



134051-LLP-1-2007-1-IT-ERASMUS-EVC

# Educational Package on Historical Research

SCRITTI PEDAGOGICI



## Uses and abuses of literature: The subject of Literature as a resource for the history of secondary education

IN FIRENZE  
G. C. SANSONI, EDITORE

1891



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission.  
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# USES AND ABUSES OF LITERATURE: THE SUBJECT OF LITERATURE AS A RESOURCE FOR THE HISTORY OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

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## Abstract

Literature has always occupied a major place in school curricula and it can therefore provide a valuable resource for the study of the history of education. In this essay I describe the different parameters that bear in the teaching of this specific subject in secondary education, which are also the areas to which I propose one should direct his/her research (literature schoolbooks, other educational aspects related to literature teaching, wider historical context). In presenting these research areas that help understand the uses to which literature is put in the educational systems of different historical periods, I also refer to some cases in point that have been developed in the research paper presented in the same website (section "Writing History Online"), "Dictatorship and Literature Teaching in Secondary Education in Greece (1936-1940)" by Lambros Varelas.

## 1. Introduction

The uses of literature in education are strongly connected with its views prevalent in different historical circumstances as well as with the different ideological aims and pedagogical purposes promulgated by different societies through their educational systems. 'Literature', in its contemporary sense, that is, as the best *creative* writing irrespective of genre in both poetry and prose, is an 'invention' of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Previously, 'literature' had the senses of 'serious writing' or even 'anything that is written'. However, the view of literary texts as carriers of the best conceptions of the human mind owes a lot to 19<sup>th</sup> century and romanticism, who viewed the author, or the poet, as charismatic individual, capable of expressing the true human mind, capturing the essence of beauty through his/her imagination.

This view of literature as an elevated art form expressing the best that the human mind could conceive of, has clearly marked its place in the school curricula of Modern Europe, although the purposes it served were not always oriented toward its appreciation as an art form – actually, most of the times they were rather far from it. On the one hand, the teaching of language and rhetoric through literary texts continued a very old, indeed ancient, tradition. On the other, emerging nationalisms saw in literature a depository of knowledge on national history and culture suited to their purposes. In between the teaching of language and rhetoric and the fostering of national identity, which continue to inform the uses of literature in European secondary education to a greater or lesser extent until today, other pedagogical purposes, related to moral, political, religious, aesthetic and scientific considerations, have come into play in different degrees and shaped the physiognomy of educational systems in different countries at different times. As literary texts are aesthetically pleasing, emotionally engaging and enjoy the status of a depository of human knowledge and sensibility, it is indeed no wonder that they have been used as a major vehicle for all these varying purposes. In this sense, literature offers an important research field that helps define the profile of different educational systems.

However, the subject of Literature as a resource for the history of education has certain specificities that emerge partly from the fact that it comprises a largely heterogeneous corpus of works, which are by no means *a priori* suitable for educational purposes. In fact, literature in its course of history has had an ambivalent relation to education itself. It is impossible to go through the entire history of this relation here, suffice it however to remind Horace's doctrine of *dulce et utile*, i.e. pleasing and (morally)



useful, that dates from Roman times and has prevailed in different periods of the European literary production up to the neoclassicism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the different forms of engaged literature (or 'literature of commitment' as it is often termed) that have procured literary works of no less importance than those that are more or less close to the idea of 'art for art's sake'. The fact that formal education has made – and still makes – use of this very wide array of texts for teaching purposes alerts us to the varying profiles of different educational systems at the same time that it underlines the importance of the different parameters that serve to accommodate this heterogeneous material to the needs of formal education.

In what follows I present some of what I consider as key parameters in transforming Literature into a teaching subject for secondary education. The study of these factors is essential if one attempts to formulate an idea of education in different periods and regimes based on the teaching of this important subject. The increasing digitization and online offer of schoolbooks and other archival material such as educational laws, school regulations and curricula, pictures, journal and newspaper articles, have greatly eased this kind of research. The "Webliography" section of this website offers numerous suggestions in this direction.



## 2. Literature schoolbooks

Literature schoolbooks are the major tool for teaching the subject and the *locus par excellence* where the transformation of artworks to teaching material takes place. Hence they provide an obvious starting point for our research. There are a number of parameters involved in the making and pedagogical function of literature schoolbooks that convey the ideology of the educational system that produces them, which one needs to examine:

### 2.1 The procedure of compiling literature schoolbooks

By beginning to examine literature schoolbooks in order to scrutinize the uses of literature in them, one naturally tends to focus at the book itself, overlooking the procedure that has led to it. However, this procedure is often revealing of the pedagogical purposes and ideological aims driving its compilation. Questions that need to be asked include the following:

- Is there a purpose-designed/written book or is an already existing anthology/other book used instead?
- In the case of a purpose-designed book (which is usually the case in modern times), is it compiled by a single or multiple editor/s?
- Was/were the editor/s appointed directly by the Ministry of Education or was/were (s)he/they selected through a competition?
- If there was a competition, what sort of requirements did it focus on?
- Is there a sole compulsory book for every school or are there multiple schoolbooks available?
- In the case of multiple schoolbooks, who decides which one to use? The board of teachers? Every teacher individually? Do students have a say in this decision?

The answers to these questions may provide a first point of reference as to the level of organization and democracy characterizing a particular educational system and may alert us to a more nuanced interpretation of the book's contents. This kind of information can be found in educational laws and ministry documents, which are being increasingly offered online, either in Ministry of Education- or other kinds of archives.

For an example you can see the discussion of the case of Greek literature schoolbooks before and during the Metaxas' dictatorship (1936-1940) in Lambros Varelas' paper "Dictatorship and Literature Teaching in Secondary Education in Greece (1936-1940)", [pp. 1-2](#).

#### The choice of literary texts.

Naturally, the choice of literary texts in schoolbooks provides the field where one may see most clearly the ideology behind its compilation. Schoolbooks represent but also contribute to the formation of national [literary canons](#)). A schoolbook may adhere to and reinforce an already established canon by offering a selection of texts suitable for teenagers but also of recognized literary value, or it may steer away from it in differing degrees, and for reasons and purposes that need to be examined as they could be considered either liberalist and progressive or propagandistic and totalitarian. In what follows, I elaborate a little further on different aspects of the selected literary texts that one may examine.

#### Authors

The authors of the selected literary texts provide an easy and apposite entry point, helping to judge the physiognomy of the book with respect to the canon. A canonical author, even if he/she is not represented in the compilation by his *opus magnum* –this kind of works is sometimes deemed unsuitable for teenagers, on account of either its difficulty or its content– still shows an effort to abide by persons of recognized value. The inclusion of non-canonical authors, living or not, may be either a positive sign of openness to hitherto unrecognized tendencies (a more recent trend), or a negative



one, of an effort to endow authors of lesser, dubious or merely propagandistic value with canonical status. One need also consider possible exclusions of authors on account of their gender, political views or sexual orientation.

A case in point may be provided by the exclusion of the widely acclaimed homosexual poet C. P. Cavafy<sup>1</sup> from the [schoolbooks of the Metaxas' dictatorship in Greece](#).

### Content

The topic(s) of a literary text and the way that the text positions itself towards it/them, i.e. the text's content, is the first and major point of contact of the student with the literary text (and pretty often the last too, but more on this later). This is the area that reveals most clearly the ideological priorities and purposes of the educational system that the book serves. The replication of dominant ideologies regarding the individual and the society to a smaller or larger extent is natural to expect from a mechanism of socialization such as is the case with any educational system. However, the topics covered – and the way they are covered – by the selection of literary texts may help reveal the distinct physiognomy of each particular educational system vis-à-vis the society it represents: more or less liberal, progressive, paternalistic, totalitarian, etc. Questions that may be asked of this material include:

- What are the recurrent subjects of most texts? Are they focusing on the individual or in the wider society/nation? Are they focusing on contemporary life or the more or less distant past? How are individual and society, past and present represented?
- How are interpersonal relationships portrayed in these texts? Are there explicit references to sexuality? Is there any mention of homosexuality and of what sort?
- How are traditional hierarchical distinctions (male/female, national/other, etc.) and the underprivileged (unemployed, country-dwellers, perhaps women, etc.) represented?
- Are there explicit mentions of politics, religion and ideology and if yes, of what sort?
- Are the texts whole or have some parts been censored? In the case of novels, what extracts have been selected? Are they representative of the entire novel or does this de-contextualization alter their meaning significantly?

These are just very few of the questions that one may ask of a literary text's content but they can orientate us towards the profile of the educational system which the selection of texts serves. As it becomes evident from the questions above, the examination of content should pay attention not only to what is included in the book but also to what is kept out of it; for instance, recurrent instances of censorship or the abundant use of de-contextualized extracts directs us to cruder uses of literary texts that may signal overt ideological manipulation.

### Form

Content is inseparable from form in literature as in all art, and in fact attention to form may reveal altogether different meanings from what a naïve reading may at first conceive. For a number of reasons, the form of literary texts in secondary education has often been treated as transparent. The level and kind of attention to form may reveal the extent to which literary texts are being presented and valued for their literary status (their 'literariness' as it can also be termed) at least as much as for their subject matter. Consideration of form, by drawing attention to the way meanings and nuances are orchestrated in a text, tends to enhance students' critical skills. In this sense, neglect of form may signify a greater tendency for ideological manipulation. But how is attention to form reflected in the selection of texts, which is our concern in this section (1.2)?

Literary genres are in a way, and among other things, a codification of literary forms. A literary education attentive to the artistic nature of its subject requires the exposition of the student to as many literary genres as possible, as well as the explanation of their history, differences, and possible effects. In fact different genres draw the reader's attention to their artistic devices to different degrees, and

<sup>1</sup> For an English translation of his poems you can visit <http://www.cavafy.com/> and you can hear a rendition of his "Ithaca" by Sean Connery on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1n3n2Ox4Yfk&hl=el>.



they are respectively more or less prone to a referential reading, inattentive to form (for instance in biography, autobiography, chronicle and memoir, artistic conventions are downplayed in favor of content which is presented as ostensibly true and accurate), as there are genres that may privilege particular subjects over others (compare for instance lyrical poetry to epic). So, as far as the choice of literary texts goes, the exclusion of certain genres or the privileging of some of them over others may signal the ideological aims of the schoolbook. A case in point is here again offered by the [literature schoolbooks of the Metaxas' dictatorship in Greece](#), that abound in genres that invite a referential reading inattentive to form, i.e. chronicles and memoirs.

### Structure of the schoolbook's contents

The structure of the literature schoolbook's contents may offer a last area of examination. A chronological, or even alphabetical, order is generally less directive than other kinds of groupings which tend to be favored in lower grades and totalitarian regimes. Groupings on account of topics, such as 'family life', 'animals', 'nature', 'national history', 'religion', etc. are obviously more directive and revealing of the ideology that drives the compilation of the book. On the other hand, chronological order signals a historical approach to the presentation of texts, which aspires to acquaint students with the works of literature in a scientific manner.

### Peritext

Apart from the selection and grouping of literary texts, peritext (i.e. the elements surrounding the texts) is a major tool for transforming largely unrelated and autonomous artworks into a unified teaching material.

### Schoolbook prologue

The schoolbook prologue, if there is one, provides a good idea of the book's stated aims and purposes, the rationale behind the selection of texts as well as how it is expected to be used. Taken at face value, it explicates the goals that the book is hoping to achieve. Judged against the evidence of the book's contents, it can reveal the items of a hidden agenda.

### Introductions to individual texts

Wherever available, the introductions to individual texts help clarify the reasons of a text's inclusion in the book. Introductions tend to direct students to the aspects of the text that the editor is hoping to highlight. The foregrounding of some aspects and the neglect of others may alert us to the ideological and pedagogical role that the text is invited to play.

### Authors' biographical notes

Authors' biographical notes, placed either before or at the end of the text, similarly direct the student to its perception. For instance, the description of an author as major national capital is not very likely to invite a critical stance of any kind, whereas the description of another as having a natural gift for portraying landscapes and the rustic life is equally unlikely to invite speculation on other aspects of his/her work. Of course, at the same time, these biographical notes reflect very clearly as well as contribute to the formation of the literary canon.

### Exercises

Although exercises are a more recent addition to literature schoolbooks, they are a valuable resource for our research wherever available. Similarly to the introductions to texts, exercises, by drawing students' attention to particular aspects of the texts, help understand the pedagogical and ideological uses of the text. They may ask students to discuss particular aspects of the literary work in a certain way, and they may or may not foster their critical understanding of it. Questions that may help us realize how exercises shape the understanding of the text could include the following:

- Where do the exercises focus? Do they cover the most prominent aspects of the text or divert attention from them to secondary issues?



- Do they draw attention to form and, if yes, how do they treat it? As a possible insight to the text's meanings or as a set of stylistic devices?
- Are the questions 'open', i.e. phrased in a way that permits many different answers or do they direct the student to just one possible answer? And, to put it slightly differently, how do they treat conclusions about a text's meanings?
- Do the exercises require lengthy or brief answers? Do they encourage students to develop their arguments?

### Pictures

Pictures, wherever available, provide yet another commentary of the texts, highlighting some of their aspects. The depiction of a text's characters, landscapes, and scenes of action may help the student engage with the text but it also concretizes their characteristics for him/her and may tend to dispose of unsolicited nuances.

For a case in point, you can see the discussion of images in Greek literature schoolbooks in L. Varelas' paper on "[Dictatorship and Literature teaching in Greece \(1936-1940\)](#)".



## 2. Other educational aspects related to literature teaching

Although literature schoolbooks are the major tool for teaching the subject, and hence the primary candidate for close scrutiny, they alone cannot reveal entire picture of the role that literature is invited to play within the educational system under study. Related historical evidence such as school regulations and curricula as well as contemporary theoretical discussions around the subject and, wherever possible, students' workbooks, help qualify the findings that come from the examination of schoolbooks.

### Regulations and curricula

These kinds of documents provide important information on how is literature to be taught, explicating (or allowing us to infer) the ideological aims as well as the pedagogical methods at work. Some questions that one may consider are the following:

- What are the stated aims that literature teaching is supposed to achieve? What is the literary-theoretical paradigm within which they operate?
- Are there any explicit pedagogical methods proposed? Of what sort?
- What are the limits imposed on the teacher with respect to the selection of texts, teaching approach, exercises and teaching hours?
- Is literature taught in isolation or in conjunction with other courses e.g. national history, writing, other?
- How many hours are devoted to the teaching of literature?

This kind of information can be found in educational laws and normative acts such as ministry decisions, which are increasingly offered online through the national ministries of education or other archives. The clear statement of aims and pedagogical methods is naturally of great importance to our research, but if these kinds of statements are non-existent, factual information such as whether literature is taught in isolation or in conjunction with other courses may also help us infer them. For instance, the teaching of literary texts alongside other subjects is an indication of its subsidiary role to the fulfillment of purposes that do not make aesthetic education a priority (see, for instance, the relevant discussion in L. Varelas's paper "[Dictatorship and Literature teaching...](#)").

### Theoretical backing

Educational systems, particularly when they emerge out of radical reforms, are often informed by theoretical discussions, taking place in scientific books, journals and newspapers, which are well worth examining. Some questions to be asked of these texts may be the following:

- What are the actual ideas propounded in these texts? What is the literary-theoretical paradigm within which they operate?
- Who are the persons conducting this discussion – are they academics or government-related? Does the general public participate in this discussion (through letters to the newspapers for instance)?
- Where is this discussion taking place – scientific books, specialized journals, newspapers? It might also be worth to consider the publishers' ideological bending, whenever known.

Primary sources for this kind of information are of course the books, specialized journals and newspapers of the period, which are now being increasingly offered online in digitized archives.

### Students' workbooks

Student workbooks are a rare but invaluable resource for the study of any subject's teaching. Workbooks reveal hidden but all-important aspects of the everyday educational praxis and offer an insight of both the students' and the teachers' adaptation of schoolbooks and regulations to the needs and potentials of the class. The types of questions and exercises, the students' answers and the teachers' corrections and comments show how the educational plan is realized on a daily basis. They also show the level of the actual understanding that students have of literature, the degree of ideological manipulation and the extent to which independent thought and challenging ideas are encouraged, quietly swept aside or blatantly suppressed. Judged against schoolbooks and



regulations, student workbooks should also give us an idea as to the freedom exercised by teachers during the course of their work, as well as to the prevailing pedagogical methods among them which may or may not be in tune with official ministry directions. Finally, this kind of primary historical source can also give us an insight of the actual student level and help us judge as to whether the stated or inferred ministry aims and purposes were in tune with, lower, or above the students' potentials.



### 3. Wider educational and historical context

The examination of the above-mentioned sources should finally be placed within the wider educational and historical context of the period under study. The researcher is expected to rely far more heavily on existing bibliography for this part. Aspects of the educational system, such as teachers' training, the teaching of other humanities subjects, statistics of student population and retaining figures, extra-curricular activities, may help refine his/her findings by reinforcing some explanatory hypotheses while undermining others.

Finally, no educational system exists within a political and historical vacuum. The wider historical context (political regime, historical circumstances) may explain many of our findings' aspects – quite a few of them possibly also as unintentional – as much as our findings aspire to add to our knowledge of it and qualify it.