

ever more complex, and thus ever more fragile, civilization do without a fail-safe ethic of responsibility? One that is more intrinsically effective than the cumbersome legal system? One based on a preemptive holistic consciousness? Since the MLA has chosen to involve itself in extraliterary issues, should it not address one of such import? But with what tools? What in the philosophy of Foucault or Derrida or Marx can help us here? Or of Freud or Lacan? Psychology is clearly unsuitable, because it, like the legal system, is primarily reactive. A holistic spirituality, on the other hand, is proactive: it brings with it an awareness of the constant need for mental integrity.

And when work stops and you reach out to recreate, where will you go to find your spiritual center in the twenty-first century? Perhaps in the much-vaunted “decenteredness” of things? Well, good luck!

But perhaps the word *spirituality* still sounds scary. Perhaps *Zen* would be a better word or, more neutral, *mindfulness*. This, it seems to me, could become a hallmark of the MLA. The abbreviation *MLA* has given rise to various nicknames in the outside world: “Muddy Language Association” (playing on the perceived cult of obscurity) is one of the more endearing. But why not “Mindful Language Association”? Could the association’s president perhaps be persuaded to invoke mindfulness at the annual convocation? A prominent revolutionary of a different era, Robespierre, wanted to instill by fiat a state cult to the goddess of reason. Compared with that goal, simple mindfulness seems much more feasible.

How could mindfulness counter the current spirit of negativity? If I took the majority of last year’s sessions to heart, I would not be inspired to read any more of the canon of great literature. Really, is so much negativity necessary? Is not the very act of reading literature already endangered enough by the ubiquity of electronic media? Must we hasten the decline by destroying the last remnant of positive motivation? Let us declare openly that reading literature is a sacred, meditative act, as many of the finest writers have affirmed. Aesthetic experience long ago replaced for many the experience of religion. You literary professionals have good reason to cherish this sensibility and to protect it. By all means, deconstruct if you must, but please make sure you prove your points rigorously, always with the text—and, yes, the author—in mind. Mere generalizations, obscurely worded, of the psychosociocultural kind act less like proof and more like innuendo, like gossip, which in the end says more about the gossipier than the intended target. To be sure, if you do deeply resent a work or an author or an entire culture, if you wish to ruin your own aesthetic appreciation, you should be perfectly free to do so in our society. But please do not ruin mine! (Indeed, should I be allowed to sue you for damages?)

But if you wish to vent your anger within the MLA, you can still do so, and in an entirely positive way: help

impeach in open forum a major obstacle to mindfulness, that outgrowth of career hysteria the publish-or-perish syndrome. Help admit that about eighty percent of annual publications (in my subjective estimation) are terribly unmindful ephemera and will only take up valuable space in expensive libraries. The remedy is not complicated: everyone, young scholars most of all, practice self-limitation. Let less be more; delay publication until you are absolutely convinced that your points will still be valid, say, thirty years from now (well, more might be asking too much). That should restore a sense of perspective! Think of your professional life less as a “career” (a “full gallop,” in an earlier sense) and more as an inspiring “walk,” perhaps a walk through the woods à la Thoreau: Would you really want to leave trash behind?

Such then is, in essence, my modest appeal. With it may the MLA, now over a hundred years old, enter, like a starship, the awesome vastness of a new millennium—mindfully.

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The Goal of the Profession of Languages

To the Editor:

Is there a standing place?

Writers have seriously challenged valuing, selfhood, meaningfulness. . . .

Is there any core of ideas—not absolutes—that could be seen as a reference for agreement or challenge whenever communication is attempted? I offer some possibilities.

Basics

1. Human living is or can be worthwhile.
2. To become fully human, a baby must have enculturation in general behavior and in language achieved through relationships with other human beings.
3. No one culture can achieve all the possibilities of worthwhile human living.
4. No one human being can achieve all her or his potentialities for worthwhile living.
5. Being aware of various possibilities open to her or him, no human being can escape selecting from among them by whatever means—deliberately, consciously, capriciously, unthinkingly . . . —however it may be that he or she arrives at doing this and not that when it is possible to do either but not both at any given moment. Selection is continually involved in all matters, from the least significant through the selecting of whether to continue to live or to die, as long as more than one possibility remains available.

6. Some selecting cannot escape preferencing in some sense, between pleasure and pain as a starting point, say, and going from there to strong preferencing concerning other experiences—whatever they are that make one's life worthwhile, or not. The choices at some points inevitably include comparisons involving both immediate decisions of better and worse and final hierarchies of general thoughts and actions of greater and lesser worth or value in the individual's judgment.

7. It perhaps comprises much of the above to say that human beings cannot escape meaning, cannot escape being meaning-full.

Definitions

Literature: Any expression in language that provides to a reader or hearer an experience in addition to doing whatever else the expression might be seen as doing, such as informing, warning, soothing, inciting, or deterring.

Criticism of literature: Any commentary that deals with something considered literature, whether the commentator offers understanding, evaluates, condemns. . . .

Philosophy of criticism: Any commentary on or explanation of anything considered criticism or the philosophy of criticism, or any suggestions of what criticism, philosophy of criticism, and literature in general should or should not do.

Human Nature

There is a complex of existence embodied in individual positivistic entities, and we must deal with it continuously, whatever caveats and denials we feel we must make in considering it.

The nature of the physical aspect of a human being is such that it must have oxygen available to it every few minutes, congenial fluids every few days, and sufficient food every few weeks, if it is not to die; is able to receive sense data ("the given") from most of the other positivistic entities that impinge on it; and can propagate itself sexually.

If we can agree on so much, we at least ought to be able to talk about other aspects of what human beings can do, such as fostering children, thinking abstractly, and being aware that one is aware, whatever the complexities of human nature that allow so many variations in how specific individuals act and think.

Meanings

Our meanings are our interpretations of realities that impinge on us, from within or without. We simply cannot avoid "making sense" out of all that happens to and with us—each to the extent of her or his capacities—so long as we remain human.

[Meanings] have to mediate for the individual in his thinking, feeling, willing, desiring, loving, fearing, suffering, en-

joying . . . between all his cognitive, affective and volitional activities and that actuality with which these activities are concerned. They are what we^{sw} think of^{sw} and what we^{sw} think with^{sw} when we think—whether we think of our own right-hand thumbnail, an honest man or a centaur; they are what we feel when we admire a dancer or dread an interview [. . .]. [W]e find when we think more carefully and self-critically that—though we talk otherwise—it is not actuality that we^{nb} directly^{nb} think of, feel or want [. . .]. 'Actuality' itself [. . .] is further off. We deal with it through meanings. [. . .]

Meanings have also to mediate between individuals, be their common world to them, their common representatives of actuality. They are *not*, as we are thinking of them here, private events, concoctions of an individual [. . .]. Meanings are public, in any way that any beings can be public.

(I. A. Richards, "Meanings Anew," *Speculative Instruments* [Harcourt, 1960] 130–31; Richards places superscript characters around words, inviting readers to think about what meaning[s] he hoped to achieve with them)

Language

Language experiences may affect one as surely as any other type of experiences: their effects range from causing a physical response, like salivation, or an erection, or tears, or laughter, to enabling one to pursue, achieve, and control some of the most valuable mental or emotional experiences available to an individual.

It therefore follows that some experiences with language are more valuable to an individual than are others. Uncountable variations are needed to identify the better and the worse available to any individual.

To attempt to find and show how nearly meaningless life or language can be judged is a valid, perhaps inevitable, effort for at least some people. For most people most of the time the main comparable efforts should be and, I believe, are to find and show how much meaningfulness of value may be available.

A culture, however defined, cannot escape better and worse uses of language, examples of language, ways of enculturating language, or whatever. Any culture may and no doubt should embody a good deal of understanding of other cultures, but individuals cannot help making value judgments of what they experience from other cultures any more than they can of their own experiences.

To teach, encourage, and inspire ourselves and all others in our culture to seek out, experience, and create the best that has been and can be expressed in language in our world: that is one way of defining the goal of the profession of languages.

If we do not have some such goal, as a profession what are we?

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