

Reports and Reforms: Where Are the Foreign Languages?

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WE LIVE in exciting times. We live in perplexing times. How does it happen that these seem to be the best of times and the worst of times? The language profession is riding a wave of popularity, support, and development, while at the same time our colleges and universities are criticized for their inflationary costs, their moral vacuum, and their intellectual chaos. Is there a paradox here? Are our colleges and universities simply the victims of sensationalist journalism and political demagoguery? Or is there a valuable meaning to these differing directions? To try to answer these questions, I first look at what some of the many recent reports on the state of American education say about the study of foreign languages. I then examine the changing landscape of foreign language education in order to see how the profession reflects the concerns of the various national reports. Finally, I inquire how these two domains might be related. Discourse in both these domains has become standardized by the demands of genre and of other conventions.

With alarming regularity we receive reports on the woes of higher education, and with renewed lamentations reports on the state of culture in this penultimate decade of the century. While it is unlikely that the imminence of the new millennium is a proximate cause of such frequent publications, the apocalyptic attitude is clear and distinct. As we approach this secular end of days, we find "our nation at risk." We learn of the epidemic spread of ignorance. We discover that our economy and our institutions teeter at the abyss. In the words of the most famous of these reports, "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and as a people" (National Commission 5). The portentous language of this report achieved its intended effect. Suddenly the nation rediscovered the importance of education. At long last someone uncovered a direct relation between education and the rest of the life of the country.

Surveys, those tools of false prophets and trendsetters, indicate that students perform miserably on factual examinations. As E. D. Hirsch recounts in his famous recent study, some students want to place

Toronto in Italy. They cannot locate the Soviet Union on a map. They think that Latin is the language of Latin America. And they suppose that Golda Meir was an Arab sheik. Unfortunately such surveys always seem to target a specific age group rather than a broad section of our population and always seem to convey a certain adult *schadenfreude*. One often witnesses those over the age of thirty or forty looking across the generation gap with smug satisfaction. I doubt, however, that ignorance and confusion are the sole province of the young. A former colleague, who had just returned from a vacation in Venice, was asked by a senior professor of psychology, "Venice? What country is that in? What language do they speak there?" We laugh at anecdotes like these about the old and the young, but we are pained by the loss, the vacuity, that they exemplify. We are pained by the loss of a sense of place and time, by the isolation in a mindless present without nostalgia, without allusion, without tradition, and ultimately without identity. These examples are enough to make one believe that the critics and prophets are correct: we have arrived at the end of time, the barbarians are at the gates, the apocalypse is upon us.

What each new jeremiad on education adds qualitatively to the discussion is uncertain, and we seem, to some extent, to be the victims of a snowball effect. The more commentaries that appear, the more they seem to be making the same indictments. I find that these reports bear a curious similarity to the rebarbative works of Gnostic cults, works that have, appropriately, been discovered in caves from Egypt to the deserts of Mongolia. The reports present stark black-and-white pictures of unwilling students, indifferent teachers, and ill-financed administrators. After noting decline, devaluation, deformation, and destruction, the authors sound the alarm and call us to

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actions that all have another consistent prefix—redefine, reform, reestablish, reintegrate, renovate, restore. It is only fair to recognize that the various reports of the past decade have taken the grand view on the high road: they look at the panorama of education in its entirety and not at the constituent parts. Indeed, because they have considered the curriculum as a whole, they frequently identify fragmentation and hyperspecialization as primary symptoms of the ills of college and university programs. To charge that the academic community is split into mutually incomprehensible disciplines and subdisciplines is not simply a recurrence of the topos of the Tower of Babel: it is an indictment of solipsism and of the breakdown of the goals of liberal education. There is in this indictment a profound problem of governance. What governs? The interests of the discipline with its demand of ever-increasing specialization or the interests of the institution (however that might be conceived, either as the fulfillment of its educational mission or as the best interests of the students)? That the interests of departments, which embody the aspirations of the disciplines, and the interests of the institutions that the departments constitute may not be consonant is a cause for lament and a fact of life. Presidents, provosts, and deans are the nominal heads of our colleges and universities, but few doubt the power of the disciplines as they are currently figured, the authority of what has been called the “Shadow Government of the Lords of the Discipline.”

Readers with a philological bent will ask themselves whether the reports do not reflect a rebirth of *Quellenforschung* ‘the study of sources.’ The accounts of the woes of education share certain characteristics. Drawing on different wellsprings of our imagination and history, the reports seem to use biblical paradigms (the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the Flood, or the Tower of Babel), Greco-Roman mythology (Pandora’s box, the seven labors of Hercules, the Iron Age), or the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Perhaps a fictional paradigm is most apt for the analysis and interpretation of education: *Bleak House*, *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, or *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

Published in 1983, *A Nation at Risk* focuses on the ills of high school education. Like many of its successors, it uses several commonplaces that have become conventions of the genre of educational crisis reports. The report grants to education a series of goals that are sometimes related and sometimes contradictory. First, there is the issue of livelihood: education is portrayed as the process of the acquisition of vocational skills. Literacy is just one of those skills along with mathematical reckoning or plumbing. Second, education is deemed a means of creating understanding, as the process of forging the bonds of a rich and complex society: “A high level of shared education is es-

sential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom” (7). From individual and social concerns, the report rises to the level of the entire planet. The world is a “global village.” “Global village” is a popular oxymoron that indiscriminately combines notions of economy, ecology, politics, and sociology and that seeks to impose a putative consonance on the world, a harmonious unity that embraces the biological and the therapeutic. The sequence of these commonplaces—career, society, and the world at large—is not unusual, but it is uncertain how one is to reconcile them with still another frequent commonplace: the United States is threatened by competition from abroad. The nostalgic innocence of the global village vanishes with the introduction of threats against national security. Let it suffice to note that there is a deep paradox in this report that resurfaces unquestioned and unresolved in the discussion of foreign language education.

A Nation at Risk recommends only two years of study of a foreign language for high school students who are college-bound. It also recommends that foreign language study be introduced early in school:

Achieving proficiency in a foreign language ordinarily requires from 4 to 6 years of study and should, therefore, be started in the elementary grades. We believe it is desirable that students achieve such proficiency because study of a foreign language introduces students to non-English speaking cultures, heightens awareness and comprehension of one’s native tongue, and serves the Nation’s needs in commerce, diplomacy, defense, and education. (26)

This recommendation elicits another series of commonplaces that merits attention: (1) the study of language is related to the study of culture, (2) the person who does not know a foreign language does not know his or her own language (Goethe’s adage is often implied but rarely cited), and (3) foreign language study meets the country’s military, intelligence, diplomatic, and business needs. I do not intend to denigrate these statements by referring to them as commonplaces. I do, however, think that we must be alert to the point where commonplaces achieve the status of pieties or apodictic truths. Their commonness is no reason for our facile or unwitting acceptance of them.

Late in 1984 William Bennett issued his report, *To Reclaim a Legacy*. Given its emphasis on the Great Tradition and the great texts of Western civilization, it somewhat surprisingly gives the study of foreign languages only a brief, though essential, mention. College students should have “demonstrable proficiency in a foreign language (either classical or modern) and the ability to view that language as an avenue into another culture” (9). These are telling words. To dis-

tinguish, in the 1980s (as opposed to the 1880s), between classical and modern languages is to assume an atavistic posture; it casts the discussion in terms of Western languages. The phrase "the ability to view that language as an avenue into another culture" is either euphuistic or unclear. But it is the remainder of the report that should interest us. For all its attention to the close reading of significant texts, the Bennett report does not appear to recognize that relatively few of these great books were written in English. Far from being presentist in its orientation, *To Reclaim a Legacy* offers us a different oxymoron: an atemporal and universal Anglo-American past.

The Association of American Colleges released its report *Integrity in the College Curriculum* early in 1985. The play on the word *integrity* in the title suggests the richness of this short document. Like the other two reports, this one proposes a minimum required curriculum. The study of foreign languages, however, does not figure in the basic list of "experiences" or skills: critical analysis, literacy, understanding numerical data, historical consciousness, science, values, art, international and multicultural experiences, and study in depth. Despite the inclusion of the international-multicultural element, the omission of foreign languages is interesting. Is this an oversight in what is in other ways an exemplary document? One might read between the lines and surmise that the knowledge of a foreign language is a fundamental skill that makes possible many of the required activities. Or one might deduce that the study of a foreign language is not an appropriate subject at the college level and that, like reading, arithmetic, and other skills, acquisition of a second language belongs to earlier stages of education.

There have been, of course, several other reports, but I shall mention only one, Ernest Boyer's book *College*. Again, my comments can be brief, because despite the emphasis on language (by which is meant the English language) and on international education (by which is meant the study of other countries), there is virtually nothing about the study of foreign languages. Another oversight?

Now I have asked myself if I am simply being naive or egocentric or obsessive in hunting down references to foreign languages in these reports. I hope not, and I think not. The importance of the study of foreign languages is generally accepted: we do not seem to be witnessing a resurgence of hostility or indifference to the field. The reinstatement of the foreign language graduation requirement at many institutions of higher education and the introduction of a new entrance requirement in some state universities confirm continued and strong support for the field. But the almost complete omission or the trite justification of the field in the recent spate of reports is at once curious and

troubling. Why the study of foreign languages goes unmentioned we cannot determine, but the omissions demonstrate that the role of foreign language study is unclear. What we in the profession might consider as the obvious case in support of foreign languages is not so pellucid to the writers of the reports. The omissions reflect on the status of foreign languages in our colleges and universities, and the reflection is perhaps not flattering.

Now if we turn to the profession, we see a very different picture. The language profession seems to be approaching the Heavenly City: students are back in the courses after their sojourn in Purgatory, and the Funding Deities have seen fit to show their munificence. The country is dotted with new language laboratory facilities. Technology points the way out of Babylon to the promised land of proficient multilingualism. The federal government ponders the creation of a new agency dedicated to foreign languages and international studies. Foundations are alert and generous. Our journals show evidence of fruitful developments and active debates. The study of language is enjoying a prominence both in the public eye, where newspapers feature upward trends, and in the classroom as well. Foreign languages are "hot" once again, and discussion of foreign language education has also heated up. There are new words, new interests, and new sides.

It is not possible to review here all the issues before the foreign language profession, but surely one of them must be the conspicuous absence of foreign language study in the reports on higher education. I have noted the minor part that such study seems to play in the most recent discussions of undergraduate general education. And it is equally surprising to discover that the issues of undergraduate general education play an insignificant role in the discussion of the study of foreign languages. If this is tit for tat, or an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, then we are all losers in the game. The profession must pay closer attention to the wider issues of undergraduate education. Our profession's inclination toward insularity is not a source of intellectual or administrative strength. It is counterproductive to attempt to develop the profession inside colleges and universities while at the same time neglecting the major agenda of those institutions.

The insularity of the profession has led to curious consequences. Language courses tend to be contrasted with "content" courses, an invidious distinction if there is one and a profound misunderstanding of what a foundational course can be. The insularity has also led to a misunderstanding of most undergraduates' goals in studying a foreign language: whether we like it or not, students do not attend college for the sole purpose of learning a language. That simple fact has in turn led to odd explanations of why college and university courses have not produced fluent speak-

ers. It has become common to assert that students have not learned languages and that either the methods, or the technology, or the materials, or the teachers are at fault. The logic of the explanations that have attempted to account for these problems does not withstand careful scrutiny. Moreover, the explanations are curiously behaviorist: do a certain thing to students in a certain way, and they will speak in tongues. I would not venture that this model of explanation has any basis in second language acquisition theory, let alone in fact. The all-important notion of motivation has yet to be clarified.

What, after all, would impel a student to master a foreign language? Not a foreign language requirement, the pieties and platitudes of which even a naive freshman can see through. If a requirement specifies three or four semesters in the classroom with a mediocre final grade, we can scarcely claim that incentives are built into the curriculum. Many departments give perfectly clear signals of their own opinions of foreign language courses, courses taught by barely trained teaching assistants and adjunct faculty, courses that rarely find a tenured faculty member in the front of the class, courses that account for the largest enrollments in a department and that have the least prestige. What would impel a student to study a foreign language if he or she had little or no opportunity to make use of that language in other courses and other activities of the undergraduate years?

The present state of foreign-language teaching in this country is complicated by the repeated failure to distinguish between the goals of undergraduate and graduate education, and this failure is probably another symptom of the specialization of the disciplines. At the graduate level, the study of the common Western languages has been traditionally linked with the study of literature, with the hasty passing of required reading examinations. In the so-called critical, exotic, rarely taught, or uncommon languages, the study of foreign languages has been tightly linked with strategic-area studies and consequently with defense, intelligence, diplomacy, and business, a link that is the legacy of conflicts from World War II through the cold war, the Korean war, the Vietnam war, and up to the present. The legacy appeared in *A Nation at Risk*, and it reappears in almost all the current reports about the growth and development of language programs, language centers, and federal legislation about the study of foreign languages.

This call for language study carries with it a distinctly nationalist, if not militarist, orientation. Here is a quotation to consider:

No region is too remote to be the concern of American diplomacy. And all too frequently American armed forces must ply their trade in lands and among peoples whose

very names would have been unknown to an earlier generation. . . . One would suppose accordingly that many Americans would be equipped with scientific and detailed understanding of these multifarious cultures, that the United States would lead the world in the study of foreign lands no matter how distant, that no society could be named for which there is no American expert, and that the American academic structure would reflect this world perspective. . . . Ideological World War III has started and there is no certainty that it is well won yet. . . . In this war for men's minds, obviously the big guns of our armament is [sic] competence in languages and linguistics.

Do the ideas of the text sound familiar? Do we not hear similar arguments, admittedly in a milder form, in various reports, newspaper accounts, and speeches? But this quotation is thirty years old! It is taken from the congressional testimony of Mortimer Graves, then head of the Linguistic Society of America, in his request for increased spending for linguistic research funds (qtd. in Newmeyer 55-56). Consider now the section titles from a major work: (1) "What Is Essential to a Nation?" (2) "World Affairs," (3) "The Nature of Foreigners," (4) "National Defense," and (5) "A Long-Range Policy." These recurrent themes cannot help but ring a bell, but these section titles are from the *New Theses* of Aizawa Seishisai. Completed in 1825 and published in 1858, this work is one of the major documents of *sakoku*, the doctrine of the national isolation of Japan in the nineteenth century under the Tokugawa government. I cite these two disparate documents, not because I wish to suggest that there is nothing new under the sun, nor because I believe that history is cyclical, nor even because I avow that those who do not understand their history are destined to repeat it. I cite them because they seem to suggest that we are at some kind of impasse in trying to justify our labors with unchanging convention. It is odd that our vocabulary seems reduced to a limited group of *idées reçues*.

The classic received idea of these documents and of so many discussions of foreign language study now is the national interest. But just what is the national interest? Who determines the national interest? Why is the term so often used in the singular rather than in the plural? These questions might sound rather grandiose and rhetorical, but they are really political questions, and they are on the mark. If we are going to argue for change in the structure and content of our language programs and funding agencies because of the national interest, then we might do well to know what that interest is in the first place. The crystal ball of world politics, like the Book of Life, has never been easily legible: we did not predict the events in Vietnam, in Iran, or in Afghanistan, and we shall probably not be able to foresee the next such events

elsewhere. It is not our ignorance of foreign languages and cultures that has clouded our vision. Knowledge of foreign languages will do many things for us, but omniscience and prescience do not figure among those benefits. I am not advocating a radically passive stance. There are, however, options between the positions of a Quietist and a Faust.

The term *national interest* seems to have undergone a peculiar evolution. It begins, it seems, as a term associated with defense and intelligence activities following World War II, and it still retains that sense in many discussions. In recent years, in what has come to be called our postindustrial era, the term *national interest* has been transferred to the domain of economics and trade. The battleground has expanded from the Pentagon to include Wall Street and Silicon Valley. The new enemy is the competitor. Much of the logic of argumentation that links our country's balance of payments to our failure to master a language of the Pacific rim suggests a theory of causation that I find difficult to accept uncritically. The quality and quantity of electronic wares manufactured in Japan and the trade barriers that Tokyo has established are not functions of our failure to have sales representatives fluent in the Japanese language. Here, as in other instances, we must beware of making false promises. Knowledge of foreign languages will not automatically solve international trade problems.

We must also be aware of irony and paradox: the study of foreign languages—the opening of the mind to other languages and cultures—is becoming part of a new economic and technological nationalism. But economic and technological independence is more a rhetorical flourish than a realistic possibility. Technology belongs to no single nation and is the product of vast international cooperative efforts. Forty percent of the work force of IBM, the archetypal American corporation, is outside the United States. Our banks have scarcely been isolationist in their lending practices, and their survival—along with much of the economy of the free world—hinges not on a knowledge of Spanish or Portuguese but on monetary policy, the avoidance of default, and the cyclical renegotiation of massive debt. To invoke the battle lines of “us against them” is to indulge in self-deception and to ignore the facts. *National interest* can no longer have the meaning it once enjoyed.

The appeal to the national interest is also intimately linked with the impulse to study foreign languages for professional purposes. To satisfy the demands of the national interest, we must have students who study and employees who use foreign languages. The assertion is unexceptionable: no reasonable adult should contend that the young pay no attention to their future. At the same time, no reasonable adult should accede to the obsession with jobs and financial status. There are options between becoming a brother of the Order of Saint Francis and a disciple of mammon. But the professionaliza-

tion of language study is counter to the most important movements within professional education. The headlong rush to accountability and professional interests occurs at exactly the same moment that professional schools are swinging back to liberal education. Medical schools and law schools have made strong statements against preprofessional training in college and for the values of general education. Just recently the Massachusetts Institute of Technology revised the curriculum for engineering students so that the study of the humanities and the values of general education would play a greater role in the education of students, even to the possible detriment of professional training. And Felix Rohatyn, one of our country's leading financiers, recently excoriated the professional education of business schools: “I believe that businesses should go back to basics in recruiting, should forget about the business schools and recruit the best young liberal arts students we can find.”

The efforts to restructure foreign language education so that it responds more precisely to future professional demands is thus counter both to major trends in the graduate professional schools and to the major movement within undergraduate education in this country. The road to hell may well be paved with golden good intentions. The reports on education all point to a renewal of the values of general education, while our profession seems to move toward professional training. The distance between these two positions seems even more pronounced when we examine enrollments. The vast majority of students study a language for little more than two years, which does not allow them time to acquire the serious mastery of a language for any professional purposes.

The reports on education with which I began and the new impulses within the foreign language profession appear to be asynchronous and even contradictory. Professional education intends to move a student from point A to point B, to give the student a kit of knowledge and skills so that he or she can accomplish certain tasks. Liberal education intends to change the student. But where in the calls for changes in foreign language education are the references to the profound transformations of knowledge, thought, and feeling that come with the authentic study of foreign languages, texts, and cultures? Where is the educational vision of learning that heightens the differences among languages and peoples and that deepens understanding? Where is the insight that study of another language does not just give us an advantage over someone else but changes us? Yes, the federal government enjoys and expects a nationalist rhetoric, which has our soldiers, diplomats, spies, and business executives preserving our country from external threats. I hope that we and our students do not fall victim to simplistic rhetoric. We should recall that the ugly American, who lived and worked in another country, ignored its history, religion, literature, folklore, and people. No one will deny

the importance of trade, security, and diplomacy. At the same time, no one should deny the value of knowledge, understanding, and common respect.

I am assuming that I am not a mere archconservative reactionary seeking the good old days; indeed, I do not believe that the good old days ever existed. Nor do I suggest that we unite and counter new efforts in foreign language education. I might not go so far as to advocate that we let a thousand flowers bloom, yet I think we should cultivate our garden and see how it fits into the landscape. It is high time that we clarify for ourselves and for others what it is we are doing in foreign language education. It is not enough to assert that learning a foreign language will lead a student toward appreciating another culture, toward understanding contrastive grammar and vocabulary, or toward getting a better job. This is a hodgepodge of goals. Moreover, my attempt at commenting on some recent reports on higher education is more than an exhortation to follow the leaders. These are exciting times, and these are perplexing times. We are presented with the challenge of stating

our case. If we do not accept the responsibility of ascertaining our own values and setting our own goals, then someone else will perform the tasks for us.

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