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Literary Texts and Intercultural Learning

Exploring New Directions

Ana Gonçalves Matos

Peter Lang

Intercultural Studies and Foreign Language Learning

This book offers new perspectives on the pedagogical value of literary texts. The book is, in the first place, a theoretical study – speculative in nature – about the inherent connection between reading and interculturality. The author argues that reading literary texts may open up a passage to a ‘third place’, a space in which a student can learn more about their own identity and ultimately arrive at a more nuanced understanding of otherness. Some of the skills implicated in the construction of textual understanding can facilitate intercultural learning, opening up opportunities for a pedagogical approach in which the reading of literary texts develops a student’s intercultural perspective and fosters reflection on cultural difference. The author explores the pedagogical potential of the book’s theoretical premises through a sustained classroom-based example.

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Intercultural Studies and Foreign Language Learning

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To my mother, Ana
To my daughters, Ana and Inés

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INTRODUCTION

‘The Door’

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.

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.

—‘The Door’, TOMLINSON 1997: 48

If the reader is made to formulate the cause underlying the questioning of the world, it implies that he must transcend that world, in order to be able to observe it from outside. And herein lies the true communicatory function of literature.

— ISER 1980: 230

Charles Tomlinson’s poem ‘The Door’ helps to identify the perspective adopted in this book: ‘the door’ as metaphor for literature as intercultural dialogue.

Something has already been said of books as doors to intercultural understanding. Several authors such as Bredella (1996a, b, c; 2000; 2004); Delanoy (1993; 2005; Bredella and Delanoy 1996); Kramsch (2000a; 2003); Burwitz-Meltzer (2001); Rogers and Soter (1997) just to name a few, have emphasized the connection between 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 decentre and take up the perspectives of the other, to see the world from another place. It is with this view, and bearing in mind its pedagogical potential, that I propose to examine how reading literary texts may open up a passage to a space in which one may learn about oneself and ultimately arrive at an understanding of otherness.

As in the poem, ‘too little has been said of our coming and leaving through [the door]’, suggesting that passing through it involves a dynamic process of change. Tomlinson and Iser here seem to converge in expressing the possibility that literature offers of transcending our lived experience in a real world, as if a door were open. I found, particularly in Iser’s inductive and heuristic model of the act of reading as a cooperative enterprise, the theoretical account of such an *event*. Other contributions situated in the areas of cultural studies and post-colonial studies will be also considered.

The current approach cannot be associated with the text itself – Bredella (2000) warns against making too many demands of literature¹ – but justifies a *means of access* to intercultural experience through literature.

Recently much has been written on interculturality, and *intercultural* appears in many contexts (cf. Deardorff 2009), which makes it imperative to clarify 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 individual as developed by Byram (1997) and defined more succinctly by Guilherme (2004), so the concept now comprises also behaviours, attitudes

1 Iser also addresses this problem: ‘The hermeneutic feedback is blocked or even obliterated if one sets out with an established theory for which one seeks support in literature. The literary work then is downgraded to the status of an illustration for the theory in question’ (1993: 50), and ‘it is an integral feature of literature that [...] it is not *created* for any one specific use [...] Thus, any talk of “use” remains naïve if the conditionality of this use is not taken into consideration’ (1993: 208; emphasis in the original).

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.

In brief:

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 merely related to national and ethnic groups: '[This concept of identity] accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions' (Hall 1997: 4). Furthermore, cultural identity is shaped through processes of socialization and so is by its very nature creative, dynamic, changing and becoming. In this perspective, as Henke has noted, identities may change both diachronically and also synchronically,

since every individual takes part in several collective identities [...], or might even experience multiple identities in different situations or with different people. As constructions of self, both individual and collective identities are flexible and subject to negotiation with the cultural system in which they are culturally embedded. (Henke 2003: 80)

As to how to outline an approach to literary texts in this perspective, a model is proposed that, very concisely, will incorporate one of Byram's (1997) five factors or *savoirs* – skills of interpreting and discovering. This skill will enable the passage from the reader's more personal response to a text to a cooperatively and dialogically built intercultural perspective on the text in question.

In the perspective adopted, some of the skills implicated in the construction of textual understanding facilitate intercultural learning. Byram has suggested that skills of interpreting and discovering bear analogies with the traditions of some approaches to literature (1997: 64); therefore the alliance is a natural one.

Geertz also compares the anthropological enterprise to that of the literary critic and the process of acting in a culture to that of interpreting an ambiguous text:

Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour. (Geertz 1993: 9–10)

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. As Rosenblatt, amongst others, sustains: 'Whatever the form – poem, novel, drama, biography, essay – literature makes comprehensible the myriad ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that life offers' (1995: 6).

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, our inner subjective personal space of emotions and experiences. This Janus-like space evokes transition and change. The door may be a third place in its own right. 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 implied in the readers' projections and experiences is crucial. Bredella (1996: 4) underlines it when referring to the reader's response to a text as aesthetic experience. 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 Kramsch'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' (2000: 228). This borderline is not 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 visualize the multiplicity of perspectives to be adopted from the same space, heading in different directions, aiming at different landscapes. It is also, very significantly, a reminder of how our views of the world are always of a perspective nature. As Rushdie has put it: 'human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the senses of that phrase' (1992: 12).

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.

This third place of the intercultural speaker may also be formulated through 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. (2002: 38–39)

To expand this intersection of what could be called an *intercultural space* and literature, I would like to underline how literature as a source has served theorists from such varied areas as anthropology, sociology, cultural

studies, geography, history and psychology. In the same way, these areas of knowledge may in turn offer literary studies some tools that may help shed light on how representations of otherness are constructed in literature (e.g. Vieira 2003: 673–679).

Returning to the poem ‘The Door’, and bearing in mind how anthropology is necessarily occupied with an encounter with *the other*, I would like to point out how this threshold could signify another more concrete metaphor: the division between the space of the ethnographer’s tent and the studied native world around it. Rosaldo notes how for Malinowski the tent already represented ‘[...] an ambivalent site from which the ethnographer looked in two directions: outward, gazing on the village, and inward, escaping to read novels and simply to be alone’ (1986: 92). The present study was therefore informed and also inspired by readings from a more anthropological viewpoint, since the value of anthropological views and tools in the intercultural perspective adopted is clear. Discipline borders should also be transcended in order to bring critical awareness of new and promising intersections between languages, literature, culture, education and self. This interdisciplinary approach may challenge perspectives and modes of thought which I am inclined to relate to Soja’s concept of *third-space*, as a useful one from a literary point of view:

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)

Here lies the opportunity for a pedagogical approach which aims at developing intercultural learning through reading literary texts, and which should strive to find meaning and pleasure in the texts we give our students to read, valuing cultural difference and fostering reflection on diversity.

The Council of Europe’s *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (2008) attests to the growing recognition and awareness in Europe of the need for more investment in intercultural dialogue. A space for intercultural dialogue with literary texts is the suggestion of this book as a contribution to that objective.

The book is, in the first place, a theoretical study, speculative in nature, about the inherent connection between reading and being intercultural. The intercultural process *of* reading and *through* reading is characterized as third space, a reflective space for meaning negotiation and ultimately a space of transformation. I therefore plan to demonstrate how theories from these two areas, supported by insights from other areas of study such as anthropology, cultural studies and psychology, can connect and contribute to explaining and validating this combination.

The relevance of this book may be particularly significant for foreign language pedagogy, because it is naturally posited between cultures. However, the need for such an alliance for the development of critical intercultural readers in our changing, exciting and problematic contemporary world accounts for its pedagogical potential in other areas as well.

At present, students who are extensive travellers demand a different approach to the cultural dimension, which should prepare them to meet and interact with otherness taken in its changing multiplicity. For teachers, the intercultural perspective may generate a renewed interaction developing around the frontiers of cultural identities as premises in the production, reading and analysis of literary texts.

To this end, an example in the classroom, based on a specific model encapsulating the message, will be examined. The experiment does not aim to generalize but rather to illustrate how the theoretical discussion developed in the study may be used as a base to inform a concrete, tentative approach. The pedagogical potential of the theoretical premises put forward in this study may be realized in different contexts.

The book² attempts to accomplish the purpose discussed above through an examination and reappraisal of literary theory in the perspective of interculturality. As a result, Wolfgang Iser will be singled out because of his detailed theoretical account of the act of reading as a dialogical process, which, I intend to demonstrate, bears significant affinities with interculturality.

2 The book has its origin in a doctoral thesis. Some of the central ideas, at an early stage of development, have appeared previously in Matos (2005).

CHAPTER ONE

Reading as *third place*

Perhaps it is in the field of tension between one vacuum and another that literature multiplies the depths of a reality that is inexhaustible in forms and meanings.

— CALVINO 1986: 120

The text must therefore *bring about* a standpoint from which the reader will be able to view things that would never have come into focus as long as his own habitual dispositions were determining his orientation [...].

— ISER 1980: 35

Introduction

To begin with, Iser focuses his analysis on the reading *process*, contradicting the tendency felt in literary theory to locate the authority to build meaning either in the text or in the reader. The refutation of this dichotomized *either/or* inclination implies a most decisive shift of attention to a less stable terrain – the interaction developed between text and reader. The supremacy of either is denied and both are deemed indispensable. In a similar way, in an intercultural encounter building meaning is also not confined to any single interlocutor or culture involved. It is in the third space¹ of meaning negotiation that intercultural dialogue takes place.

- 1 I will not differentiate between *space* and *place* following Soja (1998: 40) since the concept, applied to literature and interculturality, is used as a metaphor, signifying a sanction free mental space that invites reflection, privileges uncertainties, provokes contestation and is open to different imagined possibilities born from a dialogical interaction with alterity.

The concept of *third place* is, therefore, a common feature of reading literary texts and intercultural dialogue.

Intercultural posits itself in an emergent space in between cultures. Iser characterizes well what he terms 'cross-cultural discourse' by pointing out a complex network of intercultural connections that are dynamic, dialogical and subject to change, for example, through the anthropological process of *defamiliarization*:

A cross-cultural discourse distinguishes itself from assimilation, incorporation, and appropriation, as it organizes an interchange between cultures in which the cultures concerned will not stay the same. A foreign culture is not just transposed into a familiar one; instead, [...] a mutual patterning and repatterning is effected by such a discourse. First of all the foreign culture is modeled on conditions set by the receiving one, and thus it becomes defamiliarized. Such a defamiliarization is due to the terms imposed on otherness for its reception [...] (Iser 1996: 262)

Insofar as reading, particularly reading a foreign culture, constitutes an encounter with the as yet unknown, it challenges our own boundaries as readers and ultimately forces us to redefine them. Reading is seen by both authors quoted in epigraph as a uniquely valuable consciousness-raising activity and both refer to this process using terms – *vacuum* and *standpoint* – that we may relate imagetically to space.² This is particularly relevant in

- 2 This spatial vocabulary (cf. Kramsch 1999a) recurrent in intercultural discourse – e.g. 'third space' (Bhabha, Soja, Byram and Zarate, Kramsch inter alia); 'interstices between cultures' (Bhabha); 'margins and centre'; 'boundary' or 'borderline', 'decentre' (Byram) – takes on a particular relevance when seen from the perspective of the literary text dealing with geographical and psychological displacement, as in the texts mentioned throughout this book. In this context, the image of the reader as traveller clearly regains a very significant intercultural dimension contributing to imagine the literary text as a door. Bakhtin makes a contribution to this subject. Very briefly, he defended that the self was a structure organized around the categories of space and time articulating the 'law of placement': '[...] the meaning of whatever is observed is shaped by the place from which it is perceived' (Holquist 1990: 21). Furthermore, he added that 'Our places are different [...] also because we regard the world and each other from different centres in cognitive time/space. [...] the arena in which all perception unfolds'. Fillmore's text (1998) on 'deixis and context' offers an interesting angle for the analysis of texts that can reveal a sensibility for the (inter)cultural