

## TEACHING OF THE NOVEL: FRUSTRATIONS AND CONSOLATIONS

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Problems connected with the teaching of the English novel to Turkish students in university English language and literature departments are mainly of two kinds. There are problems arising from the nature of the novel as a literary form; there are also problems arising from the fact that, when students come into serious contact, more or less, for the first time, with unsimplified English novels, they are still trying to learn the English language.

The first type of problem is common both to the British and non-British student, and it has been put clearly by Percy Lubbock in **The Craft of Fiction**: To criticize a novel, Lubbock observes, we must try to grasp its «shadowy and fantasmal form... to hold it fast, to turn it over and survey it at leisure,» but our effort is perpetually defeated, because: «Nothing will keep a book steady and motionless before us, so that we may have time to examine its shape and design. As quickly as we read, it melts and shifts in the memory; even at the moment when the last page is turned, a great part of the book, its finer detail, is already vague and doubtful. A little later, after a few days or months, how much is really left of it? A cluster of impressions, some clear points emerging from a mist of uncertainty, this is all we can hope to possess, generally speaking, in the name of the book. The experience of reading it has left something behind, and these relics we call by the book's name; but how can they be considered to give us the material for judging and appraising the book? Nobody would venture to criticize a building, a statue, a picture, with nothing before him but the memory of a single glimpse caught in passing.»

Percy Lubbock has in mind, of course, the properly educated and trained native speaker who has a great deal of experience in reading novels. When the foreign student has finished reading a novel, the impres-

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sion left behind is likely to be much more obscure. To get familiar with a novel even to the degree that Lubbock finds unsatisfactory, is a difficult task for the majority of students in Turkish universities. Most students start reading a prescribed book with the best of intentions; some finally decide to be content with what notes they can take during discussion in class. Others, more determined and conscientious, manage to finish their reading in time. But the very suggestion of a second reading would produce only hopeless 5 miles from them all! \

As we see, the first difficulty in the teaching of fiction leads us directly into the second source of difficulty: novels are long and take a long time to read; the foreign student reads slowly, and especially in the first two years his comprehension is not entirely accurate or full. Should we, then, as some people seem to suggest, first teach him the English language properly and when he is thus fully equipped, put him on to the study of English literature? Plausible as it may sound, this view is far from being quite well-grounded. It makes a rather severe distinction between language and literature which are in fact inseparable.

Since it is impossible for the foreign student to learn English through direct experience of the language as part of life in the way the native learner acquires his mother tongue, reading is almost the only means available to him to improve his English. Where there is little reading there can only be little language learning. And this is where the study of English literature can help enormously. I have little acquaintance with current approaches to the teaching of English as a foreign language, but I fully agree with the writers of a sensible book on this subject. They write: «It is in literature that the student is most likely to find words used memorably with force and point. It is there that he will find words used in the widest range of contexts and there that he will find words passionately or delicately conveying emotions and attitudes. There he may practise sustained efforts of imagination, learn to see wholes greater than the sum of their parts, and find joy in the exercise of his mental powers at full stretch.»

Of the major forms of literature the novel makes use of the widest range of prose. Novels contain speech (both direct and indirect), description, narration, and commentary. They also arouse the reader's curiosity and maintain his interest through the «stories» they tell. As E. M. Forster pointed out, «We are all like Scheherazade's husband, in that we want to know what happens next.» Most novels, therefore, provide an excellent opportunity for the foreign learner to observe language in action, to see words again and again in many slightly different contexts with changing

connotations, and to accustom his mind more and more to the structural patterns of English.

Let me point out at once that I am not advocating the use of novels merely as material for language learning. I am trying to suggest that by means of a suitable approach, it is possible to introduce the student to a serious study of the English novel at an early stage, and at the same time to develop his sensitivity to the subtleties of the English language by bringing him into contact with the works of some great writers using that language. I believe that such a sensitivity to language cannot be obtained from coursebooks for teaching English. No course book is likely to present the learner with anything comparable in its effects to this one sentence paragraph from Fielding's **Joseph Andrews**:

«Joseph had not finished his letter, when he was summoned downstairs by Mr. Peter Pounce, to receive his wages; for, that out of eight pounds a year he allowed his father and mother four, he had been obliged, in order to furnish himself with musical instruments, to apply to the generosity of the aforesaid Peter, who, on urgent occasions, used to advance the servants their wages; not before they were due, but before they were payable; that is, perhaps, half a year after they were due, and this at the moderate premium of fifty per cent, or a little more; by which charitable methods, together with lending money to other people, and even to his own master and mistress, the honest man had, from nothing, in a few years amassed a small sum of twenty thousand pounds or thereabouts.»

The basic device here is the simplest type of irony-- which consists merely in saying the opposite of what one means. Yet, through the cumulative effect of repetition and by means of cleverly applied delaying tactics, Fielding has turned this simple device into an effective weapon of light-hearted satire. In its various more complicated forms irony can be a very difficult thing for the foreign student to understand; and there is no doubt that Fielding's novels can provide an early and suitable introduction to study of irony. After all, the student must begin somewhere, because he has a long way to go from **Joseph Andrews** through Jane Austen's opening sentence in **Pride and Prejudice** («It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.»), to the type of irony we find in Dickens's **Nicolas Nickleby**: «Mr. Squeers's appearance was not prepossessing. He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two. The eye he had was unquestionably useful, but decidedly not ornamental.»

I am aware that this is not an easy task to achieve. It requires deter-

mination and hard work from the student, and careful guidance from the teacher. But the effort is worth making, and it has to be made.

A possible approach to overcome the two major difficulties I have touched on is to select a number of fairly short and representative scenes and passages from the novel under study for close textual reading in the classroom. My own practice is to start reading the passage aloud, making sure that the meaning of all the important words and phrases has been understood, and asking questions to draw attention to some significant points in the text or to stimulate discussion on them. As new passages and scenes are studied in the same way during successive meetings, the student can, hopefully, obtain a good understanding of the author's style, narrative technique, and view of life.

Let us take for illustration a well-known scene from **Joseph Andrews** again. On his way from London to his village, Joseph has been robbed, severely wounded, stripped off his clothes, and then rolled into a ditch by the side of the road:

«The poor wretch, who lay motionless a long time, just began to recover his senses as a stage-coach came by. The postilion, hearing a man's groans, stopt his horses, and told the coachman, He was certain there was a **dead** man lying in the ditch; for he heard him groan. «Go on, sirrah,» says the coachman; «we are confounded late, and have no time to look after dead men.» A lady, who heard what the postilion said, and likewise heard the groan, called eagerly to the coachman to stop and see what was the matter. Upon which he bid the postilion alight, and look into the ditch. He did so and returned, «That there was a man sitting upright as naked as ever he was born.» - - «O Jesus!» cried the lady; «a naked man! Dear coachman, drive on and leave him.» Upon this the gentlemen got out of the coach; and Joseph begged them to have mercy upon him: for that he had been robbed, and almost beaten to death. «Robbed!» cries an old gentleman: «let us make all the haste imaginable, or we shall be robbed too.» A young man who beloged to the law answered, «He wished they had passed by without taking any notice; but that now they might be proved to have been **last** in his company; if he should die, they might be called to some account for his murder. He therefore thought it advisable to save the poor creature's life, for their own sakes-if possible...» The lawyer thus persuades the others that Joseph must be taken into the coach and carried to the nearest inn on the road. But the coachman will not allow him to enter his coach without first being paid «a shilling for his carriage the four miles.» The lawyer, however, would be held responsible for it. Even then the problem is not solved: Joseph needs something to cover his nakedness. Someone must lend

him a greatcoat; and although all the men travelling in the coach have extra ones, no one is willing to lend his to Joseph. It is finally the poor postilion who takes off his own coat and gives it to the shivering young man, saying «That he would rather ride in his shirt all his life than suffer a fellow-creature to lie in so miserable a condition.» The episode ends with the arrival of the passengers at Mrs. Tow-Wause's, and takes up a whole chapter which consists of about six pages in the Riverside edition of the novel. It contains good illustrations of Fielding's method and thought, and it is short enough for detailed study in class. In the Author's Preface Fielding has already explained that his book is to be a comedy, and that his major source of comedy is to be **affectation**. In Joseph Andrews affectation is inseparably linked to selfishness, which, in Fielding's view, is one of the two strongest forces behind our actions - the other being benevolence - which forms the basis of his much cherished concept of goodnature.

In the episode of the stage-coach we see how Fielding exposes man's basic selfishness by simply placing the scene before us and letting his characters talk and act. We observe that he establishes the miserable condition of his hero as touchstone for judging moral worth: whoever is unwilling to help Joseph is condemned as selfish and inhuman - the worst of sins in Fielding's scale of values. And whoever is kind to him is considered an essentially good person. Throughout the novel Fielding embodies these fairly simple views in a number of scenes, incidents, and situations, revealing the extent of selfishness and hypocrisy in the composition of human nature, and expounding his concept of virtue. During concentration on the most important of these in class, the student has the text before him all the time; and since the selected scene or embodies these fairly simple views in a number of scenes, incidents, and motionless before us» for close study.

The slow progress that results from this method of teaching gives the student enough time to finish reading the whole novel meanwhile. When, finally, he has finished his individual reading, there will be in his mind a succession of vividly remembered scenes, incidents, and characters against the relatively dim background of the entire book. **And with this** we have to be content.

I am totally aware that in practice this approach is not at all as easy as I make it sound here. There are many factors to consider and difficulties to overcome all the time. A sensible selection of authors and novels is very important. The literary value of a book has to be balanced against its length, difficulty, and relevance. In studying the 18th century novel, for instance, we must prefer **The Vicar of Wakefield** to Laurence

Sterne's **Tristram Shandy**, though the latter is a much greater book. Sometimes a lesser book has to be preferred to a masterpiece by the same author, because the former happens to be a shorter and easier work. On this principle we must choose **Joseph Andrews** instead of **Tom Jones**, and certainly **The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man** or even **Dubliners** and not **Ulysses**.

The mention of Joyce's books brings to mind a question that is often asked by teachers and students: Should not we leave chronology aside and begin the study of the English novel with works by 20th century writers? The assumption here is that the novels of writers like Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding are too far removed from us and their language is old-fashioned and difficult, whereas contemporary novelists use the sort of English that the foreign student is trying to learn, and the subjects they treat are more relevant to his own life. There may be some truth in this assumption, but not as much as it may seem to have at first glance. For one thing, the first person narrative method used in Defoe's and Richardson's novels makes the language of these books relatively easy to read, because of the necessity to suit the language to the character and education of the narrator. As we have seen in the passages quoted from **Joseph Andrews**, even the language of Fielding's omniscient narrator does not present any important difficulty. As for subject matter: the vitality and resilience of a character like Moll Flanders, her unyielding courage and determination are the triumphs of the human spirit; Richardson's insights into human psychology are timeless; and the variety of human types presented in Fielding's novels represents the basic aspects of human nature. Fielding himself was keenly aware of the universality of his characters. Of the selfish lawyer in the stage-coach scene, for instance, he says: «The lawyer is not only alive, but hath been so these four thousand years... He hath not indeed confined himself to one profession, one religion, or one country; but when the first mean selfish creature appeared upon the human stage, who made self the centre of the whole creation, would give himself no pain, incur no danger, advance no money, to assist or preserve his fellow-creatures; then **was** our lawyer born; and whilst such a person as I have described exists on earth, so long shall he remain upon it.»

The moral values presented in the works of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding, and the writer's attitude to them are, on the whole, clearly defined. Their straightforward chronological narrative methods present no important problems in reading.

In the 18th century the novel was still a newly developing form; in the 20th century it became the **dominant** form; and to show how far it

has moved from its early stages, I can do no better than quote here David Lodge's summary of its main features: modern fiction «is experimental or innovatory in form, exhibiting marked deviations from existing modes of discourse, literary and non-literary. Next, it is much concerned with consciousness, and also with the subconscious or unconscious workings of the human mind. Hence the structure of external 'objective' events essential to narrative art in traditional poetics is diminished in scope and scale, or presented selectively and obliquely, in order to make room for introspection, analysis, reflection and reverie. Frequently, therefore, a modern novel has no real 'beginning', since it plunges us into a flowing stream of experience with which we gradually familiarize ourselves by a process of inference and association.»

Obviously, it is no easy task to grapple with the works of representative modern writers. Fortunately, however, **all** modern novels do not display **all** these features **all** the time. And fortunately again, by the time we are ready to teach modern fiction, our imaginary student has reached his fourth year in the English department, and he is already acquainted with the works of the major novelists of the two previous centuries. He has now a good deal of experience in reading, not only novels but also poems and plays. But he still needs careful guidance, and our practice of textual scrutiny in class is still a very useful approach, because the modern novelist is, above everything, a highly conscious artist and craftsman, and makes great demands on the reader's attention.

Let me take an illustration from Virginia Woolf, one of the best practitioners of modern fiction, and a great artist, if not also a great writer. In the first part of **To the Lighthouse** we see Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay walking in their garden arm in arm: «His arm was almost like a young man's arm, Mrs. Ramsay thought, thin and hard, and she thought with delight how strong he still was, though he was over sixty, and how untamed and optimistic, and how strange it was that being convinced, as he was, of all sorts of horrors, seemed not to depress him, but to cheer him. Was it not odd, she reflected? Indeed he seemed to her sometimes made differently from other people, born blind, deaf, and dumb, to the ordinary things, but to the extra-ordinary things, with an eye like an eagle's. His understanding often astonished her. But did he notice the flowers? No. Did he notice his own daughter's beauty, or whether there was pudding on his plate or roast beef? He would sit at table with them like a person in a dream. And his habit of talking aloud, or saying poetry aloud, was growing on him, she was afraid; for sometimes it was awkward - -

Best and brightest, come away!

poor Miss Giddings, when he shouted that at her, almost jumped out of her skin. But then, Mrs. Ramsay, though instantly taking his side against all the silly Giddingses in the world, then, she thought, intimating by a little pressure on his arm that he walked uphill too fast for her, and must stop for a moment to see whether those were fresh mole-hills on the bank, then, she thought, stooping down to look, a great mind like his must be different in every way from ours. All the great men she had ever known, she thought, deciding that a rabbit must have got in, were like that, and it was good for young men (though the atmosphere of lecture-rooms was stuffy and depressing to her beyond endurance almost) simply to hear him, simply to look at him. But without shooting rabbits, how was one to keep them down? She wondered. It might be a rabbit; it might be a mole. Some creature anyhow was ruining her Evening Primroses. And looking up, she saw above the thin trees the first pulse of the full-throbbing star, and wanted to make her husband look at it; for the sight gave her such keen pleasure. But she stopped herself. He never looked at things. If he did, all he would say would be, Poor little world, with one of his sighs.»

This passage is part of chapter twelve which consists of about seven pages in the Penguin edition. It contains the essence of what Virginia Woolf contributed to the English novel. The narrative technique used here is perhaps the first thing that attracts our notice. From the first sentence we are placed inside Mrs. Ramsay's mind, but at the same time we see her from outside, so that we are able to follow simultaneously what is happening in the external world and what is going on in the heroine's mind. Mrs. Ramsay's reflections on her husband reveal his character, but they also provide insight into her own character. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are completely different persons: he is difficult, eccentric and all intellect; she is sensitive, kind and all emotion. Yet they are happily married and we are shown how greatly this depends on the character of the wife. Mrs. Ramsay does not quite understand her husband, but believes that he is a great man and so, different from ordinary people, and is prepared to accept him as he is. The degree of her admiration is amusingly suggested in her reflection that «it was good for young men... **simply** to hear him, **simply** to look at him.» On the other hand, the thought that the atmosphere of lecture-rooms must be unhealthy for her husband's young students is very typical of Mrs. Ramsay, who is always full of concern for the sufferings of other people. It is only when we keep this point in mind that we can attach any meaning to the conjunction «But» used at the beginning of the next sentence. The adversative use of «but» sug-



gests that one part of Mrs. Ramsay's mind (the part which concerns itself with the health of Mr. Ramsay's students) is objecting to the killing of the rabbits. This is why she asks: «But without shooting rabbits, how was one to keep them down?»

In the passage above, we notice that concern with the external world has been reduced to a few simple actions, and the realm of interest has been transformed to the inner world of the self. The student's attention must be drawn to the fact that this shift is a result of the writer's concept of reality, and that Virginia Woolf's profound preoccupation with technique aims at finding the best means for getting at this reality.

Attention must be drawn also to the traces of a view of life that remains constant through almost all of Virginia Woolf's novels: a person, a few objects start in Mrs. Ramsay's mind trains of thought which flit over the whole puzzling, incoherent, yet fascinating universe we live in. And the stress is on the baffling nature of it all: Mrs. Ramsay cannot account for her husband's ways («Was it not odd, she reflected?»). Even though she bends down and looks carefully, she finds it impossible to know for certain whether it is rabbits or moles that are ruining her flowers. («It might be a rabbit; it might be mole.»).

Let me take another illustration, and this is from the chapter called «Rabbit» in D. H. Lawrence's **Women in Love**. Gudrun goes to Gerald's country house and picks up a big pet rabbit (it is to be a drawing lesson for Gerald's little sister). In a sudden fury the rabbit kicks and scratches her arm badly: «Gudrun stood for a moment astounded by the thunderstorm that had sprung into being in her grip. Then her colour came up, a heavy rage came over her like a cloud. She stood shaken as a house in a storm, and utterly overcome. Her heart was arrested with fury at the mindlessness and the bestial stupidity of this struggle, her wrists were badly scored by the claws of the beast, a heavy cruelty welled up in her.

Gerald came round as she was trying to capture the flying rabbit under her arm. He saw with subtle recognition, her sullen passion of cruelty. He takes the rabbit from her. «Gudrun saw Gerald's body tighten, saw a sharp blindness come into his eyes.» With a vicious blow of his hand he crows the rabbit at once. «Gudrun looked at Gerald with strange, darkened eyes, strained with underworld knowledge, almost supplicating, like those of a creature which is at his mercy, yet which is his ultimate victor. He did not know what to say to her. He felt the mutual hellish recognition. And he felt he ought to say something to cover it. He had the power of lightning in his nerves, she seemed like a soft recipient of his magical, hideous white fire. He was unconfident, he had qualms of fear.»...

« 'Did he hurt you?' he asked. ...

'Isn't it a **fool!**' she cried. 'Isn't it a sickening **fool?**' The vindictive mockery in her voice made his brain quiver. Glancing up at him, into his eyes, she revealed again the mocking, white-cruel recognition. There was a league between them, abhorrent to them both. They were implicated with each other in abhorrent mysteries.»

And when she shows him the scratch on her arm: «The long, shallow red rip seemed torn across his own brain, tearing the surface of his ultimate consciousness, letting through the for ever unconscious, unthinkable red ether of the beyond, the obscene beyond.»

The whole scene illustrates Lawrence's concern with some dark forces lying hidden in the depths of the self, and his method of revealing them in concretely realized moments of great intensity. Every movement of the rabbit is so vividly and exactly described that its mad fury electrifies the whole scene and prepares the reader for the narrator's comments on the effects of the incident on Gudrun and Gerald. Obviously, the whole chapter has been designed to bring about a sudden revelation of common sadism in them both. But, obviously again this is not an easy thing to do; and here we see Lawrence trying to force language into meanings which are almost impossible to convey through words. The use of such basically poetic devices as simile and metaphor, and the hypnotic repetition of a string of rather obscure phrases like «magical, hideous white fire», «white-cruel recognition», «unthinkable red ether of the beyond, the obscene beyond», are all calculated to overcome this difficulty. Under the great emotional intensity of the moment, the reader is «bounced» into a state of mind in which he does not quite notice that an omniscient narrator is «giving verbal expression to subconscious states.» To put it more crudely, the reader watches the reactions of the characters to the rabbit; but it is in fact the narrator who is trying to convey to him an idea of what is happening at both conscious and subconscious levels of the characters' minds. The rabbit's fierceness simply triggers off the strong element of cruelty lying buried in both Gerald and Gudrun; but the sheer force of Lawrence's art lends it symbolic significance.

There is, of course, nothing new about this approach to the teaching of fiction; but I believe that it is an approach well adapted to the needs of Turkish students. Moreover, it is quite in keeping with the way most novels are written. We can use Fielding as our authority here. In an early chapter in **Tom Jones** he says: «in the ensuing pages... when any extraordinary scene presents itself..., we shall spare no pains nor paper to

open it at large to our reader; but if whole years should pass without producing anything worthy his notice, we shall... hasten on to matters of consequence... My reader, then, is not to be surprised... if my history sometimes seems to stand still and sometimes to fly.» It is not difficult to feel an echo of this view of composition in some of the prefaces Henry James wrote to his novels.

There is more temptation today than ever before to read books of criticism on a number of prescribed novels rather than to read the novels themselves with the degree of attention they require. The teacher can gather together some of these clever critical opinions and pass them on to his students in a series of lectures. This, we all agree, is **not** what we want. We don't want to tell our students what to think on a number of books. That is no education at all. Our task is to train our students to understand what they read, to respond intelligently and sensitively to works of literature, and to form their own judgments on them. This can be done only if, from the first, the student's primary concern is the text