

LITERATURE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

I

Last month a group of second year students of English at the Zagreb Faculty of Philosophy filled in a short questionnaire. They were asked: Did you have any literary texts in your language classes when you were at secondary school? If so did you enjoy them? Do you think literature in secondary school foreign language courses a good idea? If so what kind of texts should be included?.

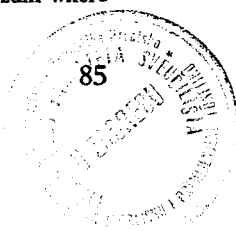
The students were also asked to give details of the school they came from. It transpired that they had their secondary schooling in 14 different towns (Buzet, Čakovec, Dubrovnik, Karlovac, Labin, Opatija, Pula, Rijeka, Slavonski Brod, Slavonska Požega, Sisak, Subotica, Zadar, Zagreb, Virovitica). Predictably almost all of them had attended such schooling centres or streams as: cultural, journalism, foreign languages, tourism, culture and art, pedagogy, social studies, all except one who had attended a secondary school for turbine fitters.

It is interesting to record that, of the 29 students who completed the questionnaire, 20 had had at least some literary texts at school, and only nine had not. Thus we may conclude that of the schools in Croatia<sup>1</sup> which prepare students for vocations concerned with the humanities and social sciences probably as many as two-thirds include some literature in their foreign language teaching. In answer to the question as to whether they had enjoyed such texts 29 answered "yes" some very enthusiastically, and only one (not the turbine fitter) answered "no". Of those who answered »no« one began her answer with "Unfortunately we did not have literary texts when we were at school" and another "It's too bad we didn't have a chance to enjoy American or English literature when we were at school".

A number of students, even when advocating the inclusion of such texts struck a cautionary note — that the standard of English was usually not up to using texts unsimplified — that it was difficult to get discussions going as pupils didn't all do their homework. Only one complained that the teacher did not know what to do with the text, indeed several said they were fortunate to have had teachers who had passed on to them a love of literature.

Most students let themselves go very freely when giving reasons why they thought literature should be included. The following answers are typical. First a simple answer echoed by many others "I think that literature is necessary in secondary schools because it is the best way to learn a language. Grammar is also necessary, we should study both of them." Three rather more sophisticated answers were: "This ... opens another question: Literature or everyday language? I think that pupils in secondary school should get acquainted with literature because that is a way of approaching a very important dimension of foreign lan-

<sup>1</sup> Speaking strictly of Croatia the answer from Subotica should, have been left out. However it does not falsify the picture, as it could easily have been from Split or Varaždin where literary texts are also included.



guage. . . We should let pupils know something about English society, history and other categories from which that literature occurred"; "literature . . . is a good way to improve vocabulary and to know much more about writers and their time, plus the special pleasure of reading a good book"; "I can't understand why literature has fallen into such disfavour. One of the reasons might be the emphasis on the practical everyday language. For my part this argument is completely misplaced. By the proper choice of texts we may give students a chance to master an everyday register of words and terms as well."

The replies quoted above, and most of the other replies that have not been quoted, repeat two basic reasons for including literature in the secondary school programme:

- literature as teaching about cultural background;
- literature as an "important dimension" of language.

At first these might seem to be two different aspects of the function of literature in language learning — but are they?

## II

The most fundamental difference between non-literary texts and texts treated as literature is that then latter demand interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Unlike informative language, instructional language, scientific or technical language, unlike the scripted exchanges in shop, post-office or tourist agency — the literary text calls upon and provokes very varied resources of language users above what may be thought of as simple "understanding". To read a text as literature demands not only (indeed not mainly) an understanding of grammar or words. It calls into play all the receptive and problem solving skills that we (pupils, students, teachers at all levels) possess as part of our equipment as users of language at all. Each moment of literature — sometimes even single lines, expression, words — calls forth, to a greater or lesser extent, the interpretive powers that we have accumulated through our stored knowledge of the world from childhood onwards, and in its turn expands that store of knowledge.

Interpretation, an attempt to "receive" on one or several levels (an attempt which, with rich works of literature, may go on all our lives) is not simply a possible response to literature — it is *the characteristic* one. To read a text as literature is to acknowledge that it is something different from a chunk of information or a useful formula for achieving smooth impersonal relations, that it is not something with a single undisputed meaning, but something whose impact is of a different nature.

I will quote here again from the student questionnaires: "a good poem or a good extract from a novel remains always somewhere written in the mind, and its influence will be noted sooner or later". I can back this up from my own remembrance of some of the steps through which my own reception of Croatian literature went. I can well remember the shock of joy when individual words came to have a real meaning *raspjevano* was one of the first, still used by me with pleasure on particular days (and purely metaphorical which is one of the properties of literature), also *tmuran*, *blistav*, *plašljiv*, *uzburkano*. Most

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted for the notion that *interpretation* is the essential difference between the literary and the non-literary text to *On the Margins of Discourse*, 1978, Univ. of Chicago Press, by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Professor of English and Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

of these came to me first through texts, but later came to be imprinted on my knowledge of the world. Lines from poetry gradually came to "mean something" *Cvrči cvrči cvrčak, Ako je zima nije lav, Pahuljice padaju ni ih niti čut.* The later still less fragmentary lines such as: *Otkud zlato, koji krova neima / Mirna krova da ukloni glavu?*" or *A ljudi koji u tom kraju žive, ljudi su blaži, ljudi su tihi, ljudi mudri, ljudi razumni.*<sup>3</sup> Or the names of novels — *U Registraturi, U klanjcu,*<sup>4</sup> *Pod starim krovovima, Svoga tijela gospodar* came to stand for a whole complex of ideas, information, "feelings written somewhere in the mind". In a partial reverse of the situation, or I might say in an incident of dual experience of the link between literature and a moment of ordinary life, I can most vividly remember when I and Professor Torbarina driving down to Brela on a spring morning stopped in Gorski Kotar before a tree standing against the sky and together said "Lovliest of trees the cherry now / Is hung with bloom along the bough".

In my experience of assimilation of Croatian literature all these, even the single words, were expanding my realization of the language. And all of them, sometimes in context the single words also, needed interpretation. Some of this interpretation demanded an understanding of cultural background, not as a separate subject but as an inseparable part of the interpretation and contextualization of the literature itself.

I am not supposing that my own gradual experience of literature in "the... society from which that literature occurred" can be used as a parallel to the problems of secondary school children in Croatia learning English as a foreign language — yet I think there are points of contact. Also I believe that we as teachers should have rather flexible notions about what is meant by the reception of a literary text. Sometimes it may simply be the reception of a word or line "Lovliest of trees the cherry...". Translation will certainly have to be used, also possibilities of interpretive discussion in the mother tongue. Always, however, at the end the experience should be refreshed of the text in the original language. For shorter texts tape recordings by native speakers — easily organizable — are more or less essential, one day soon video recordings may add a dimension.

### III

This article was supposed to be to suggest reasons why the inclusion of literary texts in language teaching is desirable, but I have already and inevitably begun to drift on to the next, and closely related topic — the last that was included in the student questionnaire "If so then what kind of texts should be included?". If a similar questionnaire were addressed to teachers it would immediately be followed by another "And how would you teach them?". But these need to be the subject of another article, an article based on discussions and exchange of experience by many teachers at different levels including perhaps the teacher at 14 different schooling centres in Croatia (Buzet, Čakovec, Dubrovnik...)

<sup>3</sup> These lines from *Dundo Maroje* are slightly wrongly remembered, which does not affect their impact.

<sup>4</sup> I am aware that *U klanjcu* is not Croatian, it was a novel that meant a lot to me, and its memory still does.