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Naturalization, Desautomatization, and Estrangement: Problems of Literary Reception and Cognition in Academic Teaching

Introduction

This paper will present the outline of a project that started in Januari 2004 at Göteborg University. The research group of eight persons has its focus on how literary fiction is used in academic teaching situations at the departments of Comparative Literature and Modern Languages. The issue to be investigated is how to teach the art of reading literature *as literature*—literary artefacts—and not only as information of cultural habits, exposition of ideological themes, or mediation of educating messages.

One of our presumptions is the idea of the literary text as a process, rather than an object or a product, hovering between *recognition* and *estrangement* or *defamiliarization*. On the one hand the literary text appeals to the reader's *cultural competence* of recognizing well-known literary plot-types, motifs and generic variations within the current culture. If this cultural repertoire is alien, recognition fails, the reader becomes estranged, and the uptake of the text fails. Recognition thus seems necessary for a successful reading. On the other hand this immediate recognition means *automatizing* the reading process and *naturalizing* the text to the price of losing the surplus of meaning generated by literary devices. Therefore estrangement is also used as a necessary *literary* device as Victor Schklovsky (1988) has argued. Literary estrangement means

breaking the reader's horizon of expectations and obstructing the reading, but it also means pointing to a new frame of reference and alternative ways of seeing and understanding the text. Thus, literary estrangement both *prevents* spontaneous reading and *promotes* an attentive reading with new dimensions of perceiving and – most important – *reflecting* on the text and the problematics displayed.

In order to explore these processes we want to study not only linguistic texts but also visual texts, that is *pictures*, and their potential in literary teaching situations. This implies a partly semiotic approach. One of our hypotheses is that verbal and visual texts might elucidate and promote reflection on each other's way of producing meaning and significance.

In our project we will study the reception two-way: partly in a textual perspective, partly in real readers' perspective. Our main outlook combines reception theory, reader response theory and translation theory.

Our paper will discuss five approaches:

1. the interaction between student-reader and the text,
2. the reception-structure of the text and (un)historical ways of reading, and
3. the reception of translated literature.
4. visual texts in literary reception
5. reception through academic practices

Part One: Reception in real readers' perspective

(Staffan Thorson)

To increase our knowledge of literary understanding as applied by selected / experimental groups of students, we will investigate ways of reading literary texts by think-aloud methods, videotaped literary group discussions, interviews and questionnaires.

In the analysis of the students' individual reception—i.e. their statements and their reconstructions of the text—we are interested in the interrelated elements of:

- recognition / estrangement
- schema
- foregrounding

To us it is important to focus on the student-readers' statements and their qualities of *recognition* and *estrangement* on both linguistic and other textual levels: phonology, words, metaphors, genre... According to Miall and Kuiken (1994) *estrangement* is an aspect of the reading process that is grounded in feelings. They also say that "in reponse to stylistic devices, feelings influence a reader's departure from prototypic understandings." What that ("feeling") means is not quite evident to us. Our first question is:

1: What are the cognitive qualities of *recognition* and *estrangement* in the student-readers' reception? How do these qualities influence the readers' reception?

Our second element is *schema*. Schema theory has its origins in Gestalt psychology and its basic claim is that a new experience is understood by comparison with a stereotypical version of a similar experience held in memory.

Schema theory might be of help when we analyse the students' responses to literary texts from a cultural and contextual basis. In a

cognitive perspective we might with Peter Stockwell suppose that genres, fictional characters, situations and episodes can all be understood as part of schematised knowledge negotiation in the interaction between reader and text. Stockwell (Stockwell 2002, 79) maintains that there are at least three ways a schema can evolve:

- the addition of new facts to the schema (accretion)
- the modification of facts or relations within the schema (tuning)
- the creation of new schemas (restructuring)

Thus, our second question is:

2. What are the qualities of the schemas in the student-readers' reception to a literary text? How do the schemas influence the reception?

Our third element is *foregrounding*. The term *foregrounding* refers to the fact that literary texts, by making use of some special devices, direct the reader's attention to formal or semantic structures. Some parts of the text are thereby promoted into the foreground. These textual locations are given more attention, and in the reader's perception they play a relatively more important role in the act of reading and interpretation (Peer 1992).¹ In literary reading the reader's cultural competence, his linguistic ability and literary experiences are of importance to meaning-production and interpretation of the foregrounding devices. Miall and Kuiken (1998) propose that research on readers' reception to literary texts focus on readers' encounter with foreground features.² This gives rise to our third question:

¹ "In this perspective, the distinction between objects and subjects tends to disappear, as it should: there is no such thing as an objective description of artefacts or monuments, only subjective representations chosen by every reader in support of his or her response to them, intellectual or emotional, when faced with the task of rationalizing or verbalizing the process."

² Cf. Iser (1978, 93): "[t]he strategies, then, carry the invariable primary code to the reader, who will then decipher it in his own way, thus producing the variable secondary code. The basic

3. What foregroundings do the student-readers identify? How do these foregroundings influence the students' reception?

An overarching question concerns the relations between text and reader. As is well known, the reading process is not entirely predetermined by the text, nor is it entirely the reader's free choice: the text prestructures the processing of the text, but the actual process not only fills in the gaps but may also re-structure this prestructure – as if the text had changed as an answer to the reading. According to Wolfgang Iser the act of reading really is an interactive process, i.e. a kind of dialogue with the text as an active partner. We want to investigate the presuppositions of that outlook, and we think that Iser's phenomenological support could be improved. Thus our fourth question is:

4. What theoretical presuppositions are required in order to justify the idea of interaction or some other kind of interchange between text and reader?

Thus in our project we would like to improve the support for the idea of some kind of interaction between text and reader in the act of reading. To reach this goal we must analyse student-readers' reception as has just been outlined. But we must also try to find out what kind(s) of reading the text is preparing for and how this structure could be said to interact with the reader.

structure of these strategies arises out of the selective composition of the repertoire. Whatever social norms may be selected and encapsulated in the text, they will automatically establish a frame of reference [...]. The very process of selection inevitably creates a background-foreground relationship, with the chosen element in the foreground and its original context in the background." Miall and Kuiken (1994) report what answers they received to the question "[W]hat is distinctive about readers' responses to foregrounding?". Schklovsky provides one of their answers by defining *estrangement* or "making strange" as poetic devices that lengthen perception. Miall and Kuiken (1994, 5) have attempted to study the process of responding to foregrounding, and they propose that literary devices as foregrounding elicit a more immediate, vivid, and personal response from the reader.

Part Two: Reception theory from a textual point of view

(Beata Agrell)

The textual focus is on the literary text as a *readable phenomenon*. The material is a corpus of texts intended for academic teaching in Comparative Literature. Teaching Comparative Literature includes both historical, theoretical, and aesthetic aspects. In an academic context literary reading (as we see it) is primarily reflective and analytical, trying to find out how the text is made; how it produces meaning and significance in its historical and cultural context; what literary traditions it is affiliated with; and how it is interacting with its (historically) implied reader. The aim of academic teaching is to make students competent readers in this sense, which also includes the ability of talking and writing on these matters. But academic teaching practice today does not live up to these ambitions, especially not in the widening field of literary history (Spolsky 2003, 165).³ This is where the textual part of the project comes in.

The task is to study textual strategies from a point of view of reception theory, with special regard to how the reading process is prepared in the text. The primary objective is to find out what kinds of reading the text is designed for in its original historical context, but also its inscribed potential for contemporary readings. The aim is to find out what cognitive structures and schemas are built into the text, and their potential of triggering different reading strategies—historical and contemporary. The result will be compared with how our real student readers deal with the same

³ Cf. Spolsky (2003, 165), in reply to Adler & Gross (2002): "It is now time to argue not only that cognitive literary study must be embedded within the hard-won recognition of the historical imperative—the imperative, that is, to consider both diachrony and synchrony together—but to argue further that the necessity of that embedding itself argues that cultural/historical criticism must acknowledge the history of the human body and its mind."

text(s), and differences between textual and readerly strategies will be analysed.

As a readable phenomenon the text is seen mainly as a *process*, hovering between *schema* and *correction* of schema (Iser 1978, 91).⁴ This means that the readerly hovering between recognition and estrangement referred to in Part One is *pre-structured* in the text (Iser 1978, 98).⁵ The task of the student is not barely to enact this pre-structured process, but to investigate, analyse, and reflect on it. What schemas are used? How are they interrelated, and what ways of thinking are displayed? How do they relate to the cultural conventions of the time of text? What frame of reference do they presuppose, and what horizon of expectation are they projected against? That is: What kind of reading is the text designed for? And: what is the role of the text in the act of reading?

The need of this kind of reflection is evident in historical studies. Most pre-modern textual strategies are pragmatic and didactic, aiming at moral or religious education—and the public of the day *wanted* it that way, as e.g. J. Paul Hunter (1990) has shown.⁶ But in our modern and post-modern culture didacticism is seen as

⁴ "Each schema makes the world accessible in accordance with the conventions the artist has inherited. But when something new is perceived which is not covered by these schemata, it can only be represented by means of a correction to the schemata. And through the correction, the special experience of the new perception may be captured and conveyed. Here we have not only a renunciation of the idea of naive, imitative realism but also the implication that the comprehension and representation of a special reality can only take place by way of negating the familiar elements of a schema. [...] the schema embodies a reference which is then transcended by the correction. While the schema enables the world to be represented, the correction evokes the observer's reactions to that represented world." (Iser, 1978, 91).

⁵ "[...] the main task of the text strategies is to organize the internal network of references, for it is these that prestructure the shape of the aesthetic object to be produced by the reader." (Iser, 1978, 96). This pre-structure might be called *the schema of the aesthetic object*—containing the potential for all realizable aesthetic objects supported by an individual text. As Iser writes: "This is the ultimate function of the aesthetic object: it establishes itself as a transcendental viewpoint for the positions, represented in the text—positions from which it is actually compiled and which it now sets up for observation."

⁶ See Hunter (1990), chap. 9–11, on Didacticism.

outmoded, and even offensive; in fact it is *automatically estranging*. Therefore our students (and some teachers too), tend to apply modern ways of reading classics like Dante, Boccaccio, Cervantes, or even the realistic novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: doing anything to *naturalize* the didactic devices.

This is a shame, since these are the schemas most elderly texts are made of. What is necessary from both historical and aesthetic points of view, is first to *recognize* these schemas, stereotypes, and clichés, and then to study how they are set out in the text—varied and associated in a dynamic network of cultural references. Only when this historical work is done, the question of the *modern* significance of the text can be handled. And then the *dogmas* Dante is teaching fall into the background. Instead, Dante's *way of teaching* the dogmas, evolving in the textual process, might be foregrounded—and this change of aspect is a necessary condition of grasping the text in its potentially modern significance (Cf. Spolsky 2003, 174).⁷ Thus, finding out this modern potential is actually a *historical* task, as H.R. Jauss (1989, 205) has pointed out.⁸ A fundamental teaching device in Dante is the ancient *figural* outlook that Erich Auerbach (1984) has described—that of prefiguring schemes for future historical or eschatological events and persons. This outlook creates

⁷ "[...] although our human brains have not changed significantly over the past few millennia, their cultural surroundings have, and so it is hardly surprising that some of the people who thought about understanding and interpretation in the past, [...], have produced theories of mental function that can be interestingly analogized to current theories. It is surely more reasonable to assume that it is just those analogies and confluences, rather than the borrowed prestige of science that have generated the excitement of recent cognitive studies of literature."

⁸ "[...] the particular source of this development [of Gadamer's "principle of effective history"] is the insight that a 'positive and productive possibility of understanding' lies in temporal distance itself. Distance in time is to be put to use and not—as historicism would have it—overcome, that is, abolished through a one-sided transplanting of the self into the spirit of the past. The horizons of the past and the present must necessarily be contrasted before they are fused if the text in its otherness is to serve as a means of appraising the interpreter's prejudices and, finally, of allowing the interpretation to become an experience that changes the person experiencing it."

the predominant cognitive structure of the text as shared with the reader. *Training* the reader in this way of seeing and thinking while reading is what the textual strategies are designed for.⁹

The same argument will do for other kinds of historically or culturally distant texts. The strongly ideological working-class literature of the early 1900s, for instance, is of no spontaneous interest for our students—although they do like *contemporary* texts with ideological bias, feminist or post-colonial. Thus, even in quite modern cases a historical way of reading would be necessary: that is, to discover the cognitive processes and structures which open up for both historical understanding and contemporary appreciation.

In sum: We are in the need of special instruments for studies of cognitive structures of historically and culturally distant texts; and this need is also urgent in the third part of the project, dealing with translation studies.

Part Three: The reception of translated literature

(Cecilia Alvstad)

In departments of Comparative Literature, students read numerous literary works in translation from various languages and historical periods. It is therefore important to pay attention to translated works and not only to non translated (“original”) texts when we study students’ readings of literary texts and the cognitive structures built into these texts.

⁹ This processive cognitive structure is also what might render a modern outsider an insider, without cheating him into a historical fantasy: “when attempting to understand a text whose horizon of signification is no longer immediately available, but instead has become alien due to its distance in time [...], the false assumption of immediacy—the supposed timeless presence of all classical art—must be recognized for what it is, and the naive alignment of a historically distant text with contemporary expectations about meaning avoided.” (Jauss/Jauss 1989, 204).

Translation is a complex cognitive process in which both reading and text(re)production are combined. The translated text, i.e. the result of this cognitive process, can by definition not be identical to the text it is a translation of. It is common that cognitive structures like schemas and elements of foregrounding, which are built into the text appear in an altered way in the translated texts as compared to the source texts. These alterations are caused by several different factors, for example linguistic, literary and cultural, and they can also have more specific cognitive explanations. For example, a translator might not have been aware of an experimental variation of a schema in the source text and thus involuntarily translated it into a template of that schema.

Through an attentive study of translated literary works the translators’ cognitive process can be studied indirectly. My part of the project will focus on how cognitive structures like schemas, correction of schemas and foregrounding are dealt with in the translated works that are part of the university curriculum. Most of these translated works are canonical. Canonical works are often translated several times by different translators and therefore many cases of parallel translations of the same source text can be found. Parallel translations present especially interesting loci for studying these structures as different translators opt for different solutions, which of course affects the cognitive structures built into the text (e.g. Toury 1995, 72–73; Pym 1998, 107).

Apart from studying cognitive structures built into translated texts I will study students’ responses of these same texts. As a first step I will study students reading translations as part of their normal curriculum, which means that they only read *one* translation of a specific literary text and generally some handbook text commenting upon it. But I would also like to introduce reading of parallel translations, or parallel reading of a translation and its source text. This would be a means to enhance the students’ awareness of literary

texts as composed by repertorial elements which are organized in specific ways and of textual strategies which structure the act of reading by drawing attention to the repertorial elements.

Parallel reading could also enhance the students' awareness of translation as a result of translator's transformed readings and thus their perception of the act of reading as a creative act of meaning production. The study of translated works makes it possible for both researchers, teachers and students to approach reception from both a textual perspective and a real readers' perspective, that is, to combine the two ways of studying reception we link together in the overall project.

Part Four: Visual texts in literary reception

(Sonia Lagerwall)

Literature and visual arts go far back together in the history of European aesthetics. Often referred to as *sister arts*, text and image naturally differ by way of the medium exploited: while literature uses abstract signs and is typically linear and temporal in character, a figurative painting makes use of analogical signs and is spatial in character and immediate to perception.

Despite the distinct specificities of each code, the two arts have nevertheless been closely intertwined throughout history. From medieval times up to the nineteenth century, literature is a major intertextual source for visual arts, providing religious, mythological and historical themes and motifs. Inferior in rank as *mechanical arts* during centuries, painting and sculpture much depend on literature for their legitimacy. Visual genres such as church paintings and the illustrated *Biblia pauperum* mediate the stories of the Scriptures to the illiterate, emphasizing the didactic potential of pictures in much the same way as do the Renaissance emblems or the first children's

textbook, Comenius' *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (ca. 1652). As the first Academies of Arts are created in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, literature's superiority in ranking among the arts is definitely questioned. Artists more systematically begin to sign their work and painting ultimately achieves the status of a *liberal art*. With the eighteenth century the visual arts have finally gained a relative aesthetic autonomy, and Lessing, in his famous *Laocoon* (1766), is eager to stress the differences between text and image. Since the second half of the nineteenth century the examples of writers that have turned explicitly to the works and the techniques of visual artists for inspiration are numerous. Modernist literature with its strong interest in form is symptomatic of the way the general focus has shifted from a narrative to a spatial logic. (Frank 1991, Mitchell 1980). This tendency, in turn, has brought renewed attention to an important ekphrastic tradition in Western Literature that goes all the way back to Homer and the ancient romance. Through the ekphrastic mode of writing, poets – competing with painters – strive to achieve the effect of *visualization* that is inherent to the visual arts.

Given this dialogicity between the media, images make an interesting domain for teachers of literature to explore. What is the educational potential of images used in the literature class? What pedagogical benefits can painting and film offer teachers of literature at departments of Modern Languages and Comparative Literature? These are the questions that my part of the project sets out to explore.

Though distinct signifying practices, literature and visual arts display interesting parallelisms in regard not only to subject matter but also to the way in which writers and artists respond to contemporary questions within a given epoch. Pictures are cultural products to the same extent that literary texts are. Medium specific conventions and

techniques are just as present in visual aesthetics as in verbal ones and offer individual artists a repertoire to play *with* or *against*.

As compared to written texts, images offer instantaneous perception (which is not to say that pictures need not be “read”). Visual arts thus lend themselves to various uses in the literature class, whether the teacher’s intention with the image is to *illustrate* or to *stimulate reflection*. The cross-over between verbal and visual arts will be examined as a means to teach reading skills, that is, to develop the students’ reading competences when engaged in the reading of literary texts. The purpose is to discuss and evaluate specific classroom activities that integrate visual arts in the text course with this intent.

A basic assumption is that contemporaneous art can provide insight into the aesthetics of an epoch and help to elucidate fundamental literary concepts and notions (Hatzfeldt 1952, Benton 1992, Bergez 2004). Among the aspects that will be of particular interest to the project is visual arts as a means of introducing the students to literary movements and to the metalanguage of narratology. Focus on the visual aspects of the text and paratextual elements (layout, organisation into parts/chapters/paragraphs, cover illustration) will be examined as a means to bring the students’ attention to the literary work as a *composition*, an artificial construct that pre-structures its reception. Furthermore, cinematographic adaptations and illustrated editions of literary works will be of specific interest to the project. Here, the question to be answered is whether the comparison between different ‘versions’ of the same text may serve to highlight differences in reader roles, thus making the students more aware of textual strategies and the constraints they impose on the empirical reader. Finally, although the scope of the project is all *literary*, the complementary study of the two art forms presents the advantage of sharpening the students’ awareness of the characteristics of each individual medium.

Part Five: Reception through academic practices

(Andrea Castro)

Starting out of the idea of reading practices¹⁰ I am interested in seeing in what ways the departments of modern languages, as institutions, prepare the socialisation of students into certain ways of reading and certain ways of perceiving and understanding literature in the context of a ‘language’ and of a ‘culture’. To this end, we need to investigate what role literature plays, as well as what is meant by ‘literature’, in the context of language teaching. Other relevant issues to investigate are what curricula say about literature and what ideas teachers have about literature in this context. In the course of the work, concepts like ‘literature’, ‘language’ and ‘culture’ will be discussed and related to each other.

In this study I am therefore not interested in the *actual* practice in the classroom, but in the set of ideas and attitudes *previous* to it. In order to be able to grasp that set of ideas and attitudes in the departments or sections of modern languages in Swedish universities, I aim to approach three different aspects:¹¹

Course curricula

By studying and analysing curricula I aim to be able to see what the objectives of literature courses are in the context of the larger term course. On the one hand, course curricula determine what students

¹⁰ The idea of reading practices is related to the notion of literacy as social practice in New Literacy Studies (NLS). My focus is on reading literature as a social practice that is developed in academic studies. In this context, the way or the ways students are trained to read literature will be rooted in certain conceptions of literature, culture and language. For a good background of NLS and for literacy as a social practice see Street (2003).

¹¹ The study will start with the Spanish sections in the eight Swedish universities and will later on be extended to other languages.

are supposed to learn/train through the course. On the other hand, we should be able to understand through curricula what the function of literature is in the learning of a second language. More specifically, if literature is there only as an expression of the culture it comes from or if there are other qualities of literature that are emphasised.

Lists of literature

The lists of literature are a result of an interpretation of parts of the curricula. By studying them we can appreciate a way of putting the curricula in action. By analysing the lists of literature –both the official and the ‘hidden’¹²– we can learn something about what ‘literature’ and ‘text’ mean. After a first look through the lists of literature belonging to literature courses in eight Spanish sections, my hypothesis is that ‘literature’ mainly means prose. Poetry and drama, if comprised in the meaning, are treated as secondary.

It is also important to pay attention to which writers are included. For example, books or stories by Gabriel García Márquez, Ángeles Mastretta and Laura Esquivel are included in the first literature course (1-20p.) in most Spanish courses. The relevant question here is what kind of writers these are and what this selection says about Spanish written literature.

The teachers’ ideas and attitudes as shown through a survey

Yet another aspect of the set of ideas and attitudes towards literature in language teaching will be approached through a survey to the teachers. In this survey teachers will be asked to formulate their

¹² Students often receive photocopied material (a short-story, a poem, the lyrics of a song) from their teachers. This material does not usually appear in the lists of literature.

teaching intentions and how they put them into practice. They will also be asked to comment on the lists of literature and to interpret parts of the course curriculum. Finally, they will be asked to explain how they examine the course and what is needed for a student to achieve a pass-grade.

More specifically, I am interested in seeing how teachers intend to *use* literature in their courses. Is literature a means to a better language acquisition? Is it a means to understand a different culture? I intend to understand if literary texts, in the context of second-language teaching, are exclusively read as the reflection of a certain culture or also as literature (art) with all the complexity the latter entails. In this regard, I have a particular interest in how teachers relate to ‘defamiliarisation’ in literary texts. When reading literary texts in a second-language, there seems to be a usual difficulty in differentiating between ‘defamiliarisation’ as a literary device and the linguistic and cultural difficulties that a text may present to students that are not familiar with the language and the culture the text comes from. I am interested in seeing if teachers expressly mention this difference and if they work towards making students conscious of it.

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