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Literature? C'est un monde: The Foreign Language Curriculum in the Wake of the MLA Report

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Since its publication, the report of the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World,” has made me meditate on various academic issues, but my real-life epiphany occurred a few months ago, when I attended a pre-K–8 school open house. The principal, who was illustrating the school’s radical curricular revisions, shared with his audience the dilemma that plagued him during the restructuring of his program: Would it be moral to fragment the students’ daily schedule even more by adding a foreign language requirement? Despite its avowed dedication to outstanding literacy and, needless to say, to diversity of all sorts, not to mention the need to prepare new generations for a multicultural, global world, the school ultimately chose to remain faithful to a monolingualist ideology. Ironically, two days later, while waiting at the doctor’s office, I found in a 2007 issue of *U.S. News and World Report* an article that discussed the Pentagon’s deployment of civilian anthropologists “to help understand Iraq’s ‘human terrain’” (Mulrine). Recruited by the military as cultural analysts, these social scientists provide troops with observations about the complex local dynamics of Iraqi society, its symbols, and its relation with power players, which are then translated “into action for soldiers” (36).

There I was, confronted with two extreme manifestations of what the MLA report defines as the “instrumentalist” view of language and culture

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(235). On the one hand, a narrow conception of foreign idioms as mere communicative tools, so limited in scope that they can be easily sacrificed in favor of other activities and expressive means allegedly endowed with higher educational value—practicing hand bells, for instance. On the other hand, a clear understanding of the usefulness of translingual and transcultural competencies, co-opted, however, for strategic intelligence purposes.

In the face of such examples, which are anything but isolated cases, it is unquestionable that we, as academic educators in foreignness, can and have to play a pivotal role in supporting what, at the opposite end of the spectrum, the MLA report presents as the “constitutive aspect of language” (236). By combining advanced expressive competencies and profound cultural awareness, language as a “complex multifunctional phenomenon” (235) can foster understanding of self and other and offer tools to resist reductive or aberrant instrumentalizations. But how do we persuade students to come to us in order to acquire that expertise? With its suggestions for curricular and institutional change, the report promises to keep the academic debate on the mission of language departments in higher education alive and kicking for quite a while.

The report’s reflections and recommendations regarding the present and future of foreign language teaching are in line with a wider pedagogical and scholarly reconceptualization of the humanities, from the proposal to rename the field of comparative literature as comparative cultural studies to the self-examination of English departments about the role of linguistic competencies—written and oral, literary and more broadly cultural—in the undergraduate curriculum of the third millennium. We have long accepted that an approach to literature as the quintessence of Arnoldian sweetness and light is history. The curricula of many foreign language departments and the scholarship of numerous faculty members already reflect the radical changes brought about by the advent of cultural studies, as the report also observes (237). Therefore a systematic commitment to a broader notion of cultural literacy in the entire foreign language sector is sensible, provided that individual academic institutions do not implement the report’s call for transformation only as a pragmatic response to short-term needs (like the government’s fixation on certain foreign languages as weapons to get to know the enemy) or as expressions of ephemeral fashions.

At the same time, the flaws that have been ascribed to the cultural studies approach can work as caveats for a scenario that looms in the report—namely, the risk of building a pop foreign language undergraduate major that teaches everything and nothing, devoid of a precise focus and of methodological rigor. I endorse the idea that literature should constitute not a

single but one of the discourses in the undergraduate foreign language curriculum (a comparatist myself, I have happily occupied the translingual and transcultural territory since my undergraduate days). Yet I believe we should prevent literature from becoming the Cinderella in the cluster of disciplines that are summoned to contribute to the new integrative approach to the major. I am not saying this to reinstate the rigid two-tier language-versus-literature system we inherited.

In an ideal academic world, blessed by the perfect synergy of administrative support, interdisciplinary collaboration, departmental restructuring, and individual faculty members' innovative pedagogical and scholarly practices, the programs envisioned by the MLA report could successfully develop a variety of cultural contents and approaches while preserving each professor's areas of specialization and following precise goals set by the faculty as a whole. In more realistic frameworks, however, the foreign language major might turn into a bad copy of an area studies program, in which jack-of-all-trades educators offer a bit of everything, sacrificing coherence and depth in the name of an illusory extensiveness: a touch of history here, a pinch of geography there, a bit of politics, some literature—possibly contemporary and noncanonical texts so as to appear more progressive—a fleeting look at cinema, art, religion, society, and a taste of food. In other words, a program that, precisely for its lack of a well-defined identity or intellectual rationale, could be housed in any academic unit, offering administrators a tempting pretext to dismember us. The danger haunting this allegedly wide-ranging and flexible model of education in institutions with limited resources or different priorities is hence a certain banalization of the curriculum, which may backfire precisely against the expectation that foreign language departments will lead the way in this transformation.

As we redesign our course contents in the wider cultural and cross-cultural context suggested by the report, let us keep in mind that we can gain even more in this new configuration by preserving the centrality of the literary text and highlighting its specific dynamics, capitalizing on the skills that we can export from literary analysis to other disciplinary areas. Instead of apologizing for the nature of our knowhow, trying to ascribe value to a supposedly ineffectual literature through other disciplines that we often perceive as stronger and more respectable, we (just as our colleagues in English departments) should present our discipline as able to throw light on other cultural phenomena, as the forge of messages and interpretive strategies that modify or even create those adopted in other areas.

Like all that belongs to the aesthetic rather than to the practical realm, literature too often seems a curricular luxury, a surplus with maintenance

costs that, especially in periods of shrinking budgets, are considered less and less justifiable. Yet we should defend this apparently superfluous educational wealth without either enclosing it in a vacuum or excessively diluting it in a disciplinary melting pot. I would apply to literature the observations that a character in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, Chad, makes about the great force of the new art of advertising: It is "infinite like all the arts. . . . In the hands, naturally, of a master. . . . With the right man to work it *c'est un monde*" (359). A literary text itself is a world. Students should rediscover it not as a self-contained enclave but as the center of an interdisciplinary network connecting individual feelings, collective drives, historical reasons, geographic contexts, social issues, ideologies, all of them transfigured through a sophisticated and imaginative use of language. And we—to evoke James once again—are the right men (and women), the masters, to make it work as such and to help students draw from it fundamental competencies that are crucial to a wide spectrum of academic units and professions.

If the language specialists envisioned by the MLA's report are expected to make an active, receptive, and creative use of language (see Saussy), it is literature more than any other sectorial discipline that, as it conveys content, calls attention to language and fosters critical thinking and inventiveness. The training in discourse analysis, writing, and expository skills and the art of effective and creative argumentation that we can offer students are at least as exportable and useful as any other, more applied expertise. We can enrich our students' reading and interpretive adventure if we teach students not simply to treat the literary text as a cultural phenomenon but also to analyze cultural phenomena as texts, reading their lines but also between the lines, with rigorous and well-defined tools.

Professional retooling in any job is at once a challenge and an opportunity. I think we have to be open to this translanguing and transcultural turn but not attempt to transform ourselves into eclectic Renaissance men and women under the illusion of our limitless capacity for development and credibility. We should resist the pressure to tailor curricula to the alleged tastes and expectations of undergraduates at large in the hope of stealing a few students from other departments or of retaining a couple of not-too-committed majors. The danger of this strategy is the creation of a simplistic, although apparently more appealing, course of study that is in fact quite distant from the "deep cultural knowledge" that the MLA report recommends (236). With that kind of outcome we will fail to gain the respect of other academic units and above all of our own pool of customers who are interested in acquiring valuable and measurable expertise of some sort.

Perhaps—why not—we should also try to reeducate students (who sometimes choose a foreign-language major with the idea that it will be less demanding than other sectors of the humanities) and require some retooling of them so that, with careful mentoring, they can strike a balance in their academic experience between practical training and intellectual investigation for its own sake. Experience has taught me that students' preferences are not so homogeneous and predictable as we might think; students do not always lean toward more applied material. In several of my interdisciplinary courses, they have sometimes explicitly asked for more literary content, precisely because they wish to be exposed to materials and approaches that they would not get in other academic units. I have students who, from other undergraduate majors and even from the law school, come back to my classes to read, write, and talk about literature, to compensate for the too matter-of-fact and unimaginative nature of their specialization and to keep alive a certain analytic frame of mind and humanistic background that they consider fundamental for a well-rounded education but also for their more practical career goals. There must be some truth in what we hear is the increasing demand for philosophy and humanities graduates for jobs in business and management.

Although I am not implying that these represent the priorities of most students, I feel we should not neglect interests and choices of that kind by throwing the (literary) baby out of the (cultural) bathwater. In this respect, it is ironic to find, in the same issue of *Profession* where the MLA report was published, an article by Jane Gallop and one by James F. Slevin, both addressing the losses that literary studies have undergone by making too many concessions to nonliterary fields. While the MLA report is asking the foreign language major to dethrone literature in some way, Gallop highlights the paradox, in English studies, of the shift from the New Critical heritage to new historicism and cultural studies. "While the move to understand literature within culture is theoretically good," she writes, "the problem is that we generally don't do cultural history nearly as well as our colleagues in history departments, who have professional training in historical methods. We have become amateur, or rather wannabe, cultural historians." At the same time, she adds, English has given up "the most valuable thing," which transformed scholars "from cultured gentlemen into a profession: close reading." Her point is that, without trying to resurrect the New Critical ideology from which close reading emerged, the practice this reading technique allows us to gain with literary texts in literature classes is a powerful and "widely applicable skill, of value not just to scholars in other disciplines but to a wide range of students with many different futures" (183). We may add that precisely because it forces us to

pay attention to details and to substantiate our observations with specific evidence, close reading helps us avoid generalizations and reflect on those “differences in meaning, mentality, and worldview” that the MLA report underscores as the objective of a reconceptualized foreign language education (238).

Likewise, in his defense of academic literacy as “the most crucial work” of the discipline of English, which is also a call for “a greater public understanding . . . of what humanistic inquiry is” (200, 203), Slevin reminds us that, despite “our radically expanded conception of studiable cultural texts,” English “is fundamentally an interpretive discipline grounded in close reading of how language works in art, in discourse more generally, and in the world understood as knowable in part through the mediating force of cultural objects” (206).

I think that departments of foreign languages and literatures can play a complementary role to the English departments’ “complex work of inquiry and critical exchange” (Slevin 203) by not disavowing the value of how the foreign language discipline teaches in order to unrealistically overstretch its contents and competencies. The alliances that the MLA report suggests be forged with other departments have already led, in many universities, to solid collaboration for general education humanities and writing courses. This kind of synergy is convenient to English, because it helps English professors manage their usually massive enrollments; it is equally beneficial to foreign language units, allowing them to escape their isolation and to introduce elements of their cultures well beyond the major. As we know, however, reaching out with courses in English is a blessing and a curse for a foreign language major program. The price to pay for more visibility is a weakening of the language component. To strike a balance between these two poles, a transformed foreign language academic program might offer—and encourage majors to take—comparative and interdisciplinary collaborative courses as electives¹ and add to their elective basket courses offered in English by other departments (history, economics, art history, government) on topics that are related to the foreign country whose language they are learning and that reflect students’ specific interests.

By relying on external specialists, we would jettison the hubristic assumption of an exhaustive and solid cultural and transcultural formation within our departmental walls and at the same time preserve the foreign language through the entire four-year major. I fully endorse the MLA report’s insistence on the need to strengthen foreign language competence at the undergraduate and graduate levels as well as throughout the spectrum of academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences (242). We need to offer intensive undergraduate language courses, teach upper-

division courses in the target language, and integrate classroom study with a meaningful study-abroad experience. Furthermore, we are asked to equip students with both sophisticated training and tangible skills; we should give them clear signals regarding the demands at stake in the language learning process. Often their language performance (especially written) is paradoxically better in grammar classes than in upper-division courses that emphasize literature or culture, not simply because of the increasing complexity of the material but also because of the tacit supposition that students' ideas matter to teachers more than their expressive skills and that the grade will reflect this hierarchy, overlooking grammatical, syntactic, and stylistic flaws. If we really wish to ensure "language to the end"—as Haun Saussy, a member of the ad hoc committee, synthesizes one of the objectives of the restructured undergraduate language major, namely, the central and active presence of the foreign language throughout the curriculum, up to fourth-year courses—it is worthwhile clarifying standards and enforcing rules more rigorously instead of favoring, perhaps unwittingly, a dangerous downward leveling for fear of losing majors.²

While of course we must do our best to respect our students' thoughts, we would do students a disservice by not encouraging them to obtain the accuracy and maturity expected of educated near-native language users. To foster "deep translingual and transcultural competence" by bolstering "the ability to operate between languages," as the MLA report recommends, does not mean diminishing the value of advanced language training; rather, it makes that training an integral component of this new, expanded target—the creation of "informed and capable interlocutors" (237) who, in addition to interacting proficiently in the target language with educated native speakers, can relate to the foreign culture and simultaneously meditate on their own national tradition. Therefore, a fortiori, precisely because so much is now involved in language learning, it becomes of paramount importance to pursue the goal of advanced competence with renewed pedagogical tools, even if—as the MLA report observes—it is rarely attainable (237). To borrow a Machiavellian simile, the foreign language educator who aspires to produce graduates with near-native proficiency but must accept the lesser goal of teaching students to speak a foreign language well enough to get by should act like the clever archers mentioned in *The Prince*. Determined to hit a target that appears too distant and aware of the limited strength of their bows, they "pongono la mira assai più alta che il loco destinato, non per aggiugnere con la loro freccia a tanta altezza, ma per potere, con lo aiuto di sì alta mira, pervenire al disegno loro" 'aim much higher than the destined place, not to reach such height with that arrow, but in order to be able to attain their design with the aid of such high aim' (51; 20).

Translation occupies a leading position among the pedagogical tools that can enhance linguistic rigor and creativity while foregrounding cultural awareness. The MLA report clearly urges the development of translation and interpretation programs. But, on a smaller scale, in my ideal foreign language transcultural curriculum I would insert a mandatory course on practices and theories of translation, revolving around texts taken from a variety of contexts (literary and nonliterary) yet also able to foster student reflection on the phenomenon of “carrying across”—across languages, cultures, identities, historical and geographic milieux, value systems, and ideologies.

Needless to say, the successful implementation of innovative educational strategies depends on an institutional commitment to recruiting language teaching personnel trained in and for the profession and not simply native speakers of the target language.³ Making this commitment means putting an end to the paradoxical and rather perverse dynamics of an academic system that, after releasing a bountiful supply of graduate degrees in the discipline, too often responds to the demands of that discipline by not hiring its own products and preferring cheaper substitutes.

Only in this way can we really build solid and lasting joint ventures between language and literature faculty members. Because of the variety of language department configurations, I would leave to each department the choice of how to devise and implement this “shared educational mission” (MLA 241). However, be it a collaboration between expertises in the two fields or an intervention that is more directly pedagogical and mutual, constant dialogue and exchange on curricular matters, transcending monopolies and power struggles, are essential to the joint creation of a cogent four-year program that can ensure a verticality in linguistic, literary, and cultural competencies.

I happen to think that, far from increasing the popularity and the enrollment figures of a foreign language major, the weakening of the language component leads to the death of the culture altogether. This observation applies as much to the survival of BA programs as to the future of PhD graduates and faculty members. It is unfortunate that both at the MLA convention and at several other scholarly conferences in foreign literatures and languages most papers are delivered in English. Likewise, it would be refreshing and certainly beneficial to our profession to see more nonnative speakers (graduate students and professors alike) publish their research in the target language.

I hope that the MLA report will revamp the concept of defamiliarization, increasing the incentive to tackle a different language and culture as complex living entities that force us to open up to otherness, crossing

borders to foreignize ourselves.⁴ On that note, I conclude with a quotation from a very translingual and transcultural Italian writer, Claudio Magris, which, in this context, I hope will sound not like an elegy to a defunct discipline but rather like an ode to its unlimited transformative power:

La frontiera è duplice, ambigua; talora è un ponte per incontrare l'altro, talora una barriera per respingerlo. . . . [L]a letteratura, fra le altre cose, è pure un viaggio alla ricerca di sfatare questo mito dell'altra parte, per comprendere che ognuno si trova ora di qua ora di là—che ognuno, come in un mistero medievale, è l'Altro. (52)

The border is twofold, ambiguous; sometimes it is a bridge to meet the other, sometimes a barrier to reject the other. . . . [L]iterature, among other things, is also a journey to try to debunk this myth of the other side, to understand that each of us is sometimes on this side and sometimes on the other—that each of us, as in a medieval mystery, is the Other.
(my trans.)

NOTES

A shorter version of this essay was presented at the conference *Fostering Translingual and Transcultural Competencies* at Georgetown University, 24 April 2008. I am grateful to Serafina Hager, convenor of the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics at Georgetown University and chair of the Italian department, for offering me the opportunity to contribute to this event. I wish to thank Rosemary Feal and all my colleagues who attended the conference for their generous encouragement and insightful comments.

1. Resources permitting, the “credit-bearing discussion module in the target language” suggested in the report for interdisciplinary courses taught in English (239) is, ideally, an effective compromise between language skill enhancement and cross-cultural enrichment outside the foreign language major. I emphasize the resource constraints, however, because, in the real-life scenarios in which most of us operate, I am afraid not too many foreign language departments can afford to ask their staff systematically to maintain regular course offerings and simultaneously contribute to extradepartmental pedagogical venues. Few foreign language faculty members would be happy if, despite the best administrative intentions, supplementary discussion modules became for them a teaching overload without compensation of some sort.

2. Far from endorsing elitism per se, my observations on academic performance expectations in foreign languages and cultures take into account the current debates in United States secondary education about the need for more demanding high school curricula and in particular the recent popularity of International Baccalaureate (IB) programs not only in wealthy areas of the country but also in less affluent districts. See, for instance, Mathews and Hill. Significantly, besides the promise of rigorous college-level skills and the IB’s successful integration of different subject areas, the appeal of the IB according to its supporters lies precisely in its transcultural approach to education, thanks to its international focus and its strong emphasis on the foreign

language component as a prerequisite for global citizenship. The hostility vented at the anti-Americanism of the IB indirectly brings back to the foreground an essentially monolingual and monocultural perspective, a perspective that, just as it overlooks the plurality of languages and cultures rooted in United States soil, can also be considered responsible for the endangered status of foreign language, literature, and culture studies at the university level.

3. For instance, an applied-linguistics specialist is a much-needed and valuable presence in any language department, providing the liaison between language and literature in a contextualized, culturally rich, unified language-and-content curriculum.

4. I have in mind foreignization as the translation strategy that, in contrast with domestication, disrupts the codes of the target language by calling attention to linguistic and cultural differences instead of aiming at an unproblematic intelligibility. See Venuti.

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