

THE USES—OR USELESSNESS?—OF ADVERSITY

“SWEET,” the Duke Senior said, “are the uses of adversity.” “Which,” as you know, “like the toad, ugly and venomous, / Wears yet a precious jewel on his head.” The Duke, it will be recalled, found good in everything: not just in the jewel but in tongues, books, sermons everywhere. We have an affinity with the Duke, but it is mixed. By profession we surround ourselves with tongues, books, and sermons, but if that endeavor is our everything we find little good in it nowadays, and our toad is not bejeweled.

His Grace was in banishment, of course, but so are we. Ten years ago, when ADFL was founded, we were only suspect and on trial, and our prerogatives were being cut off, but we were not yet banished. Richard Brod, our coordinator and editor, and one of the few unshaken monuments of that earlier and slightly better day, has recently (in the May 1979 *ADFL Bulletin*) taken the measure of our exile: since 1968 French cut by a fourth in the high schools; German and Russian off a third in college; other languages entirely cast out from the curriculum and thus from student consciousness. Ernest May and Dorothy Harrison tell us that a handful of graduate departments could provide all our staffing needs for a couple of decades: Our adversity seems unrelieved. Where are the sweet uses?

At various times all of us have tried to catch a bit of refraction from the jewel, from a brighter sun some “farbiger Abglanz” (to use once familiar words of a now exotic language). Much of the good one finds is personal achievement—fully replicable only in similarly favorable circumstances and by persons of similar gift—though a potential inspiration to all. Richard Brod singles out John Rassias and the Dartmouth program, as would I. Not inappropriately, John Rassias is our lone representative on the President’s Commission. Other uses issuing from our adversity are more general and more generously distributed, and among these I would reckon the growing inventiveness of our undergraduate curriculum. The MLA’s review of 1974-75, *Options for the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Cultures* (published by ACTFL), is a good witness. A great deal was afoot in those years of the immediate post-1960s. Maybe a great deal is still afoot today. But now we seem stalled in a forest, and it is not Arden. Have we succumbed to the cumulative blows of lost requirements, falling enrollments, meager employment, emaciated programs, and the general lack of reward for all our efforts and inventiveness? Have we made peace with recession? Small wonder if we have. Speaking for myself, it is all I can do to look around at the gifted students in my graduate

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course and to wonder what is to become of them and whether we have any right to teach them. Depressive doubt is a poor companion for the Sixth Age.

I hold fast to the proposition that we can convert our adversity to some use. The ways are thorny, but they could lead us out of the dark wood. In the past I have advocated these steps; I still advocate them:

Prepare to give a reasoned explanation of the true nature and fundamental importance of language and literature.

Relate the study of foreign languages to the state of the modern world, from geopolitics to trade balances.

Reorganize and redirect elementary work, curbing the emphasis on exhaustive grammar, increasing the share of genuine as distinct from made-up texts, making the intellectual level of our subject as nearly equal to the other humanities as possible.

Take earlier and fuller advantage of the stimulus of foreign study (including contact with our own “ethnic” elements).

Broaden our undergraduate work in the direction of comparative literature and culture or “German Studies,” “The Latin-American World,” and so on.

Having done these things, lobby for a restoration of the language requirement, reminding colleagues that monolingualism is as much of an affront to human dignity as is abuse of the mother tongue.

Reduce drastically the number of graduate programs and tighten the requirements of those that remain.

Make graduate training more practical, ignoring no aspect of our discipline as it is or should be conducted in actual practice.

Try, before it is too late, to capture at least a beachhead in the two-year colleges—and train people to teach there.

All these and other items like them might not be jewels for the Duke, but they could at least sweeten our adversity.

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I am now persuaded that there are two other things we should do, and they are the immediate subject of this paper. One is fully within our power, the other is largely so, requiring only a little help from the administration. Neither is inherently likely to succeed (failing the inspiration of clear disaster), because unfortunately both are directed against persons and privilege. Each suggestion rests on a general principle of, I think, compelling validity. In fact, stating the principles first may make the argument more palatable, because the translation of principle into reality involves trauma.

1. A departmental entity should represent a sort of largest common denominator, the objective correlative of a major aim or function of American education, and the administrative structure should be so constituted that form mirrors function with as little duplication and waste as possible. In anthropological terms the department should be the largest, not the smallest, recognizable kinship group.

2. The professoriate in any department should, with due allowance for specializations, constitute something approaching a microcosm of the larger world within which it operates, a visible embodiment of the ideal end point of education in the field; and the individual teacher should be capable of serving as a role model, not just a taskmaster. These *are* principles, but they are also in a way rhetorical camouflage for an upending of the present order of things. In practical terms:

1. We should consider abolishing single-language departments in favor of departments of foreign languages; or departments of foreign languages, literatures, and cultures; or even departments of "Literature."

2. The relative representation of Americans in our departments should be augmented, especially at the senior level, and that of the variously foreign (foreign-born, foreign-trained, and foreign-recruited) correspondingly reduced.

I mince no words because I think these ideas are important and need to be discussed in full awareness of what they imply. They must not be sugarcoated, as are most proposals for reform, to make them appear innocuous. But the status quo must not be sugarcoated either. Any decision to do nothing is also a decision, and with the second proposal at least the crux comes every time we hire anyone—if we ever do these days. The changes resulting from these proposals will hurt or offend many, but is what we are doing now without hurt or offense? I don't fancy the omelette metaphor, but I do follow Thomas Jefferson's words, speaking about a larger issue, namely the move from despotism to liberty: we cannot expect to be translated in a feather bed.

The question of the legitimacy and rationale of

departments is seldom raised. In that same *ADFL Bulletin* of last May our colleague, Yale's President A. Bartlett Giamatti, does so, and his words are worth heeding. "The ways people really think, teach and especially do research are not defined solely by departments and never have been." Still, departments "serve to indicate larger zones of concern and common interest, but they must be shaped and perhaps reconceived." Faculties "must be willing to assert new administrative patterns, patterns that more nearly reflect the teaching and research interests of faculties and the needs and desires of . . . students." He even urges "that larger language departments make common cause with smaller ones, instead of viewing everyone else as competition." I would go further.

It may be instructive to try to identify the unifying principles—Giamatti's "common interest"—that the present divisions embody. Quite without animus: a conventional language department reflects the conviction that the major constellation of thought and concern is a nation or group of nations, usually the former. It is curious how subtly (and unwisely) we in German concentrate on the Federal Republic and its predecessors to the neglect of Austria, Switzerland, or even the DDR; or our friends in French, on Paris to the neglect of *France outre-mer*. Whether our specific concentration is on a language, literature, or culture, "country of origin" dominates our thinking and predetermines our administrative structure. In some respects of course it must. The French and Spanish languages have to be studied separately, not in some kind of mixture. One cannot do foreign study without being in a country. A native speaker or an "ethnic"—perish the word—has to be a speaker or a native once removed of something or of somewhere. If we want mainly to talk with such a person or visit a given country, then a department of Russian or German or whatever is an adequate reflection of our aim and interest. The monolingual department probably works well for the beginning and intermediate levels of instruction. Here the orienting principle *is* the single foreign language, though not as monolithically as our teaching implies, and the conventional locus of identification and administrative function, the department of language, is probably justified. But if this is so natural, what do we make of the signal failure of such conventional structures to secure our corporate health? It can't all be the fault of someone else or of the poor toad.

The true weaknesses become apparent in the upper-division and graduate levels, and conspicuously so in our professional and scholarly life. Is what we do really bounded by the lexicon and syntax of one language? Are we not also interested in language as a phenomenon, as the irreducible measure of our status as human beings, as the determinant of our thinking,

our mechanism for the ordering of reality, and as the vehicle for a large part of our aesthetic life? All this of course is manifested in individual languages. To be interested in broader things does not derogate from individual languages and their importance. It enhances them. But it implies another possible structure for our function as teachers and scholars. As surely as day leads to night, compartmentalization by single language leads to relative neglect of knowledge about language as such. (Similarly, to be sure, departmental focus on linguistics can lead to premature theorizing without sufficient foundation in an adequate number of languages.)

The imbalance is graver in literature. Most literature is by nature, even by the intent and inclination of its writers, a transgressor of national boundaries. The point is painfully obvious in its negative corollary. What student of French literature is given an adequate grasp of the influence of classical antiquity on writers and critics from the Renaissance onward? What German major knows enough of the English eighteenth century to appraise the derivative quality or the originality of Lessing, Herder, Goethe? For that matter, what major in American literature can gloss his early nineteenth-century writers for their affinity with German Romanticism, its poets and philosophers? It is altogether possible he can't even read German.

If the ideal focus of departments of literature is literature itself, not Italian literature or Russian literature, then the proper reflection of that focus is a department of literature. Only because literatures other than English require the special acquisition of competence in a foreign language, while English is (ostensibly) the natural possession of our students, is there even reason for as many as two departments, one of English and American, one of foreign literature. The apparatus of theory, the history of literature, and that of criticism, are not—or should not be—tied to a given language; they are international and should be studied as such. National tendencies exist in criticism and literary theory, but that is no reason for cultivating in every German graduate student a phenomenologist or a new Barthes in every French major—and in neither one a connoisseur of Empson or Burke or Frye. Quite the contrary. Most obviously, a colossal waste obtains, and would long since have been spotted as such by the deans if they understood such things, when theory is taught in four or five major departments, to as many separate clienteles, as it is in my (your?) institution.

But if we combine departments what is to become of language teaching? Why is this a real question? Single languages have a clearly visible identity, which will protect them, and departments can have subsections. What happens already in the many Germanic and Slavic departments? If one department can teach

Brazilian Portuguese and Romanian could it (adequately broadened) not teach almost any other Indo-European language? Greek and Latin are not just different languages but heads of separate language families, yet they coexist almost everywhere, taught often by the same person. In structure, in curricular innovation and versatility, and in their demands on preparation and ability, departments of the classics could serve as inspiring, not to say sobering, examples to the rest of us. Some fields of algebra and of geometry are virtually foreign languages to students of the other mathematical fields, yet no one seriously proposes splitting departments of mathematics. Mutual support and strength, stimulus to experimentation, enhanced national visibility—all could derive from association with teachers of other languages and literatures. What else is MLA or ADFL about? What are the advantages of atomization? Why do we hold fast to our minimal identities? Are we proud—or afraid? Are we jealous, defensive, anxious? Do we worry that our students will see greener pastures?

Not only do inherent reasons of disciplinary integrity speak for departments of foreign languages; political reasons cry out. What have we accomplished by clinging to departments of German and French? Too often a cultivation of weakness, a prolongation of relative ineptitude in the councils of governance. Too often a status of dependency, a life of suffering, because we do not know well enough the mechanisms of policy or the rhetoric, even the language, by which it is moved. Too often a delusion on the part of our own junior colleagues, who fail to anticipate the standards by which they will be judged when their promotion papers leave our sheltered precincts and go to the dean's committee of review.

I can hear it now: "Unite with those _____? Cooperate with *them*?" The temper of the reaction, the inevitable expression of horror, will be a sign not so much of confidence as of our lack of assurance, and of the need to do precisely what will be inveighed against. If calm could be preserved long enough to weigh merits rather than to cry shame, we might also be able, at the lowest level (inelegantly called "clout"), to picture what our institution would look like with a department of foreign languages and literatures. Where might that department rank in comparison with English, or with the Mother of Humanities, history? Could it effectively look out for its own interests? Divided, we are falling. United?

My second proposal will be thought reminiscent of the old slogan "Buy American" and similarly redolent of "quota" and "protectionism." In a profession sensitive to verbal malpractice (and almost masochistically liberal), the association is not complimentary. Indeed, guilt by association may condemn

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the whole idea. The idea is simple to the point of simplism, and it involves extrinsic standards. It is an easy target for scorn, not the kind of thing nice people say in public; and the first person to propose it before the faculty should be tenured. But hard facts and sound reason speak for it. It is an uncomfortable idea whose time has come.

In search of at least modest objectivity I examined the proportion of the American-born and American-trained in the professoriates of a dozen of our leading departments of German. (German is uniquely blessed—and conspicuous—since our record is spread out for all to see, in the *Personalia* issue of *Monatshfte*. The situation in other languages would surely be little different.) What I found made my own pessimistic expectations look sanguine. In the most urgent and personal sense I beg all readers to ask themselves whether this situation can be dismissed as either accidental or fair. In days such as these I would also ask them to assess its survival value. This is the case:

In the assistant and associate professor ranks about seventy-five percent of our faculty is American.

In the rank of full professor the percentage is just over forty.

I know the problems of slippage in statistics and of the drawing of inferences. In at least one department I would recognize a person born and trained abroad as by far the most conversant with American education. I recognize the ambivalence of the German-American contingent and have tried to subtract that population from my count. I concede and support the role of the native scholar, not only as a high-order informant but as intellectual leaven to what might otherwise be a pretty flat loaf. Still, the disparity and the inequity are striking.

And we all know how such inequality comes about. Only in quest for the lowest full-time position does the American Ph.D. automatically have the better chance, and that in some part because employing departments are wisely, if not by principle, disciplined to ignore the priorities and protocol of academe. Even the most parochially French, German, or Latin American department would hardly go back to the old country to recruit either advanced students or new assistant professors. To do so would be self-defeating to the point of suicide.

This "better chance" gives the young American candidate, across the board, a sixty percent shot at a job in our field, and that percentage includes those who already had a job when they got the degree. What statistical likelihood are we to assign to the chances of retention and tenure? It is at tenure time that the American Ph.D. begins to compete with those from abroad, and the situation amounts to an increasingly cruel logjam from there all the way to the top. What happens, after all, when a good in-

stitution decides—fragile endeavor!—that it will go forth and "hire the best"? It turns with disquieting frequency to foreign sources.

Ah, but merit is the key. Well, what merit? Where defined and where recognized? Examined in the light of what criteria? Publications are a vital measure of scholarly distinction, almost as important as we make them out to be, but do we inquire only into quantity or into quality as measured by some absolute, transcendent standard? Should we not also ask whether the questions addressed have any substantial bearing upon the concerns of American students and American institutions? Have we not a responsibility to distinguish that which serves the understanding of a national literature narrowly conceived from that which relates a national literature to other strands of the Western tradition, most particularly our own? Shall we make no effort to differentiate between parochial methodology and broadly informed critical awareness?

Quite apart from the greater ease of publication in European countries—"alles für die Wissenschaft"—great comfort accrues to the scholar who operates from home base, works in a critical tradition coterminous with that of his editors and publishers, has little obligation or need to mediate between material and audience, and specializes in the filling of lacunae. He can build a large and important bibliography. But is he for us?

I do not contend that such reservations apply to all or even most foreign scholars in our midst. I deny that they apply to none. Enough have made and continue to make their reputations this way, and have persuaded enough Americans to follow them, with the result that our research has an uncomfortably hermetic quality, an unenviable lack of resonance in the world of American letters and education. It is the syndrome Jeffrey Sammons addressed in his article for *German Studies in the United States*, "Some Considerations on Our Invisibility." I feel even more strongly than Sammons does and find his arguments most telling when they are least tempered and qualified. I would eagerly subscribe, for example, to his statement that "in functioning as an outer annex of German *Germanistik*" (or the French or Spanish counterpart thereof), "only accidentally located in North America, we are failing our public." We are indeed, and we are contributing to the alienation of our brightest students, those interested in foreign languages and eager to devote themselves to work with foreign literatures, but not at any price. Subtly and increasingly, as our students move along their prescribed paths, into the major, on to graduate study, and finally into the ranks of faculty, we tempt them to abandon their own cultural identity, specifically their literary and educational heritage. We ask that they give up in some degree their right to read

literature (and to train others to read literature) in the context given it by our own society. We persuade them to accept competition with native students and scholars on the terms and by the rules of those native students and scholars. We train them to assume an alien mantle. It does not fit. They cannot win.

If by this metamorphosis we were securing a true internationalism of the spirit, a world of the mind without borders, who could object? But what too often happens is a shift from one dominant parochialism to another. Nationalism as such remains disturbingly intact.

Nor does this shift of allegiance, this alien definition of merit, produce greatness. Accepting the standards of Madrid or Zurich or Paris means automatic inferiority to the institutions of these countries. Their institutions have for Spanish, German, and French the staff, the resources—and the mission—of our departments of English. If we try to create a mini-Sorbonne or a Munich-once-removed we only make ourselves ridiculous. Our true aim is not—or should not be—to make American students into replicas of European ones or our faculties into little enclaves of the expatriated in spirit. And we ignore the example of our very mentors: how many heads of German *Anglistik* and *Amerikanistik* are Anglo-Americans? How many professors of American literature at the Sorbonne are from the United States? For that matter we ignore the model of England. How many of that country's remarkable breed of scholars in French, German, or Spanish were Frenchmen, Germans, or Spaniards? Relatively few.

Which raises by implication another argument for the *American* Germanist, Romanist, Slavist. The teacher and scholar at home in his institutional context is more likely to be aware of the genesis and tenacity of those attributes of college and university life that constitute its flavor, indeed its essence, and that must be dealt with in order to effect progress and change. This

awareness applies both to the education of the young and to the manipulation of governance. Granted, those from abroad may (should?) be able to bring a critical, distanced view to bear on our institutions and thus to affect them positively. But that doesn't happen if their commitment is elsewhere.

And finally, briefly, an American has one uncontested advantage, one unrivaled boon to confer on his students: that of being a true role model, of showing in his own person that the study of German literature or Romance linguistics can be pursued by an American student to the point of mastery, even to the point of making a worthwhile career of it. If he or she can do it, I can.

So, with different departments and more (not exclusively) American faculties we may be able to serve better the purposes that should characterize advanced study in all areas of foreign literature and culture: the appreciation and assessment of the achievements of others in the indispensable clarity of distance, the examination and questioning of our own intellectual life and aesthetic accomplishments by other than the circular standards of familiarity, the creation of either an eclectic understanding or a higher cultural synthesis through the approximation of differing traditions. Our enterprise is essentially comparative. Mutual illumination and the exercise of reciprocal criticism can help us to comprehend each member of the comparison. Catholicity—or a dialectic—of things examined and known can help us to see both members as part of Western civilization, of civilization as a whole. Anagogically, the entire enterprise can guide us to a higher life of the mind, and the less unilinear our pursuit the better it can do so. That, in the ultimate sense, is why we should have more departments of foreign languages and literatures and more Americans in them. At least someone should test the idea. If it worked it would be a sweet use of our adversity.

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