

Critical Thinking and Literature Teaching

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Introduction

Literature takes a traditionally important share in the pedagogic curricula of English departments in Algeria. It is granted that this subject has much to contribute to the general learning process, as well as it is a source of knowledge in terms of history, culture and society at large. The tendency in our country is to approach texts from the angle of literary history, and to refer to established canonical criticism for study purposes. But this makes a rather static and subservient examination of an art produced by a dominant culture. It encourages imitative approaches and inhibits autonomous and personal endeavours. Indeed, our students could legitimately seek alternative directions in interpreting foreign texts through their own cultural and intellectual sensibilities.

It is quite timely in this age of reconsidering where the centre of discourse is located to make our students realise that writing is, to quote Fredric Jameson, “a socially symbolic act”, and that writers are stakeholders in the predominant philosophical and cultural mainstays of their universe, in whatever form or mode of writing they intend to express themselves, and whatever personal viewpoints they wish to convey.

I would like to argue the case that more critical judgement and more autonomy should be granted to our students to exercise genuine critical thinking. There are three main aspects which I wish to examine to further my argument. First it is fundamental for learners to value the referential and contextual elements at play in a text, and to be sensitised to the specific issues at stake; second, it is no less important to take literature as a medium of expression, with its autonomy in form, style and representations; third, it is necessary to establish links between text and context, so as to uncover authorial intentions and implied messages.

The cultural dimension

Students come to realise at university that language acquisition is a continuous process, and that refinement and depth of expression are very much aspects to work on for performance. Reading full-length literary works is then a necessary and vital step for the reinforcement of their linguistic competence, and for the exploration of areas of language that only creative writing can afford them. They are urged to treat literature as an ‘elevated’ form of communication, for which a number of artefacts are used to render moods, tones and narrative tensions, and therefore they come to ‘consider the underside of the story, projecting unspoken emotions and reactions beyond the ideas that (are) more directly expressed’(Judith A. Langer, 1997 : 74). So while it is important for students to achieve comprehension (through vocabulary building, note taking, plot summarising), it is equally important for them to find out, early on, whatever references and messages are rendered

through the various writing media adopted. The predominance of dramatic or humoristic developments, the recurrence of specific figures of speech, or the adoption of a metaphoric language, not only indicate clear stylistic choices but also refer back to particular contexts. In this connection, cultural awareness is bound to be recognised as a vital pedagogic aspect. Mohamed Miliani has stressed the need for our students to develop their knowledge of world culture, as well as to be sensitive to their own, national, culture, in order to develop an 'intercultural literacy' (M. Miliani : 1998 : 79). In fact, an insufficient sensitisation to this aspect of knowledge at an early stage will bring the students to the university 'with no preparation for the enjoyment of literature' (R. L. Wright, 1993 : 4), which means that they will also require remedial work.

For them the task of studying texts becomes a complex process, involving both the building of cultural knowledge and the linking of text with cultural context. This problem has been given due consideration by Algerian curriculum designers, who have seen fit to introduce a course in 'cultural studies' at first-year level, and a 'civilisation' course during later years to parallel literature classes. But such teaching is no entire solution to fill all gaps in general knowledge, and other sources of information can be considered. Part of the teachers' commitments, at least in the early stages of university learning, is to supply classes with other materials (background information, additional texts, audio-visual aids, etc.) to reinforce knowledge. This being said, an introductory literature course at first year level is also contemplated, and could be operating as of next

academic year, together with a course in literary theory for second-year students, to prepare them for 'mainstream' literature. This clearly shows that a consensus has been reached, that it is no longer possible to teach a language and ignore its cultural/literary background. As far as literature is concerned, a number of resource books have been designed to facilitate this learning process, and can be indicated to students as additional aids (e.g., R. Carter and M. Long, *Teaching Literature*, 1991; G. Lazar, *Literature and Language Teaching, A Guide for Teachers and Trainers*, 1993; S.A. Arab et al., *Bridging the Gap, Language, Culture and Literature*, revised edition, 1997, etc.)

The motivation of our students for literature depends also largely on the literary works that are selected for them. One has to appreciate that a delicate balance has to be maintained in terms of comprehension of text, context, language and culture. When asked about their own preferences, my students repeatedly insist on accessible books, especially those in which they discern some common ground with their own culture, and where they can sympathise with the experiences described in them. This is indeed not an isolated case in the world, for EFL students in general like to find some common ground between the culture of the target language and their own culture (L. Krsul, 1986; M. Brock, 1990; L. Krsul, 1990). Thus the referential elements from which they approach texts is for them an important issue, and the 'closer' they feel to the text, the more involved they become. Actually, as Mark Brock suggests, texts which recall the students' local settings, or better still, English

translations of non-native literature, can be culturally appealing to the reader (Brock, 1990:24-28).

The latter proposal seems to me the soundest, as it coheres with the principle of identification with values as an incentive for reading. So English versions of Tayib Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, or Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, for instance, reflect a recognisable African-Moslem context, and memorable experiences of the confrontation between Africa and the West, between Islam and the Christian world. They can prove to be emotionally and ideationally rewarding, and elicit high motivation. But such works, naturally, ought to be considered alongside the classics of Anglo-American literature, if only for comparative purposes. Among the students I have had over the past few years, authors like Dickens, D.H. Lawrence, Hemingway or Scott Fitzgerald are favourites, precisely because they get to grips with the socio-cultural values they reflect, and challenge them. Tensions between authors and their societies, as expressed in their works, can bring the students to look at such societies in a new way. E. Ibsen suggests rightly that 'how a text interprets reality may challenge our own prejudices and fixed opinions about other cultures' (E. Ibsen, 1990:3).

Actually students are always prepared to grapple with realities which are far removed from their own, if the 'stories' narrated are sufficiently sign-posted with the cultural/ philosophical backgrounds which they come to consider in comparison to their own. If cases of misinterpretation arise as a result of 'differences in cultural ethos'(M. Brooks, 1989 : 10) between the writer's own fictional objectives and the students'

expectations, the teacher's role then is to point to metacognitive elements which may account for the actual messages intended by writers. For instance, James Joyce's culturally-marked short story 'Eveline' can be approached at least in two different ways, depending on whether students distinguish in it an acquiescent authorial position regarding the Irish cultural norms directed by Catholicism, or whether they consider the story as a covert critique of a society which suppresses individual freedom, and, in this case, prevents the young Eveline from leaving Dublin and her tyrannical father with her fiancé.

In general, the teacher's role will be to orientate students in respect of socio-cultural norms, and of the writer's possible intention to challenge or endorse such norms, i.e. "to think for themselves" (Mac Lean, 1997) and not accept meanings at face value.

Relating Text to Context

From the above considerations, I suggest it is very important to request our students to 'objectify' their reading, and thus to consider the intellectual distance between the socio-cultural conventions as norms at play and the possible departure of writers from such norms. This necessarily involves an academic discernment, a 'reading with a suspicious eye' (C. Wallace, 1995), with a view to assessing the thematic preoccupations of writers, as rendered by their individual styles. Even if 'songs of praise' are frequent to express an apparent harmony with society and/or nation, students should be prepared to examine the irony, or double-entendre, that can be disclosed in them to express dissenting attitudes.

Such poems as W. H Auden's 'The Unknown Citizen', or Claude Mac Kay's 'I've Known Rivers', come to mind, as they deride in a covert way conformist conducts, or unconditional adherence to Christian values. Many works more openly point to inadequacies or ambiguities in social and cultural values, and query them on moral grounds. Even if, as George Murdoch thinks, texts 'ought not to be taught primarily for whatever moral values they contain'(G. Murdoch, 1992 :3), one cannot overlook the moral preoccupations, expressed in the allegorical mode, in works like *The Scarlet Letter* or *Moby Dick*. Such works indeed draw attention to fundamental ontological issues, and query individual and/or collective conducts of men regarding such issues: what drives the demented Captain Ahab to want obsessively to kill the supposedly evil whale, and so put his men at risk? What makes the Puritan community portrayed in Hawthorne's romance punish Hester Prynne so harshly, and turn her into a 'pharmakos', if not for their own absolution? The quarrels of writers with their societies hinge on moral issues, even if such issues extend over religious and political matters. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* can be examined as a novel revealing the distress of sections of the American society, sacrificed on the altar of market economy during the years of depression, and A. Miller's *The Crucible*, through the Salem witch-hunt that it dramatises, as an allegorical rejection of Mac Carthyism. Jerome Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is also an interesting illustration of the artist's quarrel with his society, here in the treatment of the generation gap, coupled with the denunciation of a 'phoney' middle class.

The use of the symbolic/metaphoric mode is to be recognised by students as a privileged medium of expression carrying social, political, moral or philosophical preoccupation. In fact, as Northrop Frye writes, 'criticism as a whole (...) would begin with, and largely consists of, the systematising of literary symbolism' (N. Frye, 1957 :71). The task at hand for our learners, is in large measure to identify and examine the systems of representation in texts, in order to infer meanings and interpretations. As I have attempted to demonstrate so far, the effectiveness of the exercise depends in fact on the students' ability to detect extra-textual implications. Their responsibility is then to gather the required knowledge of the collective consciousness, in particular the histories and myths reflecting the psyche of the societies referred to in works.

Students' Perceptions of Authors' Intentions

Theoreticians of the pedagogy of literature regard creative writing, on the whole, as a system of representations based on language forms and structures, which frequently deviate from linguistic norms. As a number of them think, texts ought to be read 'in-between the lines' in order to 'infer' meaning genuinely. To this effect, as Michel Foucault already wrote in the 1960s, an ideal hermeneutic approach would be 'to analyse simultaneously, through one single process, the general grammar, the general history, as well as the economics, by relating them to the general theory of signs and representations' (M. Foucault, 1966 : 90; translation mine). Foucault insists on the importance of the extra- textual elements inferred by the 'signs and

representations' he mentions, so that any rewarding study involves a search for an ideational content beneath the surface of words. The interpretative task can be simple when there is no great distance between text and context, symbol and reality. Dickens' novels are one instance of such 'simplicity'. Consider the portrait of Gradgrind in *Hard Times* as an unmistakable symbol of utilitarianism:

Thomas Gradgrind. With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature. (Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, 1854: 4)

But a more subtle and far-reaching symbolism can be studied in Melville's short story, *Bartleby*. The main character's weird and obstinate refusals to carry out orders, and in fact, to adhere to the commonly accepted forms of conduct ('I would prefer not to') is a reflection of the writer's preoccupation with the loosening of ties in society, and of individual isolation.

The place of the writer as reflector of social realities (even if quite often through the use of figurative language) is thus an important standpoint from which to approach literary works. Some recent developments in critical theory deserve attention also, in so far as they bring to the fore the point of view of non-Western criticism; this critical position privileges such notions as hegemony and empire to recall the historical relationships between the West and the rest of the world, and to 'deconstruct' Euro-centric visions of literature. Theoreticians of post-colonial studies have indeed drawn attention to the colonial and post-colonial contexts in which Western literature has developed. Their point of

view can invite studies in the light of such contexts, so as to trace any relevant ideological ethics and motivations in Western writers. In this respect we can refer to theoretical essays like Edward Said's *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, as well as Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Decolonising the Mind* and *Moving the Centre*, in so far as they revisit accepted Western attitudes regarding non-Western cultures. From such a standpoint, some classics can be re-examined and queried.

A reading of Fenimore Cooper's frontier stories would throw light on this issue, beyond the streak of romanticism that pervades such stories. In *The Deerslayer*, Cooper tries out his theory of "gifts", whereby each human grouping is endowed with specific gifts, or skills. But in his distribution of gifts, the American novelist emphasises the virtues of white Christians, whom he places far above the character of red Indians. In this story, the white hero wins his fight over a red Indian for the ownership of a canoe; next he asserts his people's superiority at arms over Indians; finally he proclaims his moral superiority as a white Christian, for he will not debase himself by scalping his dying opponent : "No, no, red skin, he said. You've nothing more to fear from me. I am of Christian stock, and scalping is not of my gifts"(N. Foerster et. Al, *American Prose and Poetry*,1970 :578).

Works like those of Fenimore Cooper, Rider Haggard and others have been put in perspective by postcolonial criticism, because they arrogantly set forth the "virtues" of their dominant civilisation. This form of implied superiority has been subjected to critical treatment by Ngugi, who derides the racist implications

in much of Western literature. For him such literature reflects a history 'which has largely been one of exploitation, oppression and elimination of other peoples (Ngugi,1993 :226). Edward Said for his part advocates 'contrapuntal reading'(E. W. Said,1994 :78), and points to texts which exude a hegemonic mentality, even if they are not meant to support the colonial process. He marks out Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a novel profoundly imperialist. In particular, he draws attention to Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park* as a pioneering conveyer of imperialist culture. He unearths methodically what is not explicitly mentioned, that Sir Thomas Bertram can keep a large fortune and a luxurious mansion house in Britain because of his exploitation of black workers in Antigua. This leads him to conclude: "I think the novel steadily, if not unobtrusively, opens up a broad expanse of domestic imperialist culture without which Britain's subsequent acquisition of territory would not have been possible"(Said, *ibid* :78).

As young people living in a former colony, our students are surely in a position to examine sensitively such issues, and can only be encouraged to consider them in the literary texts they study. Likewise they could be prompted to examine Western works alongside other works published in former colonies, to see how the latter engage in a de-mythification of canonical literature. Tayib Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North*, besides its dramatic developments, is a "roman-à- thèse" which debunks a number of negative myths about Africa, and actually can be read as a parody of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* ; similarly Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* can be examined with an awareness of

the novelist's intention to reflect a more authentic picture of the African character than the one offered by Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*.

By adopting such analytical procedures students would then come to realise that a mode of writing is necessarily related to the issues it deals with. Systems and patterns of language can be investigated, and shown to reveal much of a nation's collective consciousness through the creative endeavour of individual writers.

Conclusion

I have not attempted in this paper to propose revolutionary approaches to the teaching of literature. I have simply argued for a holistic and globalistic approach to this teaching, with the conviction that literary texts should not be considered as icons of Western culture. Conversely, they should engage our students to consider them as media of communication, as reflectors of worldviews as much as they are art forms conveying abstract rhetoric. An appropriate literary metalanguage is thus necessary for such treatment, and would reveal a proficient use of language, as well as a keen sense of interpretation and assessment. Obviously this requires a graded approach, and a process that takes the student from the stage of comprehension to the stage of critical interpretation. One should also be sensitive to the needs of students, at least at their early learning stages, i.e. to deal with texts whose contents bear echoes to their own cultural environment or conversely, challenge them. It is up to the teachers to draw attention to the extrinsic elements of texts likely to invite critical inquiries into such texts. An essential part of the exercise is to work on

their connotative functioning, in order to decipher the philosophical, moral and ideological values and assumptions which they may reverberate.

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