siegen Understanding Foreign Culture as an Integral Part of British Studies	57
Douglas Pickett, London The Singer, the Song and the Audience: Explorations in the Status of Literature	105
Mark Roberts, Keele The Centrality of Literature	135
Henry G. Widdowson, London Aspects of the Relationship Between Culture and Language	147
III. CULTURAL STUDIES AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH	
Christoph Bode, Kiel Crossing the Border - Closing a Gap: Notes on the Hermeneutics of Teaching English Poetry to Foreign Students	165

Dieter Buttjes, Dortmund Making Meanings and Shaping Subjectivities: The Reception of Texts in Cultural Studies	187
Werner Delanoy, Klagenfurt Vampire Meets American: Teaching Literature in the Foreign Language Classroom	211
John W.J. Fletcher, Norwich Iris Murdoch's London: A Case Study in Teaching English via Literature	23 3
IV. GEOGRAPHICAL STRATIFICATION: THE BRITISH ISLES	
Ernst Burgschmidt, Würzburg The Two Languages of Wales	247
Ernst Burgschmidt, Würzburg English and Gaelic in Ireland	259
Joachim Schwend, Germersheim "In Bed with an Elephant?" The Anglo-Scottish Experience as Reflected in 20th-Century Scottish Literature	271
V. GEOGRAPHICAL STRATIFICATION: ASIA AND THE COMMONWEALTH	
Shinsuke Ando, Tokyo The Rediscovery of Tradition in Modern Japanese Writers	297
Michael Clyne, Melbourne Australian English in Contact With Other Englishes in Australia	305
Albert-Reiner Glaap, Düsseldorf Keying in to Canada - Contemporary Canadian Plays	317
Yasmine Gooneratne, Sydney Asia and the West: Perceptions of Asia in Western Literature	331

Larry Smith and Sandra Tawake, Honolulu Culture as Reflected in Creative Literature	351
Wimal Dissanayake, Honolulu Literary Representations of Social Change in Asia: Notes Toward an Interpretive Strategy	365
R.K. Gupta, Ganpur The Role of Literature in Teaching English Composition and Rhetoric to Students of Technology	391
VI. LITERARY CASE STUDIES: ENGLAND	
Nigel Alexander and Rosalind King, London Shakespeare, Brecht, Zeami	401
Heinz Antor, Würzburg Aspects of Hermeneutics in E.M. Forster's A Passage to India	411
Norman F. Blake, Sheffield Shakespeare, Discourse and the Teaching of English	431
Franz M. Kuna, Klagenfurt Texts as Contexts: Problems of Reception and Transformation in Film Versions of Literary Works. The Example of the Fifties	447
VII. LITERARY CASE STUDIES: AMERICA	
Lothar Bredella, Gießen Understanding a Foreign Culture Through Assimilation and Accommodation: Arthur Miller's <i>The Crucible</i> and Its Dual Historical Context	475
Peter Freese, Paderborn Jay McInerney's Bright Lights, Big City, or How to 'Compound Happiness out of Small Increments of Mindless Pleasure'	523
Vernon Gras, Washington Interpreting under a New Paradigm: Faulkner's Light in August, 'Rezeptionstheorie' and Activating Lena Grove	555

Monika Hoffarth-Zelloe, Washington The Corrective Function of Stereotypes in the Reception of Black American Literature	569
VIII. POSTSCRIPT	
Peter Strevens, Cambridge Paysages linguistiques de Demain or, The Eurolinguistic Outlook	601
List of Contributors	613
Index	625



Christoph Bode

Crossing the Border - Closing a Gap: Notes on the Hermeneutics of Teaching English Poetry to Foreign Students

The French for London is Paris. Eugène Ionesco

I. Proem

There is in David Lodge's extremely funny "adademic romance" Small World an in every sense of the word peripheral character by the name of Akira Sakazaki, who teaches English at Tokyo University and in his spare time translates into Japanese the latest, though not quite fresh novel, Could Try Harder, of a former angry young man, Ronald Frobisher. Conscientious Akira Sakazaki, to be sure, tries very hard to understand Frobisher's English and to render a faithful and congenial translation, but he runs into enormous difficulties because the kind of English Frobisher's fictional characters speak is decidedly non-standard and highly idiomatic. In his plight, Sakazaki bombards Frobisher with aerogrammes asking for clarification of points such as the following:

p.107, 3 down. "Bugger me, but I feel like some faggots tonight."

Does Ernie mean that he feels a sudden desire for homosexual intercourse? If so, why does he mention this to his wife?\(^1\)

Or:

Page 86, 7 up. "And a bit of spare on the back seat." Is it a spare tyre that Enoch keeps on the back seat of his car?²

Frobisher, reading this to his wife Irma, is all understanding:

"I mean, you can see the problem," says Ronald. "It's a perfectly natural mistake. I mean, why does 'a bit of spare' mean sex?"

"I don't know," says Irma, turning a page. "You tell me. You're the writer."

"Page 93, 2 down. 'Enoch 'e went spare.' Does this mean Enoch went to get a

Lodge (1985), 105.
 Ibid., 108.

> spare part for his car? You've got to feel sorry for the bloke. He's never been to England, which makes it all the more difficult."3

When this is read by a non-native speaker of English, this fictional item of cross-cultural non-understanding or misunderstanding takes on a very interesting new quality: The text, by analogy, refers partly to its being read and, where no explanations are provided, paradoxically stages and thematizes the possibility of its not being understood. What is more, the text as it were mirrors the very situation in which it is being read and understood or not understood: It becomes an instance of a Sakazaki reading if it is not understood, an instance of a Frobisher reading if it is. So, non-native speakers either find themselves in Sakazaki's shoes and the joke is on them (but lost on them, too) - or they have become, by virtue of their acquired linguistic and cultural competence, honorary Englishmen and -women, who can smile about the little Sakazakis in them all. They are Frobishers with a past, Frobishers with an extra cultural background.

The situation emblematically encapsulates much of what cross-cultural understanding is all about: Learners widen their horizons by adopting additional linguistic and cultural perspectives, by gaining access to new information, and, perhaps the keystone of it all, by acquiring new ways of processing information, new and old. Once this process of familiarisation has reached a certain point, they "can't go home again",4 because both "they" and "home" have become different from what they used to be, put into perspective as they have been. But they cannot leave home either, carrying it with them all their lives. This is why they have a remarkable advantage over Messrs. Frobisher and Lodge: their "Tokyo", wherever it may be, is not the clichéd caricature we find in Small World, and their "London", it may be assumed, isn't either. To have to learn English as a foreign language and to have to enter a different culture laboriously, step by step, is an enormous asset, not a liability; it is an unearned privilege, denied to those who are simply born into it: It is to be feared that they may hardly ever know what it means to both share the fun that is made of non-native speakers and to perceive, at the same time, the insularity and parochialism this kind of humour bespeaks.

The following is an attempt to specify what literature, and poetry in particular, can contribute to the teaching of English as a foreign language and an

Acton, William R. and Judith Walker de Felix. "Acculturation and Mind" in Valdes (21987), 20-29, here 28.

assessment of the various hermeneutical procedures implied by different approaches.

II. The positivistic paradox, or, the reading of literature as painting by numbers

When literary texts are introduced in foreign language teaching (and there are some who say this should not be done at all, because they believe it is distracting and disorientating or runs otherwise counter to their educational aims),5 it is mostly for two different reasons: either to teach culture, or to teach language. If your aim is the teaching of a foreign culture, you will do best to pick literary texts which are highly "typical" in the sense that they contain, explicitly or implicitly, a lot of specific information on the target culture, its characteristic traits, idiosyncracies, traditions, etc. However, if you introduce such a literary text fairly early in your unit, your students will still lack an understanding of the very information the text contains and your main activity will then be to explain (in the most pedestrian sense of the word) what it means when it says this and that. It should be clear that this kind of "reading" of a literary text for a non-literary purpose is, strictly speaking, no reading of it at all. The text is simply taken as a sort of spring-board to something that is extraneous to it, as a mere occasion to talk about something else. In this approach, the literary text is used as jumping-off place - once you've jumped, it holds no interest in itself whatsoever. It served an auxiliary function, and that is it.

If, on the other hand, your students have already become quite familiar with the subject of your unit as a result of your teaching with non-literary materials and you introduce a poem or a short story later in the unit, the result will be somewhat different, though not basically so: Now students will be in a position to re-identify for themselves in the literary text those bits of cultural, historical, ideological etc. information that they have been acquainted with before. But again, it would be difficult to claim that what they do is in any serious sense of the word a reading of the literary text as a literary text. In fact, what they do amounts to little more than the equivalent to painting by numbers: Textual elements are schematically identified and put into a one-to-one relation with "reality". The task is completed, the poem "explained", when all the major blanks are filled, i.e. related to something outside the text.

Valdes mentions some objections in "Culture in Literature" (see Valdes, ²1987, 143f.), as does Widdowson in "The Teaching, Learning and Study of Literature" (Quirk/Widdowson, 1985, 180ff.).

In both cases, therefore, the movement is away from the text, its treatment is tangential. Of course, neither students nor teacher are to be blamed for this. It is an inevitable consequence of their approach. Once literature is studied "as evidence for something else",6 not for its own sake, the well-known "flight from the text"7 is pre-programmed. When you use literary texts as social, historical and cultural documents, deliberately eclipsing their literary-aesthetic dimension, what else can you expect? When you treat a literary text as any other non-fictional or non-poetic text, then - it is an observation close to tautology - it will respond on the very same level as you put your questions.8 You get what you deserve, but certainly not the most out of it.

Just how much this reduction of the literary text is the result of the chosen approach to literature can be seen from what I would call the positivistic paradox: The better your choice of text has been in terms of cultural teaching, the less the text will be seen as a literary-aesthetic construct. The more specific it is to the target culture and the more productive it seems in terms of crosscultural mediation, the less it will serve as an illustration of what the indigenous literature is like and can do. If that isn't a catch 22 ...

This even holds true if none of those engaged in the classroom situation is consciously pursuing a positivistic approach - even against the teacher's best intentions a tendency to "explain" a highly culture-specific literary text with recourse to extra-textual reality will necessarily establish itself. The positivistic approach to literature is not something that must be deliberately chosen - it is "always already" there, whether you like it or not, when you use literature to teach something else.

One way to counter the old formalist/structuralist reproach that the positivist systematically evades and circumvents his subject and talks about anything else but the literary text9 would be to embrace it and say: Yes, but we never made any other claims. We do use literature as a handmaiden and, for us, there lies no "reduction" in this, because the job was advertised as that of a handmaiden.

Widdowson (1977), 78.
 Michael H. Short and Christopher N. Candlin. "Teaching Study Skills for English Literature" in Brumfit/Carter (21987), 89-109, here 89.
 Cf. Widdowson (21977), 79: "What does Tintern Abbey tell us about Wordsworth's philosophy? What do we learn about Victorian London by reading Oliver Twist? and so on. The point about questions of this sort is that they reduce literature to the level of conventional statement about ordinary reality. [...] Questions such as these, then, are not directed at the specifically literary nature of literature: instead they treat literature as a source of information such as we might treat conventional forms of discourse like a historical document, a philosophical treatise, a sociological questionnaire" naire." ⁹ Cf. Bode (1983), 50ff.

This defence is, I think, not particularly convincing. For one, it leaves unexplained why one should introduce literary texts for non-literary purposes at all. Thinking of the enormous semiotic extra potential commonly ascribed to literary texts (a point to which I shall come back later, in IV), it seems a bit like buying a Porsche to do one's last minute shopping round the corner. Secondly, the flaw of this approach is not only one of dubious economy, of choosing something extraordinary to do something ordinary, it also involves a very serious disorientation of the learner in that it incites him to read a fictional or poetic text in a different way from how it is actually read in the target culture. To induce somebody to read a fictional or poetic text as if it were not a fictional or poetic text is to encourage misreading in its crudest form. The point bears repetition: to read a poem as if it were not a poem, to read a short story as if it were not a short story, entails the most fundamental misunderstanding possible in textual matters. This should not be taken lightly: If in teaching culture this most basic distinction of cultural/textual practice is denied, when and where will the damage ever be made good?

The charge against the positivistic misreading of literature in teaching a foreign culture has been phrased in very general terms: to study literature for something else is to neglect its character and specificity. The same can, of course, be held against its use as material for language teaching. For if the focus is on linguistic patterns, vocabulary etc., the literary text as literary text must be out of focus. Nothing could be more obvious. As the late Albert Henry Marckwardt put it, "the use of literary texts as drill materials for the acquisition of language skills [is] totally inappropriate." The situation in both fields - culture teaching and language teaching - being virtually the same, it follows that a combination of the two can hardly alleviate the predicament. To suggest, as has been done, that literary texts should be used for the combined purpose of teaching a foreign language and a foreign culture is only tantamount, I think, to conniving at the perpetuation of literature's double subjugation.

This being so, one could easily sympathize with those who believe that rather than encourage the misreading and misrepresentation of literature in foreign language teaching, one should not introduce literature in such courses at all. I do believe, however, that there is a function for literature in this context beyond the "handmaid" function delineated above, and an extremely valuable function, too. But before I sketch how the teaching of literature qua literature can powerfully assist the teaching of foreign languages without yet be-

¹⁰ Marckwardt (1978), 69.

ing confined to a merely auxiliary position - the seeming contradiction is deliberate - I mean to refute an argument which, I think, defends the use of literature in foreign language teaching with defective reasons.

It is common knowledge today that there is no such thing as "literary language", no linguistic differentia specifica that would be shared by all literary texts, but be lacking in all others. Deviant use of language is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition of literature. "Literariness" is not a textual/linguistic feature, but a pragmatic category - it is not the starting point for our reading, but the result of our processing the text according to interpretive strategies culturally mediated and culturally set apart from other reading strategies. It is our focussing on the text in a special way that brings out its "literary" features. 11

For a moment it seems as if this has pulled the rug from under the above complaints about the "reduction" of literature and the neglect of its "character" etc. If the "literariness" of a text is not a textual/linguistic feature, let alone an "essence", but "only" the result of our treating it as such, how can there lie a disparagement in a different use? In other words: if all texts are basically the same and open to "literary" as well as "non-literary" readings, why plead a special case for "literature" at all? The opposition seems a specious one, and the argument works both ways: for an inclusion of so-called "literary" texts in foreign language teaching and for the possibility of "non-literary" readings of them, should the need arise.

This, however, is a blatant non sequitur, and a grave misunderstanding of the anti-essentialist concept of "literariness": From the idea that "literariness" is not a textual/linguistic feature but a pragmatic category, it does not follow that all texts are basically the same. Quite on the contrary, the different usages to which they are put in a specific culture are a determining factor that must on all accounts be taken into consideration. As there are no texts outside cultural practice, it is impossible to ignore and neglect how they are actually read and processed in a given culture. These are social facts and to speak of texts as if they existed in a socio-historical vacuum is to fall into a new kind of textual essentialism and objectivism in the very act of refuting the old one. There is no text "as such", no text apart from its being read in a historically and culturally concrete situation. Therefore, to read a text which by cultural practice has been stabilized as a "literary" one as if it were not is still a fundamental misreading, even if, yes, especially if you do not believe in textual objectivism or textual essentialism. The gauge is still there, only it is no longer ahistorical,

Cf. Bode (1988), 340-378; Fish (1980); Brumfit/Carter (1987), 5ff.
 Cf. Bex (1988), 124, 126.

transcendental and absolute, but found in the practice of a cultural community.

To treat alike all texts a culture has produced, no matter in which genre they have been positioned, is an absurd idea. Whatever their motives, those who cherish this idea and act accordingly can hardly refer to the functionalist concept of literariness as support for their stance.

When you teach language, culture and literature, it makes good sense - does it not? - to accept what counts as language, culture and literature in your target society.

III. A case in point: the poetry of John Betjeman

Let us take a closer look at the above stated paradox, viz. that the more culture-specific a literary text is, the less it will serve to illustrate what the indigenous literature is like and can do, because all the extra information indispensable to an understanding of the "area studies" side of the text will inevitably distract attention from its literary and poetic qualities - let us look at this paradox by way of a seemingly extreme example, the poetry of Sir John Betjeman.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica informs us that Betjeman (1906-1984), who was knighted in 1969 and became poet laureate in 1972, is a

poet whose nostalgia for the near past, exact sense of place, and precise rendering of social nuance made him widely read in England at a time when much of what he wrote about was rapidly vanishing. [...] His celebration of the more settled Britain of yesteryear seemed to touch a responsive chord in a public suffering the uprootedness of war and its austere aftermath.¹³

Godfrey Smith's The English Companion: An Idiosyncratic A to Z of England and Englishness has an entry on Betjeman-twice as long as that on Larkin-which begins,

It has been observed of Betjeman's work that it gives you the key to a past which you will instantly recognise even if you were never there. Few key words in the lumber room of every Englishman's mind (Ovaltine, Sturmey-Archer bicycles, Home and Colonial stores) are not memo-

¹³ s.v. Betjeman.

> rably embedded in his oeuvre. His inimitable artifice has transmuted these folk memories into art. 14

Indeed, here we have already the elements that recur time and again in all appreciations of Betjeman's role and standing in post-war English poetry and that all mark him as a highly "culture-specific" poet:

- 1. He is characterized as being "quintessentially English", 15 as displaying an "essential Englishness", 16 and writing a kind of poetry which sometimes makes critics wonder, "What sort of sense [...] does Mr Betjeman make to the reader abroad - to someone outside our island ethos? Is he chiefly an author for export or for home consumption only?"17 Philip Larkin's answer to that was clear and in the negative: Betjeman's poetry was such a "Special, English thing" that "with its wealth of local allusion and local sentiment, its highpitched titter, [it] does shut a door in the face of American or European visitors." But, of course, although "its appeal is limited to those who share its cultural background,"19 Betjeman's poetry might, on the other hand and for that very reason, well serve "as a kind of imaginative Baedeker, mastery of which by the over-seas readers confers a clear sense of present English living."20
- 2. The extraordinary commercial success of Betjeman's poetry his Collected Poems (1958) sold more than 100,000 copies in a comparatively short time and saleswise he must be the most popular English poet after World War II - is highly indicative of a prevalent mood in certain sections of British society. It is true that the recognition of his success sometimes takes the form of a double-edged compliment ("Sir John Betjeman [...] is known to and admired by thousands of his countrymen who seldom read and never buy a volume by any other living poet."21). It is also true that, apart from Larkin's praise, Betjeman's poetry has found few professional admirers, but many detractors (John Wain castigated "the writer's almost complete lack of the skills of the true poet, his wooden technique, his water-colours slapped at the canvas, his incuriosity about literary art."22). But the popularity of "that belated Edwardian"23

<sup>s.v. Betjeman.
Clarke (1983), 58.
Stanford (1961b), 15.</sup>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Quoted in Clarke (1983), 65.

Quoted in Clarke (1963), 65.
 Press (1974), 49.
 Stanford (1961b), 15. Stanford formulated this as a question. His book was published in 1961 and I believe the use of "present" was questionable even then.
 So the blurb to John Press's book on Betjeman.
 Wain (1963), 171; cf. Thwaite (1985), 7: "The appointment of Sir John Betjeman as Poet Laureate towards the end of 1972 was greeted in many quarters with the sort of

or even "Victorian"24 remains an indisputable social and cultural fact. One may say that "Mr Betjeman's poetry is studded with the landmarks of one whose life has been a part of the literary upper-middle-class Establishment."²⁵ or that "the English life" he depicts is that "of southern England in the middle-Middle or upper-Middle class,"26 and may add that his nostalgia meets the needs of that particular class.27 But the very fact that this is so - that his writings have been in tune with "the cultural temper of these post-war years [which] is decidedly insular"28 - is a further reason to pick Betjeman's poetry as an example for culture-specific literature: his poetry is what in important sections of British society counts as poetry.

3. The third reason that qualifies Betjeman as a very culture-specific poet indeed lies in a special technique by which he achieves both his "Englishness" and his appealing nostalgia. It is his systematic use of concrete, named detail, his "habit of particularization":

It might be said of Betjeman that he never, if he can help it, calls a spade a spade: if he happened to be writing about spades, as likely as not he would refer to them by the name of their manufacturer. For example, he seldom speaks of a motor-car tout court: it is nearly always an Arrol-Johnston, a Hupmobile, a Hillman Minx and so forth. Similarly with clothes, shampoos, lemonade, marmelade, etc., etc.: nearly all are given their brand-names or those of their makers - e.g., Windsmoor, Drene, Kia-Ora, Cooper's Oxford.29

Betjeman's imagination is concrete and particular, 30 especially so with regard to place and buildings. Being an expert in architecture and topography, he draws on his immense knowledge in these fields and "delights in describing places and buildings not for their intrinsic value but for their human associations"31 - and their cultural significance, one might add. For Betjeman, architecture is both "the visible manifestation of the spiritual life of a society"32

good-hearted but amused condescension that one imagines might have met the announcement that Dickens' Cheeryble brothers had been invited to join the cabinet."

23 Sampson (1975), 846.

24 Cf. Clarke (1983), 63: "The whole tenor of Betjeman's imagination has even been described as Victorian: his fondness for the quaint and the grotesque, his wistful piety, scribed as Victorian: his fondness for the quaint and and his unabashed sentimentality."

25 Stanford (1961b), 36.

26 Stanford (1961a), 319.

27 Cf. Wain (1963), 168/169.

28 Bergonzi (1959), 130.

29 Brooke (1962), 38.

30 Cf. Kermode (1962), 140-154; Stanford (1961), 58, 59.

³¹ Clarke (1983), 63. 32 Press (1974), 13.

and a material manifestation of culture "as the whole way of life of a people" (T.S. Eliot):33

Architecture has a wider meaning than that which is commonly given to it. For architecture means not a house, or a single building or a church, or Sir Herbert Baker, or the glass at Chartres, but your surroundings, not a town or street, but our whole over-populated island. It is concerned with where we eat, work, sleep, play, congregate, escape. It is our background, alas, often too permanent.34

In this sense, Betjeman's topophilia (W.H. Auden),35 his "intense preoccupation with topographical detail,"36 is only his special way to thematize his prime concern: "His subject is, quite simply, Culture."³⁷ But not, it has to be emphasized, "culture" as an abstraction, but culture as it is concretely manifested and recognized in meaningful particulars. If that doesn't make his poetry congenial to positivists, nothing will ...

4. A fourth reason might be added to this list. It is that Betjeman's poetry is extremely conservative in form and totally lacking in experiment:

Not even his warmest admirers could claim that in his choice of metre and stanza-form he is anything but traditional, derivative and reactionary. The modern movement initiated by Pound and Eliot has passed him by, and it would be almost true to say that, formally speaking, he has never written a wholly original poem.³⁸

Normally, this is couched in more benevolent words ("he remained unaffected by the modernist movement in poetry", "he has not felt the need to make the kind of radical innovation in poetic technique which has distinguished the work of Pound, Eliot and Lawrence", 39 "[he remained] immune [...] to the pressures of modernism¹⁴⁰), but the assessment stands uncontested. It should be a safeguard against too "aesthetic" or "auto-referential" readings of his poetry-his use of English will constitute no stumbling block to "referential readings" ... And yet, I mean to show by example that even such a positivist's favourite son as John Betjeman, whose poetry seems to lend itself so easily to positivistic readings, suffers a distorting misreading when it is

³³ Eliot (1975), 297. The connection was first pointed out by Stanford (1961b), 13/14.
34 Betjeman quoted in Stanford (1961b), 14.
35 Cf. Press (1974), 19-21.
36 Brooke (1962), 37.
37 Bergonzi (1959), 130.
38 Brooke (1962), 36.
39 Press (1974), 18, 48.
40 Clarke (1983), 63.

"prepared" for foreign students in such a way, and that from the nature of this misreading we can gain an inkling of what poetry read as poetry could contribute to the teaching of English as a foreign language.

My example is John Betjeman's "Devonshire Street W.1". I chose it for two reasons: it is a typical specimen of his poetry, and it has received at least one fairly detailed interpretation, which, in its merits and shortcomings, is equally typical, namely of what happens, if...

Here is the poem:

Devonshire Street W.1

The heavy mahogany door with its wrought-iron screen Shuts. And the sound is rich, sympathetic, discreet. The sun still shines on this eighteenth-century scene With Edwardian faience adornments - Devonshire Street.

No hope. And the X-ray photographs under his arm Confirm the message. His wife stands timidly by. He opposite brick-built house looks lofty and calm Its chimneys steady against a mackerel sky.

No hope. And the iron knob of this palisade So cold to the touch, is luckier now than he 'Oh merciless, hurrying Londoners! Why was I made For the long and the painful deathbed coming to me?"

She puts her fingers in his, as, loving and silly,
At long-past Kensington dances she used to do
'It's cheaper to take the tube to Piccadilly
And then we can catch a nineteen or a twenty-two.'

In his quite competent interpretation of this poem, Hans-Joachim Zimmermann says that the basic facts, the subject of the poem, lies open at the first reading. It is about a man who, accompanied by his wife, has been informed that he is fatally ill. One may wonder why Zimmermann thinks that this is "an everyday situation" (118) and that the poem's "form, which borders on banality, seems to be in accordance with its content" (!) (119) ("seems" offers no hope here, because Zimmermann is out to prove that the *form*, at least, is not as banal as it may look at first sight...). Be that as it may, in the following paragraphs he corrects this view: something extraordinary *has* happened, after all - as the exposed "shuts" at the beginning of line 2 and the double "no

⁴¹ Zimmermann (1966), 118-125. Page references in the text are to this article. The quotations have been translated from the original German.

hope" (lines 5 and 9) show, mortality has entered a human existence. But already lines 3ff. give occasion for an explanatory paraphrase: as the scene is qualified as "eighteenth-century", we learn that the houses must be built in *Georgian Style* and that - "somewhat tastelessly" - they were decorated "at the beginning of the 20th century" (119) with faiences. "Faiences" is explained in a footnote, which also gives the reign of King Edward VII: 1901-1910. But far more can be said about Devonshire Street, W.1. There are, Zimmermann knows, two Devonshire Streets in London, one in W.1, the other in E.C.2, so the area code is "important" (120). Devonshire Street W.1 is a "noble street", strictly residential, with elegant semi-detached houses in refined *Georgian Style*" etc. Is this essential? Zimmermann thinks it is:

This technique of allusion and evocation is lost on readers who do not know these or similar English streets and their atmosphere; they are not 'in the know'. They do not understand that familiar details stand by proxy for the architectural whole and conjure it up, that the mere mention of these real facts ['Realien'] evokes a mood on which the poet does not elaborate any further. (120)

For those who are still not convinced that they have missed something essential that is not explicitly mentioned in the text but has to be added by an informed interpreter, Zimmermann holds something extra in store: "Devonshire Street W.1 lies at the heart of Londons's medical area." Physicians who have their practice here, he tells us, are well-established, rich, and they will only treat patients who pay their considerable fees. Zimmermann continues, "This association, evoked by the mere name of the street, will suggest itself only to the initiated reader; the poet makes no explicit endeavours to make this plain" (120). And as if to underline the importance of this insight, he states categorically that "in the understanding of the first stanza lies the prerequisite to the understanding of the whole poem" (120).

Well, this is either trite or wrong. It is trite in the sense that it could be said of any poem whatsoever - if you do not understand the first stanza, you can hardly claim to have understood the entire poem. It is wrong in the sense that the reader does *not* have to know Devonshire Street W.1 and that he does *not* have to know beforehand that it lies in London's medical area in order to understand the poem. That the couple have been to a doctor can be infered from stanza two, and that they do not live in that area - so that the doctor they have seen is not their family doctor, but a specialist - can be deduced from the last lines of the poem. Zimmermann's expert knowledge is welcome, but totally supererogatory.

A number of further points Zimmermann makes could be commented upon, but I shall confine myself to a tendency which colours the second half of his essay just as much as positivistic explanation characterizes the first - it is discernible in this:

- the sky (1.8) is an autumn sky (121);
- the man, because of a sudden faintness, leans upon the iron knob of the palisade (121);
- to his cold hands the iron seems unpleasantly cold (121);
- the absurd idea that the iron knob is luckier than he crosses his mind (121),42
- there is no metaphysical comfort for the moribund; annihilation of bodily existence means general annihilation; equally, a scientific belief in the natural necessity of death is lacking (122);
- to take a taxi would be an extravagance (123); and then, in a final flourish:
- Husband and wife, an elderly couple, are simple, common people, who have to economize (123).

What is happening here? None of this is in the text. Zimmermann's "explicating prose paraphrase - somewhat despised in modern criticism" (124) - has deviated into full-blown projection. And not by mere coincidence so. Although he states towards the end of his essay that "this is not a topographical poem" (124), it was his positivistic approach to it that clandestinely prepared the way for this kind of "How-many-children-had-Lady-Macbeth?"reading: If one sees literature primarily as a metonymy of reality, one is not only free, but almost obliged to complete the picture. To invest character, scenery, situations with a life outside the text is then only a "good continuation", not the overinterpretation it may seem to others. The two idiosyncratic moves - "You must know that Devonshire Street W.1 lies in a respectable medical area" plus "the couple have to get home as inexpensively as possible" - complement each other: Positivistic explanation and rampant overinterpretation are birds of a feather. Thus we are told that the nearest underground station for the elderly couple is Regent's Park and that buses nos. 19 and 22 go to Chelsea (so that's where they live), and we are given "the whole story" behind their visit to Devonshire Street W.1 as well (cf. 123), as if these items were all situated on the same plane of reality.

⁴² The passage might well be interpreted, I think, as written in a kind of style indirect libre instead. Zimmermann seems to be a bit unsure about the "narrative situation" of this poem. On the one hand he says that the scene is evidently seen through the eyes of the old man (122), but he exempts line 4 from this, because he knows that Betjeman is the architectural expert (124)!

It is true that Zimmermann near the end of his article repeats that "the subject of the poem is the sudden entry of death into everyday life" (124), but at the same time he maintains that "the topographical real facts have to be explained to the foreigner, before the wealth of this poetry can reveal itself to him." (124f, italics mine). I should like to disagree.

IV. "Devonshire Street W.1" is not about Devonshire Street W.1, or, the virtues of reading poetry as poetry

It is childish to study a work of fiction in order to gain information about a country or about a social class or about the author.

Vladimir Nabokov

"Devonshire Street W.1" is about love, comfort and compassion in the face of death. It is about the ultimate disruption, which cannot be undone: the entry of finality into human life.⁴³ It is about transience in the face of material permanence and indifference - but also about the overcoming of that transience through human permanence and reliability.

It is called "Devonshire Street W.1" because the enormity of the inconceivable is best presented by its opposite, the ordinariness of the familiar. The sound of the heavy mahogany door with which the poem begins has a famous analogue in English literature: the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*, after the murder of Duncan. Thomas de Quincey was the first to describe the general effect:

[...] if the reader has ever been present in a vast metropolis on the day when some great national idol was carried in funeral pomp to his grave, and chancing to walk near to the course through which he passed, has felt powerfully in the silence and desertion of the streets and in the stagnation of ordinary business, the deep interest which at that moment was possessing the heart of men, - if all at once he should hear the death-like stillness broken up by the sound of wheels rattling away from the scene, and making known that the transitory vision was dissolved, he will be aware that at no moment was his sense of the complete suspension and pause in ordinary human concerns so full and affecting as at that moment when the suspension ceases, and the go-

⁴³ On Betjeman's deep-rooted terror of death see Brooke (1962), 31, Clarke (1983), 58, Press (1974), 6, 40-42, Schmidt (1979), 223, Stanford (1961b), 33, 109-111, Sparrow (1963), 176, and Lord Birkenhead's introduction to Betjeman's Collected Poems (1973),

ings-on of human life are suddenly resumed. All action in any direction is best expounded, measured, and made apprehensible, by reaction.44

What de Quincey says about the particular scene in Shakespeare could equally well refer to "Devonshire Street W.1":

the pulses of life are beginning to beat again: and the re-estalishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them. 45

We have understood the poem not when we know what Devonshire Street W.1 is, but when we have understood what it will mean for the couple from that day on. In "Devonshire Street W.1", "Devonshire Street W.1" has a special, an extra meaning - one that cannot be looked up in a topographical guide, but one that can only be deduced from the poem itself.

No knowledge of faiences will help to understand the meaning of the wife's gesture - and the last two lines are not about the couple's finances; or, if they are, the knocking at the gate in Macbeth is because somebody wants to get in... Non-literary readings of literary texts and non-poetic readings of poetic texts are not so much marked by "wrongness" - whatever that may mean in interpretive matters - as by their poverty. 46 And it is this conspicuous poverty which for me constitutes a "misreading" of a literary text.

A literary reading of a literary text traces that special, extra meaning, which is, as it were, superadded to the normal/everyday/referential meaning of the words. A literary reading is the delineation and conscious duplication of that secondary structure which is made up of the elements of everyday language, but transcends them at the same time. To read a text as a literary one is to be aware of its symbolic dimension, of its surplus in meaning.⁴⁷

Roland Barthes⁴⁸ illustrated this once in a little diagram, which is to be read from bottom to top:

XXII, XXIII. Of his poems, "The Cottage Hospital", "Death in Leamington" and his elegy for Dr. Ramsden can be recommended in this context.

egy for Dr. Ramsden car 44 de Quincey. (1977), 169. 45 Ibid., 170.

It should be noted that this remark refers only in part to Zimmermann's interpreta-tion. He does recognize the meaning of the wife's gesture, although his topographi-cal and positivistic hunch continually interferes with his literary exegesis, especially

so in the last two lines of the poem.

47
It could be argued, however, that as "literariness" is no essence but the result of our reading strategies, texts which are culturally classified as non-fiction or non-poetic might serve the same purpose because they display the same features once we focus on them in a "literary-aesthetic" way. The point is discussed at length and finally refuted in my Asthetik der Ambiguität, 340-378 (370f. especially).

8 Barthes (1983), 76.

180 C. Bode

3 sa ?

1 sa se

In literature as well as in culture, signs - with their two aspects of signifiant and signifié - are hierarchically integrated in such a way that the signifiant/signifié-compound of one level can be understood as the signifiant of a higher level, to which the concomitant signifié either is immediately present (because the code is stabilized by cultural convenience and constant usage) or has to be divined or conjectured from its particular contextualisation, as is the case in literature and in poetry especially. Each text constitutes its own secondary code ad hoc, i.e. there is only one instance of its application: this particular text. Each text is a new challenge that engages the reader in the (re-)production of meaning. Therefore, to revert to my example, it is not enough to insist and reiterate that Devonshire Street is a street in London's West End (level 1) - that is only the primary meaning -, what it means in this poem (signifié on level 2) is for the reader to find out.

So essential is this move to the reading of *poetry as poetry* that Goethe once remarked that symbolic representation was actually "the nature of poetry: it speaks of something particular, without thinking of or pointing to the general. Whoever grasps this particular vigorously, obtains the general at the same time, without being aware of it, or only later."⁴⁹ But he speaks, of course, of a particular that shows already the potential to transcend its limitations - to *insist* on its particularity as such (level 1) would be equivalent to killing the poetry in poetry.

What, then, can be the function of literature in foreign language teaching? How can the teaching of literature qua literature contribute to cross-cultural understanding? Surveying the various arguments that have been put forward in support of the inclusion of literature in foreign language teaching, one can only be surprised at how often these arguments are based on totally erroneous and outmoded ideas of what literature is and can do. For example, linguists especially are prone to believe that literary texts are messages which authors have left behind and that students should learn to reconstruct the author's original intention (we find this even in Widdowson: "[The critic's] task is to decipher a message encoded in an unfamiliar way, to express its

⁴⁹ Quoted in Gero v. Wilpert (61979), s.v. Symbol (translated from the original German).

meaning in familiar and communal terms and thereby to provide the private message with a public relevance."50). Closely related to the intentional fallacy is the expressive one which encourages you to reconstruct the feelings and states of mind the author of the text had or meant to convey. Another outdated fallacy is the mimetic one: here, literature is seen as a mirror of reality giving us an illusion of it (Brooks: "If we say that language is oriented essentially toward a restatement or symbolic transformation of experience, we may say that literature is oriented toward the conscious creation of an illusion of reality."51), which means, of course, that in reading it we learn about that which is mirrored:

The world created in the work of literature is the foreign world, and literature is thus a way of assimilating (through the same experience of 'looking on') knowledge of this foreign world, and of the view of reality which its native speakers take for granted when communicating with each other.52

All these conceptions of literature fall deplorably short in that they fail to distinguish between referential texts on the one hand and fiction and poetry on the other. This distinction is, it is true, upheld by those who say that "great literature" deals with universals of human experience and expresses values⁵³ - but then their ideas of human universality and value as property (as opposed to value as relation) will not bear closer examination.⁵⁴

No, what literature can contribute is that the reading of literature as literature is a constant testing and training of new ways of processing information and a perpetual divination and trying out of new, tentatively proposed meanings. Literature - and poetry in particular - is language in the making. It stages the drama of language: to mean through relation. Its virtue lies not in what it tells us, but in what it makes us do. Its meaning is not on the page, but in what it triggers off in our minds. It constantly, systematically and intensely provokes us to exercise - playfully and free from the constraints and sanctions of reality - what we have to practise anyhow when we learn a foreign language or try to understand a different culture: flexibility of mind, combinational skill, imagination, the sudden change of a frame of reference, the ability to hold diverging meanings in our minds etc. Literature contributes best to foreign language teaching when it is taught as literature.

⁵⁰ Widdowson (1977), 5.

⁵¹ Brooks (1964),99.
52 Littlewood in Brumfit/Carter (1987), 177-183, here 179f.
53 But see Marckwardt (1978), 46, Valdes (21987), 138ff.

⁵⁴ Cf. Bode (1989).

If it is the supreme advantage of literature that in "literary discourse the actual procedures for making sense are much more in evidence [than in the normal reading process]",55 then "literature teaching" properly speaking, "is about abilities, not knowledge [emphasis mine]",56 and its aim should be "to develop a capacity for the understanding and appreciation of literature as a mode of meaning, rather than the accumulation of information and ideas about particular literary works [emphasis added]."57

Or, to put it differently, if foreign language and cross-cultural teaching is concerned with crossing borders and closing gaps, then literature does not just provide particular frontier crossing points but a general border-crossing ability (and permit!), it builds not particular bridges, but offers the boon of a bridge-building capacity. To teach literary texts as if they were non-literary ones is the equivalent to giving the hungry man some fish; to teach literary texts as literary texts is to give him a net.

V. Which border? Which gap? A postscript on the limits of teachability

In 1969, Leslie Fiedler published, in *Playboy Magazine*, an article under the heading "Cross the Border - Close the Gap",⁵⁸ in which he hailed the advent of "post-modernism" as a form of art and literature that transcended the established dichotomies of high culture vs. low culture and *belles lettres* vs. pop. Of course, postmodernism has achieved nothing of the kind. Art and Literature, as was to be expected, stand only firmer for that onslaught - such self-styled rebellious movements prove very invigourating to Art and Literature as a social institution, because their incorporation and co-option only serve to extend its realm.

But in another sense, the phenomenon of pop culture - in its widest sense - has indeed crossed borders and closed gaps: with the ongoing Americanization of the Western hemisphere (and the East is about to follow suit), students are more and more familiar - not through teaching, but through cultural practice - with the paraphernalia of an emerging common popular culture, which, highly commercialized and universally disseminated by the media, is imposed, as it were, from above while pretending to be the genuine expression of what people want. When it comes to contemporary literature, it

⁵⁵ Widdowson quoted in Brumfit/Carter (1987), 14.

⁵⁶ Brumfit (1986), 189. 57 Widdowson in Quirk/Widdowson (1985), 186.

⁵⁸ The article has been reprinted in Cunliffe (1975), 344-366, and in Freese/Pütz (1984), 151-166.

will be harder and harder to determine which texts are really "culture-specific", and more often than formerly teachers will ask the help of their students to close some gaps for them.

But that concerns "level 1" information only. As long as "the [literary] text serves to trigger off a process of interpretation, [...] this process depends crucially on what the receptor brings to the text."⁵⁹ When I taught "Devonshire Street W.1" in two university courses, the main dividing line was not between those who had high literary competence and those who had not. It was between those who had already undergone the experience of losing a close relation and those who had not. It was a gap that I would not and could not bridge. There is a hermeneutics of knowledge and skill as well as a hermeneutics of experience. Between them lies the border of teachability. Mr. Sakazaki lives this side, although "he's never been to England, which makes it all the more difficult."

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⁵⁹ Enkvist in Quirk/Widdowson (1985), 48.

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612 P. Strevens

Wilhelm Vietor in Germany, Henry Sweet in Oxford, Paul Passy in Paris, Otto Jespersen the Dane, Harold Palmer and A.S. Hornby working in Tokyo; and of H.H. Stern in Toronto, to name only the more obvious specialists who are no longer alive; so our successors will look back from the next *Etats-Généraux* and realize that the Council of Europe's Languages Projects were major milestones in the improvement and professionalization of language teaching.

In short, I believe that Europe in another 200 years will be an envied region of multilinguals, whose prowess in communication will be the envy of the world!

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Abbey Theatre 266 Barthes, Roland 28, 30, 31, 32, 35, 36, 38, 43, 45, 73, 74, 98, 99, 114, Achebe, Chinua 7, 9, 154, 352 Albee, Edward 533 133, 179, 183, 382, 468, 471, 598 Albery, Nobuko 352, 353, 354, 356, Baudelaire, Charles 301 Beattie, James 273, 486 361, 364 Alexander, Peter 403, 408 Beaumarchais 301 Alisyahbana, S. Takdir 366 Beckett, Samuel 8, 28, 45, 453 Allsop, Kenneth 453, 454, 471 Behan, Brendan 262 Althusser, Louis 371, 375, 376, 389, Beissel, Henry 325, 329 449 Bellow, Saul 476, 533 Alvarez, A. 455, 456, 471 Belsey, Catherine 372 Amis, Kingsley 452, 453, 460, 464 Benjamin, Walter 54, 55 Amis, Martin 129, 130 Bennett, Arnold 464, 467 Anderson, Lindsay 464, 465, 469 Bentley, Eric 512, 516, 517, 520 Andros, Sir Edmund 505 Bergson, Henri 99, 559, 566 Apel, Karl Otto 483, 484, 485, 520 Bernard, J.R.L. 306, 314 Arendt, Hannah 54, 55 Betjeman, Sir John 171, 172, 173, Aristotle 30, 120, 402, 403, 458, 460 174, 175, 177, 178, 183, 184, 185, Arnold, Matthew 124, 125, 273, 274, 236 276, 278, 284, 289, 291 Bickley, Verner C. 352, 364 Artaud, Antonin 468 Bielicki, Jan 547, 551 Auden, W.H. 109, 110, 133, 174, 392 Blake, William 130, 133 Ausband, Stephen C. 393, 397 Blind Harry 272, 291 Austen, Jane 127, 396, 523 Bloch 374 Austin 432, 444 Bloomsbury 45, 411, 417, 421, 427 Ayer, A.J. 91, 98 Booth, Wayne C. 13, 18, 19, 21, 35, 42, 43, 44, 45 Bacon, Francis 120 Borges, Jorge Louis 49, 55 Bakhtin, Michail 13, 41, 42, 45, 371, Boswell, James 274, 291 447, 450, 451, 452, 470, 471, 472, Boyer, Paul 502, 505, 506, 507, 509, 560, 563, 566, 567 511, 512, 516, 520 Balzac, Honoré de 301, 467 Braine, John 460 Barbour, John 272, 291 Brecht, Bertolt 401, 403, 404, 405,

406, 408, 409, 512

Breuer, Rolf 57, 60, 98

Broch, Hermann 54, 55

Barke, James 285, 286, 291

Barrie, J.M. 275

Barstow, Stan 460

Brooks, Cleanth 557, 558, 561, 566
Brown, George Douglas 275, 276, 291, 292
Brown, John Mason 517

Brown, Russel M. 318 Bubner, Rüdiger 75, 98, 478 Burns, Robert 273, 277, 290

Duris, Robert 2/3, 2/7, 2/0

Campbell, Ian 288, 291 Camus, Albert 549 Carlyle, Thomas 120, 145, 274 Carnap, Rudolf 87, 90, 99 Cassirer, Ernst 33, 65, 83, 99 Castiglione, Baldassare 82 Chabon, Michael 523, 524, 526, 547,

552 Chapman, John 49, 516 Chaucer 126, 133 Chekhov 107 Chesterton, G.K. 114 Chomsky, Noam 75, 80, 86, 97, 99

Cinthio, Giraldi 403, 408

Clark, Ian 78, 86, 99

Cleaver, Elridge 582, 595

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor 120, 143

Conquest, Robert 452

Conrad, Joseph 7, 8, 127, 128

Conradi, Peter J. 236, 243

Cormack, John 287, 292 Corneille, Pierre 50, 107

Coulthard, Malcolm 432, 433, 434,

436, 441, 444 Cowley, Malcolm 558, 566

Culler, Jonathan 73, 74, 99, 112, 125, 133

Daiches, David 120, 121, 124, 128, 129, 133, 288, 292 Darwin, Charles 280, 284 Daudet, Alphonse 301

Davie, Donald 452

Davis, Thomas 263, 269

Dawkins, Richard 407, 408

de Quincey, Thomas 178, 179, 185

Defoe, Daniel 467

Derrida, Jaques 63, 96, 99, 382, 384,

467, 468, 469, 471

Descombes, Vincent 386, 389

Dickens, Charles 7, 122, 127, 172,

234, 276, 533

Dilthey, Wilhelm 62, 84, 99, 483,

484, 485

Dostoevski, Fjodor 304

Dryden, John 124

DuBois, W.E.B. 574, 581, 595

Dunbar, William 272, 277, 288, 290

Eagleton, Terry 27, 45, 376

Edo culture 300, 302

Edwards, Ifan ab Owen 253

Edwards, Jane 255

Edwards, O.M. 253

Eichenbaum, Boris 464

Eliot, George 127, 128

Eliot, T.S. 7, 62, 82, 91, 99, 108, 123,

124, 125, 133, 174, 184, 239, 300, 395

Ellis, Bret Easton 523, 524, 526, 530, 533, 547, 548, 549, 552, 553

Ellison, Ralph 580, 596

Elyot, Sir Thomas 82

Emerson, Ralph Waldo 339, 393

Engels, Friedrich 68, 374, 375

Enright, D.J. 452

Evans, Caradoc 255, 267

Fahey, Diane 211, 228, 230

Faulkner, William 533, 555, 557, 558, 559, 560, 561, 563, 565, 566, 567 Fenollosa, Ernest 297 Feuerbach, Ludwig 68 Fiedler, Leslie 182, 184 Fielding, Henry 108 Fish, Stanley 170, 184, 384 Fiske, John 193, 194, 199, 203, 204, 205, 206, 208, 307 Fitzgerald, F.Scott 533, 549 Flaubert, Gustave 467 Fontane, Theodor 467 Forester, C.S. 147, 148, 160 Forster, E.M. 348, 411-429 Foucault, Michel 28, 29, 32, 35, 43, 45, 97, 112, 133, 378, 382, 386, 447, 449, 450, 472 Fowler, Henry W. 140, 153 Franklin, Benjamin 532, 533, 552 Frazer, James 558 Frederick, King of Prussia 407 French, David 319, 320, 321, 324, 328, 329 Freud, Sigmund 29, 96, 142, 304, 405, 503, 557 Fries, Charles C. 392, 397

Gadamer, Hans-Georg 13, 29, 36, 38, 39, 40, 42, 43, 44, 45, 84, 85, 100, 131, 133, 415, 428, 478, 481, 482, 483, 493, 519, 520, 556, 566, 569, 596
Galsworthy, John 464
Geertz, Clifford 198, 208, 479, 520
Gissing, George 123, 133
Godwin, William 451, 472
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von 50, 52, 53, 55, 180, 403, 475, 482, 484

Goffmann, Erving 226, 230 Göhring, Heinz 489, 520 Golding, William 395, 456 Goldmann, Lucien 68, 100, 371 Goldoni, Carlo 49 Goldsmith, Oliver 338 Gorbachov, Mikhail 408 Gottsched, Johann Christoph 50 Gouin, François 611 Gramsci, Antonio 371, 375, 376, 382, 383, 389 Gray, Alasdair 281, 287, 289, 292 Greenblatt, Stephen 20, 21 Grünzweig, Walter 78, 86, 99, 207, 208 Gunn, Neil Miller 278, 279, 280, 281, 283, 285, 289, 292 Gunn, Thom 452, 455 Habermas, Jürgen 35, 63, 66, 71, 75, 85, 90, 92, 100 Hall, Stuart 471 Hammett, Dashiell 540 Hancock, Tony 216 Hancock, W.K. 307, 315

Hanham, Harold John 277, 290, 292 Hansen, Chadwick 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 512, 519, 520 Hansen, Nikolaus 538, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 553 Hardy, Thomas 234 Hauptmann, Gerhard 52, 53, 55 Hawthorne, Nathaniel 393, 394, 395, 397 Hay, John MacDougall 275, 276, 281, 292 Hearn, Lafcadio 297 Hebbel, Friedrich 52

628 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich 28, 62, 68, 80, 100, 101, 339 Heidegger, Martin 38, 54, 55, 84, 97, 100, 382, 483, 552 Hemingway, Ernest 476, 533, 549 Herder, Johann Gottfried von 483, Herzog, Kristin 582, 583, 596 Heuermann, Hartmut 214, 217, 231 Hewison, Robert 448, 472 Highway, Tomson 319, 326, 327, 328, 329 Hill, John 454, 459, 460, 462, 465, 466, 472 Hillis Miller, J. 4, 12, 18, 21, 22 Hiss, Alger 513, 514, 518 Hofstadter, Douglas R. 100 Hofstadter, Richard 61, 79, 80, 81, 515, 516, 520 Hogben, Lancelot 142 Hoggart, Richard 448 Holub, Robert C. 35, 39, 40, 45 Homer 47, 49, 55, 108, 114, 336 Hörmann, Hans 40, 77, 101 Hornby, A.S. 612 Horstmann, Axel 479, 480, 481, 482, 520 Hughes, T. Rowland 255 Hughes, Ted 455 Hühn, Peter 214, 217, 231 Humboldt, Alexander von 150, 483 Hume, David 280, 285 Husserl, Edmund 29, 39, 90, 101, 467, 483 Huxley, Aldous 278 Huxley, T.E. 280

Hyde, Douglas 263, 264, 266

Ihimaera, Witi 352, 353, 356, 357, 359, 364 Irving, John 583, 592, 593, 594, 596 Iser, Wolfgang 15, 16, 22, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 44, 46, 57, 62, 101, 215, 216, 222, 227, 228, 231, 571 Ishiguro, Kazuo 343, 344, 346, 348 Jakobson, Roman 448, 464 James, Henry 127, 300, 452 Jameson, Frederic 376, 380 Janmohamed 387, 389 Janowitz, Tama 523, 524, 525, 526, 533, 547, 552 Jaspers, Karl 485, 486 Jauß, Hans Robert 22, 36, 39, 46, 62, 216, 231, 555, 556, 566 Jennings, Elizabeth 452, 456, 472 Jespersen, Otto 118, 133, 612 Jhabvala, Ruth Prawer 347, 348 Johnson, Samuel 121, 128, 288, 290,

291 Jones, Bobi 255 Jones, Thomas Gwynn 255 Jonson, Ben 120 Joyce, James 108, 125, 266, 463, 467

Kachru, Braj B. 10, 11, 14, 22, 309, 315, 352, 364 Kafka, Franz 467, 472 Kafu, Nagai 297-304 Kai-shek, Chiang 513 Kant, Immanuel 27, 94, 101, 132, 483 Kazan, Elia 512 Kazin, Alfred 557, 566

Keats, John 336, 395, 533 Keller, Hans 547, 548, 549, 552

Kellogg, Robert 458, 462, 463, 472 Kesey, Ken 534, 545 King, Martin Luther 575, 596 Kipling, Rudyard 114, 123, 133, 342, 428 Klähn, Bernd 549, 552 Knox, John 272, 281, 287, 288 Köhring, Klaus 214, 231 Kramer, Jürgen 209, 214, 231, 191 Krappmann, Lothar 225, 226, 227, Kristeva, Julia 378, 468, 472, 562

La Fontaine, Jean de 301 Lady Gregory, Augusta 266 Lakatos, Imre 69, 102 Lang, Andrew 49, 276 Larkin, Philip 171, 172, 184, 452, 456, 460

Krusche, Dieter 478, 521

Kuhn, Thomas S. 69, 92, 101

Lasch, Christopher 525, 552 Lattimore, Owen 518 Lawrence, D.H. 127, 174, 234, 452 Leach, Bernard 297

Leavis, F.R. 115, 127, 128, 129, 130, 133, 370 Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm 338

Lentricchia, Frank 365 Lessing, Doris 450, 456, 471, 472 Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim 50, 56

Letley, Emma 289, 292

Lévi-Strauss, Claude 65, 66, 69, 73, 75, 77, 102 Lewis, C.S. 131

Lewis, Sinclair 467 Linklater, Eric 275, 283, 292

Lim, Catherine 347, 352

Lodge, David 33, 45, 46, 113, 133, 165, 166, 184, 453, 456, 472 Löffler, Sigrid 547, 548, 552 Lord Cecil, David 115, 133 Lucas, F.L. 402, 408 Luhmann, Niklas 35, 70, 72, 77, 78, 79, 80, 102 Luther, Martin 48, 52, 404 Lyndsay, David 272, 292 Lyons, John 72, 92, 93, 94, 96, 102

Mac Colla, Fionn 279, 280, 282, 283, 287, 292

MacCoul, Finn 278, 279 MacDiarmid, Hugh 277, 285, 289,

MacDonald, Thomas Douglas 280 Mackenzie, Compton 285 Macpherson, James 266, 274 Madison, G.B. 486, 487, 488, 489, 521

Marcuse, Herbert 369, 389 Martz, Louis L. 235, 238, 243 Marx, Karl 68, 103, 104, 142, 146, 152, 200, 304, 373, 374, 375, 376, 389

Marx, Leo 393, 397 Masakazu, Yamazaki 401, 406, 408 Mason, Bobby Ann 533, 552 Matussek, Matthias 549, 550, 553 Matza, Diane 585, 588, 596 Maupassant, Guy de 299, 301 McCarthy, Senator Joseph 454, 512, 514, 515, 516, 518

McGrath, John 286, 292 McIlvanney, William 286, 289, 292 McInerney, Jay 523-530, 532-553 Mead, G.M. 226 Melville, Herman 7, 392

Meredith, George 115 Mhac an tSaoi, Maíre 266 Miller, Arthur 475, 476, 498, 499, 501, 512, 513, 516, 517, 518, 519, 521

Milton, John 7, 119, 130, 133, 145,

Minturno 403, 408

Molière 301

More, Sir Thomas 64, 102

Morganwg, Iolo 250

Morris-Jones, John 255

Morrison, Blake 452, 453, 455, 472

Morrison, Toni 571-576, 579, 580,

583,-598

Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus 304 Muir, Edwin 277, 290, 292

Mukarovsky, Jan 60, 102, 103, 216, 231, 450

Mukherjee, Bharati 347

Munro, Neil 277, 279, 292

Murdoch, Iris 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243,

451, 452, 456

Musil, Robert 467

Musset, Alfred de 301

Nabokov, Vladimir 8, 178 Naipaul, V.S. 7, 9, 347

Narayan, R.K. 9, 347, 348 Nash, Walter 435, 436, 437, 438,

439, 440, 441, 444, 445

Ngugi, Wa Thiong'o 9, 352

Nietzsche, Friedrich 29, 122, 128,

133, 378, 381, 382, 455, 481, 482

Nissenbaum, Stephen 502, 505, 506, 507, 509, 511, 512, 516, 520

Norinaga, Motoori 304

Novalis 483

Noyes, Reverend Nicholas 509

Ó Diréan, Maírtin 266

ÓCadhain, Maírtin 266

Ó Ríordan, Seán 266

O'Casey, Sean 262, 267, 288, 292

O'Connell, Daniel 259

O'Neill, William 512, 513, 514, 515, 521

Oakley, Ronald, J. 513, 514, 516, 521

Oedipus 402

Ogai, Mori 298, 299, 300, 302, 303

Ojaide, Tanure 154, 160

Orwell, George 395, 454, 464

Osborne, John 457

Paisley, Ian 287

Palmer, Harold 612

Pantycelyn, Williams 254

Parry, Robert William 255

Parry-Williams, T.H. 255

Passy, Paul 612

Peirce, Charles Sanders 112, 133,

556, 567

Piaget, Jean 480, 481, 521

Pike, Robert 506, 518

Pindar 47

Plato 30, 47, 97, 102, 103, 120, 132,

134, 533

Pope, Alexander 121, 124, 126, 133,

134

Popper, Karl R. 69, 80, 83, 85, 102

Posener, Alan 546, 547, 553

Pound, Ezra 174

Praxiteles 533, 534

Premchand 383, 384, 389

Quine, Willard Van Orman 83, 90, 92, 93, 94, 96, 97, 98, 102

Rabinovitz, Rubin 463, 472 Raj Anand, Mulk 9 Rao, Rajo 7, 9 Reagan, Ronald 512 Reaney, James 326 Reed, Warren 340, 348 Reisz, Karel 447, 457, 463, 464 Richards, I.A. 370 Richardson, Tony 457, 464 Richelieu 48 Ricoeur, Paul 13 Rimer, Thomas J. 401, 406, 408 Robert the Bruce 271, 272 Roberts, Kate 255 Robinson, Mairi 290, 292 Roosevelt, Theodore 513 Rorty, Richard 13, 43, 44, 46, 556, 565, 567 Rosenberg, Ethel 513 Rosenberg, Julius 513 Ross, Malcolm 318 Rousseau, Jean Jacques 49, 120 Rowland Huges, T. 255 Rushdie, Salman 131, 347 Russell, Bertrand 83, 90, 93, 103 Ryffel, Barbara 546, 547, 548, 553 Ryga, George 325, 329

Said, Edward W. 365, 378, 388, 389 Salinger, J.D. 525, 536, 537, 538, 541, 553 Sapir, E. 150, 160 Sartre, Jean Paul 85, 103, 108, 113, 134, 534 Saussure, Ferdinand de 5, 29, 33, 112, 134 Schlegel, Friedrich 52, 483, 484 Schleiermacher, Friedrich 51, 52, 53, 56, 483, 484, 485, 486, 521 Schlesinger, John 464 Schmidt, Siegfried J. 61, 62, 67, 88, 100, 102, 103 Schnaubelt, Peter 548, 553 Scholes, Robert 458, 462, 463, 472 Schütz, Alfred 90, 488, 490, 521 Schwanitz, Dietrich 61, 79, 103 Scott, Sir Walter 274, 282, 289, 291, Searle, John R. 75, 88, 89, 103, 432, 445 Seelye, H. Ned 185, 476, 521 Seung, T.K. 96, 103 Shakespeare, William 7, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 55, 56, 107, 145, 179, 223, 248, 401-409, 431-445 Shaw, George Bernard 262, 267, 454 Sheridan, Richard Brinsley 273 Sheridan, Thomas 273 Shklovsky, Victor 33, 37, 38, 46 Shoguns, Tokugawa 301 Shun, Lu 384 Sidney, Sir Philip 120, 121, 134 Sillitoe, Alan 447-472 Sitwell, Edith 115 Smith, Godfrey 171, 185 Smith, Iain Crichton 283, 293 Smollett, Tobias 274, 293 Socrates 30, 31, 481 Soseki, Natsume 297-304 Southern, Richard 405 Soyinka, Wole 7, 9, 154, 352 Spark, Muriel 456 Spenser, Edmund 266, 271 Spinoza, Benedictus de 533 Spranger, Ewald 486 Sridhar, S.N. 8, 22, 352, 364

632

Stackelberg, Jürgen von 48 Steiner, George 47, 55, 56, 95, 104 Stendhal 31, 46 Stern, H.H. 187, 612 Sterne, Laurence 108, 266 Stevens, Wallace 533 Stevenson, Robert Louis 109, 134, 289, 293

Stewart, Walter 317, 330 Stoker, Bram 222, 223, 231

Storey, David 460

Stowe, Harriet Beecher 582, 583, 584, 597

Strevens, Peter 3, 5, 6, 7, 22, 309, 315, 601-612 Sweet, Henry 612

Swift, Jonathan 67, 262, 267 Synge, John Millington 262, 267

Taut, Bruno 297 Taylor, John Russel 457, 466, 469, 470, 472 Taylor, Robert 512 Thibaut, Matthias 546, 547, 553 Thirabutana, Prajaub 352, 353, 357, 362, 364 Thomas, Dylan 255, 454, 533

Thomas, R.S. 255

Thompson, John B. 376, 389 Thoreau, Henry David 393, 575, 597

Thorne, J.P. 152, 160

Tolstoy, Leo 467

Tremblay, Michael 319, 323, 324, 326, 328, 329, 330

Trilling, Lionel 370, 426, 429

Trollope, Anthony 122

Trudeau, Pierre 322

Turner, R.H. 226

Twain, Mark 395

Index

Tydings, Millard E. 515

Ullmann, Stephen 60, 92, 93, 94, 97,

Updike, John 476

Van O'Connor, William 557, 567 Viehweger, Dieter 88, 89, 104 Vietor, Wilhelm 612 da Vinci, Leonardo 340 Virgil 114

Voltaire 338

Wa Thiong 'o Ngugi 9, 352 Wagner, Heinrich 262 Wain, John 172, 173, 185 Walker, Alice 585 Wallace, William 271, 272, 291

Wanliss, Thomas Drummond 276, 277, 293

Warshow, Robert 517, 518, 521 Washington, Mary Helen 587, 588, 590, 597

Waterhouse, Keith 460 Webb, Keith 271, 293

Wedderburn, Robert 272, 293

Weir, Ann Lowry 352, 364

Wendt, Albert 351, 352, 353, 355, 358, 359, 360, 364

Wesley, Charles 125

White, Eric 404, 409

White, Gertrude 411, 426, 427, 429

Whitehead, Alfred North 47

Whorf, Benjamin Lee 76, 104, 150, 152, 161

Wierlacher, Alois 478, 521

Wierzbicka, Anna 152, 153, 161

Wilde, Oscar 5, 23, 122, 134, 454

Willet, John 401, 404, 406, 409

Williams, Raymond 66, 68, 71, 72, **82, 104, 193, 371, 375, 376, 385,** 386, 389, 448 Williams, Waldo 255 Wilson, Angus 370, 464 Wittgenstein, Ludwig 67, 71, 74, 75, 93, 104, 533, 556, 567 Wolfe, Tom 547 Wolff, Erwin 21, 216, 231 Woolf, Virginia 123, 234, 452 Wordsworth, William 120, 121, 122, **125**, **134**, **168**, **533**, **545** Wright, Richard 577, 578, 582, 598 Wulf, Anna 471 Wyatt, Sir Thomas 48 Wyndham, John 106

Yeats, William Butler 115, 119, 134, 266, 275, 293
Yosai, Wakon 297
Young, Edward 125, 126, 134
Yukichi, Fukuzawa 302, 304
Yukio, Mishima 303

Zawodsky, Magnus 546, 547, 553 Zeami 401, 405, 406, 408 Zedung, Mao 513 Zimmermann, Hans-Joachim 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 185 Zola, Emile 299