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On Teaching French Civilization

by Ira O. Wade

IN JANUARY, 1957, when Professor W. R. Parker published his pamphlet *The National Interest and Foreign Languages*, he reported on page 48:

...Up to the present, comparatively little "area" work, on either the graduate or undergraduate level, has developed, involving the languages of Western Europe. A potentially significant exception is a current program at Princeton. In some other institutions (e.g. Yale), single courses have been developed by modern language departments utilizing the "area" concept in concentrated form.

The report of Professor Parker in 1957 could hold true, I suspect, in 1961. While colleges and universities have been extremely active developing "Near Eastern Programs" and "African Programs," and especially "Slavic Programs," I know of no great activity in developing "Western European Programs." As for the "potentially significant" exception mentioned by Professor Parker, I can report that it is still, I am afraid, only "potentially significant," since in an official listing of the departments and divisions which was published at Princeton about two weeks ago, the Special Program in European Civilization was omitted from the list, so minuscule is its "potential significance."

There are, notwithstanding my wryness, hopeful signs that the teaching of civilization and culture is more and more being coupled with the teaching of a foreign language, even the foreign languages of Western Europe. One of the effective reasons for this trend is the competitive activity which is going on in the teaching of language and civilization and culture in the non-Western European areas. It is difficult in a well-organized college or university where there are American Civilization Programs embracing not only literature, but arts and sciences, political and social institutions, history and philosophy, not to give a thought at least to the possibility of uniting these subjects in a European Program. The union of these same subjects in Near Eastern, Slavic, Far Eastern, African, or Latin American Programs can only add impetus to this movement. If for no other reason than to prevent the Western European from becoming in America the "forgotten man" of the twentieth century and to see him dispossessed in favor of the Arab, the Congolese,

and the "Heathen Chinees," we are forced to address ourselves to this problem.

We are indeed attempting to do so. The Northeast Teachers' Conference in the spring of 1960 undertook to inquire into the teaching of culture and civilization at all the levels of language teaching from elementary through graduate work. It is true that the meeting at Atlantic City did not achieve any great success, and came near ending in a riot closely resembling what recently took place in Algeria. At all events, I think the reports did show the necessity of giving some thought to the teaching of culture and civilization in our language programs. They also showed rather clearly (at least insofar as I am concerned) that we haven't a very coherent idea of what culture and civilization as a subject of teaching is, nor are we very explicit in our method of teaching it. Still, despite these obvious shortcomings, I found that meeting an encouraging beginning.

I should state also that while there are still no European Civilization Programs in our colleges and universities connected with the teaching of languages, we are devising ways and means of getting some of the job done. One can commend with some satisfaction the appointment of a Chair of French Civilization at Harvard University. One can look with great hope upon the widespread tendency in many of our good colleges to send to the countries of Europe students who have been, during the Freshman and Sophomore years, adequately trained in the use of the country's language. The Junior Year Abroad enterprise has been one of the solid developments in our post-war education. If we have not offered adequate opportunities for studying a foreign civilization in this country, we have at least opened up ways whereby this may be achieved, at least partially, in the foreign country. Now that we have a University as Stanford, for instance, which has established centers at Tours, Stuttgart, Florence, and Tokyo to which it intends sending a large proportion of its liberal arts students for a one year study, there is certainly in prospect for that University a rich harvest, if the other Universities will follow that pattern. While Stanford pioneers in the undergraduate field, Hopkins has been experimenting at the graduate level with its school of International Studies at Bologna.

These examples which we have much satisfaction in reporting are all too few, however. They represent the best we are doing rather than what we are in general doing. Against the optimism engendered by these two or three examples, one has to face squarely the facts that in the teaching of culture and civilization of the European country whose language is being studied, we are meeting some very serious difficulties.

While there is no great profit in beating our breast and wailing loudly about our frustrations, it does seem proper to bring them out in some clear way so that we may devise means of meeting them.

The first difficulty stems from the fact that there is no general agreement that the objective in learning a foreign language extends beyond the learning of the language. It is a fact that many of our language teachers are well satisfied if the students learn how to reproduce and manipulate the language (speaking with a good pronunciation and a fair accent and a reasonable facility, writing correctly if not elegantly or persuasively, and reading with a ready comprehension). These teachers are easily persuaded that this goal is no easy task, that it takes all the time allotted to them to even approximate results in language learning and that whatever else is added is a fringe benefit, a sort of dessert for the heavy task of acquiring a language skill. Since in many instances, teachers who advance this opinion are some of our finest language teachers, and since they are often not interested in or well-acquainted with the civilization of the country whose language they are teaching, they defend with considerable skill this point of view, which is, when all is said and done, worthy of respect.

These teachers are often opposed by colleagues who argue that while the goal is learning the language, it can only be reached by emphasizing the fringe benefits. They report that without the picturesque, student interest lags. There is much to be said for their opinion also. No one who has taught language for a time can fail to realize that for the student (particularly the semi-motivated or the unmotivated student) much of his task is tedious, if not boring. In the "good old days" the teacher admitted this fact and then got on with the work. But now that disagreeable facts are seldom admitted, particularly to the young, the plan is to establish student motivation. There is nothing wrong with this scheme of things. We started out in the discussion of our difficulties by saying that some teachers do not teach civilization; it would be absurd to deplore now that some teachers do. It is true that we often hear that what these teachers are teaching as civilization isn't civilization at all, or a surface civilization. Whether this is the case or not, I am not prepared to say. Given the innate "playful spirit" of the American, it is conceivable that too much showmanship has entered our language teaching. What constitutes "too much" is, however, difficult to define; a rule might be that whatever is fundamental to the civilization and interesting to the student should be taught, whatever is superficial to the civilization and interesting only to the PTA or the Community League should not.

A third group of teachers of languages just don't believe that it is their job to teach the civilization of the country. In general, they feel that when the language has been sufficiently mastered the student should be introduced to its literature. Their view is in keeping with the traditional view of language teaching in our colleges. If there was any consensus of opinion among the leaders as to the aim which extended beyond the learning of the language, it was thought to be the study of literature. Hence all language departments in our colleges have been regarded as language and literature departments. Often the statement is made by language teachers themselves that they haven't been trained in anything but language and literature and that they are unqualified to discuss the historical, philosophical, institutional, and aesthetic (when other than literary) aspects of the civilization. This is, indeed, the case. So far as I know, there is not a graduate program in any University in the country which trains its teachers in the aspects of European Civilization. Indeed, I heard the Dean of one of our very serious graduate schools in International Affairs say within the year that there was no need for programs in European Civilization because we know so much about it already. That this is an over-statement is proved by the testimony of these teachers of languages. It is a consequence of their insufficient training that the teaching of civilization is left in general to history teachers in our colleges. One might add that history teachers don't seem to have a superior training for the job either.

In spite of these difficulties, it is advisable to give some very serious thought to the teaching of civilization in connection with the teaching of our foreign languages. It is not seemly to be too dogmatic, but my experience, though limited, tells me that only a small number of our students are willing to concentrate in their Junior and Senior years in a foreign literature. Perhaps in time the situation will change, but at the moment I find that students in general who are not particularly adept in the natural and biological sciences, are interested not in a subject, but in life. They seem to me unwilling to commit themselves to one subject: they are as unwilling to concentrate in politics and in economics as in literature and in the arts. Perhaps they sense the need for a more flexible education than we have been supplying. At all events, I don't have to urge students any longer to get as broad an education as possible. I now have to be careful that it is not so broad that it is lacking in depth.

The way in which this broad training is to be given seems very clear to me. For teachers of European languages, the broadest training we can offer our students is European Civilization. There is nothing startling

in this suggestion; after all, fully sixty-five per cent of our liberal arts courses in our American colleges and universities are slanted European-wise. The real problem is not whether these courses should be given but how they can best be coordinated into a coherent humanistic education. It is comparatively easy to combine interdepartmental courses in literature and history, or literature and political and social studies, or literature and the fine arts, or literature and philosophy into a fairly coherent program. It becomes increasingly difficult when three of these areas are united. Then, too, experience has shown that it is not sufficient to give the student certain courses without at the same time instructing him in putting them together. I suppose that the general course in a country's civilization has been devised as an answer to the problem. At any rate, the general introductory course is the usual way of solving the problem. Practically every foreign language department will offer a course in French civilization. This course is normally a "survey" of the country: a little geography, history, politics, economics, sociology, a little literature and art, a little view of manners and customs. Very often, it is factual, historically oriented, anecdotal, with emphasis (if such a hodge-podge will admit of an emphasis) on the literary work. Usually the text is one of the four or five books which we have on the civilization of France, supplemented by pictures, slides, music, recorded dialogue, drama, etc. This type of course is offered widely as *the* civilization course. Many universities (Fordham, Yale, Princeton) have instituted it, and I understand that Summer schools and institutes offer similar work.

I subscribe to these courses as long as it is understood that they are *only* introductory. They do not present a foreign civilization, they present only a certain number of facts and artifacts, along with a certain number of guides concerning their organization. The materials which can be utilized have been brought together in a *Materials List* published two years ago by the MLA and edited by Professor Douglas W. Alden. I would supplement the list with a set of *L'Encyclopédie par l'image* edited by Hachette, by a full set of the *Horizons de France* series and by a full set of the *Michelin Guides*.

This course, though only a beginning, can be a very useful course indeed, if it adds to the selected facts presented a reasonable evaluation and a fixed set of principles on the analysis of a civilization. The last item is especially important. We assume (and quite rightly, I suspect) that any information which we can pass on to our students about France is worth receiving, especially if *we* pass it on. We have to be careful, however, or so it seems to me, to distinguish between information and how to evaluate the information. The real training of the student con-

sists in showing him how to evaluate his information. As in all the humanities, it is not enough to state and to describe, one must know *how* and *why*. Now this is not an easy task. It consists in forging a method for the analysis of a civilization which will facilitate the penetration and comprehension of that civilization.

It is thus the fixed set of principles which will guide the student through the last two years of his study of a foreign civilization. It is a truism, but a very necessary truism, that a civilization consists of a number of people speaking a language and living within a certain territory, who have had a historical development in which a number of living problems, national as well as international, had to be solved. These people have created a number of institutions, produced a number of art works, developed a number of ideas and a way of looking at life peculiar to itself. This language, these historical events, problems, institutions, art works, ideas, this way of looking at life have all together given to these people a reality which we have to penetrate. Our best chance of doing so consists in seeking in the elements which give substance to the people the qualities which give a reality to that substance. The task of the student of civilization is thus to sharpen a critical approach which will bring out the organic vital qualities of these elements.

Now this can be done in many ways. I have known teachers, for instance, who could do a beautiful job bringing out the qualities of French Civilization by referring either to a play of Molière, a novel of Balzac, or a fable of La Fontaine. Indeed, I am reminded of a wise remark made by the late André Siegfried who once wrote that the best way to understand French Civilization was to read the Fables of La Fontaine. But while I subscribe heartily to the way in which this can be done, I must state that such a method is always most successful after we have learned much about the civilization in other ways.

We should retain that every civilization is composed of a language, a geography, an ethnography. It also is made up of arts and letters, political and social institutions, and manners and customs. It has had a history, and it has developed a way of looking at life. That is every civilization embraces in its own peculiar way the subject matter of a liberal arts college. Training in its analysis is in a way training in the liberal arts. As a matter of fact, I know of no better way of practicing the liberal arts than to devote one's self to the study of an organic civilization. This subject matter is all related in a very organic way. The qualities of the language carefully deduced will be found to resemble those of the institutions, or those of the arts, or those of the manners of the people. These relationships are seen with ease, however, only after

a lifetime of study given to each subject. One wonders how he can devote so many lives to so many subjects when he has only one life to give.

I have pondered long this problem. If one could find a set of textbooks, dealing with the French Soul, or at least with the Frenchman, whether he has a soul or not, could one grasp the major points of his character and stop there? We have such books: Siegfried has a little monograph entitled *L'Ame des peuples* in which he devotes a chapter to each major race of Europe, Madariaga has one entitled *Englishmen, Frenchmen, Spaniards*; Luethy has composed a very lucid portrayal of the Frenchman in his *A l'heure de son clocher*. We could perhaps name a dozen of these books for France or for any other European country. While they are interesting, and very helpful too, particularly in giving the categories in which a foreign people can be seen, and very entertaining in the paradoxical way in which they are inclined to treat the subject, they don't seem to give the feeling of a Frenchman living. Perhaps I could make clear what I mean if I say that they do present the Frenchman, but not the reality of France. Used in connection with the material itself they can be very valuable none the less.

I have wondered also whether there is any consistent way in which the material could be selected and presented. Suppose one collected, for instance, the works of French writers who have talked about the civilization of others (Voltaire's *English letters*, Mme. de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*, or even Amelot de la Houssaye's little paragraph describing *Holland*). Would he find that he could grasp the reality of the Frenchman speaking? So often in talking of others, we reveal very clearly who we are. Or would we approach our goal more closely if we would gather what French have said about France: Péguy, Mauriac, Malraux, Maurois, and a host of others? Or should we collect all of this under a more general study such as the "Philosophy of Civilization," much as we have given a methodology to the study of literature in "literary criticism" or to the study of history in the "philosophy of history." I return constantly to the idea that, whatever the method, we are doing the same thing when we attempt to penetrate a work of art, or to penetrate a period of history, or the history of an idea, or a civilization. For there is really a coherent area of learning which can be incorporated under the rubrique "culture and civilization." There are profitable ways in which we can collect this material, organize it, evaluate it and teach students how to penetrate its reality. But we must first learn how to master it ourselves before we apply it to others. That is the responsibility of those of us who call ourselves humanists.

The carrying out of this responsibility entails on our part a return to school. We have to broaden our perspective, increase our knowledge, deepen our sympathy for other subjects. We have to devise new ways of giving meaning to comparative subjects, to coordinate subjects. We have to forge means of passing from a description of reality to the meaning of reality. We cannot stand idle and leave our task to time. It is, to be sure, a difficult moment and we are not too well equipped to do our task. But a modest beginning is possible. I would suggest that we first assemble and use a basic library of French civilization, a materials list in the larger sense of the term. I know a library of that sort, it was assembled six or seven years ago at the Centre Universitaire International in Paris by the late Gaston Berger. In that library were brought together: *Peuples et civilisations*; *L'Evolution de l'humanité*; *Que sais-je?*; and *L'Encyclopédie française*. If one would add a generous number of albums on French art and architecture, and a reasonably composed music library, that would be our basic material.

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