

ON AWE AND AWARENESS - THE LITERARY TEXT IN THE CLASSROOM

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Education may well be, as of right, the instrument whereby every individual, in a society like our own, can gain access to any kind of discourse. But we all know that in its distribution, in what it permits and prevents, it follows the well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict. Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourse with the knowledge and powers it carries with it. (Michel Foucault, *The Discourse on Language* 1972: 227)

The results of a two-year research¹ carried out in State secondary and primary schools in São Paulo showed that the discourse of the Foreign Language teacher in these schools was marked by a search for transparent univocity which appeared as a desire for a monolithic and univocal view of the foreign language, a univocal teaching methodology and a univocal and transparent teacher-student hierarchy in the teaching-learning process. This search, however, was seen to be constantly cut short by the complex heterogeneity of the classroom (see Menezes de Souza 1995, and Grigoletto and Menezes de Souza 1995), which itself appeared as variable levels of teacher and learner knowledge, obscure, ill-defined or unreal teaching-learning objectives and a chronic misfit between the needs/expectations of the learner and those of the teacher and/or school institution.

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| Ilha do Desterro | Florianópolis | nº 37 | p.021-033 | jul./dez. 1999 |
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In general this complex heterogeneity (Bakhtin 1981) was seen by the teachers concerned to be negative, random and often judged as the consequence of a lack of discipline and a lack of motivation on the part of their learners.

In our reading of the situation, this search for transparent univocity represents a desire for a univocal and transparent sign (Derrida 1985) through which the school institution seeks to impose a single and transparent dominant set of values (Bourdieu 1983, Foucault 1975). The teacher, who is normally led in training courses to apprehend a merely reproductive teaching-learning model (Cavalcanti and Moita Lopes 1991, Bourdieu op.cit.) becomes prone to blindly seek univocity in the classroom. For Derrida such a search is reflected in the mythical attempt to construct the Tower of Babel, by means of which a single language would come to exist so as to permit the pronouncing of the only name of the only God, and thereby institute a single logos; this attempt, however, also according to the myth, received in response the wrath of this self same God in the form of the destruction of the Tower. By destroying the Tower and, hence, the desire for a single language which it represented, God imposed the unicity and univocity of his name and his logos, (by not permitting these to be accessible or verbalised in human language), and simultaneously destroyed the universality of this name and this logos, since, without a common, universal language, this name and this logos were condemned to eternal translation. From then on, the need for interpretive processes is instituted (Foucault 1987), and henceforth gives rise to the problem of prohibited transparency and impossible univocity.

Apart from the Foreign Language classroom which was the object of analysis of that project, this phenomenon is especially visible in the teaching of literature, given that literature, as a social discourse imbued with dominant social and cultural values (Fish 1980) generally has, as one of its stated objectives, the appreciation of a putatively undeniable and transparent value held to be present in the literary text. The corresponding consequence of the divine wrath, in this case, is the difficulty on the part of the learner/reader to perceive this value.

This article aims at presenting preliminary conclusions of a project which to a certain extent furthers the conclusions of the previous research; the general objective of the present project² is to analyse the teaching-learning of mother tongue and foreign language literatures at university and secondary level in the light of this struggle for the univocal sign.

1. On 'WORK' and 'TEXT'

In interviews with the teachers observed, and in the Prefaces of literature textbooks used at secondary level, three major objectives are generally highlighted for the teaching of literature:

- The development of an appreciation of canonical texts
- The development of a capacity of multiple readings
- The development of the pleasure of literary/aesthetic reading

These objectives carry the mark of an intrinsic internal conflict: whereas the first of these objectives emphasises literature as a closed set of inherited texts of unquestionable value, the second and third objectives putatively seek to encourage and empower the reader/student's (pleasurable) construction of his own readings. This conflict may be better understood in the light of what Barthes (1989) calls the concepts of '*text as work*' and the '*text as text*'.

As a *work*, the literary text is approached as a ready-made, stable and complete *product* or *object*, whose meaning and value are seen to be pre-established and contained within it. In this sense, the *work* is seen to present an emphasis on the *signified*, where a single or reduced number of established meanings are singled out and considered to pertain to the text as *work*. For Barthes, the *work* is also considered from a *filial* perspective as pertaining to a series of other works of the same author, or as pertaining to a certain period or a certain genre. Finally, seen as *work*, the literary text is read from the perspective of the *author*, as a product of his epoch, his biography, his culture, his values. Within

this perspective of the literary text as *work*, the text acquires a monumental nature and is expected to inspire or provoke a sense of respectful *awe* in the reader.

In contrast, as *text*, the literary text is approached as a *process* where *signifiers* demand constant interpretation or attribution of meanings which are not pre-established or stable, but are always in a dynamic state of flux, giving rise to a plurality of possible meanings. Thus, for Barthes, as *text*, the literary text is considered as a *creative process* which requires the interaction of a *reader* in the role of attributer of meanings not yet present in the text. As such, the active participation of the reader in the *text* is seen to promote *awareness*, independence and a critical active participation of the reader.

Therefore, the first objective cited above, the development of an appreciation of canonical texts, may be seen to approach the literary text as *work*, and hence *conflicts* with the other two objectives which, by emphasising the reader, approach the literary text as *text*.

2. Classroom Ritual

In terms of observable classroom practice, the literature classes observed at secondary level generally kept to the following ritual: the class occurs predominantly in the expository mode, and the learners are expected to have read, before the class, the set literary texts in their original form or as extracts contained in their textbooks. Having thus presupposed the reading, during the class, the teacher *reads or asks questions* (generally contained in the textbook) on the texts, and the learners *answer the questions*. The teacher then *corrects the learners' answers* and *seeks to explain* the content of the texts read. The class ends with the teacher *setting the texts* and questions to be read and answered before the following lesson.

In the case of the university level literature classes observed, the ritual was similar. Here, however, the teacher insists that the learners *re-read* the set texts before the class. As these classes are first and second

year mother tongue literature classes, the set texts tend to be the same canonical set texts of the secondary curriculum; as such, the university literature teacher thus considers the pre-class reading of the texts as a *re-reading*, presupposing that these texts were previously read at secondary school. This pre-class re-reading is accompanied by the reading of set literary criticism texts selected by the teacher. During the class, the teacher *discusses and comments* on the texts read, both literary and criticism. This is then followed, as in the case of the secondary level class, with the teacher *setting the texts* to be read for the following class.

In both cases, the dominant mode of the classes is the expository mode, where the teacher sustains a prolonged monologue during the class, with only minor interruptions on the part of the learners to answer the questions of the teacher.

In his expository monologues, while explaining, discussing, asking questions and correcting or commenting on the content of the texts, the teacher maintains a marked emphasis on the *conditions of production* of the text, in terms of historical information of the period in which the text was written, or in terms of biographical information on the author. During this phase, the teacher presents interpretations of the texts offered by the textbook, by renowned literary critics or, on some occasions, by the teacher himself.

Prabhu (1992: 234) describes classroom routines or rituals as characteristic of social situations of recurring encounters and as a means of defusing potential tensions existing in the classroom, by providing a source of relative security and stability. For Prabhu, this security and stability arise from the set roles that routines tend to allocate to participants.

Bourdieu (1991: 126), however, calls attention to the unequal distribution of power at stake in social or institutional routines or rituals which tend to establish representations or images of the participants involved; these participants then see themselves and the other participants through these images and representations; in describing rituals of institution and investiture, Bourdieu emphasises the *symbolic*

efficacy of such rites, that is, the power they possess to act on reality by acting on its representations. Such rites have the power of transforming not only how the person invested is seen by others, but also how he comes to see himself, and how others come to see themselves in relation to him.

Whereas Prabhu seems to see rituals in positive terms as a means of producing stability and establishing a kind of discursive “buffer zone” representing security (and thus avoiding conflict) for both teacher and student in the classroom, for Bourdieu rituals are seen negatively as an essential element in the process of social legitimation and hegemonic manipulation. In other words, it is the hegemonic³ power structure that benefits most from the security and stability offered by routines or rituals:

The veritable miracle produced by acts of institution lies undoubtedly in the fact that they manage to make consecrated individuals believe that their existence is justified that their existence serves some purpose. But, through a kind of curse, because of the essentially diacritical, differential and distinctive nature of symbolic power, the rise of the distinguished class to Being has, as an inevitable counterpart, the slide of the complementary class into Nothingness (op.cit.: 126).

This state of affairs concerning the unequal distribution of authorised power and knowledge in the classroom, however, is not as straightforward as it seems. The monologic, expository nature of the literature class appears to legitimate the teacher as the sole source of knowledge and as the sole authorised interpreter of the literary text in the classroom. Yet, as mentioned above, the teacher rarely presents his own interpretations of the set texts, preferring to offer the interpretations presented in the textbooks or those of the literary critics.

For Bourdieu, in order for the discourse of authority to take effect it is not enough for it to be understood, it has to be recognised as such under certain conditions which define legitimate usage: it must be uttered by a person authorised to do so by means of a *skeptron* or symbol of authorisation, in a legitimate situation, in front of legitimate receivers and through the use of legitimate forms. Bourdieu's formulation of the process of legitimation allows for the figure of the 'authorized impostor':

... the use of language, the manner as much as the substance of discourse, depends on the social position of the speaker, which governs the access he can have to the language of the institution, that is, to the official, orthodox and legitimate speech. It is the access to the legitimate instruments of expression, and therefore the participation in the authority of the institution, which makes **all** the difference [...] between the straightforward imposture of masqueraders [...] and the authorised imposture of those who do the same thing with the authorisation and the authority of an institution. The spokesperson is an impostor with the *skeptron* (op.cit: 109).

The literature teacher therefore seems not to see himself as a directly authorised interpreter of the literary texts. By preferring to yield to and wield the interpretations of the critics and the textbooks, the teacher appears to see himself as an *impostor* who, in order to become a legitimate spokesperson, must take possession of the *skeptron* or symbol of authorisation. His use of the interpretations of the textbook and other recognised/authorised critics may be seen as this *skeptron*:

Teacher F (extracted from a monologue, university level, to class, after presenting an interpretation not defined as his own): "For this, we have read a fragment of a quite complex text of Luckacs, remember?"⁴

Teacher D (extracted from a monologue, university level, to class): "[...] because we still need to discuss certain more specific aspects... I'm going to come down a little more on the form of the novel and even draw on some more of Antônio Cândido and Afonso Romano."

The question of why the literature teacher seeks the security of the *skeptron* to present himself as an authorised interpreter remains. A possible answer to this question appears to be present in the very classroom ritual of the literature lesson. The predominant monologic, expository nature of the lesson suggests that the literary text is preferentially approached as *work* and not as *text*. As *work* the text is seen as a legitimate and authorised cultural monument whose meaning autotelically pre-exists the presence of a non authorised reader; the author is thus privileged over the reader.

As such, in order to legitimate his reading of the text, the teacher cannot present himself to his class as a reader; he thus avoids presenting his own personal interpretation of the text, which he probably feels, is merely a reading of the *work* and not *the meaning of the work itself*, given that when the literary text is approached as *work*, it is seen from the perspective of the *author* and not the reader.

As a teacher, however, he has to present and discuss the meaning of the work; in order to avoid being an impostor reader, he thus opts to be an impostor author, legitimised by the *skeptron* which in this case consists of basing his reading of the *work* on authorised interpretations (seen not as *products of a reader's perspective*, but as *re-productions of the author's perspective*) of legitimised critics or textbook writers.

3. On Awe and Awareness in the Literature Class

Given the ritual of the literature class, and in spite of the stated objectives of promoting a capacity of multiple readings and promoting the pleasure of literary/aesthetic reading, the objective of developing an appreciation of canonical texts seems to predominate to the almost total exclusion of the other two objectives. The canonicity of the literary text may thus be seen to inhibit the possibility of approaching the literary text as *text*. The approach of the text as *work* brings in its wake the promotion of a passive *awe* in the presence of the authorised monument to the detriment of any active development or promotion of

an awareness of literariness and its processes of construction and reception.

As mentioned above, in his expository monologues, while explaining, discussing, asking questions and correcting or commenting on the content of the texts, the teacher maintains a marked emphasis on the *conditions of production* of the text, by providing historical information of the period in which the text was written, or by providing biographical information on the author. By anchoring the text in the historical and social conditions in which it appeared, the teacher once more approaches the text as *work*, presenting it as a monument or product whose meaning is fixed and stabilised by its original conditions of production and therefore not available for new interpretations:

Teacher D (extracted from monologue, university level, to class):
“[The novel] *Quincas Borba* by Machado de Assis is written and published at about the same time, isn’t it? It tells about the process of the accumulation of capital in [19th century] Brazil.”

Teacher B (extracted from monologue, secondary level, to class):
“José de Alencar was born in 1829. He came from a bourgeois family [...] and this political life of his ended up forming part of his literature.”

The need for understanding the role of the conditions of production in the creation of meaning is indeed laudable, but in this case the conditions of production of the *writing* of the text are contrasted with the conditions of production of the *reading* of the text.

Seen as a *work*, the former conditions are privileged to the detriment of the latter, which devalues the perspective of the reader. Bakhtin (1992 :364-365) warns against this:

It is not very desirable to study literature independently of the cultural totality of a period, but it is even more dangerous to close literature only into the period in which it was created, in what may be called its contemporaneity. [...] all that belongs only to a present moment dies together with it. [...] In the process of its posthumous life, the work seems to surpass

itself, surpassing what it was in the period in which it was created.

In spite of the predominant monologic and expository mode of the literature class, and the wielding of the literary text as work, the voice of the learner is never totally silenced in the classroom, and erupts unpredictably to make its presence felt, to break the aura of awe that the literature teacher seems to disseminate in the classroom. Often the voice of the learner may be heard dialogically in the apparent monologue of the teacher's words:

Teacher A (secondary level, to class): "Look, I thought you had read the novel... I can see now from your faces that many of you have not read at all, but anyway, as I was saying, that..."

Teacher B (university level, looking angrily at a student): "What do you find so funny, eh? If you find something funny, I'm talking about serious things. If all of you are finding something funny, it is much more fun to stay outside than to stay here in this heat listening to something stupid, isn't it?"

In these examples, the heterogeneity perceived as a lack of discipline and lack of motivation in the foreign language classroom of primary and secondary schools is also seen to be present in literature classes both at secondary and at University level, where the struggle for the univocity and the transparency of the linguistic/literary sign is repeated. In Bakhtinian terms (1981 :291-296), the desire for centralising monoglossic univocity is constantly hindered by the simultaneous existence of the opposing decentralizing forces of heteroglossia:

At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the coexistence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between different epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles, and so forth, all given a bodily form. These

‘languages’ of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways. [...] Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward.

In conclusion, therefore, based on classroom observation, certain contradictions become apparent in the teaching of literature; though the literature teachers observed contribute to the belief that literature is important in the curriculum because it teaches learners to read between the lines, to go beyond the face value of texts and language in general, preparing the reader to actively engage in processes of interpretation which demonstrate the constitutive nature of literary language, as opposed to the putatively mimetic nature of referential ‘ordinary’ language, in classroom practice these features seem to have been forgotten, or at least seem to have fallen into disuse. The teachers observed seem to have adopted, in practice, an authoritarian monological posture as privileged interpreters of ‘sacred works’ whose readings, instead of being actively constructed by the readers/learners, are in fact portrayed as timelessly fixed and stable.

The proposed path towards a development of critical awareness of the literary text as *text* in reality ends up hindered by the actual promotion of awe before a literary *work*. This seems to indicate the existence in the classroom of an agonistic struggle over the process of signification marked by the ideological confrontation between the contradictory discourses of the school institution, the literary canon and a pedagogical discourse of putative empowerment (Giroux 1981, 1992).

Notes

- 1 Project financed by CNPq, 1992-1994.
- 2 This project, entitled 'Dos Destroços de Babel à Construção de Marfim: a luta pelo significado unívoco na sala de aula' has been financed by CNPq since 1994.
- 3 "[...] hegemony defines the limits within which we can struggle, the field of "common sense" or "popular consciousness". It is a struggle to articulate the position of "leadership" within the social formation, the attempt by the ruling bloc to win for itself the position of leadership across the entire terrain of cultural and political life.[...] In this way, the people assent to a particular social order, to a particular system of power, to a particular articulation of chains of equivalence by which the interest of the ruling bloc come to define the leading positions of the people" Grossberg (1986: 69).
- 4 All citations from our data are presented here in translation from the Portuguese.

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