Schooled!

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At a certain point in one's academic life, the mood changes. I don't mean the successive kinds or degrees of relief that attend appointment, tenure, and promotion but, rather, the grammatical mood in which we render a narrative account of ourselves. At a certain point, we stop thinking of time and subjectivity in the indicative—I am this, or I have done that—and begin to feel rather acutely the melancholic lure of the past conditional, sharpened in its regret as it slides toward the subjunctive—that is, in that affective continuum that lies between "would have" and "should have." Oddly—and this brings me to our forum's topic of the rites of passage in the academy—the shame of missed occasions, opportunities, obligations, or encounters acquires a certain, unalloyed pleasure if I express the sentiment in French. This may have to do with the distance or defamiliarization that cools and detaches affect, or holds it up to the light, when we speak in another language, or it may be a matter of having sufficiently mastered another language to be able to do so, and thus to perform another ritual as one should. In any case, it is oddly consoling to make the following confession: Si j'avais étudié des langues d'une façon plus profonde quand j'étais jeune, je serais devenu un meilleur chercheur (If I had studied languages more seriously when I was young, I would have

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become a better scholar). Why should this sentence—the texture of it on my tongue—give me such rich satisfaction, when it carries such a burden of regret? It would be inaccurate to say it inheres in the beautiful precision of the verbs, in the equipoise of the clauses, freighted as they are with the pluperfect and the past conditional, because the English translation lacks none of its clarity. No, it's about something else. I am still in the process of thinking through what this something else might be, but I venture to say that it has something to do with the body that moves between languages, that is, with a sharp savour that accrues in the very movement *toward*, even as that frequently tongue-tied body has moments of embarrassment that are singularly *untoward*.

To the truly polyglot—and here I think of my most accomplished colleagues in Comparative Literature at Université de Montréal—such discourse is either tediously self-evident or the unbridled enthusiasm that attends a conversion experience; for them, moving effortlessly and flawlessly among languages is, literally, the very air they breathe, for life as it were. By contrast, Alice Kaplan's memoir, *French Lessons*, is consecrated to the queer and entirely embodied lamination of shame and pleasure; here is her anatomization of the French "r":

> In September my "r" is clunky. It is like cement overshoes, like wearing wooden clogs in a cathedral. It is like any number of large objects in the world—all of them heavy, all of them out of place, all of them obstacles. I didn't realize that my "r" and my vowels were connected. It all went together. By concentrating too much on the "r" I was making it worse because in French vowels are primary and consonants follow from correct vowels. The first priority is for The Mouth to be in the right position to make the vowel sounds: lip muscles forward and tighter than in English, the mouth poised and round.… It happened over months but it felt like it happened in one class. I opened my mouth and I opened up; it slid out, smooth and plush, a French "r." It wasn't loud, it didn't interrupt the other sounds. It was smooth, and suave. (54–55)

Recent developments in cognitive science have demonstrated that moving among languages can delay the onset of Alzheimer's; Kaplan's point seems to be that speaking French well can also make you thin! Why be a large heavy object, when you can be smooth, suave, and plush?

When I began to teach in the department of Comparative Literature in 2005, my French was, by any measure, inadequate, and I began to work closely with a *monitrice* who began our sessions by informing me that liter-

ature professors are the worst language learners because we cannot loosen the grip of perfectionism, because we hate to appear foolish, because we cannot relax with the language. A certain abjection, then, was clearly an essential rite of passage. I cannot tell you how infinitely pleasurable this experience of submission turned out to be, and this strange admixture of anxiety and freedom carried itself forward into my teaching, where I learned that the world did not come to an end if I made a grammatical mistake or groped for the right word. And it being an irreducible law of nature that you can't keep a controlling personality down forever, I found myself saying to her one day that, no, I did not want to work on relative pronouns but rather on the pronouns y and en, "parce que je sais ce dont j'aurai besoin." I had mastered the slipperiest of the relative pronouns.

If we learn a language by rote, then we perfect it by moving into quotidian rituals, the daily passage back and forth between different ways of being in the world and, indeed, different aspects of the self. One becomes a hypothetical other person. So inestimable is this pleasure—a pleasure that, I repeat, is never uninflected by anxiety, by the superego of perfectionism—that I can but wonder at why language learning has largely disappeared as a serious aspect of disciplinary formation in the humanities. Is it not ironic that at the very time when the humanities emphasize cultural difference and "internationalization," the serious study of languages has all but disappeared in English departments? In his article "The Rise of the Monoglots," published in *University Affairs* in 2008, Léo Charbonneau points out that "before universities began to revamp the curriculum in the 1950s and 1960s, learning another language was a common component of most degree programs, even in the sciences. However, by 1991 only 35 percent of universities required second-language proficiency for graduation, according to data from the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. By 2000, just 12 percent of universities had such a requirement and in the latest AUCC survey, in 2006, it was down to nine percent." My sense is that you cannot learn anything about difference until you put it in your mouth: until then, it's all abstract.

In the current urban lexicon of the youngsters, to be schooled means to be taught a lesson the hard way, by embarrassment. It may be that, in our profession, we do not take kindly to being schooled—and certainly "le sujet supposé savoir" does not take well to the suspension of mastery. This isn't to say, of course, that intellectuals are reluctant to learn, but we are often unwilling to wander outside of our zones of comfort, where we can extend and reproduce that which we already know. It nonetheless remains axiomatic that the literary humanities' collective fetishization of

cultural difference is unlikely to go very far if we intimate to our students that everything they need to know is available in English: for this is merely to reproduce the arrogance of the dominant language and to replicate the cultural colonization to which we stridently object. I would argue, then, that the rite of passage toward otherness ought to begin very early in a literary education with real second (and third) language requirements. Such an initiative would, quite literally, embody difference and render it less conceptual, and it would obviate a certain ground of regret that many of us feel when looking back on our formative years. It would make our students' grasp of literary language, of poetics, far more adept. And in Canada, it would respond to the responsibilities of citizenship.

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