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Literature in the High School French Class

by David A. Fein

AS A MEMBER of the university teaching corps entrusted with the responsibility of educating future French teachers of this country, I admit I am somewhat reluctant to draw attention to what I perceive as a widespread weakness in our teacher-training programs. I am hopeful, however, that the problem I am about to describe will eventually be corrected, provided that our teacher education programs are flexible enough to allow some restructuring. The problem, which I prefer to initially pose as a question rather than a judgment, is simply this: are we adequately training secondary school French teachers to teach literature? Granted, students who choose teaching as their career will receive fairly extensive training in the language, will be required to take at least one course in methodology as well as an array of general education courses, will be strongly encouraged to spend at least a few months in a French-speaking country, and will certainly be expected to retain a minimal knowledge of French literary history, including acquaintance with a few of the most important works. But will the student be given the tools necessary to use literature as an effective resource for teaching French to high school students?

I maintain that the persons best qualified to answer the question are not those, such as myself, involved in educating teachers, but the teachers themselves. It is they, after all, who can most accurately assess the strengths and weaknesses of their preparation, having put all their theoretical knowledge to the acid test of day-to-day teaching. The conclusions presented in this study are based on two primary sources of information. First, during the summer of 1985, while teaching a course entitled, "Comment enseigner la littérature?" in an institute sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, I had the privilege of working closely with a group of exceptionally well motivated secondary school teachers from nine states. The class discussions revealed a substantial consensus on a number of issues involving the pedagogical value of using literature in the classroom, and the need to prepare teachers for this aspect of their work. Realizing, however, that I needed a more substantial representation of secondary school teachers before reaching even tentative conclusions, I distributed a brief questionnaire to all the public high school French teachers within the state of North Carolina.¹ The results of this survey, contained in the 118 questionnaires that were returned (approximately 34% of

¹ The survey was funded by a grant from the Research Council of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The course cited above was offered in the Graduate Language Institute in French, held at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

the total number of teachers contacted), represent the main basis for the conclusions stated in this article. Of course, I recognize the statistical limitations of this survey, and would not claim that it necessarily reflects a national consensus among secondary school teachers. I do believe, however, that the sample is large enough to merit some attention, and to raise several important questions related to the teaching of literature.

The questions I have raised regarding the use of literature in high school French classes would be of little significance if literature were restricted to a minor role in the secondary French curriculum. Indeed, I confess that before soliciting information from my secondary school colleagues, I assumed that most students could complete four years of high school French having had virtually no contact with French literature. The survey results convincingly refute this assumption. When asked to rate the importance of literature in their third-year classes, 25% of the respondents indicated that it represented the major portion of the curriculum, and 63% rated it important, although secondary to language instruction. For the fourth year, 68% selected the first category, and 27% chose the second. The number of teachers who indicated that literature had little or no importance in their upper level programs obviously represents an insignificant percentage of the total sample. Granted, the enrollment in advanced classes is more modest than that of first and second-year classes, and high school French teachers undoubtedly spend a far greater portion of their time drilling the formation of the *passé composé* than discussing the structure of one of Ronsard's sonnets. Still, insofar as one can generalize from the results of this recent survey, it appears that the vast majority of high school French teachers are expected to teach several advanced classes, and that literature constitutes a very important component of these classes.

One of the results of the survey which I found most enlightening was the chronological range of literary texts covered in high school classes. Participants in the survey were asked to list a few of the works, read as excerpts or in their entirety, that had been the most successful in their classes. The twentieth century, of course, figures prominently. *Le Petit Prince* appears in these lists with amazing (and some would say disturbing) frequency, and Prévert's continued popularity is very much in evidence. Periods prior to the twentieth century, however, are also well represented. The names of Molière, La Fontaine, Voltaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, and Baudelaire frequently recur. Even the earlier periods of French literature are represented in a surprising number of lists, and such authors as Villon, Charles d'Orléans, Montaigne, Du Bellay are cited along with modern adaptations of such works as the *Chanson de Roland*, and the *Farce du cuvier*, and *Aucassin et Nicolette*. In almost every case, the teachers listed works from a variety of literary periods, demonstrating that their exploration of French literature goes well beyond the twentieth century. While their choice of texts is obviously restricted by the anthologies they are required to use, it is heartening to know that they are attempting to serve a varied "menu" to their students, giving them samples (adulterated though they may be) of the major historical periods of French literature.

Given the apparent importance of literature in advanced French classes, the next question that arises concerns the manner in which literary passages are utilized. The vast majority of the respondents (81%) indicated that they use literature primarily as a vehicle for teaching language and culture, rather than approaching it through literary analysis or literary history. This result, which could easily have been predicted, underlines the disparity between the approach to literature which we expect our university students to follow, and the approach they usually take once they become high school teachers. Naturally, a strong emphasis on literary analysis and literary history is entirely appropriate at the university level, and I am certainly not advocating that this emphasis be entirely abandoned. It would seem sensible, however, in view of the general objectives of foreign language instruction at the secondary level, to provide new teachers with at least a basic introduction to the rich variety of methods they may utilize to exploit the linguistic and cultural facets of appropriate literary texts.

According to the results of this survey, a considerable proportion of high school teachers are not completely satisfied with the training they received in French literature. When asked whether they were adequately trained to teach literature, 47% responded in the negative. If the percentage of respondents answering "no" to the question represented only a negligible segment of the total sample, there would be no cause for concern. The fact, however, that the proportion approaches 50% merits some reflection. It may well be that most of these teachers received a very solid foundation in literature, studying selected works in depth under the direction of highly competent, and even inspiring instructors. But they apparently received little guidance on how to most effectively present literature to their high school students. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that many high school French teachers are not being properly trained to carry out an important part of their teaching responsibilities. One may well wonder whether similar omissions would be tolerated in other professions. It is inconceivable, for instance, that residents in obstetrics would be allowed to go into private practice before being thoroughly taught how to perform a caesarean section. Fortunately, teaching French literature is not a question of life or death, and French teachers are not (yet!) vulnerable to malpractice suits. Still, there is no good excuse for not giving these teachers the full training they require and deserve.

What steps should be taken to remedy the problem? First, it seems evident that we need to open a dialogue between secondary school teachers and university instructors on the subject of teaching literature.² This could be done through regional AATF meetings, informal discussions, mutual observation of classes, and, above all, listening attentively (but not defensively) to our secondary school colleagues' evaluation of their own training as teachers. The desired result of increased interaction between these two groups, of course, would be

² For an interesting commentary on the lack of articulation between literature study at the secondary and university level, see Kay Herr, "The Role of Literature in Secondary and Post-Secondary Language Instruction: Disparity or Unity?" *Foreign Language Annals*, 15 (1982), 3, 203-207.

greater collaboration between language and literature teachers at all levels.³ Language and literature are too often arbitrarily and artificially separated. We need to rediscover means by which the study of one area enriches the study of the other.

To effect any productive change, we must start by recognizing that we, as university educators, are *not* properly equipping our future French teachers to teach literature. We are, at best, providing them with a model for teaching literature at the university level, a model that will be of limited value to them once they begin teaching at the secondary level. Furthermore, we cannot escape all responsibility by simply passing the buck to our colleagues in foreign language pedagogy, claiming that the teaching of literature ought to be covered in the methodology course required of all candidates for teaching certification. These courses justifiably concentrate on teaching language through the audiolingual approach and other methods, and are not normally designed to incorporate the teaching of literature as a major component of the course. As the ball bounces back into the court of the literature teachers, I can hear them angrily protest that they will not compromise the intellectual rigor of their courses on classical drama, nineteenth-century poetry, and existentialism by giving them a pedagogical focus. Indeed, they are right to defend the integrity of their literary disciplines. There is, however, a possible solution to the dilemma.

Rather than attempt to integrate the teaching of literature into existing courses on literature and methodology, I would recommend that the subject be given separate treatment as a course in its own right. During the course on the teaching of literature, mentioned earlier in this article, I found that the topic was greeted with an enthusiasm that sustained itself throughout the duration of the session. The need for such a course is corroborated by the survey results, in which 34% of the respondents indicated that the course would be of "some value," while 65% thought it would be "very useful."

The course, structured according to the preference of the individual instructor, would combine both literary and pedagogical elements. In my own course I selected one text to represent each of the major genres—Robbe-Grillet's *Le Rendez-vous*, Ionesco's *Rhinocéros*, and Prévert's *Histoires*. In addition, we considered poems by Ronsard, La Fontaine, and Rimbaud, as well as examples of "marginal" literature especially well suited to the high school level: the *conte de fées*, the *bande dessinée*, songs, and proverbs. We explored various methods of presenting a text (*explication de texte*, *reconstitution de texte*, etc.), concentrating on means of leading inexperienced students into simplified but meaningful literary analysis, and techniques of teaching language through literature. Various texts were also studied as cultural "artifacts," useful in presenting cultural differences between French and American society. Each student was asked to present a summary and critique of an article covering some aspect of teaching

³ For a thought-provoking discussion of this issue, see Carol Herron, "Collaboration Between Teachers of Foreign Languages and Literature," *French Review*, 59 (1985), 1, 11–15.

literature. In lieu of a final exam, the participants were required to present a brief literary text, just as they would present it to their own students. The choice of texts, clearly favoring poetry over other genres, ranged chronologically from Ronsard to Apollinaire, and they were generally presented with skill, humor, and contagious enthusiasm.

On the basis of this initial survey, representing the opinion of a third of the public secondary school teachers of French in a state with a fairly strong commitment to foreign-language education, one may draw a few preliminary conclusions concerning certain aspects of our profession.

1) Literature does have an important place in the high school curriculum. Moreover, students in advanced courses are being exposed not only to examples of twentieth-century literature, but also to a wide variety of literary works from prior historical periods.

2) A serious lack of communication exists between teachers at the secondary and post-secondary levels concerning the issue of literature. University instructors are largely unaware of how literature is handled at the high school level, while high school teachers are often frustrated by the disarticulation between the secondary and post-secondary approaches to literature.

3) A disturbingly high proportion of secondary school teachers have not, by their own admission, been properly trained to teach literature at the high school level.

4) The teaching of literature deserves inclusion, in some form, in the standard teacher-training program.

These conclusions, as I have repeatedly stated, are tentative, and represent the largest body of data that could be collected on very restricted financial resources. It is at least a beginning. My hope is that this assessment of the issue, and other more thorough assessments will stimulate a frank and productive dialogue between university and high school colleagues in the profession.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, GREENSBORO