Loving Words: Nightmares and Pleasures of a Glossophile or The Advocacy of Semiotic Bliss

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I would like to thank Professor R. Terry Mount of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, and President of the Mountain Interstate Foreign Language Conference, and Professor Ritt Deitz, for having invited me to to speak with you this evening. I would also like to thank Provost Marvin Moss for his generous and thoughtful introduction.

The epigraph for this post-banquet presentation is taken from an unpublished essay, "Saussure and His Difference," written by my colleague, Professor Yvonne Ozzello, and initially delivered at a session of the Modern Language Association meetings in December of 1990. "I would like to suggest that what is most helpful to the learner of a foreign language is semiotic elasticity: the ability to identify and use patterns of language different from those for which one is already programmed, as well as the pleasure gained from such a practice. The question is therefore: How can we, in our textbooks and classrooms, promote semiotic bliss, the like of which we have all felt in appropriating a new word, a new turn of phrase, a new cliche, in a language which is not our first language? How can we turn our students into glossophiles, into *amateurs* (lovers) of linguistic and cultural diversity? The glossophile jubilates because he/she is in love with signifying difference and significant otherness."

In 1993, the year that I was President of the Modern Language Association of America, I was frequently called upon to pronounce on topics that were not, strictly speaking, related to my own research. I found that I enjoyed this mode of writing and speaking that involved a combination of anecdote, personal reminiscences about my experiences in a variety of classrooms, and reflections on what it means to teach language, literature, culture to American (US) undergraduates and graduates at the end of the twentieth century. In preparation for this evening, I read through some of these talks, and the four presidential columns I wrote for the *Modern Language Association of America* Newsletter. I realized that two major themes

emerged from these 1993 presentations: the first, that teaching all levels of language courses and literature courses in French, has always involved for me, and I believe for my students, a great deal of pleasure, and the second, that I continue to be as I was three years ago very anxious about the future of language teaching and learning in the United States. What I find most striking is the discrepancy between the pleasure experienced by me and my students in the language, literature and culture classroom, a pleasure which the epigraph by Yvonne Ozzello attempts to name, and the official discourses about language study that prevail in the United States and that emanate frequently from language pedagogues, methodologists, second language acquisition specialists, as well as from government and business administrators promoting language learning. In these official discourses "pleasure" is certainly a foreign, indeed alien, word and concept.

Let me begin with the nightmares and the anxiety and end with pleasure. The nightmares are based on what is beginning to happen in the state of Wisconsin at the secondary school level, and what might happen on the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin system where I teach. The nightmares are also based on statistics from around the country, and the closing and contemplated closing of language programs, with the exception of Spanish, at many of our colleges and universities. In its most recent comprehensive national report on the study of foreign languages at U.S. institutions of higher education released on Wednesday, October 9th 1996, The Modern Language Association of America, with the support of the U.S. Department of Education, studied enrollments at 2,772 two and four year insitutions across the country. The good news in the report is the generally rising trend in foreign language enrollment since the 1960's, 70's or 80's, and the significant increase not only in Spanish, that now accounts for slightly more than half of all registrations in foreign language study, but also in Asian and Middle Eastern Languages, especially Chinese. The bad news is the significant decrease in the study of French, German, and especially Russian. The potentially bad news is how some administrators may interpret these figures and the danger that, as Elizabeth Welles, Director of Foreign Language Programs at the MLA wrote, "the variety in languages offered for study in colleges and universities will diminish." The problem, in this period of financial constraint, is how to sustain smaller than expected and small language programs and courses, how not to cut back by cutting out, how to maintain the range of languages available for study.

Today, in most countries of the world, English—American English—is fast becoming everyone's second language. Simultaneously, in the United States, the literature of much of the world is available in English translation. And again today, in the United States, Spanish is the only modern

language, other than English, that is experiencing a growth of enrollments in **both** high schools and colleges and universities.

The study of "foreign" languages (I put quotation marks around the word foreign when I write it, to show my dislike of the word in this context) has never been enthusiastically supported in the United States, although different sections of the country, different groups and classes within our society have, at varying times and for diverse reasons, but rarely for intellectual or ludic reasons, encouraged the study of either Latin, or Greek, or French, or German, or Russian, or Spanish, or Japanese, or Chinese.

I will ask you to enter one of my recurrent nightmares with me and to imagine for a moment language and literature classes in the year 2046, fifty years from now, in which language learning is reserved only for students of commerce, industry, and the foreign service; in which machines and media equipment have replaced printed texts and human teachers; in which literary and social studies have disappeared in favor of empirical research and data collection; in which Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Latin, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, and Yiddish texts are studied only in American-English.

One of the conferences I attended in 1993 made a lasting impression on me, and I use it as the central figure, the focus, for my nightmares. The conference was called "An Agenda for Change," and was sponsored by the National Foreign Language Center, founded in 1986 and directed by sociologist and data collector Richard Lambert. The National Foreign Language Center, now directed by David Maxwell, is affiliated with Johns Hopkins University and has its headquarters in Washington, D.C.

The conference was held in Washington, D.C. and attended by senior representatives—I quote from the letter of invitation I received "of business, journalism, international science, the U.S. Congress, federal government agencies, private foundations, colleges and universities, educational membership organizations, international institutions, as well as state language supervisors, language teachers and administrators." And indeed, during the three days of the conference, there was an impressive array of speakers representing these different groups, representing most of the discourses one hears today in the United States about the state of, the importance of, the need for "foreign" language study and teaching. With the exception of the scholars who came from Australia, England, Israel, and the Netherlands almost all the United States speakers presented a united front insofar as they spoke in hostile terms about the Modern Language Association of America, about literary and cultural studies, and—less frequently but consistently with negative references—about French. Several speakers referred to French as a language that had become quite useless

in 1993 and whose election by students some speakers found strange and anachronistic.

In a sense this was not surprising. The conference goal was "to discuss the formation of public policy for the improvement of America's foreign language instructional system." Speakers from the United States repeated over and over again the words of the program announcement:

"Our current foreign language educational system suffers from many problems. Too few students reach a level of competence high enough to use another language effectively; language instruction in our schools is so segmented and discontinuous that teaching and cumulative learning are difficult; and our evaluation strategies are increasingly at war with sound pedagogical practice. Teachers and students alike find themselves battling the architecture of a system that often undermines their most determined efforts to succeed."

Now it is certainly true that "foreign" language instruction in the United States has problems, and problems that are, by and large different from those in Europe and Australia, where language instruction begins much earlier for more students, and rarely at the college and university levels. In his most recent book, *L'Enfant aux deux langues* (The Child with Two Languages), (1996) the French linguist Claude Hagège, adopting the tone of an Old Testament prophet, writes: "The unilinguals of tomorrow's Europe risk being seen as people bereft of speech." (278) This prophetic tone would be completely inappropriate if applied to our own country. For many Europeans it is a question of survival.

It is also true that modern languages, literatures, and cultures as they are taught in our high schools and colleges do not prepare students to engage in business negotiations or in the foreign service branches of the government, nor do they prepare translators for business or government. And it also true, alas, that few students choose to study the less commonly "taken" and therefore taught languages, even when they have the possibility. But at their best, colleges and universities do teach students to read and to understand, and they do open up for more advanced students the written and visual texts of other countries and cultures. They do, also, at their best, give students moments of intense intellectual and ludic pleasure.

Several speakers at the National Foreign Language Center conference referred to what they called "the MLA model" as the example **par excellence** of what was being done poorly in our colleges and universities. The "MLA model" as the phrase was repeated, seemed to be shorthand for "soft," "elitist," and "useless." And "soft," "elitist," and "useless," were equated with the study of literature and the study of culture. One speaker referred to culture as "touchy-feely," as opposed to hard language learning. The "MLA model"—"soft," "elitist," "useless"—became in turn, in the discourse of many speakers, a way of attacking the academy for its lack of commitment to the practical use of languages, its lack of commitment, in short, to the national interest. (Let me say, in passing, that I consider "elitist" and "elite" as words badly in need of positive redefinition).

In his concluding remarks, David Maxwell, the director of the National Foreign Language Center, contrasted the "MLA model" and the "competency model." The notion that the MLA and the academy consider it important to teach students to read, understand, and if possible speak and write so that they might then read literary works was presented as old fashioned, ridiculous, and impractical.

Time and again during this conference, Richard Lambert, David Maxwell, and others speakers from the National Foreign Language Center called for "a national plan," "an over-arching plan," "an architecture" that would oblige all those who teach modern languages in the United States to "speak with one voice"—and this "one voice" would undoubtedly call for an end to the study of literature and culture and useless languages such as French. The vision of the National Foreign Language Center is my nightmare.

My vision is quite different. It includes many voices as well as many tongues. By "many voices," I understand both different paths to language learning and language learning for different ends—intellectual, ludic, practical, scientific; language learning for students and scholars of literature, culture, linguistics, philosophy, for business and the government—but not exclusively one path to one end. By "many tongues," I mean many languages, the more commonly taught as well as the less commonly taught, and making these many tongues available to students in primary and secondary schools. (Recent research has shown that children who learn a second language early profit from an increase in their brain mass). However we do this, the goal must always be to open possibilities, not to foreclose.

In his general remarks that opened the second day of this 1993 conference, Senator Paul Simon of Illinois, a strong supporter in the United States Senate of the study of modern languages, made the following observation about attitudes in the nation's capital: "At cocktail parties in Washington, D.C. it is OK to know nothing about opera, poetry, and foreign languages." The key word here is "foreign." Meaning "outside," "alien," "inappropriate," the word relegates languages to a marginal and perhaps also a dangerous status. Coupling "foreign" languages with opera and poetry suggests that these are not only effete, elitist, impractical, and unimportant areas, but also areas that could have a negative impact on more easily understandable discourses and values. In my vision, "poetry and "for-

eign" languages" would be close to the top of the list of areas about which one should know something and which, equally importantly, give pleasure. They may not be useful for Washington cocktail parties, but they do open paths to the knowledge and enjoyment of oneself and the rest of the human world.

Some of the reasons that were stated officially at the conference "An Agenda for Change," and the reasons that are usually given to justify the study of a foreign, second language are as follows:

1. to build international contacts and understanding
2. to further commercial networks on an international scale
3. to learn about another culture
4. to experience the world differently
5. to understand one's own language more fully
6. to discipline one's mind
7. to develop in young children general alertness

These are all partially acceptable reasons. What is rarely mentioned in such a listing is that language learning is also fun—another more popular way of saying "semiotic bliss"—, that language learning is a pleasurable activity for both the individual and the group.

I would like in this second and shorter part of my talk, to try to determine why language learning and language teaching give pleasure, at least for me, and to define more precisely what I understand by the use of the term "pleasure." In the title I originally suggested to Professor Deitz for this talk, I had used the word "confessions," a word that translates my sense that such pedagogical encounters are not usually thought of, or perhaps even meant to be, filled with pleasure. Confession inevitably implies guilt.

This may be the appropriate moment to make an autobiographical confession. I have no doubt that part of the pleasure I derive from working in a language that is not my mother tongue, is nevertheless related to my mother. Before my birth, she had been in vaudeville, part of a two-woman singing act known as the Correlli Sisters. When I was growing up, my mother spent several hours of each day at the piano singing. The songs she sang were in British English "I carry you in my pocket in a locket of gold"; in Italian "Passeggiata per Milano, passeggiata piano, piano" or from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, "Voi che sapete"; in American Yiddish "Bei mir bist du sheyn"; in Russian "Ochi chornya, ochi krasnya"; in German "Lenya Lehmann geh mal spazieren"; and perhaps most significantly for my future affective and linguistic development, in French "Parlez-moi d'amour," and "Plaisir d'amour."

Let me make it clear that although French is what I teach, I am assuming that my reactions would be similar had I, for other autobiographical

reasons, specialized in and subsequently taught Spanish, German, Russian, Italian, Portuguese, a Scandinavian language, an Oriental language, an African language or a Semitic language. I am also assuming that something special happens in the "foreign" (in the other) language and literature classrooms that is unique, and that is related to the fact that many if not most of us who are there (teachers as well as well as students) are working within a language that is not our mother tongue.

I shall try to describe some of the particular contexts of language and literature classes not conducted in English which may contribute to "pleasure," although these contexts have changed, at least at Madison, for Spanish whose enrollments are soaring.

1. the importance of group work in classes that are considerably smaller than those of other college or university courses; language classes are frequently the smallest, most intimate, least impersonal of all the students' classes, the class in which daily preparation is a necessity, in which students are called on frequently, and by name. Students in language classes are never anonymous.

2. the importance of voice, body, tongues, words and word-play. In some psychoanalytic theory, these may be fundamental sources of psychic pleasure, releasing, if only temporarily, habitual repressions and creating a freer zone of exchange between voices and bodies.

3. the focus on themes or big questions that inform all literary texts, themes of Eros and Thanatos, of absence and presence, of mortality, precarity and vulnerability, themes that it is often easier for students and teachers to discuss and to analyze in a language that is not their own. This involves the pleasure of breaking with those social taboos that forbid public discussion of religion, sex, politics. I propose that this is a source of considerable intellectual pleasure.

4. the circulation of desire and the intensified activity of transference and counter-transference in the language classroom. This is a more delicate domain, and if you are not already convinced that these structures do indeed operate in human interactions that seem to reproduce familial settings, this is probably not the place to belabor the point.

I would also like to propose some personal reminiscences that sustain the descriptions given above about the particular context of the language classroom. I have already mentioned the effects of my mother's singing, but beyond my mother's voice "singing in tongues" I was, as are many children in the United States today bombarded, at home and in my family, by a variety of accents in the English that I heard around me. My mother's parents spoke English with a heavy Russian accent and in the case of my maternal grandmother, Russian **and** Yiddish accent. My paternal grandparents spoke English with an even heavier German accent. I also heard

Russian, Yiddish and German spoken. My mother's singing partner, the other Correlli sister, was Italian, as was her husband, and Julia and Al Alonge often took care of me when my parents traveled to Europe in the years before the Second World War. In addition, my mother was not only a singer, she was also a superb mimic.

At the end of the Spring semester 1996, I asked four of my advanced undergraduate French students why they had continued to study French at the University after High School. In each case, they were three girls and one boy, the answer was the same. Each one spoke of the passion for French of his or her high school French teacher. In each case this passion was contagious.

The phrase "Loving words" may be read as "words of love" or as an activity in which we, students and teachers, become aware of the extraordinary adventure we are living in and through languages. In André Schwarz-Bart's novel, *The Last of the Just* (*Le Dernier des Justes* in French), published in 1959, there is a passage in which the protagonist, Ernie Levy, learns the Hebrew alphabet in the following way:

"Forewarned by Moritz's example (Moritz, in the novel is Ernie's older brother who showed no interest in the study of Hebrew, of the Torah or the Talmud), the grandfather took Ernie in hand when he was less than four. From Poland he had sent for a Hebrew alphabet in relief. He initiated the little angel by the ancestral method, which is sweet and attractive—smeared with honey, the rosewood characters were given to the young student of the Law simply to suck on. Later on, when Ernie was capable of reading brief phrases, Mordecai offered them molded on cakes, in the making of which Judith (Mordecai's wife and Ernie's grandmother) diplayed all her cleverness." (129)

"Loving words" (as in this example of learning Hebrew by sucking on the sweetened letters) must involve us in the possibilities of the "**signifier**," of the material aspects of words, even if we call it by other names, the sounds of words, the shape and taste of letters, the relationship between shapes and sounds and etymological traces. "Loving words" will, I hope, lead us to put pleasure into our writing about the language classroom and language learning, will deter us from focussing exclusively on the practical and the useful in a deadly serious and often trivial manner. "How to" articles and books have their place in the academy, but they ought not to occupy all the place.

Let me close this talk on "Loving Words" with a quotation from the essay "Poetry is/and (the) Political" (1979) by the French writer Hélène Cixous. In her essay, which is addressed to women, Hélène Cixous insists on the necessity of combining the poetical with the political, never one without the other. In my essay, which is addressed to all of us as teachers of

language, literature, culture, film, I insist on the necessity of combining pleasure and practicality. In the words of Hélène Cixous what we have in common is: "the need to go to the sources and enjoy together."