

A Return to Sources

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AT FIRST GLANCE, there would seem to be much work awaiting the teacher and scholar of language in the twenty-first century. The powers that be are obsessed with the industrial pollution of water, land and air. The case seems to be clearer, or foggier, for pollution of language. Useful old words are no longer part of our student's vocabulary. The words that remain in common parlance are used in a slack and careless manner. Obvious poor logic and clumsy grammar are heard from the television sets and read on the front pages of newspapers. While this is happening, the number of students of language and, consequently, the number of teachers of language, have grown ever fewer over the past generation. Although the CEOs of major corporations call for employees who have a liberal arts education that will allow them to reflect and respond creatively to new techniques and new challenges, the presidents and regents of universities seem determined to encourage students to pursue narrow vocational training, supplemented by entertaining lectures in the social and physical sciences. More serious, perhaps, are the larger intellec-

tual trends of the late twentieth century, which promise to continue into the new century and which threaten the study of language in a fundamental way.

There are, at least, two obstacles facing anyone committed to forwarding the study of language and literature. First, will there be any but antiquarian interest in languages other than English and any other than antiquarian research to be done on them? We are promised a world monoculture in which the same books, movies, and songs are read, watched, and listened to all over the world. People with good jobs will be occupied with computers, the aerospace industry, and biotechnology. The rest will be delivering pizzas and smiling as they check out their customers at Wal-Mart and McDonald's. In some German universities, physics and economics are already taught in English. The clear implications of the positive suggestions in Al Gore's *Earth in Balance* is that the brilliant diversity of the planet's ecological systems can only be preserved if we all learn to behave in the same way. To save the diversity of the natural world, we must suppress the diversity of the world's human cultures.

The heart of culture is language. "*Qui dit homme dit langage et qui dit langage dit société*," as Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote in *Tristes tropiques* (1955). It is in dealing

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with languages that the multiculturalism advocated by university administrators reveals its real agenda. The courses and programs set up to promote multiculturalism never include required courses to teach the language and literature of the earth's many cultures. They are usually social science courses, which employ various Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment theoretical systems to propagandize the ideals of the liberal regime and are taught in English.

Of course, the triumph of the world monoculture with its popular entertainment and its technology all expressed in a kind of Basic English, or even Pidgin English, is by no means a certainty. Samuel Huntington has suggested in his *Clash of Civilizations* (1996) that the world's cultures will survive and that the technocrats who were going to run the world, in his earlier vision, are, in his current way of thinking, going to work for the great cultures and their religions and in their languages.

Even, however, if the teacher and scholar of language were to dodge the monocultural bullet, it might not be so easy to avoid stepping on the anti-traditionalist third rail. Languages are traditions. They represent millennia of teaching and learning, of critical thought and careless misunderstanding, both of which may lead to linguistic innovation. Then the process of teaching and learning begins again. Most of this process does not take place in schools, or by means of professional teachers. Languages are handed down from one generation to the next by parents and family, friends and fellow workers. They are shaped and changed by poets and comedians, admen and housewives. Although books are an important part of language, much language never enters the pages of a book and true mastery of a language can only be learned by doing, by speaking and writing, not by memorizing a textbook, as essential as memorization is at

certain stages in language acquisition. The Enlightenment ideal of a science is one that can be learned from the pages of a book. True knowledge is what can be read in a book. Language, like science and ice skating and lovemaking, is an art that uses books, but achieves perfection in practice.

There is another way that language does not fit into the Enlightenment worldview and its attendant curriculum. Enlightenment social sciences achieve knowledge by counting and want to deal with what can be counted. Achievement in language is determined by quality, not by quantity, at least not by quantity alone. Of course, the larger your vocabulary, the more you can say, but you can say those things clumsily or gracefully. A Racine or a Hemingway can present important moral truths beautifully in a vocabulary that is disciplined and relatively narrow when counted, but which is used in a way that evokes more than it says. Access to great literature can lead the reader or listener to understanding more than most social science texts. What is more, the same text may teach him different things at different points of his life. Catullus wrote two lines of Latin verse:

*Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse
requiris.
Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.*

(I hate and love. You ask me perhaps, why I should be doing this. I don't know, but I feel it happening and I am on the cross.)

There is more to be learned from those two lines of simple Latin than from many books on love, the relation between the sexes, and human psychology. It is composed so as to speak to many different generations and to resound through the ages, awakening understanding and compassion from times that in many respects are very different from one another.

The vocation of the language teacher is to preserve the contact of each genera-

tion with its predecessors, using language in a way that combines vocabulary and syntax, thought and passion, beauty and truth. That vocation is a tradition in which the teacher, the product of millennia of teaching, tries to hand on language, itself the product of myriads of millennia of human communication. The use of beautiful or powerful language to hand on high culture is perhaps the most distinctive trait of human beings. Every aspect of human behavior, when broken away from its integral unity and studied by itself, can be found in other animals. Beavers build dams. Birds communicate danger or desire. Gorillas bring up their young in different ways, depending on where they live. The distinctively human involves not just quantity but quality: the transmission of high culture and philosophical religion in beautiful and moving language. To participate in this challenging discipline involves uniting complex and difficult skills: manipulating concept and symbol, form and context, content and individual voice. It may be done clumsily or performed with the precision and beauty of a ballet. Being able to evaluate the quality of the performer, the speaker or the writer, is essential for mastery of a language.

A professor of linguistics has an ideal quite different from the teacher and scholar of language, the philologist. The linguist seeks to introduce the ideals of the Enlightenment Project into the traditions of language learning and use. The accomplishments of linguistics have been greatest in areas which are basically physical, such as phonology, analyzing the sounds formed by the human body to communicate. Linguistics does not try to analyze the levels of perfection or incompetence of language use. Hans-Martin Gauger has recently written about the "Helplessness of Linguistics" before linguistic change and development. Is an innovation an improvement or degeneration? The linguist cannot answer and,

indeed, refuses to answer. He lacks any criterion which would allow approval or disapprobation. Dostoevsky saw that on the highest level, "If there is no God, all is permitted." On our more humdrum level, we can see that "If there is no authoritative tradition, all is permitted." Ordinary humans feel that this situation is wrong. Every variation does not create a new dialect. We ourselves recognize that sometimes we say things we do not mean to say. We err. We can tell the difference between erring and creating. For the mainstream linguist the only error is the theoretical error that claims that the living tradition of language, evaluated by a human being, a complex amalgam of spirit, mind, and body, can give us guidelines for judging a sentence, a poem, or a speech. One linguist asked an e-mail list by what right he could impose his dialect, which insisted, for instance, on a distinction between "lie" and "lay" on a student whose dialect did not possess that perhaps arbitrary distinction. What scholars can do is to observe and to catalogue. Their job is descriptive, not prescriptive. This attitude, originally perhaps a rather arcane, academic one, has now become the mainstream view in education schools and in elementary schools.

The philologist, the teacher and scholar of language and literature, of texts and grammar, knows that his mission, handed down from Zenodotus and Aristarchus, from Quintilian and Sir Thomas Elyot, and from thousands of others, insists that he impose the standards that the tradition preserves. Language is both physical form and spiritual substance and appreciating, tasting that unity in difference is distinctively human. To privilege the physical and the quantitative at the expense of the spiritual and the qualitative is to participate in an assault on what has made human culture so uniquely fulfilling and creative over the millennia. Tradition has seen the

human being as a unity of body, mind, and spirit and the rejection of this complex unity is what C. S. Lewis called "The Abolition of Man."

The Enlightenment scholar doubts that the philologist belongs in the modern university. The humane science of philology traces its traditions to the Museum of ancient Alexandria. It feels at home in the university, an institution which is medieval in its historical origins and its traditional goals. Worse than either of these negative traits is the fact that the philologist possesses a knowledge that is almost poison to the believer in the Enlightenment Project. A key article in the Enlightenment credo proclaims that letting the physical world go where natural forces take it leads to greater complexity and wealth. He sees this in the evolution of the biological world and in the rising prosperity brought by the global free market. The philologist knows the story of languages, of Greek and Latin, for instance, or English. These languages began in complexity and depth. In the hands of great and good men, poets and statesmen, that aboriginal complexity was shaped and molded into a powerful instrument for great works of literature that reflect the human fulfillment that was lived in some societies that spoke those tongues: fifth-century Athens, Republican and Augustan Rome, Elizabethan England, the American Republic in the years of its founding and early flowering.

When left to itself, however, language degenerates. It becomes simpler, not more complex. It becomes a cruder instrument for expressing human emotion or thought, not a more differentiated one. It breaks apart and people who could once understand one another, no longer do. Whether our complex world could have been formed by the random interaction of atoms and the random mutation of genes is a matter for specialists to decide. The time-scales are beyond ordi-

nary human patterns. We know, however, how Greek and Latin developed, or English or Arabic. When mastered by the great and good, they became what they can still be, instruments suited for the education of the young and the fulfillment of the adult; the basis of cultures that could make beautiful and useful things and could also make sense out of the world inhabited by those who spoke and wrote those languages. Languages are traditions that are the creations of no one person or group, but when they are used to say something beautiful and profound, this new creation is not due to randomness, but to human will and desire using the tools that tradition has given.

The vocation of the teacher and scholar of language in the next century is multiform. Much of that vocation is traditional in two senses: to teach new generations languages understood as traditions; to edit texts, themselves composed in traditional languages and in traditional genres and then, after their creation, handed down in manuscripts, autographs, proofs, and multiple editions in a way that can only be understood by the method of the tradition of texts; then to comment on and explain these texts to new generations in a way that is loyal both to the authors and their works and to the readers and students of those works. This task is not trapped in a past time or free from the constraints of time. It is not time-bound or timeless. It is historical. It is traditional. It links generations not by instinct or random mutation, but by learning the past, thinking about what has been learned critically and then going on to create something new. Then the process begins again.

This is much to do. There are so many students who not understand the richness of other tongues, or of their own. There are so many works whose texts have not been settled with the use of all the relevant evidence. There are still more

texts whose understanding requires research and hard thinking and sensitive appreciation.

Yet in the next century the philologist will have much more to do. As guardian and teacher of the distinctively human institution of the tradition of language, the teacher and scholar of language must hold high the banner of language and tradition, of standards that are historical and human. Whatever may be the case in the world of matter and biological life, where many believe that random mutation can create complexity and meaningful structures, the philologist knows that among humans this situation does not hold. The fullness of understanding the philologist seeks is not attained by reductionism, by removing the layers until the physical core is revealed. Human fulfillment requires religious insight, moral righteousness, aesthetic beauty, and factual accuracy, as well as a physical foundation. A poem, like any human statement, consists of sounds and we need to try to hear those sounds, as Louis Zukofsky insisted in his versions of Catullus. Then, however, those sounds must be linked to human meaning, and that can only be done when the sounds are produced as part of a tradition and understood as part of a tradition.

Once I knew a sculptor who proclaimed that he wanted to do more than carve a few statues. He wanted to create a new lexicon for his art. He seemed quite proud of his formulation. I suggested, as a humble philologist, that lexica were useful precisely insofar as they were not new, but preserved, carefully collected, and thoughtfully organized the traditions of their language. The new poem or the new understanding of the poem came

from the discipline of mastering that old knowledge, understood not as *creatio ex nihilo*, but as humble submission to the discipline of the tradition of language and art.

If the philologist does his job, the academic world will see a model of human creativity and fulfillment which it sorely needs. The paradigm is not Darwinian evolution or global free trade, not an invisible hand making new objects and new structures without outside interference. The model is Virgil imitating Homer; Dante following Virgil; Machiavelli pondering Livy; John Adams copying Polybius, Werner Heisenberg reading Plato's *Timaeus*. This model demands patience in learning and humility in submission to the accomplishments and traditions of the past. Even in the field of genetics, most mutations are destructive of the organism that suffers them. In the human world every change must be evaluated by means of human standards won by hard work and hard thinking over millennia. The philologist knows and tries to teach others what Machiavelli proclaimed in the first chapter of the Third Book of his *Discourses on Livy's First Decade*, that religions and republics need to return to their sources in order to renew themselves. The next century, like this one, will value creativity and freedom. The teacher of language and literature is humble before the great heritage given to philology to guard and transmit. There is also pride in that heritage and the secret of its importance. Machiavelli wrote about that importance five hundred years ago; in 1998, Régis Debray reminded his daughter of it: *Les novateurs ont la mémoire longue*.

The philologist keeps that memory alive.