

READING LITERARY TEXTS AND INTERCULTURAL LITERACY¹

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The Door

Too little
has been said
of the door, its one
face turned to the night's
downpour and its other
to the shift and glisten of firelight.

Air, clasped
by this cover
into the room's book,
is filled by the turning
pages of dark and fire
as the wind shoulders the panels, or unsteadies that burning.

Not only
the storm's
breakwater, but the sudden
frontier to our concurrences, appearances,
and as full of the offer of space
as the view through a cromlech is.

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For doors
are both frame and monument
to our spent time,
and too little
has been said
of our coming through and leaving by them.

Charles Tomlinson

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Something has already been said of books as doors to intercultural understanding. Several authors such as Bredella (1996; 2000); Delanoy (1993; Bredella and Delanoy, 1996); Kramersch (2000; 2003); Burwitz-Meltzer (2001); Rogers and Soter (1997) just to name a few, have emphasised the connection of literature and intercultural communication. Although coming from different research backgrounds, these authors have underlined how literature may help develop an essential feature of the intercultural personality: the ability to decenter and take up the perspectives of the other, being able to see the world from another place. It is in this perspective and in the context of foreign language education that I suggest a reflection on how reading literary texts may be a passage to a space in which one may learn about oneself and ultimately arrive at the understanding of otherness.

Much has been written on interculturality, and 'intercultural' appears in many contexts, which makes it imperative to clarify what is the sense I intend when using the word. In doing so I want to call attention to the move away from the concept of the culturally-competent learner, viewing 'culture' basically as a product concerning information or knowledge about a foreign culture. I follow the notion of the intercultural personality as defined by Byram (1997), so the concept now comprises also behaviours, attitudes and beliefs, considering the "internal" culture at the subjective, unconscious level of values. Culture is also to be seen as a feature of language and the two concepts are interdependent in numerous ways.

To sum up:

Being intercultural [...] is the capacity to reflect on the relationships among groups and the experience of those

relationships. It is both the awareness of experiencing otherness and the ability to analyse the experience and act upon the insights into self and other which the analysis brings. (Alred, Byram and Fleming, 2003: 4)

It becomes clear that the question of the cultural identities of the social actors is a central one and that the focus is on the interaction between these actors. However attention is drawn to the complex multiple identity positions and cultural membership of cultural actors, and therefore these cultural identities are not only related to national and ethnic groups. Furthermore, cultural identity is shaped through processes of socialisation and so is by its very nature creative, dynamic, changing and becoming.

As to how to outline an approach to literary texts in this perspective, I suggest Byram's model (1997) for 'Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence'. This model comprises five factors (*savoirs*) to be developed and proposes a taxonomy of objectives and modes of assessment for each of the *savoirs*, providing a sound basis for teachers to consider as they plan their work.

I will refer briefly each of the *savoirs* to further clarify the idea of the intercultural personality and to enable an insight into the potential of the literary text. As Byram maintains, *savoir être* (attitudes) is a pre-condition for successful intercultural interaction, "They need to be attitudes of curiosity and openness, of readiness to suspend disbelief and judgement with respect to others' meanings, beliefs and behaviours" (1997: 34). It is here that the author locates the ability to decentre that is mentioned above, involving also a process where previous existing subjective schemata are dismantled and re-built according to new norms (a process that the author calls 'tertiary socialisation'). In *savoirs* (knowledge), two categories are to be distinguished: knowledge of self and other acquired during the processes of primary and secondary socialisation and knowledge of interaction at the individual and societal levels. The latter involves being aware of the ways in which one's social identities have been formed and how they constitute a prism through which one is perceived by members of other groups and how in turn one perceives members of another group. This declarative knowledge is necessary but not sufficient and needs to be linked with skills of relating and interpreting (*savoir comprendre*). This skill may be restricted to work on documents, not necessarily involving interaction with an

interlocutor as is the case with skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*). To these four 'savoirs' included in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning and Teaching*, Byram adds *savoir s'engager* which is identified with critical cultural awareness and political education and defined as "an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997: 53).

In terms of reading literary texts it should be noted that the asymmetrical perspective of what the writer conveys through a text vs what the reader reads/feels may be further complicated if the binary language-and-culture is predicated on foreignness. Kramersch has noted (2000) how different sociocultural contexts elicit different readings of the same text and Fäcke (2003: 32-42) gives evidence of the importance and influence of autobiographical contexts on the reading and understanding of literary texts in a foreign language. Basically, "Responses to a text will be personal because readers relate what they perceive to something that is familiar to them, or rather their very perception depends on schemata effective in the act of interpretation." (Weber, 1996: 234)

To experience otherness through the medium of another language will therefore imply that foreign language learners won't be able to read a foreign culture as if they were in the place of a native speaker but responses to literature will be built against the backdrop of their own culture. The FL teacher should aim to carry out the synthesis born from this encounter in a third place, from the foreign reader's perspective but using skills that will assist him/her in understanding the explicit and implicit meanings in a given con(text) (cf. Kramersch, 2000). These skills implicate the construction of textual understanding and in my view facilitate intercultural learning. The alliance is a natural one, as Byram suggests:

[...] teachers whose professional identity includes an education in literary criticism, will probably find analogies in the skills of interpreting and discovering with the traditions of some approaches to literature. (Byram, 1997: 64)

To these skills should be added what many theorists have claimed to be an essential feature of literary texts: their potential

to engage readers in the exploration of the deepest layers of our selves through the representation of other subjective worlds.

Here we arrive at literature as a door, a passage, a threshold, a borderline at the intersection of different spaces: its one face turned to the outside, the social, the other, the unknown; and its other to home, "the room's book", our inner subjective personal space of emotions and experiences. The door may be a third place in its own right, growing "[...] in the interstices between the cultures the learner grew up with and the new cultures he or she is being introduced to" (Kramersch, 2000: 236). As inhabitants of this subjective space, readers are transported to their own shadows and clarities, displacing them, changing as they are engaged in exploring the deepest layers of their selves. This element of change patent in the readers' projections and experiences is crucial. Bredella underlines it when referring to the readers' response to a text as aesthetic experience (Bredella, 1996: 4). The author highlights the dual process of involvement and detachment of the reader. This halfway position happens as the reader becomes a participant during the reading experience while at the same time observing his/her involvement. This reflective element connecting reader and text encourages the adoption of different points of view and thus favours intercultural understanding. It is alongside this dialogue with the text that otherness may be re-evaluated and relocated in our individual mappings provoking new insights, challenging previous assumptions. The reiteration in the poem of this space-in-between as a borderline reminds us of Kramersch's metaphorical assertion that what we should seek "[...] are less bridges than a deep understanding of the boundaries. We can teach the boundary, we cannot teach the bridge." (Kramersch, 2000: 228). This borderline isn't to be understood as merely a dichotomous boundary because it covers a myriad of perspectives. The view from this third place is "full of the offer of space", it is vast, immense and it reaches our past as well as shaping our future. The image of the cromlech helps visualise the multiplicity of perspectives to be adopted from the same space, heading for different directions, aiming at different landscapes. To further extend the metaphor of the door as cultural borderline, it emerges as protective, a limit to external aggressions yet also a limit to appearance and harmony: literature as an art form that constructs representations of difference not only between oneself and others, but between one's personal and one's social self. Finally the door as a passage appears as a dynamic structure, a mediator, pointing to states of being and awareness.

In fact, intercultural learning represents a challenge to one's habitual way of thinking and feeling that, as has been recently noted (Sen Gupta, 2003:171), may bring discomfort and anxiety as the learners' values and beliefs are questioned. Therefore the context of the classroom (that will undoubtedly influence the way texts are read) becomes a disquieting place but also a place for reflection and exchange, of interrogation and critique. This third place of the intercultural speaker may be also found in Homi Bhabha's words:

[...] it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. [...] And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves. (Bhabha, 2002: 38-39)

To expand this intersection of what could be called an 'intercultural space' and literature, I would like to underline how literature has served theorists from varied areas such as anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, geography... Similarly these areas of knowledge may in turn offer literary studies some tools that may help shed some light on how representations of otherness are constructed in literature (cf. Vieira, 2003: 673-679). This interdisciplinary approach may challenge perspectives and modes of thought which I am inclined to relate to Soja's concept of "thirdspace":

Everything comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history. (Soja, 1998: 56)

I believe here lies the opportunity for a pedagogical approach that aims at developing what could be called an intercultural literacy through reading literary texts; that should strive at finding meaning and pleasure in the texts we give our students to read, valuing cultural difference and fostering reflection on that diversity. Presently students who are computer readers and extensive travellers demand a different approach to the cultural

dimension within language teaching that should prepare them to meet and interact with otherness taken in its changing multiplicity. For teachers who work between languages and cultures, the intercultural perspective may generate a renewed interaction developing around the frontiers of cultural (Anglo-Portuguese) identities as premises in the production, reading and analysis of literary texts.

To conclude in literary terms:

The weight of the world used to be vertical: it used to come from the past, or from the hierarchy of heaven and earth and hell; now it's horizontal, made up of the endless multiplicity of events going on at once and pressing at each moment on our minds and our living rooms. Dislocation is the norm rather than the aberration in our time, but even in the unlikely event that we spend an entire lifetime in one place, the fabulous diverseness with which we live reminds us constantly that we are no longer the norm or the center, that there is no one geographic center pulling the world together and glowing with the allure of the real thing; there are, instead, scattered nodules competing for our attention. (Hoffman, 1998: 274-275)

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