

# Studying Language through Literature



Studying Language through Literature:  
An Old Perspective Revisited  
and Something More

Emilia Di Martino and Bruna Di Sabato

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

---

P U B L I S H I N G

Studying Language through Literature:  
An Old Perspective Revisited and Something More,  
by Emilia Di Martino\* and Bruna Di Sabato\*\*

\*Author of Chapters 2, 5 and 6

\*\* Author of Chapters 1, 3 and 4

This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2014 by Emilia Di Martino, Bruna Di Sabato

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-5978-8, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5978-3

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements and Thanks.....	vii
Preface.....	ix
Chapter One.....	1
Language through Literature: Back to the ‘New’	
1.1 Preamble	
1.2 On the language/literature relation in educational contexts	
1.3 On the literary text as a language learning opportunity	
1.4 On ‘authentic’ language, texts, culture	
1.5 But how? On the ‘whens’ and ‘whats’ of literature in language pedagogy	
1.6 What next?	
Chapter Two.....	21
Literary Fiction: The “Good Bad Book”	
2.1 Literary fiction, or On the literary text as a speech event	
2.2 What books in the language classroom? or How to explore Young Adult Literature for language learning	
Chapter Three.....	63
Well-versed: Enhancing Language Awareness through Poetry	
3.1 On the use of poetry in language teaching	
3.2 Introducing poetry to learners	
3.3 Exploiting poems in the language class	
3.4 Other types of poetic language	
3.5 Poetry as the texture for many tasks	
Chapter Four.....	83
Playing a Part: Drama in the Language Classroom	
4.1 On educational drama	
4.2 Defining drama	
4.3 Drama in the current pedagogical trends	
4.4 A few more tips	

Chapter Five .....	93
Found in Translation: Contrastive Language Analysis as the Basis for Comparative Literature	
5.1 On ‘applied’ translation criticism	
5.2 Applying translation criticism to foreign language teaching	
Chapter Six .....	113
Nearing a Conclusion and a <i>Coda</i> : Assessing Literature through Language, Language through Literature	
6.1 Pulling the threads together	
6.2 A <i>coda</i>	
References .....	131
Index .....	155

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

Our thanks go to our families, whom we ask to forgive long absences of mind (and body) over the last few years, and to Maria Teresa Chialant, Bronwen Hughes and Patrizia Vigliotti, who patiently read the first draft of this volume, easing the production process and positively impacting the final result with their much appreciated suggestions.





## PREFACE

Che lingua letteraria e lingua d'uso si scostino di qualche poco, e talora d'una pertica buona, poco mi ci strugge: ma davvero: e non sarà la fin del mondo.

Anche le gonne d'una marchesa diversificano a chiare note da quelle della Marianna, pur essendo catalogabili entro i termini dell'idea «gonne» le une e le altre.

– Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Lingua letteraria e lingua dell'uso*, 1942<sup>1</sup>

The reader will forgive the authors if a volume written in English opens with an Italian quotation. We do not deny this choice is a tribute to our mother tongue, but also hope it will not be looked upon as mere parochialism. In a book devoted to the exploration of the benefits of the literary text to language education, Gadda's words are highly significant, due to his undeniable quality as a language innovator and to his ability to successfully blend academic language, dialect, technical jargon and many other language varieties in his literary production.

*De facto* literary language differs from the language of use, though the two are strongly intertwined and lack clearly-demarcated boundaries: Gadda's witty incipit – from a well-known essay which contributed to the debate on the topic in the lively intellectual milieu in Italy in those years – underlines the relationship *in varietate concordia*.

This volume aims to elaborate on that unity not only by exploiting the 'diversity' between the language of literature and the language of use but also by considering the 'literary' aspects of 'ordinary' language. Our work stems from the initial consideration that, despite the close relationship between the two, the destiny of literature in language education – at least in foreign language education – seems to have been determined by the association of literature with teaching practices which were judged unsuccessful and subsequently abandoned in favour of texts of the non-literary type, considered closer to 'real' language.

The quest for authenticity has led to a view of literary language as 'not authentic' because it has been artfully created to reproduce fictional

---

<sup>1</sup> *That the language of literature and that of common use should stand a span, and oft-times a full arm's length apart, truly worries me but little, and will not bring the world to a halt. Indeed, the skirts of a marchioness bear little resemblance to those of Marianna, yet both clearly pertain to the domain of 'skirts' (our translation).*

objects. And yet, literature seems to express an emphasized perception of reality – be it private, collective, or pertaining to a certain temporal/spatial context. Similarly, literary language exploits the potentialities of a language to their utmost.

And it is precisely this view of literature and of literary language that has led us to a reconsideration of the opportunity represented by literary texts for educational purposes. Moreover, contemporary literature tends to be closer to Marianna's attire, in that it imitates what we have referred to as 'the language of use' (Gadda's *lingua d'uso*). And Marianna's skirts are certainly no less appealing than the marchioness's.

We shall outline the philosophy that governs our research work and teaching practice (Chapter 1), and offer a specific insight on the use of the different literary genres: fiction, poetry and drama, each in separate chapters (Chapters 2 to 4). The opportunities represented by translation in the foreign language class constitute a recurrent theme throughout the book, but Chapter 5 will be entirely devoted to translation criticism. In the closing pages we will put forward a few reflections on assessment: we hope the *Coda* may be auspicious for the development and expansion of research in this delicate yet crucial area of education.

We are aware that the 'pacing' varies from chapter to chapter, as the reader will undoubtedly notice; this might have been avoided had we adhered to a pre-established format. However, in view of our different backgrounds, we decided to allow ourselves a certain leeway when approaching the various themes, meaning that the chapters are more orientated towards either a linguistic or a pedagogical approach. Hopefully, this will serve to bolster our ultimate aim, that of offering useful food for thought in order to reassess the role of literature in the language class. The reader must feel free to pick, mix and adjust the ideas, considerations and suggestions we have put together, and exploit them to her/his greatest benefit.

EDM and BDS

## CHAPTER ONE

# LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE: BACK TO THE ‘NEW’

(...) in literature we find not *reference* to reality conventionally conceived but *representation* of alternative constructs of reality, not actual but possible worlds, existing in a different dimension. These cannot of their nature simply be recognized by calling up relevant schematic knowledge: they have to be realized through the language which creates them.  
– Henry G. Widdowson, *Aspects of Language Teaching*, 1990

### 1.1 Preamble

After years of strict adherence to the educational philosophy of the moment and the consequent rejection of all that preceded it, the tendency now in language pedagogy is to avoid any taxonomy in terms of good/bad, old/new, traditional/innovative practices. As Parkinson and Reid Thomas point out regarding methods:

- Most ‘new’ methods, or something like them, were present in many ‘old’ classes;
- Many ‘old’ methods are still found, indeed very commonly today;
- ‘Old’ methods may be justified in all sorts of ways, not least by learner expectations and what learners and teachers are comfortable with;
- In any case, the opposition between new and old methods is an unreal one (Parkinson and Reid Thomas 2010 [2000]: 27).

It has therefore finally been acknowledged that in the field of language pedagogy most materials, techniques and activities will work, provided they are consistent with the set goals of the learning experience. Within this general framework, which could be defined as a *humanized learner-centred inductive approach to language education*, pragmatic effectiveness in communication plays a pivotal role and, in order to bring about a conscious use of verbal and non verbal communicative tools, we are here pro-

posing further reconsideration of the presence of literature in language education.<sup>1</sup>

Far from being an invitation to the combined teaching of language and literature, or an invitation to language teachers to teach literature, hopefully the following pages will shed new light on an old acquaintance (literature) which language teachers have never lost sight of, but which is still not considered ‘good practice’, especially among those who favour real and contextualized language learning. This is very well explained by Shanahan 1997 with reference to the U.S. learning environment, which is pervaded by “utilitarian goals” that influence the development of the language curriculum. In this context, “the language and literature teacher may understandably feel like an alien from another planet because (...) he or she believes *intuitively* in the value of literature” (Shanahan 1997: 166).

Before pursuing the issue, a degree of clarification is called for: what we have in mind most of the time while investigating and speculating on the possible repercussions of our arguments on language learning is undoubtedly second/foreign language learning. Nonetheless, in many cases what is discussed here is equally applicable to first language education and to learners of any age and level of competence. Indeed, we adhere to a general philosophy of education which sees the ‘who’, ‘where’, and ‘when’ as the factors which must be taken into due consideration to establish the ‘what’ and ‘how’: the learner and her/his needs, the set goals, the place and context, the distribution and duration of the learning experience, have equal importance in determining the teacher’s choices in terms of contents and methodology. And literature is no exception: the benefits for language learning deriving from activities based on literary texts cannot be taken for granted, since any successful outcome in this field largely depends on the ability of the teacher and/or the author of teaching materials to make choices proceeding from careful scrutiny of these factors. Among the many possible teaching situations and the theories explaining literature and/or how to use it in the classroom, teachers have to “draw on the range of insights available, and then to develop an approach appropriate and relevant to their students” (Lazar 2010 [1993]: 1).

As previously mentioned, we will try to focus on the current relation between language and literature from a language instruction perspective,

---

<sup>1</sup> The general philosophy of the research work presented in this part of the book has evolved through a number of stages. We initially observed current practice in our country, then compared it with other EU academic environments, and finally matched these empirical data with recent publications on the topic. Some of these considerations have already appeared in print, the most recent publication being Di Sabato 2013

mainly referring to studies in the field of English Language Teaching, English linguistics and stylistics. In doing so we will not be paying attention to seminal literature on the subject in other languages: there are so many works, from so many perspectives, that boundaries must be drawn. As to the structure of the volume, in this first chapter we will treat the literary text in general terms; the parts that follow will be specifically devoted to the different genres and to other particular aspects of literature.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 On the language/literature relation in educational contexts

Attention has always been paid to the relationship between language and literature in educational contexts, although most of the works in English were written more than ten years ago, and textbooks devoted to the teaching of English as a foreign language through a literature-based approach are even older, with publications dating back to the 1980s. Exceptions are Hall 2005, Pope 2012 [1998], some studies on the applications of drama techniques in language teaching (Anderson, Hughes and Manuel 2008; Bournot-Trites, Belliveau, Spiliotopoulos and Séror 2007, Dunn and Stinson 2011; Silver, Goh and Alsagoff 2009; Tschurtschenthaler 2013, Winston 2012, and the Special Issue of RIDE 2011), together with the interesting research work by Hanauer on the use of poetry in the classroom (2007-2010).

When speaking about the role of literature in language learning, we shall focus above all on the “use” rather than on the “study” of literature (Maley 1989), i.e. on literature as a “resource” (in the study of language) and not on literature as “the subject” of study (Parkinson and Reid Thomas 2010 [2000]). But the relationship between the two should not be looked at as a dichotomy, as if language and literature were two “poles” (Parkinson and Reid Thomas 2010 [2000]) with no respective attraction. Rather, it would be fruitful to define them as two good neighbours who, due to academic policy, are separated by bad borders (we will clarify this later). Most books keep the two subjects distinct, attaching a different weight to each, seeing language as a tool for understanding literature or vice versa; as a result, one inevitably counts for more than the other. This distinction is not at all productive and, especially in the field of text-based instruction, what is said about one ‘neighbour’ can be equally valid for the other. Ac-

---

<sup>2</sup> The examples in the book are taken from literary works in English and in Italian due to our familiarity with these two languages. However, the suggested approach may be adopted for works in different languages or pairs of languages.

tually, in many instances, it is not easy to draw boundaries between texts pertaining to the two types:

Many real life teaching situations have features of both ‘types’, together with a measure of ambiguity and room for negotiation, and even when the ‘types’ are distinguishable, identical or analogous theoretical reasoning or practical procedures can sometimes be usable in both (Parkinson and Reid Thomas 2010 [2000]: 2).

The difficulty in keeping the two separated is often illustrated by the tendency of some very specific works in the field of language education to shift occasionally to the teaching and learning of literature when dealing with the use of literary texts as a resource in the language class.

Rosenblatt’s theory of reading, based on the “efferent-aesthetic continuum” (1983 [1938]), further encourages us to reject a sharp division between the literary and the non literary in text-based language teaching. While recalling how she developed her theoretical model, Rosenblatt observes: “As I sought to understand how we make the meanings called novels, poems or plays, I discovered that I had developed a theoretical model that covers all modes of reading” (Rosenblatt 2004: 1363).

In line with transactional approaches dominant in the 20th century, Rosenblatt sees reading as a process determined by the reader’s adoption of a “stance”, i.e. that selective attitude which guides the reader to focus attention on certain aspects, while “pushing others into the fringes of consciousness” (Rosenblatt 2004: 1372). The reader may adopt a predominantly efferent stance, “abstracting out and analytically structuring ideas, information, directions, or conclusions to be retained, used or acted on after the reading event” (1373), or a predominantly aesthetic stance, paying attention to the “qualities of the feelings, ideas, situations, scenes, personalities, and emotions that are called forth”, thus participating “in the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions of the images, ideas, and scenes as they unfold” (1373). When we refer to a text by defining it in terms of any of the categories we are accustomed to (as, for example, efferent or aesthetic, literary or non literary, regulatory or informative), we are reporting our interpretation of the writer’s intention with regard to the type of reading the text should receive, but this does not exclude the fact that the reader may apply a predominant stance – efferent or aesthetic – thus determining her/his attitude and reaction toward any text.

Rosenblatt’s is an important perspective for the teacher using literature for teaching languages, essentially rejecting the dichotomy “scientific” and “artistic”, or literary and non-literary, and placing different texts and different readings on a continuum between efferent and aesthetic: “Although

many readings may fall near the extremes, many others, perhaps most, may fall nearer the center of the continuum" (1374).

Turning our attention again to the language teaching perspective, some critics point out that the use of literature as a language learning tool may lead to an increase in literary competence (Lazar 2010 [1993]). Recalling Rosenblatt's theory, Kramsch (2004 [1993]) indirectly implies that benefits may accrue to literary competence through the introduction of literary texts in language teaching. She wisely observes that:

The kind of readers teacher and students decide to be will determine the extent of their involvement with the text and the nature of the meanings their dialogue with the text will generate. If they read the text as a paradigm for certain grammatical structures, that meaning will be purely grammatical. If they read the story in an efferent manner, it will be given a purely referential meaning. If they choose to give it an aesthetic reading, multiple layers of meaning will emerge from their personal response to the text (Kramsch 2004 [1993]: 137-138).

Parkinson and Reid Thomas (2010 [2000]: 32) suggest that literature-based language teaching might even be a way to introduce literature "by the back door", thereby alleviating the pressure on learners who may feel less at ease if aware that they are in the presence of a literary text. Henning (1993) further stresses that the benefits to the language learner are not purely in terms of language competence, because linguistic and cognitive skills as well as cultural knowledge and sensitivity may be enhanced through literature.

We may ask, therefore, what underlies the attitude towards treating the subject of literary education as distinct from language education when, especially in a more general framework of meaning-based/text-based instruction, literature and language education develop similar learning paths which rely on analogous activities. Excessive attention to the so-called special purposes of language learning and to the communicative features of specialist domains in the field of applied linguistics in the last twenty years or so suggests that the "utilitarian" approach to language learning seems to prevail, in line with what Shanahan (1997) observed about the U.S. situation (see § 1.1).

To this we may add Cook's (2006 [1998]) remarks in his entry "Literature" in the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Applied Linguistics* regarding the already mentioned perception of literature in language education as a "traditional" and somewhat "dated" approach that has its origin in the humanist tradition of reading the classics in their original language:

In the classical humanist educational tradition, the study of literature is not only a means of language learning, but its goal: a major reason for learning a language, in other words, is to read its literature. (...) Language learning in which literature is central inevitably focuses more upon the written than the spoken language, and tends to make the learner's experience of the language passive rather than active (Cook 2006 [1998]: 205).

Cook ascribes the decline of the study of literature mainly to the “emphases on spoken language and functional communication, together with a broader view of culture” (Cook 2006 [1998]: 205). Moreover, stylistics cannot be said to contribute to a fruitful approach to literature from the language learner's perspective. We will address these three points later.

The present-day division seems to stem from the existence of “bad borders”, with academic practice keeping these adjacent fields well-separated. Kramsch (2004 [1993]) explains this academic habit as a sort of “self-defence” mechanism implemented by language teachers who are led to believe they are not competent to teach (or, rather, ‘touch’) literature. Such academic attitudes and policies had already been noticed by Widdowson who, as early as 1975, argued that the distinction between teaching language and literature was made in order to maintain boundaries between different academic areas. In short, there doesn't appear to have been a well-grounded justification for the division, but merely academic policies aimed at preserving a certain status quo (Widdowson 1975).

### **1.3 On the literary text as a language learning opportunity**

On the basis of the type of instruction received, students are led to reason in terms of disciplinary areas. It should be a teacher's priority to illustrate the ever present connections between contents and approaches throughout the knowledge-building process. In trying to redefine the relationship, it is generally recognized that in a language learning context a literary text has to be considered and treated much the same way as any other text-type, while not denying its added value of foregrounding those text features learners have to be aware of because they are common to any text.

By presenting some text-based tasks, Lazar (2010 [1993]) demonstrates how hard it can be to distinguish those texts which are defined as ‘literary’ from those which are not. Actually, she is not alone in highlighting the difficulty of recognizing specifically literary language peculiarities (Lott 1988; Gilroy and Parkinson 1997). The issue is so sensitive that some authors even propose distinctions other than literary/non literary which might function as a reference when we are dealing with such spheres as language, texts and communication (see Sinclair 1982's “fic-



tional"/"non fictional"; or the aforementioned "efferent" and "aesthetic" reading). This is because there is no such thing as a specialised type of literary language, as there is for specific fields (e.g. medicine or law, for example) or specific media (e.g. the press, television or the web). Literature presents a form of discourse in which "any use of language is permissible" (Lazar 2010 [1993]: 6) and literary language possesses several features which occur in other forms of discourse. The difference is that in literary texts language features are exploited to reinforce the message of the text (Lazar 2010 [1993]; Brumfit and Carter 1986): metaphors and similes, assonance and alliteration, repetitions (of words or phrases), unusual syntactic patterns, double or multiple meanings of a word, poeticisms, mixing of styles and registers. A literary text may thus function as a language booster, by highlighting those language characteristics which a learner has to be acquainted with because such features are found in any form of discourse.

Stress on the ability of literary texts to foreground linguistic features may be due to the huge amount of work done in the field of stylistics, a close study of the literary text which is seen by many as belonging to the sphere of language and linguistics rather than literature and literary criticism. This approach is not unanimously accepted from the literary studies perspective and theory has evolved considerably since its first appearance; in Sinclair's words (2008 [1966]: 3): "Many attempts have been made to "carry the reader to the brink of linguistics."

Nevertheless, stylistics is widely taught to increase competence in literature and it has also been considered of benefit to language learning because it enables "students to make meaningful interpretations of the text itself"; moreover it expands "students' knowledge and awareness of the language in general" (Lazar 2010: 31. See also Short 1988 and 1996).

Halliday's arguments in favour of linguistic stylistics to describe literary texts indirectly also highlight the advantages offered by such literary texts in the language class: the meaning of a text is reconstructed by reference to the text itself and also to what that text is not and "what it might have been". Since "the most relevant exponent of the 'might have been' of a work of literature is another work of literature" (Halliday 2002 [1964]: 9), we have to reconstruct the meaningfulness of a text by an essentially comparative procedure aimed at comparing that text to other texts of the same period. According to Halliday, "[t]he more texts are studied, the more anything is said about any one text becomes interesting and relevant" (Halliday 2002 [1964]: 9). Halliday's approach might well be effective to raise awareness of the many language resources we have to produce meaning and the many factors which guide our choice. In fact, we may compare the creative use of language in literary works to other types of language

use in texts pertaining to other domains in order to determine the relative frequency of a given grammatical feature within a text and in other works pertaining to the same classification, be it by period, genre or domain. In Lazar's words:

For the language learner, stylistics has the advantage of illustrating how particular linguistic forms function to convey specific messages (...) it not only helps students to use their existing knowledge of the language to understand and appreciate literary texts, it also deepens their knowledge of the language itself. Stylistic analysis can also provide a way of comparing different types of texts (whether literary or non-literary) in order to ascertain how they fulfil different social functions (Lazar 2010 [1993]: 32).

However, this approach is still literature-oriented: if it is adopted in a foreign language learning context, it has to be adapted to the different learners and goals. Those who favour the use of literature in the language classroom are aware that a language learner has attitudes and intuitions about language which differ from those of a native speaker who approaches a literary text using stylistic analysis. Native speakers and foreign language learners clearly have different linguistic, cultural and literary backgrounds (Lazar 2010 [1993]). In any case, the supporters of stylistic analysis for language learning purposes see it as advantageous since it can increase motivation by giving learners a key to understanding how language is used in literary texts (among others Carter 1985).

Conversely, some scholars object that language cannot be learnt through stylistic analysis and that it also deprives learners of the pleasure deriving from reading. The literary text is reduced to something that is "inert" (Gower 1986: 126). A stylistic approach to the text may be useful to stimulate reflection on language, but if applied too strictly, it may deprive learning of that invaluable process of meaning construction that engages the learner/reader and fuels her/his motivation. Furthermore, while not denying its value as a language learning resource, some authors are alert to the dangers deriving from a simplistic conception of stylistics as a linguistic approach to literature:

Stylistics however poses a number of problems as an inspiration for language teaching. By drawing attention to the ways in which literary language often departs from normal usage, it has raised doubts about the validity of literary language as a model for all but the most advanced language learners (Cook 2006 [1998]: 206).

And by prompting learners to concentrate on "unusual linguistic choices and their relation to meaning", the stylistic approach to texts may lead to a

rejection of a more “relaxed” view of literary language “as a transparent medium”, like any other text type (Cook 2006 [1998]: 205).

Kramsch (2004 [1993]) redirects attention to the importance of meaning over form, starting from the conviction that any text, regardless of its nature – be it of the informative or literary type – is made up of language. The real question, she feels, cannot be whether language teachers should teach literature but how to promote a reading approach which accommodates the many different levels of meaning.

A frequent objection to any text-based teaching is that it favours reading skills while leaving less room for spoken skills. Several authors, however, stress the opportunities a literary text offers for generating discussion and interaction. Duff and Maley (2007), for instance, argue that one of the features of a literary text is that it is open to multiple interpretations, which is ideal for stimulating spoken interaction. Once again referring to Rosenblatt’s transactional approach (§1.2), Carroli (2008) gives convincing evidence of the added value of literature as the basis for “dialogic learning”: her class experiments conducted on a group of students whose first language was English studying Italian as a second language (L2) confirm her view of the class as a “micro-hermeneutic community, where students can compare their interpretations and reading approaches, learn to negotiate and, if necessary, readjust their understanding of the literary text and their approach to reading” (Carroli 2008: 96). While perceived as reading based, as Carroli illustrates, dialogic learning inevitably implies spoken interaction among participants (see also Kramsch’s 2004 [1993] “dialogic classroom”).

Moreover, more than one author believes the literary text favours the learner’s creative self-expression.<sup>3</sup>

Last but not least, we can mention Lazar’s view that literary texts offer opportunities at higher levels to learn the language without the learner being aware of the process, which is similar to a content-based approach to language learning: “students may be so absorbed in the plot and characters of an authentic novel or short story, that they acquire a great deal of new language almost in passing” (Lazar 2010 [1993]: 17).

To sum up, the advantages of using a literary text as the basis for language activities are generally to be found in its potential to raise awareness about the language system, foster creativity, provide an ideal starting point

---

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Hanauer’s studies on poetry reading and writing in second language contexts: 2001-2010. An in-depth investigation of the issue of creative self-expression via literature-based learning is presented in Chapter 3.

for meaning construction, and stimulate recognition and discussion of (inter)cultural issues.<sup>4</sup>

Before turning to these topics, we have to address the issue of authenticity, still one of the prime concerns both of most language teachers and of those who develop language teaching materials.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.4 On ‘authentic’ language, texts, culture

Widdowson’s views on the issue of the authenticity of texts in a language learning context have caused much debate and have led to a revision of the radical attitudes that attach unique and irreplaceable value to language instruction. He touched on the subject on many occasions, gradually developing a more articulate view of the intrinsic nature of the non-authenticity of any language used in the learning environment, that is to say out of its context of use. Already in 1990 he argued that it is possible to refer to teaching materials as being “authentic” insofar as they are “instances of use” (Widdowson 1990: 137), seeking to clarify the question of authenticity by introducing the differentiation between “genuine” and “authentic”: materials might be a “genuine” record of native speaker production, but not “authentic” because they lack the native speaker’s response. Thus they are not “authentic discourse” (Widdowson 1990: 45).

From our point of view, even more illuminating was his rejection in 1998 of the issue of authenticity along with other “catchphrases” which had come to dominate educational linguistics. The very concept of authenticity is not relevant to the language used in class:

This is what many people would have us believe in their campaign for authentic language, real English in the classroom. I would, on the contrary,

---

<sup>4</sup> The three models proposed by Carter and Long 1991 to justify the use of literature, the “cultural model”, the “language model” and the “personal growth model”, are also in line with our approach: the cultural model presents students with cultures and ideologies that are different in time and space in order to foster appreciation and understanding and consequently educate their perception of feelings and artistic forms; the language model promotes a view of language as the literary medium, i.e. by reading “through” language, students will learn how to approach a text as a piece of literature while also learning specific vocabulary and structures; the personal growth model aims at a deep consciousness of the pleasure of reading and of the increasing understanding that reading generates: while appreciating and evaluating cultural artefacts, students achieve a better understanding of society and of their role within it.

<sup>5</sup> The issue has already been dealt with by the authors in previous publications. See, for example, Di Martino 2009.

argue against using authentic language in the classroom, on the fairly reasonable grounds that it is actually impossible to do so. The language cannot be authentic because the classroom cannot provide the contextual conditions for it to be authenticated by the learners. The authenticity or reality of language use in its normal pragmatic functioning depends on its being localised within a particular discourse community. Listeners can only authenticate it as discourse if they are insiders. But learners are outsiders, by definition, not members of user communities. So the language that is authentic for native speaker users cannot possibly be authentic for learners (Widdowson 1998: 711).

Nowadays authenticity seems to have become a minor problem, and with Cook (2000) we would agree that in real life there are many activities which, though not 'real', are by no means considered as useful:

On the contrary it would seem that the complexity of human social and economic affairs depends upon such 'unreal' behaviour. Reality and artifice are complementary, and each strengthens our understanding of the other. Why language teaching alone should be singled out as an area where everything should be real, and where the 'real' is somehow better than artifice, is unclear (Cook 2000: 172).

As for literature, whether it is defined as "authentic" (Parkinson and Reid Thomas 2010 [2000]) or "genuine" (Duff and Maley 2007), it is generally agreed that these are qualities that literary texts possess, providing the opportunity to expose learners to "a variety of registers, styles, and text-types at many levels of difficulty" (Duff and Maley 2007: 5): "This 'genuine' feel of literary texts is a powerful motivator, especially when allied to the fact the literary texts so often touch on themes to which learners can bring a personal response from their own experience" (Duff and Maley 1990, cit. in Parkinson and Reid Thomas 2010 [2000]: 10).

The issue becomes even more complicated when the debate shifts to cultural features in literary texts. In this case, the very concept of authenticity is quite fiercely debated. One of the advantages of using literary texts listed by Duff and Maley (2007) is that they are a vehicle for culture. However, as the authors explain, this means not that by reading literature you may "learn" the culture which lies behind a language, but rather that the elements contained in literary texts offer an occasion for "raising awareness of difference and for developing tolerance and understanding" (Duff and Maley 2007: 6).

Literary works are fictitious and this must be clear to those who use them in class. They portray reality in a way that can be 'realistic' but that is not 'real'; they can be realistic to the point of creating the illusion of reality but they are by definition works of fiction. Indeed, "there is a danger

that students will fall into the fallacy of assuming that a novel, for example, represents the totality of a society, when in fact it is a highly atypical account of one particular milieu during a specific historical period” (Lazar 2010 [1993]: 16).

Viewing the issue under a different light, the reading of a literary text can be considered a way to gain awareness of the “strong undercurrents of the time and place in which it was written”:

No one who has genuinely exposed himself or herself to a work by Dickens can claim to be a stranger to the world of 19th-century Britain; no one who has read Dante can visit contemporary Italy without a sense of *déjà vu*. These are aspects of the study of literature that we take for granted (Shanahan 1997: 167).

An uncritical use of literature as a means to convey the culture of the people who speak the language may also be dangerous and learners have to be well aware that:

(...) few novels or poems could claim to be a purely factual documentation of their society. (...) There is a danger that students will fall into the fallacy of assuming that a novel, for example, represents the totality of a society, when in fact it is a highly atypical account of one particular milieu during a specific historical period (Lazar 2010 [1993]: 16).

There is little doubt that literature provides an invaluable chance to raise intercultural awareness. Indeed, the use of English as a global language makes the literature written in English not just the expression of the English speaking countries but rather the reflection of “the rich and fascinating diversities of our world” (Lazar 2010 [1993]: 16).

Literature, therefore, is a useful medium to introduce learners to cultural and linguistic difference: of course, in order to foreground such features, literature sometimes unrealistically emphasizes certain traits. But it is exactly this quality of the literary text which gives the teacher the opportunity to trigger spontaneous recognition on behalf of learners. Cultural features are generally foregrounded by reference to places, objects, facts, persons, behaviour, and so on, but also by linguistic devices, such as the introduction of elements pertaining to different language varieties and registers. In other words, an intensive exploitation of the language medium on behalf of the writer allows for a

(...) *representation* of alternative constructs of reality, not actual but possible worlds, existing in a different dimension. (...) Even when literature makes mention of objects, places, and events which are familiar, they have to be located in the created context of an imagined world which

cannot be familiar, so their significance is never just a matter of recognition (Widdowson 1990: 177).

This “self-enclosed world” can be created only thanks to “intensive exploitation” of the potentialities of language. And the writer’s work has to be complemented by the reader’s analogous activity of “a particularly intensive exploitation of the language medium. And of course the literary writer encourages the reader in such exploitation”, in order to enable him/her to gain access to the fictitious world (Widdowson 1990: 177-178).

The subject of authenticity brings us back to language and how it is used to build up different worlds. The “obsession” (Cook 2004: 111) with authenticity can be left aside as it depends on the contingent combination of the reader’s response, the text’s discourse type and the writer’s communicative purpose in producing authentic discourse, rather than on the use of ‘genuine’ texts to promote ‘authentic’ language use in the learning environment: “Genuineness is a characteristic of the passage itself and is an absolute quality. Authenticity is a characteristic of the relationship between the passage and the reader and it has to do with appropriate response” (Widdowson 1978: 80).

## **1.5 But how? On the ‘whens’ and ‘whats’ of literature in language pedagogy**

So why and at what point is it an advantage to introduce work on literary texts? We have already implicitly answered this question, but we wish to debunk the age old adage which claims that the main purpose of literature is to introduce students to more ‘difficult’ language:

(...) a look at university curricula in many countries, from Germany to Pakistan, seems to reveal an assumption that at a certain point learners come to the ‘end of language’, and that the only way to keep stretching them, and sorting out the sheep from the goats (...), is by asking difficult questions about Shakespeare (Parkinson and Reid Thomas 2010 [2000]: 10).

From our experience at Italian universities we are inclined to agree that most language at an advanced level is taught via literary texts, especially in the field of foreign language teaching, and especially in the case of languages which are different from English.

The contention that “if you do have, say, an advanced European university class, you may have to accept that literature teaching has complex

institutional foundations, and that you are not allowed to make it too easy” (Parkinson and Reid Thomas 2010 [2000]: 10) is rather questionable: it generates a less productive use of literature which also has a negative impact on learners’ motivation to exploit the literary text as a treasure trove of language resources which serve to enrich language competence.

And yet, the assumption that the literary text is difficult to cope with and is only an advantage at a later stage of learning is common to many. According to Widdowson (1990: 177-180), literature is the best medium, after communicative activities, to informally introduce grammar elements, thus allowing for a gradual transition to “‘natural’ language behaviour” and the consequent ability to depart from systemic knowledge while referring to it when required as a sort of “back-up resource”. After this first stage of “communicative grammar” and problem-solving activities, a later stage, devoted to “the teaching of meaning”, is required. Such procedures for negotiating meaning can be based on literature seen as a source for texts “of particular interest” within this framework. As Widdowson puts it, literary texts are intrinsically appealing to language learners and there is little need for any preparatory activity to elicit the purpose for reading which is generally advisable for other types of text:

It is often suggested that learners should be primed to read texts by establishing a purpose for reading beforehand, by preparing them by means of a pre-task which is in effect a pretext. Obviously this can often be an effective strategy. But some texts, notably (though not exclusively) literary ones, are designed to attract attention and so provide their own priming (Widdowson 1990: 178).

Contrary to conventional wisdom regarding the suitability of literary texts only for advanced levels of competence, we agree with Bredella who, in his entry in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning* (2004), observes that literature is simply justified by the students’ reaction: if students enjoy reading and speaking and writing about literary texts, why not use them?

It is not a question of ‘difficulty’. As we have already pointed out, a text can be approached at various levels and from several perspectives. And a genre is made up of many different texts, presenting various degrees of difficulty, which means that within the same genre it will be possible to choose the most appropriate texts for a given language learning level and purpose.

The point is not so much, as Kramsch 2004 [1993] puts it in a chapter devoted to “Teaching the literary text”, to progress from what she defines as “the here-and-now communicative activities” developed at the elemen-



tary level to those “text-bound” discussions which are the focus of levels from intermediate onward (130). Widening our perspective to language education at large, our view is that much depends on the specific learning context and on which language is being learnt, since teaching styles greatly vary from country to country and from language to language, as well as from teacher to teacher. For example, in our personal experience in Italy and in the English as a foreign language context, most of the teaching tends to be organized in strict observance of the communicative approach but is nonetheless highly text-based. And textbooks of English as a foreign language are organized around units that cover all the four basic skills, whose content is largely elicited by an opening text. This might also be a dialogue, but in actual fact such dialogues are frequently presented in their written form. The main difference is that in the case of beginners, the activities are less creative and more manipulative. Kramsch’s question “How can the spoken skills they (the students) developed in the first year to express general meanings be now put to use to express particular meanings?” (Kramsch 2004 [1993]: 130) can be reformulated by eliminating the stress on the progression from spoken to written language: the issue is in fact the progression from general to more particular meanings, whether they are expressed in the spoken or written form.

Another point is that if a broader view of literature is adopted, many other examples of the presence of literary texts at lower levels might be mentioned. In early learning there are many instances of literature employed to teach a foreign language, though they are not perceived as such because of a restricted view of literature which has to be overcome to embrace all instances of creative writing if we want to get the most out of its use in language education. We are referring to fairytales, short poems, limericks, songs and so on. Everyone is aware that the use of such texts with young learners serves to raise motivation: exploiting the acoustic effects of language or the curiosity aroused for an intriguing plot is a key to success at any level of competence and with almost any type of learner (see Carter and Long 1991; Collie and Slater 1987, 1994; Collie and Porter Ladousse 1991; Duff and Maley 2007; Lazar 2010 [1993]; McRae 1991; McRae and Boardman 1984; Morgan and Rinvolucri 1983 for examples of what can be achieved using literary texts with older learners at higher levels of competence. And also Ellis and Brewster 1991; Garvie 1990; Morgan and Rinvolucri 1983; Wright 1995, 1997 for lower levels of competence). Once again, it is important to choose materials according to the type of learner and her/his needs and objectives, but in virtually any learning context a literary text has the power to raise the motivation and emotional response of learners (Duff and Maley 2007; Shanahan 1997; Bredel-

la 1996), as well as moral and ethical concerns in the classroom (Lazar 2010 [1993]).

Yet it is also necessary to shed new light on the act of reading itself, to get the most out of what is considered a “receptive skill” from the language learning perspective. In line with current literary education, reading has to be seen as an active and engaging activity in itself, since “every act of reading is the creation of a text” (Parkinson and Reid Thomas 2010 [2000]: 36. See also Bleich 1975, 1978; Bredella 1996; Fish 1980; Hirvela 1996).

Literature, therefore, can be useful to raise motivation, involvement, emotive response, creativity. But all this is only possible if the concept of literature is widened and ‘humanized’ and we come to see a literary text as simply a text, just like a recipe, a research article or an advertisement. The tendency to introduce students to the highest examples of literary works typical of the traditional literature teacher, should be abandoned with no sense of inadequacy on her/his part. It is true that, as Pound (1968 [1929]: 23) puts it, “great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost degree”, but masterpieces and works of “high status” (Lazar 2010 [1993]) are often remote from the learners’ interests, with potentially negative effects on the learning process.

By saying that literature has to be humanized to work in the language classroom, we argue that not only should any text be treated using the same approach, be it a piece of literature or a newspaper article, but also that literary texts should be selected regardless of a particular canon so as to make use of the most appropriate literature samples for our purposes. This means accepting what generally goes under the labels of ‘bad literature’, ‘popular literature’, ‘young literature’, and so on, on the assumption that “quite often ‘bad’ writing can prove more productive and stimulating than ‘good’” (Duff and Maley 2007: 9). The point is that texts should not be selected because they are examples of “good writing” but rather because they are “good starting points for using and thinking about language” (Duff and Maley 2007: 9).

This is in line with current trends in cultural studies which situate the study of literature in a broader framework, opening up to any literary form, be it ‘new’ or ‘popular’. The growing interest in what non specialists choose to read contributes to an expansion of the notion of literature which is of great benefit to the use of literature from a language perspective.

The “re-generating genres” option proposed by Pope 2012 [1998] in his successful book devoted to the study of English literature and language is interesting, too. The scholar re-designs the canonical categories of novel, poetry and drama as three mega-genres, namely “proses” (including

life-writing and news), “poetries” (including song and performance) and “voices” (including drama, conversation and dialogue in the novels). We agree with Pope’s ‘dynamic’ view of genres as “something we *do* as well as *see*”: “gathering and grouping texts is a matter of making as well as finding relations” (Pope 2012 [1998]: 235).

Another equally important issue is that of ‘remoteness’ – which is context and reader dependent: a text may be perceived as remote because of historical reasons, as in the case of texts which belong to a different period, but also for geographical or social reasons. Parkinson and Reid Thomas (2010 [2000]), rightly observe that readers from tropical countries may have difficulties with references to the weather, the seasons, and so on, when reading English literature, just as authors like Oscar Wilde and Victoria Sackville-West may not be totally accessible to readers belonging to what they refer to as ‘the working class’. Indeed, anyone involved in teaching languages is likely to have experienced the situation highlighted by Parkinson: “In school and universities many learners, much of the time, are ‘turned off’ by the remoteness of what they have to read” (Parkinson and Reid Thomas 2010 [2000]: 11) and in the case of the literary text this is ascribed to the nature of literary language which is generally considered to be “difficult”, while in fact it is simply “unusual”, “odd” or “deviant”. In actual fact, if the teacher chooses texts far from the students’ experience and background, this may lead to an increased “sense of frustration, inferiority and even powerlessness” (Lazar 2010 [1993]: 3). Texts have to be carefully selected without excluding those not considered part of the traditional literary canon. Selection should be guided by the students’ tastes, interests and lives.

Therefore work on a literary text should be carried out by adopting the same approach as with any other text. To imply that a ‘proper’ reading entails knowledge of author, genre, period and other background features may be, as Kramsch argues, “intimidating”: “literary language adds a dimension of particularity that seems like an added difficulty” (Kramsch 2004 [1993]: 106). Moreover it has been argued that this type of approach might lead to a return to old language practices based on teacher’s explanations or interpretations and to translation masquerading as language practice. On the contrary, various authors who stress the similarities between literary and non literary texts (Carter 1982-1997; Carter and McCarthy 2001 [1995]; Carter and Stockwell 2008) agree that the literary text can be “the springboard” for appropriate language learning activities, being an example of language “in use” just like any other text (Hill 1986).

Teaching materials might be thematically selected and organised, mixing the literary and non-literary, so as to make the learners perceive the literary text as a resource – one among many different types of texts – which provides stimulating language activities. Among the most frequently cited advantages of using literary texts for language activities we can mention: exposure to a wide range of styles and registers; openness to multiple interpretations, providing excellent opportunities for classroom discussion; and focus on genuinely interesting and motivating topics.

In lessons which are text-based and focused on language learning, the status of the text as literary is not important since “the activities could equally well be done with a journalistic or non-fiction text – and there is little or no concern with stylistic effect” (Parkinson and Reid Thomas 2010 [2000]: 32). And a literary text is in fact an opportunity to investigate other aspects that are not usually discussed in literature classes: cultural information, particular uses of language, particular meanings, an occasion to “lead learners beyond the looking-glass” (Kramsch 2004 [1993]: 106).

As we have already argued in relation to the issue of authenticity, literary texts “contribute to intercultural understanding” (Bredella 2004a, 2004b; Hall 2005) by representing contexts, situations, feelings and reactions which may be far removed (or simply different) from the reader’s own (this is well explained by the cross-cultural approach to teaching literary texts proposed in Kramsch and Nolden 1994). The reader is then obliged to put herself/himself in the position of others:

Literary texts produce different readings with different readers. A conversation about such different reading in the foreign language classroom can make learners aware of their prior knowledge, their expectations, and the stereotypes they bring to the text (...). Literary texts depict for example what it means to be a child, a woman, or a member of a minority, and what it means to be in love or to experience death in the foreign culture (Bredella 2004a: 378).

In this context, Kramsch underlines a key feature of literature as having “the ability to represent the particular voice of a writer among the many voices of his or her community and thus to appeal to the particular in the reader” (Kramsch 2004 [1993]: 131). This is in line with the tendency in language learning to depart from conformity to a given speech community and to recognize individual and creative uses of language.

Finally, regarding the benefits of exposure to sophisticated uses of language in literary texts, Lazar remarks that this increases awareness about the deviations from common usage (Lazar 2010 [1993]; Widdowson 1975). She also highlights the fact that the multi-layered nature of meaning is reconstructed thanks to the reader’s active role in elaborating what is not

explicitly written. Moreover, such texts stimulate imagination and emotional awareness, fostering self-confidence and the expression of the reader's own ideas and emotions in the foreign language.

## **1.6 What next?**

In what follows we shall show why and how we need to overcome the perception of the literary text as inevitably tied to more 'traditional' approaches to language learning, and as unsuited to teaching contexts intended to develop communicative and pragmatic competencies. In the literary text learners may find a source of motivation and an ideal ground for meaning-construction and creative activities at any level of competence. After carefully selecting texts appropriate to the set goals and underlining their status as fictitious, teachers may exploit foregrounded language and cultural features to guide learners in inductively building up their competence. Although we do not believe in the validity of a totally literary-based syllabus, we strongly feel language teachers have to recognize the potentialities of the literary text within a language pedagogy framework, so as to build up their text-based learning programmes by disregarding any dichotomy and by mixing the literary and the non-literary. Free from any misgivings and preconceptions, text selection has to be guided exclusively by the learners' preferences and needs, together with the set goals, so as to 'humanize' the presence of literature in the educational context. In Cook's words: "(...) despite changes of approach, misgivings about pedagogic validity and even doubts about its distinct existence as a discourse type, literature continues to be popular with students and an unrivalled resource for the language teacher" (Cook 2006 [1998]: 205).

