The Return of the Text

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The Return of the Text

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IT COMES as no secret to anyone who teaches foreign languages that over the past several decades, from the audiolingual method up to and including the communicative method, the literary text has been less than privileged. The reasons for the demotion or neglect are complex: they range from an enduring association of the literary text with the grammar translation method enshrined in the teaching of the ancient languages to a rejection of Olympian high culture in favor of the quotidian. There is also the pragmatic argument for which we have all heard the endless complaint: "I could read Goethe's Die Leiden des jungen Werther, but I couldn't talk about . . ." You fill in the blank: the latest election, the best dance club, or where to buy a good local sausage. Interesting enough, the mystery writer Hubert Monteilhet provided one response to that complaint some twenty-five years ago in his novel Mourir à Francfort: "Si vous apprenez l'allemand pour acheter des saucisses de Francfort, vous ne connaîtrez jamais Goethe. [...] Mais si vous pénétrez Goethe à fond, vous saurez toujours assez d'allemand pour acheter des saucisses" "If you learn German to buy frankfurters, you'll never know Goethe. [...] But if you go deeply into Goethe, you will always know enough German to buy sausages" (14; my trans.). I shall not attempt to resolve the debate between high literature and pragmatic hot dogs, especially since I am persuaded that most people have already made their own decisions and are not eagerly awaiting my guidance.

Since Claire Kramsch's receiving the ADFL award is a celebratory occasion, I shall not lament the dubious dichotomies of high and low, literary and popular, written and oral, intellectual and practical, the arduous antinomies that pretend to categorize when in fact they obfuscate. Nor shall I scold the partisans of the various points of view for their shortsightedness. Instead, let it suffice to note here that over the years in the classroom, in many of her influential articles and books, and in a pedagogical film produced more than ten years ago, Kramsch not only did not abandon the literary text but promoted it with a wider value as a rich mine for discussion, for self-exploration, and for cross-cultural interpretation. And she restored to the text and to the foreign language classroom the aesthetic experience in a world of train schedules, grocery lists, and other daily concerns that made the claim of the real world. The decision not to chuck the baby out with the bath water finds a ready biographical explanation: someone who was raised in the French school system and who earned an agrégation d'allemand from the Sorbonne might well be expected to have figured out that there is some value in literature and that beauty is indeed part of the real world. The decision to return the literary text to the foreign language classroom also has, of course, its linguistic reasons: if you believe that a text does more than convey information and that its meanings reside between the lines, then the literary text has wider and deeper spaces between the lines. There is, of course, a fine irony here: the literary text returns to foreign language teaching and learning in a reaction against mundane pragmatism; that reaction, however, is itself pragmatic, seeking to enrich and enliven the classroom, making the act of reading reflective and self-reflective, and creating a common culture of interpretation and debate within each classroom.

There is, I think, another aspect to the return of the literary text, which I should like to call timeless or, to put it another way, an enduring present in a world of constant change. I am not taking the neoconservative line about the enduring values of a grab bag collection of great books, whether they include only dead white Greek and Roman males or Native American shamans, Central American guerrillas, and others moved from the fringe to the center, are in American English, as if no other languages existed on this planet and as if everything had been written in the past ten years. Instead, I am talking about what each of us as individual readers carries with us from reading what we deem a meaningful text, what is always present with us,
even if it is not always conscious. Now let me pose a question: How many of us hold treasured memories of a newspaper article, a piece published in Time magazine, or even a gossip column from Lingua Franca? The everyday is ephemeral by definition, but we create a certain permanence of memory and feeling from a text that has touched our minds or our hearts.

When I was a graduate student, the great Flaubert scholar Jean Bruneau would always tell us to read, read, and read more, so that we would thus be able to read even more. He made this suggestion not simply to have me and my fellow students perform intellectual calisthenics (though I suspect that was part of the exercise plan) and not only to get us through the twenty-five-page, single-spaced bibliography for the French portion of our oral and written general examinations. Bruneau would then observe that the more we read, the more each text resonates from our experience of other texts. (Bruneau's grandfather was said to reread all of French literature every other year!) Now I should add that this advice was not intended to allow us to go on a great treasure hunt for literary sources, and I shall date myself by saying that the grandchild was said to reread all of Chinese literature every other year!)

Thinking back over the years and considering my own experience as a reader, I now understand that this teacher was advocating what we in modern terms would call the creation of a vast relational database that is strengthened with each additional entry as it creates new relations with older entries. We are in essence creating our own traditions with each new text. Each text becomes a pre-text and a pre-text for other texts.

The title of my remarks, "The Return of the Text," will call forth from each reader in different ways many different associations: the return of Ulysses to his homeland (perhaps Homer's original, Monteverdi's opera, or any number of the works derived from the Odyssey); the New Testament parable of the return of the prodigal son; Thomas Hardy's The Return of the Native; Arthur Conan Doyle's The Return of Dr. Sherlock Holmes; Edgar Rice Burroughs's The Return of Tarzan; Sax Rohmer's The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu (a treasured work of my early adolescence); J. R. R. Tolkien's The Return of the King (another work treasured because I read it aloud to my own children); and, of course, that great visual and legendary text The Return of the Jedi. In most of those examples, though not in all, the return is not simply a reappearance in some continuing drama: the return implies imminent victory, reconquest after a setback or loss. That you and I enjoy different associations with the phrase "the return of" signals our intellectual and biographical diversity and creates a zone of difference that we can investigate, ponder, and share. It is this wondrously paradoxical moment of individualism and community that characterizes the freedom of the pedagogy expounded in dozens of articles and several books by Kramsch, a paradoxical moment that allows us to reflect on ourselves and our own assumptions as we reflect on other and different assumptions.

In one of his encyclopedic essays, "Perché leggere i classici," Italo Calvino proposes several interesting definitions of a classic text: "The classics are those books about which you usually hear people saying: 'I'm rereading . . .,' 'never I'm reading . . .'") (Calvino 11; my trans.). In other words, it is the work to which you or I return, perhaps often, as in the case of a single poem, or after many years, like a novel first read in high school or college and then encountered again with very different eyes and a very different soul twenty or thirty years later. Perhaps even the desire to return to a text suffices to make it a classic, though Calvino does not make such a suggestion, since he was so voracious a reader and seems to have found the time both to have devoured a library and to have returned again and again to many books in that library. The act of returning to a text implies an involvement far beyond mere information gathering. None of us rereads a novel because we want to verify whether Oliver Twist really inherited his father's fortune at the end of the eight hundred pages, nor do we read the Iliad to learn whether the Greeks or the Trojans won the war. None of us rereads a poem to determine whether Gretchen was damned to hell or made it to heaven or whether the drunken boat crashed on the rocks. Patricia Chaput, the director of the Slavic languages program at Harvard University, assigns several accessible texts in first-year Russian, ranging from the tale of Peter and the wolf to passages from Tolstoy's teenage diaries. Chaput readily admits that most of the students will not continue on to master Russian (they will take the two years of the foreign language requirement), but she wants them to retain a memory of a text that spoke to them and that will haunt them ten or twenty years later. The text returns not only to the classroom but also to memory.

Sometimes it is just a single phrase and not an entire text that can be lodged in memory and return with emphasized meaning. Consider the very mundane words in German: Es war . . . ("There was" or "It was," depending on the context). Es war einmal . . . ("Once upon a time there was") is an opening phrase with which we are all familiar from fairy tales. The phrase is so familiar that we can miss how starkly odd, ironic, and paradoxical it is: it introduces something that never really was—the height of fictive creativity and the nadir of historical reality—and at the same time it introduces something that exists as long as we human beings have memory. "Es war einmal eine kleine süße Dirne, die hatte jedermann lieb . . ." 'Once upon a time there was a sweet little maid whom everyone loved.' Or, "Es war eine stolze Königin . . ." a phrase encountered in Gustav Mahler's early cantata Das klagende Lied (based on folk tales gathered by Ludwig Bechstein and the Brothers Grimm). The single word stolze tells all, that the queen is in trouble and that pride goeth before the Fall.
Out of curiosity I did a Web search in German on the words es war that yielded hundreds of pages. Going through some of them at random, I discovered that many, perhaps even most of them, alluded to the opening of a fairy tale: the Web page for a Landeskunde Museum seeking to evoke better times, an advertisement for a computer programming magazine on Visual Basic, pages of personal poetry, an Austrian ski school, and several listings of book titles on the German Amazon.com. Without the prior text, these texts—commercial, historical, nostalgic, and so on—are emptied of much of their meaning. The return of the text returns history to the foreign language classroom.

Because no text is silent or, at least, should not remain silent, Kramsch has advocated on more than one occasion bringing the text to life or back to life by reading it aloud. I would therefore like to conclude my remarks with a reading of a text that resonates through German Romanticism, through German musical culture, through Kramsch's teaching experience, through her memory filtered by the reading by Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, and through my memory through the readings by Jessye Norman and Matthias Goerne. Again, this is a text that begins with the words Es war, but these are not the words of the perennial fairy tale or legend. These are the words of an enduring moment that is at the same time an ever-present dream. The text is the poem “Mondnacht,” by Josef von Eichendorff, first set to music by Robert Schumann in his Liederkreis, opus 39, and then again in a less well known version a few decades later by Johannes Brahms.

Es war, als hätt' der Himmel,
Die Erde still geküßt,
Daß sie im Blütenschimmer
Von ihm nur träumen müßt.

Die Luft ging durch die Felder,
Die Ähren wogten sacht,
Es rauschten leis die Wälder,
So sternklar war die Nacht.

Und meine Seele spannte
Weit ihre Flügel aus,
Flog durch die stillen Lande,
Als flöge sie nach Haus. (Eichendorff 322–23)

It was as if heaven
had gently kissed the earth,
so in the fluttering of blossoms
the earth could dream only of heaven.

The wind went across the fields,
the sheaves of wheat swayed softly
the woods rustled,
and the night was bright with stars.

And my soul spread
its wings out wide,
flung across the quiet countryside
as if it were flying home. (my trans.)

Let me ask you to compare and contrast this extraordinary text—only fifty-seven words, twelve lines, three stanzas—with a meteorological report that states there will be a full moon, clear skies, and a light breeze, and you will recognize instantly the difference between depth and flatness, the perennial and the ephemeral, the beautiful and the ordinary, the evocative and the expository.

The return of the text marks the return of the personal element for the teacher and the student in the foreign language classroom. If there is anything at all that has characterized the work of Kramsch, it is the appeal to the personal, the plea to each and every teacher and student to find his or her own way—his or her own voice—through this endless and endlessly fascinating enterprise that we call language teaching and learning. As we left one of Kramsch's dazzling talks, a colleague once complained to me, “That's just fine, but when is she going to tell us what to do?” My colleague clearly had not read the opening epigraph to Context and Culture in Language Teaching: “[S]i l'on veut pas voir la pédagogie s'enliser dans le conformisme, il faut qu'à tout moment elle enseigne le refus de se conformer. Il n'est de pédagogie constructive que sauvage et la vraie pédagogie se moque de la pédagogie” 'If we do not want pedagogy to sink into conformism, it must constantly teach how to refuse to conform. The only pedagogy is untamed; true pedagogy doesn’t give a hoot for pedagogy’ (Kramsch 15; my trans.).

Works Cited


The Return of the Native is Thomas Hardy's sixth published novel. It first appeared in the magazine Belgravia, a publication known for its sensationalism, and was presented in twelve monthly installments from January to December 1878. Because of the novel's controversial themes, Hardy had some difficulty finding a publisher; reviews, however, though somewhat mixed, were generally positive. In the twentieth century, The Return of the Native became one of Hardy's most popular and highly regarded novels.