

# THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE AT THE CROSSROADS: MEANS OR GOAL?

AN ESSAY

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Abstract: In France, literature has been for a long time the basis for the teaching of French as mother tongue. Today, however, its role and position are being questioned because of both empirical difficulties linked with its daily teaching and disciplinary changes in French didactics<sup>1</sup>. Its formerly obvious use is now giving way to doubts. While some firmly stick to their old positions, as expressed in press pamphlets and media discussions (« C'est la littérature qu'on assassine rue de Grenelle », *Le Monde*, 4 March, 2000), others try to « remodel » the teaching of French in redefining the functions of its various components (literature ranging at the top) and in finding new ways to link them. These are the issues at stake in the current debate that we hope to clarify through an analysis of the Education Ministry's new instructions on secondary teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> As with all articles in this issue, the notion of “didactics” is equivalent to the English notion “pedagogy”

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**Dutch. Samenvatting** [translation Tanja Janssen] In Frankrijk vormde literatuur lange tijd de basis van het onderwijs Frans als moedertaal. Tegenwoordig staan de rol en de positie van literatuur echter ter discussie, ten gevolge van moeilijkheden in de dagelijkse lespraktijk en van verschuivingen in de didactiek van het Frans. Het vanzelfsprekende wordt overschaduwd door twijfels. Terwijl sommigen blijven vasthouden aan hun oude opvattingen, zoals tot uiting komt in pamfletten en discussies in de media ('Het is de literatuur die vermoord is in de Rue de Grenelle', *Le Monde*, 4 maart, 2000), proberen anderen het onderwijs Frans opnieuw vorm te geven, de functies van diverse onderdelen (met literatuur bovenaan) opnieuw te definiëren, en nieuwe manieren te vinden om ze met elkaar te verbinden. Deze kwesties vormen de inzet van het huidige debat, dat we trachten te verhelderen door een analyse te geven van de nieuwe richtlijnen die het Ministerie van Onderwijs heeft gegeven voor het secundair onderwijs.

**German. Zusammenfassung.** [Translation Irene Pieper].

Literaturunterricht an der Schnittstelle: Mittel oder Ziel?

Literatur bildete lange Zeit die Grundlage des Muttersprachenunterrichts in Frankreich. Gegenwärtig wird ihre Rolle und Position allerdings in Frage gestellt. Dies hängt sowohl mit den empirischen Problemen zusammen, die mit dem alltäglichen Literaturunterricht verbunden sind, als auch mit Veränderungen im Bereich der Französisch-Didaktik. Was vorher selbstverständlich war wird nun kontrovers diskutiert: In der öffentlichen Debatte halten einige Diskutanten strikt an älteren Positionen fest, wie sich in verschiedenen Medienbeiträgen zeigt ('C'est la littérature qu'on assassine rue de Grenelle', *Le Monde*, 4th March, 2000). Andere versuchen den Französisch-Unterricht neu zu modellieren, indem sie die Funktionen der unterschiedlichen Inhalte – mit Literatur an der Spitze – neu bestimmen und neue Wege entwickeln, diese zu verbinden. Um diese Probleme geht es zur Zeit und wir hoffen, durch eine Analyse der neuen Richtlinien für den Unterricht der Sekundarstufe, die das Erziehungsministerium vorgelegt hat, zur Klärung des Kontroversen beitragen zu können.

**Polish. Streszczenie** [translation Elżbieta Awramiuk] We Francji literatura przez długi czas stanowiła podstawę nauczania francuskiego jako języka ojczystego, jednakże dziś jej pozycja i rola bywają kwestionowane z powodu empirycznych trudności występujących w codziennym nauczaniu i zmian dyscyplinarnych we francuskiej dydaktyce<sup>2</sup>. Jej poprzednie oczywiste zastosowania obecnie budzą wątpliwości. Podczas gdy jedni stanowczo opowiadają się za jej starą pozycją, co wyrażają drukowane broszury i medialne dyskusje ('C'est la littérature qu'on assassine rue de Grenelle', *Le Monde*, 4 th March, 2000), inni próbują przemodelować nauczanie francuskiego poprzez ponowne zdefiniowanie funkcji jego różnych komponentów (stawianie literatury na pierwszym miejscu) oraz poszukiwanie nowych dróg ich łączenia. W obecnej debacie występują istotne kwestie, które mamy nadzieję wyjaśnić poprzez analizę nowych instrukcji Ministerstwa Edukacji do nauczania w szkole średniej.

**Portuguese. Resumo.** [Translation Paulo Feytor Pinto].

Em França, a literatura foi durante muito tempo a base do ensino do Francês como língua materna. Hoje em dia, porém, o seu papel e posição estão a ser postos em causa tanto devido a dificuldades empíricas resultantes do seu ensino quotidiano como a mudanças de fundo na didáctica do Francês<sup>3</sup>. A sua utilização óbvia no passado está agora a dar lugar a dúvidas. Enquanto alguns mantêm firmemente a sua velha posição, de que dão conta artigos de jornal e discussões na comunicação social ("É a literatura que assassinam na rue de Grenelle", *Le Monde*, 4 de Março de 2000), outros tentam "remodelar" o ensino do Francês redefinindo as funções das suas diferentes componentes (com a literatura no topo) e buscando novos modos de as interligar. Estas são as questões que estão em cima da mesa e que procuraremos clarificar através da análise das novas instruções do Ministério da Educação para o ensino secundário.

<sup>2</sup> Podobnie jak we wszystkich artykułach w niniejszym numerze pojęcie "dydaktyka" stanowi ekwiwalent angielskiego pojęcia "pedagogika".

<sup>3</sup> Tal como nos restantes artigos, a noção de didáctica equivale, em inglês, à noção de pedagogia/pedagogy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In France, the teaching of literature is at a crossroads. The question that is being asked is as follows: should literature remain a sphere of learning that is valued on its own account, with the risk that the teaching of literature will, at worst, disappear in the medium term, or, at best, become the sole preserve of an elite? Alternatively, in order to ensure that literature continues to be taught, should it become a tool or adjunct serving the learning of the mother tongue?

The debate between the “traditionalists”, or humanists, who favour the teaching of great literature, and the “modernists” or utilitarians, who favour a more immediately practical education, is nothing new in France<sup>4</sup>. Yet it has been sparked into life again in recent times, following the reform of the French curriculum for “lycées” in 2000.

In France, secondary education is split into two age groups: pupils from eleven to fifteen go to *college* and pupils from fifteen to eighteen go to *lycée*. During the last three years, they can either go to a state or private *lycée* (the school years are known as *seconde*, *première* and *terminale*), which are secondary schools where they study for their *baccalauréat* (the school leaving examination which pupils take in their final year). They have to choose a specialisation (scientific-oriented, arts-oriented, economic-oriented or technical-oriented). Alternatively, pupils can go to a *lycée professionnel*, which provides vocational training as well as the more traditional core subjects.

### 1.1 The collège

During the final year of primary education, teachers decide whether a pupil may enter *collège*. There is no legal age, but pupils usually are between ten and twelve years old when they start secondary education. Education at *collège* lasts four years (6<sup>ème</sup>, 5<sup>ème</sup>, 4<sup>ème</sup>, 3<sup>ème</sup>.) and it is split into three cycles:

- the adaptation cycle (6<sup>ème</sup>)
- the central cycle (5<sup>ème</sup> and 4<sup>ème</sup>)
- the guidance cycle (3<sup>ème</sup>)

The crucial guidance decision is made at the end of the 3<sup>ème</sup>. The pupil is advised to go either to a general, technical, or professional *seconde*. At the end of *collège*, pupils take an exam called the BEPC. However, the guidance decision does not depend on the results of this exam.

### 1.2 The lycée

General and technical *lycées* prepare for the following exams: general or technical *baccalauréat* and vocational training certificate. Secondary education at *lycée* lasts 3 years and is split into two cycles:

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<sup>4</sup> At the start of the 20th century, Gustave Lanson, regarded as the father of literary history – and as such immune to accusations of disregard for the nation’s literary heritage – was on the side of the utilitarians...

- The guidance cycle (*seconde*)
- The final cycle (*première* and *terminale*)

The *baccalauréat* is the school leaving examination pupils take in their final year, which gives access to higher education.

Professional *lycées* provide vocational training and prepare for the following exams: vocational training certificate (CAP), technical school certificate (BEP), and professional *baccalauréat*.

To understand the issues at stake it will be useful to start by briefly retracing the history of the relationship between literature and French language teaching from 1880 to the end of the 1960s. This will be followed by a description of the problems that have arisen over time, and finally by an analysis of ways of remodelling French as a subject that would allow literature and language teaching to be combined.

## 2. FROM TEACHING RHETORIC TO TEACHING LITERATURE: THE AGE OF CERTAINTY

For many years in France the mother tongue was taught via Latin: pupils learned composition using Latin models (*De Viris* by Lhomond, for example), emulating these models either by translating or by imitating them (pupils learned how to write using texts in Latin).

This situation began to change in 1880 thanks to a decree which aimed to abolish Latin composition as a component of the *baccalauréat*, replacing it with “French composition”. This is an important date in the history of the subject because it pinpoints the moment one subject area (the teaching of Latin rhetoric) was converted into another (the teaching of French literature). From then on, French composition was based upon French literature teaching. However, the teaching of rhetoric did not really disappear until 1925, at the end of a hard-fought battle pitting the defenders of the classical humanities against the supporters of a “modern” education, i.e. an education without Latin.

After this, French literature became the model for the teaching of the French language. Pierre Clarac, the famous university lecturer and Inspector General of the French education system in the 1960s, and author of *L'enseignement du français* [*The teaching of French*] (1963), believed that it was through literature that students should learn the language and also learn artistic judgement and moral values. This literature, regarded as the common national heritage, manifested itself in the form of an anthology of “beaux textes” [*beautiful texts*], carefully purged not only of authors who might tarnish its edifying image (Racine is a recognised author, Diderot somewhat less so, Sade not at all), but also of texts by recognised authors that were judged to deviate from the norm (Rimbaud’s “Le Dormeur du val” is included in school textbooks, but not “Le Forgeron”).

Mother tongue learning was based on literature, itself consisting – again according to Pierre Clarac – of the “masterpieces of our language” (preface to the textbook *XIXe siècle*). In the “lycée”, he asserted, “all literary analysis is firstly grammatical analysis,” and grammatical analysis consisted of “studying in a page of fine French the expressive value of the words and turns of phrase” (*L'enseignement du français*

[*The teaching of French*]). At primary school and in the *collège*, the language of literature was also the primary point of reference. The aim was to learn to speak and write French well, i.e. to speak and write in accordance with the codes of literary language. School grammar was the grammar of the literary language and every example cited to illustrate any rule of spelling was, as a matter of course, followed by the name of a hallowed author.

Mother tongue education was literature education, teaching the cultural capital of an elite, based upon a stable body of knowledge. So the teaching of the mother tongue via the teaching of literature had a socio-cultural function that was essentially repressive: Pierre Clarac said of textual analysis that it “could only be concerned with rich texts of exceptional beauty, texts which teachers and pupils may only approach with a kind of trembling respect ...”

### 3. FROM THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE TO THE TEACHING OF MOTHER TONGUE: THE AGE OF DOUBT

In the 1970s, the teaching of literature underwent dual crises:

- an external crisis – it came to appear increasingly ill-suited to the new student population
- an internal crisis – it was reproached with giving too much importance to literary history and disregarding new academic disciplines (linguistics, the new criticism, reception theories, etc.).

Like other European countries, France has seen a series of waves of popularisation in the education sector, to some extent arising from demographic factors, but even more so from processes of social change. Since 1960, the number of pupils in secondary education has been steadily increasing. A few figures: in 1960, France’s *collège* had a total of 1,453,000 pupils, in the public and private sector combined; by 1999, this total stood at 3,164,000. In the general and technical *lycées*, there were 421,000 pupils in 1960, in the public and private sectors; the equivalent figure for 1999 was 1,464,500. Finally, there were 383,200 pupils in the vocational *lycées* in 1960; and 696,900 in 1999. In other words, there was an overall total of 5,325,400 pupils learning French.

The improvement in the *baccalauréat* results is even more spectacular: in 1950, 4.9% of each year group obtained the *baccalauréat*; in 1970 the equivalent figure was 19%; in 1980, 25%; in 1990, 43% ; in 1997, 61% <sup>5</sup>.

The very rapid increase in pupil numbers across the entire secondary system necessarily resulted in an increasing diversity in the classes and audiences being catered for. This phenomenon had a number of aspects, first and foremost democratisation: the “colleges” and “lycées” became much more widely accessible to children from disadvantaged social backgrounds. In the *collèges*, children from disadvantaged backgrounds gained access to a complete middle school education in huge

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<sup>5</sup> Since 1985, the French education ministry has formulated its goal in terms of a slogan which has rapidly become famous: “80 % d’une classe d’âge au niveau du baccalauréat” [80% of each year group reaching baccalauréat level].

numbers. Even though the disparities persisted as before in the *lycées*, especially as regards the probabilities for accessing the different *baccalauréat* categories, from then on pupils from increasingly diverse backgrounds were gaining access to the entire secondary education system, creating an increasingly heterogeneous audience, or at least one that was very different from the audience formerly comprising the “privileged few”. The various forms of cultural complicity ceased to form the basis of the teacher-pupil relationship, especially as the pupils themselves had developed new expectations relating to their education. Indeed, the spectre of unemployment and competition in the labour market have led pupils to adopt educational attitudes that are by no means still guided by a disinterested quest for intellectual training, but rather represent social strategies grounded in self-interest. In fact, pupils choose their specialisations according to the labour market. Antoine Prost puts it very effectively:

“On ne demande plus d’abord à l’école de dispenser une culture, mais de munir les jeunes de diplômes monnayables sur le marché du travail (1997 [1992] : 59).” [“Schools are no longer primarily required to dispense culture, but to provide young people with certificates that have currency in the labour market.”]

Subjects now tend to be assessed solely in terms of the opportunities for socio-professional integration they offer – utility takes precedence over meaning, consumerist attitudes over cultural appetites. This is even truer of pupils educated in under-valued sectors or establishments, studying for a *baccalauréat* with little prestige attached to it, who frequently see themselves as “marginalised”. The teaching of literature is pointless to them, because it is seen as being of no practical use.

The management of this learner diversity was tackled both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, the system set up a range of organisational structures which unfortunately very soon came to be regarded as a “relegation” system: in the *collège*, failing pupils were directed towards the technological or vocational courses. And so it was necessary to deploy other strategies in order to prevent these failings, including strategies which sought to respond to the challenge of diversity by using a range of educational practices (modules, support, diversified courses, personal support, etc.).

Vertically, popularisation challenged the traditional principles of progression and even at a time when pupils are taking longer and longer courses, the system finds it difficult to plan a progression in the learning process. In French, the traditional modes of organisation have ceased to apply – such as the principle separating the *collège* from the *lycée* by reserving language work for the former, while the latter was devoted to learning literature, the dissertation, textual analysis, etc. The expansion of admission to secondary education made this division obsolete and the question of language teaching in the *lycée* very soon came to be posed to teachers who were poorly prepared to tackle it. The emergence of issues relating to the diversification of written French, for example, within the field of French teaching during the 1980s, is explained by the need to find new solutions to problems – among these was the heterogeneity of pupils – that had been unknown before this time.

The quantitative changes that affected secondary education in the late 60s, as well as the fact of teachers getting younger (Albertini, 1987), created a will to re-

form the teaching of literature: in 1967 the French Association of French Teachers (Association Française des Enseignants de Français) was created.; in 1969, the Charbonnières Manifesto (Manifeste de Charbonnières) set progressive objectives for the teaching of French: giving up lectures; resorting to tutorial classes; a refusal of elitism; condemnation of mass culture and of chronological and national norms, of selected passages, etc. The will to break with tradition was omnipresent. There were new curricula and new official instructions which set out the epistemological changes (language sciences were becoming the main subject in French teaching).

The spirit of reform had an important place in journals like *Le Français aujourd'hui*, *Pratiques* and *Les Cahiers pédagogiques*. Moreover, its theoretical inspiration had different sources:

- colloquiums, like the one in Cerisy (1969) which was devoted to the teaching of literature;
- the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales*, where the *nouvelle critique* main representatives taught (R. Barthes, T. Todorov, A.J. Greimas, G. Genette);
- the *centre expérimental universitaire* in Paris VIII (university experimental centre), where a research group of young teachers – Enseignement 70 – met with J. Lacan, T. Todorov, R. Barthes, J.-P. Richard, H. Miterrand, Cl. Duchet, J. Bellemain-Noël, J. Verrier...) and
- literary journals (Poétique, Littérature, Communication, Tel Que).

New sorts of knowledges appeared: besides linguistics, there also was semiology, semiotics, psychoanalysis, sociocriticism. Sometimes flimsy, nebulous, or mere fashion phenomena, they were quickly (often too quickly) adopted by literature teachers – in the name of, one must say, the most laudable intentions. As it was commonly put: morality is class-related, whereas sciences are universal.

Paradoxically, in the face of these difficulties, the national curriculum and the text books for a long time avoided imposing or suggesting learning progressions - individual teachers were left to put together their own sequence of learning to suit their own pupils. In response to this situation two new educational ideas came into being – the concepts of “projet pédagogique” [teaching project] and “séquence didactique” [educational sequence] which to some extent show a kind of transfer of responsibility from the education system towards the teachers. Teachers are no longer simply asked to observe a pre-determined framework consecrated by tradition, but to define the organisation of their teaching for themselves.

Popularisation of education, diversity of pupils, growth and diversification in the recruitment and training of teachers, a fragmented subject, evolving educational structures – all these trends profoundly transformed the teaching of the mother tongue (Canvat, 1993).

#### 4. CURRENT ISSUES

Since it was founded, at the time of the Revolution, the school system of the French Republic, inspired by the Enlightenment, has chosen the path of educating the masses and of educating in a secular tradition. This is not the case in all countries. It implies the observance of particular values, among the most important of which are

freedom of thought and equality. Knowledge of the mother tongue is therefore a key issue. “The same French for all” is the motto of the Republic’s school system. In other words, it must give everyone access to a shared language and literature, in order to give everyone a common point of reference, yet without negating individual differences. The education system has always wanted to teach the same French to all pupils (i.e. all the pupils who have access to education). But the problem is that the number of pupils has considerably increased.

Teaching the language, *and* teaching the literature become the dual aims. This means simultaneously teaching the pupil to express himself or herself (writing, reading, speaking, listening) and teaching knowledge of literature. For a long time this dual aim was unproblematic. It is not so today. More and more pupils find themselves in a situation of linguistic insecurity and outside the school system and illiteracy is gaining ground. Moreover, pupils cannot access literature because their language ability is insufficient and observers are noting an increasing reluctance to read literary texts – a reluctance that persists beyond the school years (Baudelot, Cartier, and Detrez, 1999).

Some people are now pointing to the risk that the education system of the future will be a “two-tiered” system: schools for the “good” pupils and different schools for the “others”. Yet the system is already a two-tiered one, perhaps even a three-tiered one: the general *lycée*, the technical *lycée*, the vocational *lycée*. Is this a situation of equality among pupils? Moreover, because one can distinguish between some general *lycées* – prestigious and selective – and the other “less fortunate” *lycées*, one could even say it is a four-tiered system.

Consequently any consideration of new balancing measures must take into account the inequalities that currently exist. It is vital to teach pupils to express themselves effectively in their mother tongue, which is the location of thought itself, and to give them shared cultural points of reference. And this cannot begin only at the *lycée* level. It must be tackled at *collège* level, and at primary level.

The problem is all the more acute given that the literary program of the *lycées* is in crisis in France – literature having been, for many years, it should be remembered, their core vocation, above all other subjects. Of course, the future of French language teaching is not synonymous with that of literature teaching. French is a basic subject, taught from primary school level, and present in all the different types of *lycée*. Yet the literature *baccalauréat* is undergoing a serious decline. Until 1968, it was still absorbing a significant share of the new audiences and accounted for around 35% of all final-year students. Since then it has been steadily losing ground: by 1972-1973, it accounted for only 24.3% of final-year students; in 1982-1983, 16.5%; in 1999-2000, it fell to 14% and in 2001-2002, it stood at 11%. By successive declines we have therefore arrived at a situation that is very worrying for the literature *baccalauréat*<sup>6</sup>, with the risk of lending credibility to the notion that literature is made only for a few eccentrics or for those who were not accepted for the “serious” subjects (Sciences, Mathematics, Economics).

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<sup>6</sup> The same phenomenon is also apparent in higher education, where the literature departments are having problems attracting students.



Accepting this situation would mean that “French”, in the end, would no longer have its own independent program of education, and would appear only as a component of courses specified by other disciplines – an impoverishing and paradoxical situation at a time when, in society, people are speaking out to emphasise the importance of a literary education. It would be preferable to pick up again on the ambition of the early 1990s to “diversify the forms of excellence” and to rebuild, with all the disciplines affected (languages, arts, human sciences), a plan for the “L series” (the literature *baccalauréat*). This involves a broad and ambitious definition of the teaching of French, and it involves replacing the current statement – “the crisis of the literature course is weakening the teaching of French” – with this question: “Can the remodelling of French language teaching help to restore a sense of direction to the teaching of literature?”.

##### 5. RESTORING THE SUBJECT’S COHERENCE

In the face of a subject which is fragmented and is piling up new knowledge on top of old it is necessary to restore the subject’s coherence, retaining what works while correcting the excesses and introducing innovations.

The situation will not change as long as the debates continue to circle endlessly around meaningless oppositions: literature versus communication; written versus spoken; techniques and methods versus sensibility and artistic emotion; traditional versus modern, and so on. Of all these, the first pair (literature vs communication) is without doubt the most dangerous because it carries within it the seed of the subject’s own fragmentation – on the one side there would be the teaching of techniques and skills, with a purely utilitarian bias, on the other an “artistic” teaching of literature, defined in terms of a “supplement for the soul”, a gratuitous exercise. In fact, the two notions of literature and communication are not incompatible.

The strength of the subject can only come from its ability to integrate within it all these different dimensions. Yet for all that, why should it be necessary for all pupils to have the same kind of relationship to works of literature? Why not accept that there is space for both intuitive approaches (literature is an object of pleasure) and more methodical strategies (literature is an object of knowledge) at the same time? For reading based on identification (i.e. reading based on participation) and for critical reading (i.e. reading based on distancing). We need to go beyond such sterile oppositions.

It is also vital to attempt to make a virtue of the fact that, for historical reasons, the teaching of French involves both the teaching of a language *and* the teaching of a culture (what philosopher Hannah Arendt called the “commonplaces”). Yet to achieve this, it is necessary to take into account the existence of the “new” pupils at the *collèges* and *lycées* (*their* cultural practices, how *they* relate to reading, etc.).

Teaching a language is teaching the ability to express oneself. This means teaching writing for a variety of situations, diversifying the types of writing practised – and this without forgetting the spoken word, which is our primary relationship with language. But this should also combine the study of the language with the study of

literary texts (for example, in spoken language, what makes a theatrical dialogue different from an ordinary conversation?).

And literature? One of France's defining characteristics, as Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (1991) has very effectively shown, is that it is a "literary nation". And literature, as we have seen, has played a very important role in the teaching of French. However, today's schools can no longer function simply as the custodians of a tradition. The school system does not have – and will have less and less as time goes by – a monopoly of knowledge. Schools should enable pupils to acquire autonomous modes of thought. In other words, the literary knowledge that is imparted can no longer be closed in on itself. It must be open, because its sole value lies in the way it can be applied, outside the school situation, i.e. both outside school during the time the pupil is attending school, and after school when he or she has become a citizen who no longer attends school. How can we accustom pupils to interacting with cultural objects and places when they are not at school, and in ways other than those taught at school? How can we bring them to understand that their relationship with literature is a vital and fragile one, and that they cannot limit themselves to what they have learned at school? In other words, how do we turn them into lifelong lovers of literature?

These concerns explain why the national curriculum for primary education ascribes an important role to literature and why the curriculum for the *collège* suggests reading a certain number of prescribed texts, which must be "texts conveying major cultural reference points", in a chronological sequence. The *lycée* curriculum suggests combining more informal reading (allowing pupils to talk about the books they are reading and to discuss them in class) and analytical reading (allowing pupils to learn to interpret literary texts). A pupil who has read several novels can compare them, evaluate his reactions, his emotions, sensations, impressions, his likes and dislikes, after which he will formulate a judgement (value judgement) that takes into account criteria which have some kind of objective basis (for example, the degree of originality, measured in terms of formal innovation). Relating to literature, to culture, involves a dual perspective: what is subjective and what can be assessed in objective terms. It can never become totally objective, otherwise literature would become a technical subject; it is never totally subjective, otherwise we would be in a world that is merely arbitrary, a power struggle. The historic perspective is not entirely abandoned, but, in order to combat the traditional concept of literature, the curriculum suggests that we abandon the attempt to teach the whole of French literature, concentrating instead on the literary and cultural movements that have marked major turning points and changed the way we view the world : humanism, classicism, romanticism, for example.

In terms of written language, the symbolic and pre-eminent position held by the essay and French composition for many years has been challenged. This pre-eminent position is justified neither in historical/epistemological terms nor socially; rather, it reflects a professional habit of mind and the university education behind it. Despite the voices of disapproval with their recurrent theme of "lowering standards" ("c'est la littérature qu'on assassine rue de Grenelle" (Ministry of National Education) ["it's literature that's being assassinated in Rue de Grenelle"], *Le Monde*, 4 March 2000) the national curriculum has given official sanction, under the name "imaginative

writing”, to the innovative re-introduction of writing practices inherited from the spirit of rhetoric, opening the way for an appropriation of literature based on writing. This measure has corrected the imbalance between the time given to reading and the time allocated to writing. In concrete terms, imaginative writing encompasses text-based writing activities, particularly imitation (serious or pastiche), adaptation (amplification or reduction, serious or parody) and transposition (close or free), and the production of texts, which can also take on a variety of forms (taking part in writing competitions, writing workshops, theatre workshops, etc.). For example, studying the Vauquer description involves learning about description, about the characteristics of realist description and, more specifically, Balzac’s style of description. In the novel *Madame Vauquer*’s room is not described. Pupils can be asked to describe the room, using the methods of realist description, even using a typical Balzac style. This activity combines the pleasure of creativity, literary and textual knowledge (relating to a descriptive sequence in a text), the ability to analyse, and written expression. The pupil needs to have understood the text, to have felt and observed its distinctive features; he needs to have entered into the text, to have appropriated it. The imaginative writing provides proof of this: drawing on this text he can produce a text himself – an exercise that is not exclusively theoretical (like an essay or commentary), but which reinvests the knowledge in a similar type of writing on a different subject, or a different type of writing on the same subject.

With imaginative writing pupils produce texts, i.e. they engage in an active relationship with the language, using what they have produced to reflect on what they can do and where they need to improve. In this way, they develop their relationship with the language. It is not possible to get anywhere with literature if the pupils do not have a relationship with the language that enables them to enter into the texts. What is at stake in “imaginative writing” is writing that develops linguistic ability. It is a vital opportunity to bring life into the student’s relationships to language and to literature.

As we have seen, the national curriculum for *lycées* re-affirms the indissoluble link between the mother tongue and literature. Language learning and access to literature must take place simultaneously: the teaching of language and the teaching of literature are consubstantial.

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