

Notes on a Scandal (or two)

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A couple of years ago I wrote a short piece apropos the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the publication of *Don Quixote* in 1605. I noted then that some quixotic discoveries had been made in time for the commemorative events of 2005. For example, the mystery of the birthplace of the protagonist of the novel had allegedly been solved by a team of international researchers who employed a host of scientific methodologies taking into account, among other factors, the speed of don Quixote's steed and Sancho's ass: 31 km in summer days and 22 km in winter days (according to the findings of the timely study). Naturally the discovery boasted the status of the chosen town of Villanueva de los Infantes in the tourist Route of Don Quixote. Moreover, new editions and anthologies of the *Quijote* saw the light in connection with its 400th hundred anniversary celebration, including a pocket anthology of ten chapters sponsored by *Paradores nacionales de turismo* destined to replace the Bible at the bedside tables of their historical hotels.

That Cervantes and the popular protagonist of his novel might be associated with the tourist industry is not particularly surprising. We could even say that this is a perfectly "innocent" and legitimate way for the tourist industry to capitalize on a local product. Yet, when the institutional embrace takes place at the governmental level (and *Paradores nacionales* has obvious governmental ties) things tend to get a bit out of hand. In the introductory section of the pocket anthology of *Paradores*, the President of the national hotel chain claimed that Cervantes and *Paradores nacionales de turismo* show important commonalities in that they are ambassadors of the cultural essence of Spain and the Spanish people. In his own introductory remarks the editor Andrés Amorós makes the point that (and I paraphrase) it would not be an exaggeration to say that our Bible is the *Quijote*, a book with which we learned (or were taught) how to read, the best condensation of our spirit, the symbol of everything Spanish and Hispanic in the world.

These nostalgic celebrations of the Spanish spirit were fresh in our minds when Bill Egginton and I exchanged reflections on the status of the literary classics, and generally speaking, on the current state of our discipline(s) for the first volume of *Hispanic Issues On Line*. This explains the Cervantine focus of the piece. With respect to the follow-up workshop of April 14, *Crossing the Boundaries: Culture, Linguistics, and Literature*, many of the issues discussed in this engaging forum were also related to questions of linguistic and cultural identities and authorities. I was particularly interested in the questions that were raised on and around the debates surrounding the article authored by Scott Jaschik in *Inside Higher Ed*, dated January 2, 2007. The piece which purportedly summarizes the findings and recommendations of an MLA panel of top professors of foreign languages concludes that "the programs that train undergraduate majors and new Ph.D.'s are seriously off course, with so much emphasis on literature that broader understanding of cultures and nations has been lost [...] In graduate language education, 'the teaching of literature has become an end in itself', in a 'triumph of historically dehydrated theory' ..." (Jaschik).

Regardless of where one situates himself in the debates over the development and implementation of new Foreign Languages curricula which would presumably be more attentive to historical context and present social and cultural needs, some sections of the January 2 report are clearly controversial. The following statement is a case in point: “Professors involved with planning this overhaul said that they were doing so for educational reasons –and that part of their role is to promote federal policy that embraces educationally valid language programs. But some of the professors involved said that the effort would produce graduates who were far more valuable to the government (and business for that matter), as well as for education” (Jaschik).

Speaking of the current environment in which the federal government is showing an interest (if selective) in foreign language study, Jaschik paraphrases the statements reportedly made by a Yale University Professor: “Saussy said that an environment where the federal government is suddenly interested in foreign languages and (if the committee’s recommendations are adopted) departments are making their programs more relevant, professors may feel like they face ‘Faustian bargains’ if they work with the government. In such situations, he said, academics should not make their decisions based solely on their views of the Bush administration, since future administrations may ‘require less nose-holding’ to work with. He also noted the positive contributions scholars could make to policy by training a generation of experts who might know much more about different parts of the world than do those who have run U.S. foreign policy in recent years. Federal support for foreign languages might be viewed ‘as a rose to be plucked’, Saussy said –even if there are thorns of which to be wary” (Jaschik). For her part María Louise Pratt, chair of the MLA panel, may have identified some of these thorns when she reportedly said that the association wanted to oppose “the securitization of language study” even as she noted that “there is tremendous frustration about how literary study monopolizes the curriculum” (the quotes are again from Jaschik’s report).

While agreeing that we cannot bury our head in the sand, or in the literary text, and that we need to look to history, culture, economics and society in search for sources of meaning and educational objectives beyond prescriptive notions of aesthetic, moral or social value, I would like to call attention to what I see as the dangers of “teaching to the market”. Whether we are talking about governmental agencies or the corporate world, when we teach to the market we lose sight of overarching humanistic goals that have informed and continue to inform our educational practices as Foreign Languages and Literatures programs and departments. After all, the study of foreign languages and literatures promotes “foreign thinking.” If we could borrow from M. Bakhtin here, languages are ultimately worldviews (with their own internal conflicts). Something that is repeated over and over in graduation ceremonies, at the risk of becoming a cliché (if it hasn’t already) is the notion that humanistic education promotes “critical thinking,” or as university administrators often put it, “thinking outside the box.” Well, in a very precise sense, this is what the study of foreign languages does. We cannot think “outside the box” of our sociolinguistic comfort zone unless we can see other possibilities of naming, classifying, and interpreting the world. There is also much talk in our universities about learning to see from the perspective of “the other”. Inside our market-driven economy and society, an “other” perspective may be precisely that which resists the pressures of the market. Once again, by resisting I would not mean “burying our head in the sand” and condemning our students to unemployment, but making sure we keep a healthy distance;

the kind of distance that allows us to see the market forces at work, and to engage them in dialectical (and yes critical) ways.

It's not that we shouldn't work with government agencies and corporations, but we cannot become F.B.I, C.I.A. or corporate subcontractors. In the same way that embedded journalists risk losing their "journalistic objectivity" we may risk losing our "foreign thinking" (our greatest educational asset) if we become truly "embedded teachers." As I see it, we need to keep the dissonances, the contradictions, the arbitrariness, the conflicts and the violence of the dominant market-driven language in sight if we want to be able to preserve the "foreign" in Foreign Languages and Literatures departments. In this context one is tempted to recycle Miguel de Unamuno's urgent call to rescue the sepulcher of don Quixote ("the gentleman of madness") from the forces of order and reason in *La vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* published in 1905, the year of another anniversary celebration of the Cervantine classic: "rescatar el sepulcro de Don Quixote del poder de los bachilleres, curas, barberos, duques y canónigos que lo tienen ocupado [...] rescatar el sepulcro del Caballero de la Locura del poder de los Hidalgos de la Razón" (quoted in *El Quijote del IV Centenario* 29-31).

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