

literature and the experience of the foreign language

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LITERATURE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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"La seconde force de la littérature c'est sa force de représentation (...) La Littérature s'affaire à représenter quelque chose. Quoi? Je dirai brutalement: le réel. Le réel n'est pas représentable..."

Roland Barthes.

"There is (...) one rather limited way of interpreting this view (of communication and language use) which is seriously inadequate. This interpretation assumes (...) that information (...) consists of facts (...) What this limited brand of cognitivism misses (...) we shall call 'depth'".

Earl Stevick.

The two quotations above, one by a literary critic, the other by a specialist in language learning, agree on one important point: that in language learning as in literature, the choice of expression is itself significant.

In reflections on the learning of a foreign language and its literature, it is appropriate to consider the relationship between literary and non-literary language. Too often these two manifestations of language are considered distinct. Our academic discussions of the two areas are, significantly, themselves couched in two quite different types of language, creating a terminological frontier which neither side dares to cross. Whether this is in fact desirable for the two areas is one question that this article intends to discuss. Another is whether the division is healthy for the student who strays into our respective territories.

Creative literature takes man's everyday language and does two things with it: first, the writer selects it to

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best express aspects of the complexity of man's existence; and secondly, as he uses it, he chooses it, and turns it into an echo of other voices speaking in more prosaic conventional tones,— a half-echo, capturing moments in language, as well as moments of language.

In this journal, the emphasis is on specifically foreign literature. The echoes under consideration are therefore of the use of a language of a foreign complex of humanity which we call, through want of a better term, a culture. The understanding and appreciation of a foreign literature depends on the awareness of the language options open to a writer, as much as on an understanding of the human context it refers to. Creative writing is only partly referential. It is also, in part, reflective at the linguistic level. The status of creative writing and non-creative language use requires an understanding of the linguistic context of its production in order to be enjoyed.

In other words, normal language appreciation and literary appreciation are at two ends of a continuum. They have features in common, which we will consider further, but the complex of features at each end has a different strength in each case. Appreciation of normal language is thus related to (and aided by) an experience of literary language: and the reverse is also true.

The fact that language is only partly referential is demonstrated by what is known about problems of translation. If literature were only referential, we would have to justify reading it, and teaching it, in the original. Why bother, and why not teach it in translation? The trouble with a translation is that, at the level of language appreciation, "faithful" translation is extremely difficult. For someone who enjoys the use of language, the translation of a Brazilian football commentary or legal document into English would inevitably either sound very English, (i.e. be referentially accurate and colloquially appropriate to an English environment), or also sound very odd (i.e. be

referentially accurate, but expressed in an unheard — of type of English). The open show of pride — or disgust in the national football team in Brazil would be culturally shocking in English. Such evaluation would be expressed more discreetly, (though to English ears, no less convincingly). If the enjoyment of the form of expression of a football commentary is likely to be lost in translation, how much more difficult is it going to be to render the latinate erudite prose of Conrad, or the Anglo-Saxon rawness of Lawrence? In the former case, the latinate element would become unexceptional in Portuguese. In the case of Lawrence, the Anglo-Saxon elementalism would disappear.

Poetry, of anything, is harder. Haas illustrates this with the line from Goethe:

"Kennst Du das Land wo die Zitronen blühen?"

The problems here are only partly referential:

"Do you know the country where the lemons flower?"

Is "country" exactly what is meant? Or is the sense partly "region"? Could we use the word "land", a word with semi-exotic, mythical sense in English? But the problem is not purely referential. Finding vocabulary items that match the original is hard where a word (eg. "Land") has a polysemic quality. But problems also occur in the general feeling a word has, which is sometimes referred to as its "connotation". Do lemons "flower"? And why "lemons"? "She is a bit of a lemon" is, if anything, suggestive of bitterness and paleness (European lemons being yellow). Outside England, on the other hand, lemons are known for their delicate fragrance.

Apart from vocabulary, Haas considers the problem of syntax. The question form in German is simple. Archaic English would permit "Knowest thou", but the original text is not archaic. On the other hand, the colloquial "Do you know" adds an empty question word, "do", to dilute the concentration of Goethe's line. And how would the question

be made clear in Portuguese?

"(Tu) conheces o país onde florecem os limões?"

Can the interrogative force be built into the beginning of the line? Or again, the verb final position of the German is perhaps odd in Portuguese. In other words, in poetry, not only vocabulary, but also syntax, are used to expressive effect. Vocabulary represents a choice of lexical items, and their juxtaposition creates original effects arising out of unusual proximity. Syntax is exploited to delay, or bring forward certain words, so that they receive prominence at an effective position in a line. We can agree therefore that a consideration of translation problems shows that language comprehension is more than purely referential.

Not only does one language offer a different repertoire of syntactic, phonetic and lexical choices from another: knowledge of the possibilities available, but which were not used, is necessary for the reader to be able to appreciate the significance of a given choice made by a writer. In order to be able to enjoy a literary text it is important to have experienced non-literary language in various domains. It is for this reason that Barthes can say:

"il est bon que les hommes, à l'intérieur d'un même idiome (...) aient plusieurs langues. Si j'étais législateur (...) j'encouragerais (...) l'apprentissage simultané de plusieurs langues françaises, de fonctions diverses, promues à égalité" (1978:24).

The selection of a style, a register, or specific vocabulary, signals certain "tones of voice" — irony, ecstasy, bewilderment, humour, formality. A passage may mock styles of speech and turns of thought, gently or bitingly or sympathetically. A reader can only interpret this by referring to his knowledge of the wider linguistic context of the writing, the context of ordinary language use. Put in an extreme way, in order to understand and enjoy the language of Lawrence, it is important to know the

language of the aristocracy and of the pub, as well as that of Conrad. Literature uses the language of the world to comment on it in myriad ways.

Thus, in order to be able to appreciate a foreign literature, a student needs an awareness of non-literary language — of register, idiom, maybe of dialect. Neither form of language is quite satisfactory without knowledge of the other. An early introduction to literature is desirable, but always subtended by a constant exposure to varieties of non-literary English. The connection between the two uses of language can equally well be traced by starting from aspects of linguistic description.

In publications on language learning, one important concept for instance is the redundancy of daily language. Redundancy is generally invoked to account for the fact that it is possible to communicate successfully using less than the totality of the grammatical system of a language. Learners in communicative contexts tend to drop or confuse redundant forms, especially inflexions, articles and prepositions. This is the area they are most likely to make mistakes in. These same forms are also the ones they tend not to notice when listening to speech: they focus on the meaningful elements. In the same way, however, learners tend not to learn four words where one will do. In normal language processing, therefore, the principle of economy in the interests of meaning seems to apply as a matter of course.

We could say that this tendency is reversed in the area of literature. Here the writer exploits choice at the various levels of register, lexis, grammar and phonology, so that the enjoyment of literature depends to a large degree on the reader's appreciation of these choices. The wider the reader's awareness of the writer's options, the greater

his enjoyment. Redundancy in literature is therefore low, because the paradigms of literary choice are many. In daily language we are bound by convention: in literature the writer is within reach of his own linguistic freedom, if only to mimic those daily conventions within which we lead our existence.

There are, then, connections between foreign language learning and its foreign literature, whether one approaches the problem from a linguistic or literary point of view. And it may be that if we examine the language we ourselves use about our two sub-areas, we might see the need to change our professional discourse, on either side, not only for our mutual benefit, but also for that of the learner. I would like to suggest how this might be.

In the learning of a foreign language we are engaged in a process of reconstructing from the outside the significance of successive layers of a language system. We learn to apprehend the weight of certain expressions, their socio-cultural function in the chain, their similarity and difference to other expressions -- both in English and in Portuguese. Is this a scientific exercise? A relative question, perhaps. The study of the process is scientific, to the extent that we know of certain ways of going about language learning that are more efficient than others. It also seems to be the case that the more the learner knows about "languages" and the way they function, the better they tend to be at learning them. There is therefore good reason to clarify our description of the process in order to promote more successful learning, and to pose the question continually: how can this best be taught? (There may be a plurality of answers).

However, it is too easy, when concentrating on the object of learning, to allow the object to become assimilated to the form that the class takes. Then, the object of learning becomes fossilized, and loses the

immediacy and accessibility which is so powerful a motive force for learning, and yet which can so easily vanish in the mill of personalities and ideologies of the language classroom. This, as teachers, we need to guard against: the language of science used about language learning — so useful as a basis — can thus consume and digest the very activity we wish to promote.

If this is true of language teaching, it is equally true of the teaching of literature. Teaching/learning myths stalk the classroom and cast a shroud over the subject matter. Our language for talking literature, like that of talking language learning, takes precedence over the primary objective — indeed quickly becomes the primary objective — sublimation, or ideological recuperation? Something often goes wrong.

Perhaps, then, we need to find some common ground, which does not take the learner merely as a "starting point" but as a constant point of reference. His position is too often oversimplified and redefined: "someone wanting to become technically proficient in another language"; or "someone wanting to acquire the culture (and prestige?) of a foreign literature". "Acquisition" and "proficiency" are key words. The fact that he is venturing to learn an alien tongue, and not remain within the confines of his "mother"'s language is allowed to appear a banal phenomenon. Think of the silence at the start of a foreign language class. Twenty people are about to explore and develop their ability in a language they were not born with. The disposition to fathom and hold the language of an Other may be more precious and frailer than we would care to admit. More risky but also more enriching. Economically, of course, it's a useful activity. But, and our claims here have to remain intuitive, intellectually for some it can be an awakening to switch to a language by which one has not been conditioned from the cradle. Seen in this light, there is no divide

between foreign language learning, and the appreciation of a foreign literature.

Maybe we should think of the foreign language and literature student as one who is peculiarly able to apprehend uses of a language, precisely because he was not born with them, or indoctrinated through them. Could it be that in foreign language learning, as much as in the appreciation of a foreign literature, the learner has the clarity of perception born of a newfound linguistic innocence which enables him to perceive subtleties which the native speaker must struggle to catch a glimpse of?

Perhaps Barthes had a point which could equally well be applied to language learning when he wrote that:

"le stéréotype c'est le mot répété (...) Et dès qu'une chose va de soi, je la déserte" (1973:69-70).

Or as Stevick suggests:

"Teaching is part of life, or part of death: and learning is being born, or being stifled. It is gasping gladly for that next first breath, or being told, 'Always breathe in, never out' (1980:16).

Maybe language learning is nearly a literary experience after all.

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