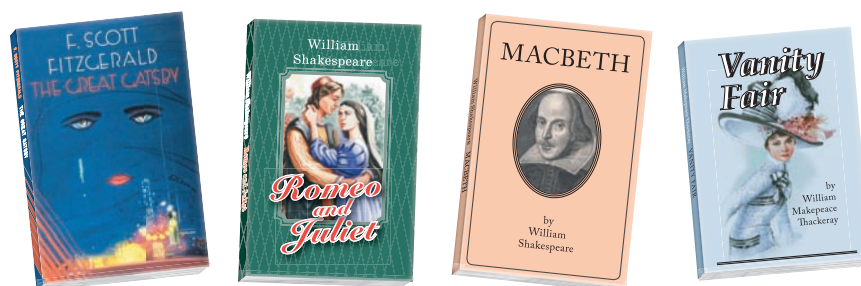*Alan Pulverness,*
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Outside looking in: teaching literature as a dialogue

Readers value literary texts for different reasons — for their cultural status, for their formal technique, for their ethical coherence — but mainly for their peculiar power to engage us as co-authors of unique patterns of discourse. Teachers, by contrast, often treat literature as an object for analysis, explanation and evaluation. In the language classroom, tasks and activities are primarily concerned with language form and referential content, while response may be acknowledged by spaces in the lesson which allow for the idiosyncratic play of personal associations. I want to propose a fresh perspective — one that proceeds from Bakhtin's view of literature as a 'double-voiced discourse', in which the writer stands *outside* language and is at the same time engaged in finding expression *in* the language. To teach literature as a dialogue between reader and text, a methodology is required which puts students into this double relationship with the text and which develops their sensitivity to literature as discourse.

Let's start, very simply, with a single word: *Well!* By itself, without any contextual information, the word resists interpretation, or rather opens up any number of possible interpretations. Imagine, however, that the word is spoken in a room in Russia, that it is the month of May and that outside it is snowing. Then the word takes on a very particular range of probable meanings: incredulity, irritation, an empathetic feeling between the interlocutors, sharing their dismay at the late arrival of spring. The example — from Bakhtin — is cited by David Lodge in *After Bakhtin* (1990). Bakhtin makes the point that in real life, the meaning of the utterance would be disambiguated by context, by paralinguistic features and by intonation. For Bakhtin, intonation has a metaphorical relationship to propositional content. He says: "If this potential were realised, then the word *Well!* would unfold into something like the following metaphorical expression: 'How *stubborn* the winter is, it won't give way, even though it is high time!'"

Language teachers may well find this observation about the significance of context and intonation familiar, if not trite. As readers of literary texts, however, we are constantly in the position of having to *construct* context and discern the play of voices in the text. The writer can give us fairly crude signals through the use of punctuation, layout on the page and different typefaces. But the way in which literature functions is much more complex than mere mimesis. Literature holds a metaphor — rather than a mirror — up to nature.

The literary text is a nexus of discourse relationships: **intra-textually**, between any given utterance and its co-text — the utterances which surround it; between the text and the white

spaces within it; between the *implied author* and *implied reader*; between all the voices within the text — and outside it; between the author — real and implied — and these voices; and **inter-textually**, between the text and other texts. What in real life is accomplished through paralinguistic and extra-linguistic signals, in literature is made manifest through language alone. It is a commonplace observation that literature is made of language, but it is not made of language in quite the same way that a sculpture might be made of marble or a painting of pigments: the world of a short story or of a novel is a world fashioned from words, but while these words might be regarded as the artist's material, it is never *raw* material. Words are derived from the voices that use them and give them meaning (whether they are generic voices or particular ones) and as soon as words are set in relation to each other, they begin to produce an interplay of different voices. When the reader adds his or her own voice to the host of voices present in the text, s/he experiences the peculiar intimacy of reading, and each reader constructs the meaning of the text afresh. Just as words do not mean without context, the literary text does not *contain* meaning, determined by the writer, which it is the reader's task to extract. As Robert Scholes (1985) puts it, «Reading is [...] never just the reduction of the text to some kernel of predetermined intention…" An extreme post-structuralist position maintains that "each time a reader reads a text, a new text is created» — in other words, that it is readers who *write* texts. This is a highly suggestive reaction against the whole tradition of the sacrosanct nature of the text, the notion of the literary canon and the critic as the arbiter of public taste. It raises philosophical questions about perception and representation, as well as political questions about the social construction of language. But in reacting against tradition, it minimises the role played by the writer to the point where it becomes almost politically incorrect to pay any critical attention to it.

The work of Bakhtin offers a way out of this critical impasse. Although Bakhtin died as recently as 1975, his work did not begin to appear in translation until the 1980s and it is only in the last couple of decades that it has begun to reach a wider public. In *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* (1993), Claire Kramsch makes a case for Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic nature of language in general as a cornerstone for what she calls a "dialogic pedagogy" for foreign language teaching and learning. She cites Bakhtin in *Discourse in the Novel*:

> «Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated — overpopulated — with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.»

This view of language *per se* may be seen to have very far-reaching implications for teaching foreign languages in general, and a consideration of an approach to teaching literature in a foreign language may be just the first step.

The reader attempting to engage with a literary text in a foreign language — however sophisticated his or her command of that language may be — is always aware of a sense of linguistic otherness. In spite of this, I believe that it is a mistake to view the teaching of literature in a second language purely, or even primarily, as an exercise in foreign language pedagogy. We need to get to the text by way of our own responses as readers and to devise a pedagogy which will be true to that response. A traditional metaphor for fiction takes up the biblical image of a house with many rooms. (The image was powerfully revived by Salman Rushdie in the speech he wrote in 1990 in the wake of the fatwa, which was delivered on his behalf at the ICA in London by Harold Pinter: "Literature is the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way.") These rooms in the house of fiction are never quite self-contained, but resound with echoes of voices from other rooms.

I want to examine the way in which the writer welcomes and incorporates these other voices and to suggest that when the reader joins them, another voice is added to — and modifies — the discourse. To quote Roland Barthes, "And no doubt that is what reading is: rewriting the text of the work within the text of our lives." Then I want to address the implications for foreign language teaching of a view of literature as what Bakhtin calls 'double-voiced discourse'.

In *There are no secrets* (1995), Peter Brook reproduces the text of a talk which he gave at a prizegiving ceremony in Kyoto. For Brook, speaking in public always provides an opportunity to demonstrate something of the nature of a theatrical event, but on this occasion, knowing that the text of his speech was to be published, he agreed to write it in advance:

«As I write these words, the author — 'myself, number one' — is sitting in the south of France on a hot summer's day, trying to imagine the unknown: a Japanese audience in Kyoto — in what sort of hall, how many people, in what relationship I can't tell.

[...]

Now, for you at this moment, 'myself, number one', the author, has disappeared; he has been replaced by 'myself, number two', the speaker.»

Brook is making a point about the relationship between dramatic writing and theatrical performance, and he goes on to discuss the effects on an audience of different styles of delivery, but this theatrical metaphor is a vivid and suggestive one to represent the relationship between writer, text and reader. For Bakhtin "the writer is a person who knows how to work language while remaining outside of it; he has the gift of indirect speech". (In another translation of this maxim, the verb *work* is more conventionally intransitive — "a person who is able to work *in* the language"; in fact the literal translation should have been "with the language", but the idea of the writer working the stubborn material of language is a useful one, since it suggests the paradoxical quality of the task — simultaneously within and without.) By using language to create personae and give them voices, by using language at all when it is "populated with the voices of others", the writer (as Lodge points out) reminds us of the original title of Eliot's *The Waste Land* — borrowed from Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* — "He Do the Police in Different Voices". Although we are concerned here with writing, for Bakhtin language is always *speech*, always *interactional*, even when the addressor and addressee are internalised within the text, and crucially, even when the narrative voice *seems* to be monologic. Bakhtin's essays deal mainly with prose fiction, since poetry has traditionally been concerned with creating more unified language worlds — whereas poets like Mallarmé wanted to "purify the language of the tribe", the writer of prose seeks immersion in it. And the language of the tribe will always convene a multitude of voices — what Bakhtin calls heteroglossia (or polyphony).

This plurality of voices can be perceived at its most explicit in the practice of much Modernist fiction — Joyce in *Ulysses*, Dos Passos in *USA* and *Manhattan Transfer*, Döblin in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and Musil in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (The Man Without Qualities) all display a highly conscious kind of literary ventriloquism — they literally do the story in different voices. And the intrusion of the author into the text to conduct a literal dialogue with his or her characters has become a familiar trope of post-modernist fiction. But what Bakhtin's work suggests is that *all* fictional writing manifests the quality of dramatic discourse — not only because the writer can dramatise through the use of direct and indirect speech, but because of the way in which the writer is able — is indeed bound — to borrow from other discourses in the world.

I want to look at some examples of the 'double-voiced discourse' of prose fiction before considering how these insights might suggest more principled criteria for designing tasks for the classroom.

In Katherine Mansfield's story "Feuille d'Album", Ian French, a young English painter living alone in Paris is cultivated — or wooed — by a number of Parisian women. They are attracted by his fragile vulnerability, but he is impervious to their attentions and they very soon give up their attempts to charm him. The narrative shifts almost imperceptibly back and forth between a voice that belongs to the women — or it may be several chattering voices — and a more neutral and apparently omniscient authorial voice. The story begins in free direct speech:

«He really was an impossible person. Too shy altogether. With absolutely nothing to say for himself. And such a weight. Once he was in your studio he never knew where to go, but would sit on and on until you nearly screamed, and burned to throw something enormous after him when he did finally blush his way out...»

Once this perspective is established, a narrative voice takes over, but one which *includes* the style and tone of the woman who has begun the story:

«Someone else decided that he ought to fall in love. She summoned him to her side, called him 'boy', leaned over him so that he might smell the enchanting perfume of her hair, took his arm, told him how marvellous life could be if one only had the courage, and went round to his studio one evening and rang and rang.... Hopeless.»

Someone else here seems to introduce a more detached and possibly omniscient narrator. Yet *summoned him to her side*, *the enchanting perfume of her hair* and *how marvellous life could be if one only had the courage* all echo the rhetorical conventions of the romantic novelette and *rang and rang* belongs to the patterns of informal spoken anecdote. When we get to *Hopeless*, the original voice (or one very like it) is firmly re-established.

Halfway through this six-page story Ian sees a young woman on the opposite balcony, as thin and dark and restrained as he is. He is totally captivated by her and feels that she is literally the only person in the world for him. This fairytale encounter is enacted through another shift in narrative style, one which immediately invokes another set of conventions — those of the fairytale itself:

«As she turned she put her hands up to the handkerchief and tucked away some wisps of hair. She looked down at the deserted market and up at the sky, but where he sat there might have been a hollow in the air. She simply did not see the house opposite. And then she disappeared. His heart fell out of the side window of his studio, and down to the balcony of the house opposite — buried itself in the pot of daffodils under the half-opened buds and spears of green…»

Mansfield works very deliberately through this variety of voices. The voices of the romantic novelette and its reader are counter-balanced by the purity and *naïveté* of the fairytale romance and all of these voices are kept at an ironic distance by the rather flat and knowing voice of the narrator.

The constant shift between these voices (including that of the narrator) which sometimes occurs mid-paragraph without any overt signalling alerts the attentive reader to a prismatic view of the characters and events. The narrator herself, rather than being an omniscient super-voice, is one voice among many, and by implication as fallible as any of them. The reader is forced to locate himself / herself somewhere amongst these voices and to join the chatter.

A more recent example of narrative polyphony is Muriel Spark's much-anthologised story "You should have seen the mess". This is narrated by Lorna, a lower middle-class girl of seventeen or eighteen, who is obsessed by cleanliness and hygiene. Like many first-person narratives, the story depends on an accumulation of effects which produce an ironic distance between the (invisible) writer and the narrator and a kind of complicity between writer and reader. One of the ways in which this complicity is achieved is through the reader's growing awareness that Lorna lacks her own voice — her discourse is inhabited by other 'voices' — primarily and quite explicitly, those of her parents, but also those of advertisements and genteel magazines promoting a petit bourgeois lifestyle and of almost everyone with whom she comes into contact. It is difficult to choose one extract, since the whole story is permeated with these echoes, which accumulate until the reader becomes desperately aware of how Lorna's discourse — and hence her view of the world and the people in it — have been colonised by these voices of authority. This is Lorna describing her first day at work in a solicitor's office:

«I was to start on the Monday morning, so along I went. They took me to the general office, where there were two senior shorthand typists, and a clerk, Mr Gresham, who was far from smart in appearance. You should have seen the mess!! There was no floor covering whatsoever, and so dusty everywhere. There were shelves all round the room, with old box files on them. The box files were falling to pieces, and all the old papers inside them were crumpled. The worst shock of all was the tea-cups. It was my duty to make tea, mornings and afternoons. Miss Bewlay showed me where everything was kept. It was kept in an old orange box, and the cups were all cracked. There were not enough saucers to go round, etc. I will not go into the facilities,

«but they were also far from hygienic. After three days, I told Mum, and she was upset, most of all about the cracked cups. We never keep a cracked cup, but throw it out, because those cups can harbour germs. So Mum gave me my own cup to take to the office.»

We imagine that Lorna has been taken around the office on her first day, introduced to the *two senior shorthand typists* and told that it is her *duty* to make the tea *mornings and afternoons*. The only language that seems to be available to her to relate the event is borrowed, almost as though she is acknowledging that things must be called by their 'proper' names. The term *floor covering* seems to have come out of a 1950s advertisement — it hardly exists in contemporary spoken discourse — and all the examples of litotes (far from clean, far from hygienic etc) and euphemism — especially *facilities* and *harbour germs* — seem to have been absorbed from her parents, perhaps unconsciously, but possibly as conscious models of a way of speaking that is proper in both senses of the word. The way that Lorna's narrative is constructed *implicates* us as readers, as we locate — and pass judgement on — the origins of her discourse, and as we recognise the degree to which this inherited view of the world and the things and people in it has brought about her state of social paralysis.

A recent and highly successful example of this kind of narrative irony is Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, where the entire narrative belongs to Stevens, the repressed butler. Here is a man who has dedicated his life to the notion of service and in the process has virtually effaced himself. Like Lorna in the Muriel Spark story, Stevens hardly has a voice of his own: it has been part of his professional conduct to suppress his own voice. When he speaks at all, he represents the voices of others. This is a particularly extreme example of the narrator as spokesperson and produces an entire novel of stifled restraint. When you examine the text in detail, it is difficult to locate a voice that belongs to Stevens — his narrative is suffused with other voices. There is his father, who had been in Stevens' estimation, a *great butler* and *the embodiment of 'dignity'*; there are the colleagues he meets in the pub, with whom he discusses standards of professional etiquette and whose humorous anecdotes he tries, unsuccessfully, to imitate; there is the journal *A Quarterly for the Gentleman's Gentleman*, published by a society that restricts membership to *butlers of 'only the very first rank'* and which is personified as 'the Society'; there is his current employer, the non-aristocratic American, Mr Farraday, and there is the voice which has the greatest effect on him — that of his former employer, Lord Darlington. Again, it is difficult briefly to convey the subtlety of the way in which the world of the novel is populated with these voices, since the entire narrative works through these stylistic resonances. This is part of Stevens' apologia for Lord Darlington's attitude of appeasement towards Nazi Germany:

«Let me say that Lord Darlington was a man of great moral stature — a stature to dwarf most of these persons you will find talking this sort of nonsense about him — and I will readily vouch that he remained that to the last. Nothing could be less accurate than to suggest that I regret my association with such a gentleman.»

«Indeed, you will appreciate that to have served his lordship at Darlington Hall during those years was to come as close to the hub of the world's wheel as one such as I could ever have dreamt. I gave thirty-five years' service to Lord Darlington; one would surely not be unjustified in claiming that during those years, one was, in the truest terms, 'attached to a distinguished household'.»

Stevens has served in an aristocratic household for over thirty-five years. He has stood silently and unobtrusively and has assimilated the outlook and the language of his masters. His prose style is populated with echoes of the people who have populated the house — *a man of great moral stature*, *readily vouch*, *to the last*, *regret my association*, *attached to a distinguished household* and, most strikingly, *the hub of the world's wheel*.

In one of the novel's key moments, the housekeeper, Miss Kenton, curious to see what Stevens is reading, prises a book out of his hands, which turns out to be *a 'sentimental romance' — one of a number kept in the library, and also in several of the guest bedrooms, for the entertainment of lady*

visitors. What is interesting here is not that the discourse of the romantic novel is invoked, as in the Katherine Mansfield story, but that it is held at bay. Stevens clearly has sentimental leanings, but his rigid sense of propriety will not allow him to adopt the voice or attitudes of the romantic lover. The tension between the butler and the housekeeper remains unspoken and the reader is acutely aware of an absence in the text, a discourse which is longed for, but which remains unavailable. Stevens, unconvincingly, explains it away to the reader:

«I suppose I should add a few words here concerning the matter of the actual volume around which this small episode revolved. [...] There was a simple reason for my having taken to perusing such works; it was an extremely efficient way to maintain and develop one's command of the English language. [...] I often tended to choose the sort of volume Miss Kenton had found me reading that evening simply because such works tend to be written in good English, with plenty of elegant dialogue of much practical value to me. [...] I rarely had the time or the desire to read any of these romances cover to cover, but so far as I could tell, their plots were invariably absurd — indeed, sentimental — and I would not have wasted one moment on them were it not for these aforementioned benefits. Having said that, however, I do not mind confessing today — and I see nothing to be ashamed of in this — that I did at times gain a sort of incidental enjoyment from these stories. I did not perhaps acknowledge this to myself at the time, but as I say, what shame is there in it? Why should one not enjoy in a light-hearted sort of way stories of ladies and gentlemen who fall in love and express their feelings for each other, often in the most elegant phrases?»

Stevens, clearly, protests too much — and it is the juxtaposition of the voices which populate his discourse that tells us so: *perusing such works*, *one's command of the English language* and *these aforementioned benefits* belong to the elevated rhetoric of Lord Darlington and his class, whereas *I see nothing to be ashamed of in this*, *what shame is there in it?*, *fall in love and express their feelings for each other* and *in the most elegant phrases* represent just the kind of sentimental expression that the chronically repressed Stevens has absorbed from his furtive reading of romantic novels, but which he feels he has to deny. Interestingly, the key words in the text which unite the worlds of reading and romance are *desire* and *enjoyment* — sexual desire as a metaphor for reading or reading as a sublimation of sexual desire — reminding us of Roland Barthes' notions of *jouissance* and *le plaisir du texte*.

What, then, are the implications of a Bakhtinian view of literature as 'double-voiced' discourse for the teaching of literature in the foreign language classroom?

One of the values which we ascribe loosely to literature is the sense of involvement that it can engender. We will justify our taste for one book by saying, "It takes you into another world" or explain our failure to appreciate another by saying, "I just couldn't get into it". But involvement at a much deeper level is precisely what reading fiction is all about. Readers are both onlookers and players, both spectators and participants. A methodology which privileges this double role will be pertinent in any literature class, but it will be particularly helpful to learners trying to overcome the remote and intractable quality of fictional writing in the foreign language literature class.

The drama teacher, Dorothy Heathcote, would get her students to inhabit dramatic roles, to 'become' their characters. When the improvisation reached an impasse — when the situation became uncertain or confused or over-extended, or when it simply played itself out — she would bring them out of role and back into the role of students thinking about, discussing and evaluating their experience. To encourage our learners to *enter into* literary texts, a methodology of response is required which exploits the peculiar power of role.

There is an important distinction to be made at this point between role-playing and acting. Julia and Geoffrey Summerfield (teachers of creative writing at the City University of New York), describe the difference as follows: "The impersonations of role move away from illusion, even though they may start there; the impersonations of acting move toward a more finely tuned, a more complete illusion, even though they may start in some perceived reality". The Summerfields,

in their book *Texts and Contexts* (1986), give some impressive examples of writing in role by their students. Their interest is in educating student writers, but the idea of role-based response work is at least as vital in educating student readers.

When I began to work on literary texts with EFL students, my instinctive strategy was to encourage them to attempt to articulate objective critical responses to what they read. I felt that they should have access to the analytical tools to substantiate their responses and the linguistic tools to express those responses. I felt that this activity was 'good for the students', at least in terms of language learning. Despite some limited success with the more motivated and linguistically competent of the students, the strategy seemed increasingly inadequate. Then I became aware of some of the work being done by colleagues in mainstream education: they were getting their secondary school students to write in role: diaries, memoirs, reports, letters, dialogues; to rewrite texts in different modes; to adopt roles and improvise scenes from or arising out of the fictional narratives they were studying. I began to try out some of these approaches, tentatively at first and then with growing confidence. The results were a revelation: students who found it difficult, if not impossible, to articulate any explicit critical judgements were drawn into the texts at a very profound level and liberated by the roles they assumed.

However, what emerged from these activities was not simply entry into the texts, but subsequent re-entry into the classroom — a greatly enhanced ability to understand what was going on in the texts. The *experience* they had undergone in role had unlocked the texts for them and given them the awareness — and the confidence — to talk about the writing. They had achieved the dual perspective of the writer — "a person who knows how to work language while remaining outside of it".

Claire Kramsch (op cit) proposes a number of approaches to teaching narrative which enable the student reader to enter into the text and "[add] his or her voice to the voices in the text". She identifies these approaches with the 'think-aloud' protocols employed by researchers to investigate the processes of reading. The 'think-aloud' technique has also been adopted by some American teachers in English composition classes. Kramsch describes it as "a secondary dialogue that grafts itself onto the text and elicits the kind of reader response necessary for active interpretation" and as "a contrastive backdrop of a more orate type to the more literate mode of a literary text." The categories of approach she suggests encourage students to explore the functions of narrative discourse rather than simply exploring the story:

Varying the medium or the genre

Activities such as mime, designing a cover and producing different text-types (epitaphs, letters, newspaper articles etc) will lead students to consider the text at a thematic level and will draw their attention to the decisions taken by the writer to cast the text in a particular form.

Varying the point of view

The voices in a fictional text are often at odds with each other — and the stories that they tell, within the story of the novel, have to be read in the light of other characters' responses. Thus, for example, in *The Great Gatsby*, there is the aura created by Gatsby around himself and there are the reactions of Daisy, Tom and above all, of Nick. There is no stable ego, no single truth to be located: Gatsby is, in a sense, everything everyone says about him. Getting students to rewrite scenes from different perspectives is a powerful way of sensitising them to this kind of fragmentation of character.

Varying text time

By rewriting the events of a narrative in a different time sequence, students can be led to appreciate the particular discourse value of flashbacks, ellipses and other fictional sequences.

Varying the audience

To emphasise the significance of the nature of the audience to discourse choices, students can be asked to read — and respond in role. This will also highlight the way in which different readers read — and in a sense 'create' — different texts.

Varying the referential world of the story

Techniques such as withholding the ending of a narrative or offering alternative endings can heighten students' awareness of the way in which their reading is constantly conditioned by progressive accommodation to developing schemata.

Teasing out the voices in the text

Here Kramsch suggests a variety of ways of concretising the interplay of voices present in a text. Deciding which voices different parts of a text 'belong to', holding a debate between contending narrative voices, setting up simulations in which students literally enter into the fictional situation and add their voices to the discourse.

The teaching of literature has long been subject to an exclusive, monologic discourse — with authoritative statements made by teachers and imitated by students. This single-voiced discourse left little or no room for divergent views. The reader, like the observer in Newtonian physics, stood outside the text and looked in. Today quantum physics and relativity theory validate the simultaneous vision of the participant / observer: light can be both wave *and* particle, things can be both here *and* there, both now *and* then. The text is no longer seen as an immobile and immutable object and the reader as a totally objective seeker-after-truth. This subject / object duality has been replaced by a model which makes the reader part of what s/he reads. Like the quantum observer, the reader stands *inside* what s/he observes, his/her own agenda and consciousness helping to 'construct' the reality of the text.

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