

Table Talk with Blake Hanna

In the course of his 35-year teaching career at the Département de linguistique et de traduction at the Université de Montréal, Blake Hanna was the driving force behind major initiatives, such as the establishment of the first language and simultaneous-interpretation lab in the early 1960s. Since retiring in the fall of 1992 he has been pursuing another lifelong passion.

by Daniel Slote

BLAKE and I are often to be seen on Thursdays in a charming little restaurant near the Université de Montréal. We have a corner table by the windows which has become known as "our table" even to the restaurant staff. Our sojourns there are little islands of relaxation where we share our observations on the past and the present, and our speculations about the future. We have never said, in so many words, how important our talks are to each other but I feel we both realize we are sharing rare moments, stolen as it were, from the pressures and tedium of everyday living. If, for some reason, we are unable to meet on a regular basis in the future, I think we will both look back on our "table talks" as we might the pages of a diary, pleased with their freshness and immediacy and perhaps startled as well at the endless stream of anecdotes, revelations, reflections, alarms and diversions.

Not to mention gossip. The latter is almost exclusively my domain since Blake, as he has often complained to me, receives few confidences of gossipy nature from his colleagues. There is something in the man which discourages the would-be tattletale, something which withers the tripartite soul of Gossip—the rude, the unkind, the bitchy—and makes the potential purveyor of the juicy albeit toxic tidbit scurry off, tail between legs. Blake does let me get away with the occasional snippet of gossip, but he usually shakes his head disapprovingly and wonders aloud at man's inhumanity to man (and woman).



Milestones in Blake Hanna's Career

Translation and Teaching

- Planned and set up the first language and simultaneous-interpretation laboratory at the Université de Montréal (1960–1964).
- Created the first bachelor's-level course in English phonetics at the Université de Montréal (1962).
- Created a précis-writing course: an innovation that has been widely emulated in translator training (1965).
- Directed the Translation Section at the Université de Montréal (1966–1967).
- Served as Vice-President of the Cana-

dian Translators and Interpreters Council (1966–1968).

- Directed *Meta* (1966–1968).
- Created a French–English technical-translation course designed to introduce students to the field and develop their research skills (1977).
- Directed 219 theses.

Interpreting and Research

- Performed simultaneous interpretation, particularly for CBC/Radio-Canada (1957–1961). Served as English interpreter of General de Gaulle's

Milestones we take for granted

We often speak of Blake's long and important career: important for certain milestones such as his setting up, with René Charbonneau and Jean-Paul Vinay, the first language laboratory at the Université de Montréal. Along with its adjunct, the simultaneous interpretation lab, these facilities were remarkable for their time (1960–1964), establishing landmarks here and throughout Canada in language teaching. Blake is modest about this achievement, but I think we all recognize a pioneer when we see one. His work in this field was exemplary and far-sighted, as was his creative innovation of a précis-writing course in 1965 as an integral part of a translator's training. We take these milestones for granted today, which is natural and a form of anonymous immortality like the nameless architects of some of the great buildings of the past; it is fitting, however, that we acknowledge once in a while our debt to a man who is still very much in our midst and who deserves our gratitude.

A passion for Diderot

Sometimes, after a glass or two (three actually) of the Chilean wine Blake and I are so fond of, I press the button on my imaginary time-computer marked D for

speech at the start of the Algerian war; broadcast nation-wide on radio and television.

- Carried out research on the early years and especially on the education of encyclopaedia writer Denis Diderot. Discovered university records at the Sorbonne that proved Diderot had studied theology, which attracted international attention because of the author's subsequent atheistic leanings. Conducted research on Diderot's training as a translator.

- Edited a biography of Diderot (1975) written by the author's daughter. The text, which has been restored to its original version, will begin the first volume of *Ceuvres complètes de Diderot*, which is soon to be published in Paris.

- Has been conducting research on a manuscript ascribed to Diderot, submitted to Blake Hanna for authentication. Mr. Hanna has been editing the text for publication and investigating its authenticity since 1989.

Diderot. And we are off and running! Blake's research on Diderot's early formative years has been an alternate source of satisfaction and frustration. Other than some serendipitous and very welcome by-products of his investigations into Diderot, there are important discoveries, many meticulously researched years in the making, about how Diderot spent his formative years (1729–1743). Frustration has gone along with accomplishment, as is the scholar's lot, but Blake's tenacity, legendary in the Département de linguistique et de traduction, is as strong as ever: he is currently doing some intensive sleuth work on a Diderot manuscript in an attempt, along with a European colleague, to establish its authenticity.

The scholar seen through his own eyes

Recently, during one of our cozy Thursday-noon conversations, I asked Blake to give me his own impressions of his accomplishments now that he has retired. It was not an easy question, perhaps even a little naive on my part—naive to expect Blake to blow his own horn—but one that interested me as I myself draw ever closer to that fateful moment. There were some generalities from Blake at first, hesitations, and attempts to deflect my question into levity: "Oh yes, there was the time I strode very purposefully into the office of the Department Chairman under the impression I was in the men's lavatory..." "Blake, I'm serious. People are going to be writing and talking about you and your career now that you've retired. I want to hear what you have to say."

"Pour me another glass of Chilean delight and I will oblige... Thanks. What do I think of my career? Well, I've reached out for those things I felt were important: One of those things has always been teaching. And then, of course, I have always had an affinity for the philosophy and the

thought of the eighteenth century. I felt, very young, that its perspective on the world was close to mine, and quite simply, I devoted part of my academic life to studying one of its most influential thinkers who, coincidentally, was also a very important translator."

"Regrets?"

"Maybe. But only in respect to time. I have so much more work to do, so little time to do it in, and I wonder who will pick up the threads later on. I don't have any disciples who might carry on along the lines that interest me. This, I must say, causes me some sadness."

And so we chatted away. There was warmth in our exchanges as always, but on that particular day they were tinged with a hint of melancholy. I think it was a welling up of the regret we all feel as we get older, as we ponder all the things we might have done, wonder at all the doors we might have opened but did not. Even if Blake had had an army of "disciples" his regret would probably have been just as strong. There is never enough time to accomplish what we feel is out there for the accomplishing... Browning said it well: "a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"

I have trunks and filing cabinets full of memories of Blake and the Department: Blake as a colleague, Blake as a friend. Let me just say how much richer he has made me in so many ways and how much his professionalism, his mentorship, and especially his friendship mean to me. I know I speak for all when I say that it is a privilege to have had Blake Hanna as a colleague and that we are all the better human beings for having known him. ■



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