



Why Liberal Arts Should Be About All Languages.

Anthony Julian Tamburri (July 12, 2011)



2010 proved to be an intriguing year with regard to language studies. We saw some programs hit hard, others were actually saved (or so it seems), and others still were re-launched. In the end, with regard to Italian, we saw the Advanced Placement program in Italian re-launched, thanks to the efforts of so many within the Italian (read, also Italian/American) community here in the United States. One sentiment, however, seemed to raise its pesky head: namely, that we do not need to understand other languages than our own because, after all, we can read things in translation. One



of these pieces was penned by John McWhorter and appeared in his The New Republic blog. I had sent a response to TNR, but they were “not interested” in it. Thus, after some musings and chats with friends and colleagues, I thought I would share it here with our readers of i-Italy.

In his The New Republic blog of December 13 (<http://www.tnr.com/blog/john-mcwhorter/79843/which-languages-should-liberal-arts-be-about-in-2010> [2]), John McWhorter tells us that he does not feel as bad about “this new trend [i.e., “the disappearance of French, German, and Italian departments”] as [he is] supposed to,” despite the fact that he is a “former French major and great fan of foreign language learning.” It is, in fact, his use of the word “trend” that I find both problematic and, I would underscore, emblematic of a certain dominant cultural trait in the United States vis-à-vis languages other than English. The not too implicit message, we can assume, is “If you don’t speak English, too bad!” [Or, as some of our parents and grandparents were told in 1942, “Don’t speak the enemy’s language,” referring to German, Italian, and Japanese.] McWhorter then follows with a series of questions—rhetorical to be sure—that only obfuscate the issue at hand.

The issue is, of course, one of access to the study of languages at major universities. Now, I am most willingly to concede the notion that all colleges and universities, regardless of student population and resources, should—indeed, can afford to—offer all subject matter, and this would include for me some languages, some sciences, and other fields students might want to study; and, here, McWhorter and I agree. SUNY Albany, however, is a major university, a research one university that, contrary to the small, struggling private college, should indeed offer, if not all subjects, indeed the majority. It is one of four major universities in a system of sixty-four universities/colleges. That said, languages such as French, German, Italian, and Latin should be available at such universities, given their importance to Western Civilization, since, as McWhorter himself tells us, “Europe has been the main cradle of Western thought.”

McWhorter, however, continues with the following statement: “[B]ut let’s face it, you can be richly immersed in [“Western thought”] via solid English translations; Nietzsche need not be read in the original. There’s an awful lot of world beyond Europe; people speak some languages there too, and in our times, a liberal arts education should focus on them.”

This is nothing short of western colonialist behavior, a hegemonic thought process that follows what can only be a steadfast notion of survival of the linguistically fittest, and monetarily based, I would add. That Nietzsche—or other major thinkers such as Dante, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Voltaire—can be read in translation is absolutely true; one can surely acquire the general meanings of their texts. However, if we are, in any manner at all, to adapt and/or bounce off of their thoughts and ideas in any profound manner, we simply cannot rely on the English translation. The very use of the term “Superman” in English, for instance, is not the same as the original “Übermensch”; the difference being that über may connote a greater quantity of something, a sense of superiority, or excessiveness; and mensch, in turn, refers to a member of the human race, a person, or, in the singular, humankind, not “man.” There is a similar problem, I would submit, with Niccolò Machiavelli’s concept of virtù and Baldassare Castiglione’s notion of sprezzatura, two terms that have sparked dialogue and debate over the past five centuries, consuming thousands and thousands of reams of paper. In the first case, the term actually transcends “moral virtue” and refers instead to one’s abilities to acquire and maintain political power, among other things; in the second case, we are dealing with a term that is supposed to describe the art of making the difficult seem effortless, among other things, once more.

That there is “an awful lot of world beyond Europe; people speak some languages there too,” as McWhorter states, is absolutely true. However, that “in our times, a liberal arts education should focus on them,” as McWhorter continues, is debatable for sure. The “should” is, in fact, the problem. It underscores the “trend” that McWhorter mentions at the opening of his article



and thus unmasks his own susceptibility to the latest fashion, as opposed to the more encompassing notion similar to one that might be articulated as follows: “a liberal arts education should [allow students the opportunity] to focus on [a number of languages that would peek their interest and offer them a broader understanding of the world around us].” This is what we should expect of any major college and/or university in this country, nothing less. To belabor his point further by posing questions with language such as that which McWhorter does toward the end of his piece—“[S]hould it be expected that any university worth its salt have majors in those languages?”—only contributes to a further obfuscation of the issue.

This is nothing more than “cultural relativism” that causes the knee to jerk in reaction to the latest trend on the horizon. In his keen response, Russell A. Berman (First Vice President, Modern Language Association) speaks to the dangers of the US risking ignorance of the mindset of “key European allies” (<http://www.tnr.com/blog/john-mcwhorter/79843/which-languages-should-liberal-arts-be-about-in-2010> [2]). In a similar fashion, Italy’s Ambassador to the United States, Giulio Terzi di Sant’Agata rightfully underscored the “cultural vitality of the euro-Atlantic identity” and its relevance to the “future of the ‘Atlantic Community,’” in a recent lecture entitled “World Affairs Council Italy, United States and the Transatlantic Relations” (unpublished paper). A significant message in Terzi di Sant’Agata’s cogent lecture was about our need to know, comprehend, and continue to negotiate and develop our understanding of this long-standing “Atlantic Community,” as he called it, that “Euro-Atlantic dimension [which] initiated—and gave momentum—to institutions, laws and ideals that today are a true ‘heritage’ for all of us,” as McWhorter himself would agree, as we saw above. Gaining profound access to such knowledge, be it historical or current, clearly entails access to/through the primary portal to that repository, its language. Thus, we simply cannot give way to those “fashionable trends” or “short-term interests,” to which “[a]t times even experts” give in, as Terzi di Sant’Agata correctly states. It is paramount to a denial of nourishment, in this case a socio-cultural one, which would only allow us to move forward as Dante did, with our “piè fermo sempre ... ‘l più basso” (“firm foot ... always the lower” [one of many inadequate translations], or, limping along, as others might say).

In closing, I surely agree with McWhorter to some degree. Yes, the “world is [clearly] smaller by the hour. Our sense of which foreign languages are key to a serious education cannot be,” however, and this is where we part ways, “founded on” what some of us consider to be a type of cultural pluralism that seems to be based on a relativism that is shortsightedly cultural, political, and, let us not ignore, mercantile. Our future generations deserve much better.

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