

**Teaching Modern Greek Literature and
Literary Theory in Open and Distance Learning:
The Example of Autobiographical Writing**

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This paper discusses the teaching of Modern Greek Literature and Literary Theory in the Hellenic Open University, Program of Studies on Modern Greek Culture. Any discussion on the teaching of this particular subject should take into account the current conditions: the fact that Modern Greek Literature is represented, until now, in a single course, integrated in a larger and multidisciplinary program of studies in Greek Culture. This condition sets a number of restrictions, mostly related to the inevitably limited exposure of students to literature in a non-literary Program of Studies and, more importantly, to their often limited special interest in that particular subject.

However, the Hellenic Open University has been founded recently and it is very probable that, in the future, more specialized Programs of Study – undergraduate or postgraduate - will be introduced. Thus, our research and propositions concerning the methodological tools in teaching Modern Greek Literature are not restricted by the present institutional frame, but aim at improving and promoting literary studies as a specialized discipline. Any Open and Distance Learning procedure should offer students the knowledge and methodological equipment required to enable the individualized and creative readings of any literary text, as well as to encourage research on the subject. Consequently, any proposed methods should be appropriate so as to be used either in a multi-disciplinary Program or in one specializing in literary studies. This way, the differences between these two frames would reside only in the quantity of knowledge and not in the quality and the efficiency of the methodological tools proposed. Thus, as Takis Kayalis (2005) has remarked in a recent article, we can defend the status of the discipline and the quality of literary studies, and at the same time be prepared to enrich the relevant material.

As tutors of Modern Greek Literature at the Hellenic Open University we have observed that adult students with no previous university experience find the creative

interpretation of literary texts a rather difficult task to handle. Not only do they not know how to do it, but they also have major difficulties in formulating any form of written interpretation. In order to overcome this deficiency, they need adequate theoretical tools and relevant exercises incorporated in their educational material.

More specifically, our paper is based on the view that any introductory course on literature and more particularly, on Modern Greek Literature at the Hellenic Open University, should provide the student with considerable theoretical knowledge. Theory permits an opening to broader horizons for the creative understanding of literary texts, for overcoming one-dimensional and confined approaches and secures the value of argumentative discussion in the study of literature. Theory reveals the different and multi-dimensional levels of human thinking, the importance of cultural and philosophical factors in the making and the reception of texts in a contemporaneous or a historical perspective. The study of theory brings literature out of the secondary school's common and restrictive experience and leads to alternative ways of interpreting literature and art (for a relevant discussion see Frydaki 2003).

The theoretical material could form a systematically organized chapter of the course book, placed separately from the main part, which currently presents the main periods and issues of Modern Greek Literature in historical perspective.

Our personal experience as tutors of the course of Modern Greek Literature at the Hellenic Open University has shown that elements such as the definition of basic concepts, the clarification of major issues pertaining to the study of literature, as well as an introduction to literary theory, combined with exemplary analyses of literary texts, could provide a solid basis for the study of literature in Open and Distance Learning equivalent to that offered in conventional Universities. The implementation of such elements becomes more imperative still in the context of multidisciplinary distance-learning programs as they would help the student realise the specificity of literary studies, as well as equip him/her for the creative analysis and interpretation of literary texts.

Therefore, our paper will propose the theoretical background necessary to the students, i.e. particular topics that could be treated in this context and, will focus on a specific issue, the autobiographical genre, to provide an example on teaching theory and analysis in a creative way with the aid of modern poetics. This example will hopefully clarify the goals of our attempt, as it aims to show the importance of theoretical knowledge for the development of critical reading skills in an ODL setting.

I. The first part of the introductory chapter that we propose could be defined as *conceptual*, and it should contain valid definitions of key terms in literary studies. The terms that should be defined are, in our opinion, the following: “literature”, “literary studies”, “history of literature”, “comparative literature”, “literary criticism”, “poetics” and “literary genre”.¹ In this part we should also define the major scopes and procedures of literary analysis, such as the systematic description and critical interpretation of a literary piece of work.

To focus on the term “literature”, for example, it would be useful to underline the historical evolution and the variability of its definitions: literature does not exist as a universal and eternal category, but as a historically and culturally defined domain; our present conception of literature is different from that of the Antiquity or of the 18th century. In order to clarify this, it may be useful to present three definitions of literature which come from different theoretical and cultural contexts: the Aristotelian definition, the definition put forward by German Romanticism as well as Mikhail Bakhtine’s definition.² This brief discussion can amend possible cognitive deficiencies due to the students’ insufficient knowledge and preconceived ideas of literature and art in general.

II. The second part of our introductory chapter, which could be entitled “a brief introduction on literary theory” and characterized as *metatheoretical*, would focus on the following issues:

a. First, on the definition of main aspects of literary theory: the ontological and interdisciplinary orientation of the domain, the need for a methodological systematization of literary studies and its reflective dimension.

b. Our metatheoretical work can also be oriented towards the critical presentation of the history and the principles of the 20th century’s most important theoretical tendencies: Hermeneutics, Mikhail Bakhtine’s poetics, Russian Formalism, New Criticism, French Structuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, reception theory and cultural studies could constitute the main chapters of this discussion.³

¹ René Wellek and Austin Warren’s classical synthesis remains a solid starting point.

² In this case we could refer to Antoine Compagnon’s analysis of the topic and to Mikhail Bakhtine’s cited work.

³ On this subject we could refer to the very useful works by Raman Selden (1995), Maurice Delcroix & Fernand Hally (1987) and Jean-Yves Tadié (1987). In order to avoid the danger of a reductionist – encyclopedic or oversimplifying– reference to terms and principles, which Anastasia Natsina and Takis

Among all the issues treated special emphasis could be placed on the clarification of the term “literariness” as an interpretation of what constitutes the essence of literature, while some basic notions of narratology might reveal the multiple ways in which a literary text is constructed.

We believe that an acquaintance with specific elements of narratology would help students in their effort to analyze poetry, prose texts and, especially, novels. Given that in Open and Distance Learning the teaching of novels poses particular difficulties due to their extensive length, knowledge of basic elements of narratology could prove helpful in systematizing the analysis and interpretation of texts, even without the tutor’s guidance. In other words, the interpretation of texts as well as the teaching of critical and theoretical analysis would become much easier if the students had already become familiar with several basic concepts of the literary text’s nature and structure as the narrative status and the functions of the narrator and the poetic subject, their respective relation to the novelist and the poet, or the manner and extent of the literary text’s correspondence to reality.

Autobiographical discourse is particularly useful in our attempt to teach basic topics of literary theory, the analysis of the text as well as the very definition of literature itself, since it raises several theoretical questions, mostly addressing the relation between literature and reality.⁴

Students can inquire, for example, how could the truthful and accurate representation of a person’s inner reality (which is, by definition, the aim of any autobiographical text) or of the true facts of his/her life could be defined as literature. How accurate can any textual or verbal representation of reality really be? On the other hand, fictional texts, including those written in the first person are without doubt considered as literature. The correspondence of the autobiographical text to reality, examined through specific examples, can introduce several issues for discussion, such as the referential function of the literary text, the fictional aspect of every textual representation or the role and functions of the text’s aesthetic elaboration -which is considered to affect its accuracy by turning the reader’s attention away from the reality represented in the text itself. As a result, the understanding of the autonomy of any literary text would become clearer; its formation as a semantic whole with its own

Kayalis (2005) have pointed out with regard to the presentation of theory on the Internet, our aim should be a synthetic approach and a critical presentation of theoretical material.

⁴ Most studies on autobiography deal with the methods of integrating reality in the text. The basic reference is of course Philippe Lejeune’s work.

rules, inner relations, references and constructions would become apparent and the problematic and vague ontological status of literature itself would emerge for discussion on a new basis.

Furthermore, the apparently simple structure of autobiographical discourse (whether in an actual autobiography or in an autobiographical novel) exemplified by a narration in the first person, could illuminate significant aspects of narration and help describe the structures and functions of a fictional novel, autobiographical or not. More specifically, examples of autobiographical discourse, if presented in comparison with fictional discourse, could contribute to the teaching and analysis of the following topics:⁵

I. The study of the narrative factors: Author - Narrator.

a. The role and the status of the narrator in a prose text: the first person narrator is not always a real person whose real name appears on the cover of a book. This fact can at first highlight the difference between true autobiography and an autobiographical novel, or a novel written in the first person, but most importantly, it can underline the distinction between the narrator and the author in any prose text. Once these basic concepts have been clarified, other distinctions become also possible: is the narrator part of the story he narrates? Does he participate in the story's present time or in its past? Etc.

b. The content of the autobiographical text, or, in other words, the condensed narration of a lifetime can demonstrate the selective and interpretational process by which reality is represented in autobiography, as well as help the student understand the text as a well-organized and coherent whole, an autonomous entity with its own inherent rules. Texts of this kind often represent reality in a metaphorical and condensed way and express the inner truth of the writer without presenting a photographic or filmic reflection of his or her entire lifetime. Consequently, the novel may as well be considered and understood as an autonomous entity, as the coherent representation of a fictional reality, produced by the writer under similar choices and restrictions.

c. The status and the roles of characters other than the narrator in an autobiographical text might lead to conclusions concerning the description of the novel's entire fictional world.

⁵ The study of narratology could be based on the fundamental work of Gérard Genette.

II. The narrative techniques of representation of reality and fiction.

a. The perspective of a first-person narrator and its inherent restrictions can easily lead to the discussion of questions related to the different points of view of both the characters and the narrators of the novel: the cognitive horizon of the first person narration does not allow the inclusion of other people's thoughts and feelings, something which, on the contrary, is possible in the case of an omniscient narrator in a fictional text.

b. The study of either retrospective or simultaneous representations of the past could show that such time relations between the story and its narration are closely linked to the accuracy of the text. The representation of the past in a simultaneous narration affects the veracity of the autobiographical text and is closely related to the fictional representation of reality. As a result, the narrator's discourse in an autobiography may well vary from a narration of facts to a monologue relating thoughts and feelings. In this case, interior monologue could serve as a good example of how fictional discourse can imitate reality.

In general, the teaching of literature and of literary theory should not only be based on textbook material and, consequently, on a passive form of learning, but mostly on an interactive and creative method of learning. Textbook material is, of course, necessary, but it should be complemented with written tasks of critical analysis and interpretation of literary texts. Writing always helps the student clarify things and formulate theoretical questions. Given the difficulties that students face with their assignments that focus on literary interpretation we think that additional exercises, making use of literary theory and narratology in particular, may assist in developing the students' writing and interpretational skills. We should invite the students not only to passively reproduce their knowledge, but also to try and apply this knowledge in the texts. Therefore, the educational material could be enriched with some interpretational models and examples, while the learning procedure should mainly encourage students to formulate questions and to focus on the interpretation of texts.

Theoretical exposition should also be accompanied by a series of exercises on interpretative analysis of selected literary works; approaching a short text in the light of three different methods, such as Hermeneutics, narratology and psychoanalysis, could prove a fruitful way of assimilating theoretical material. We can also encourage

the students to combine elements of different methodological paradigms, as well as to enrich the theoretical approach with the elements of literary history.

The main scope of such exercises should be to combine the theory and practice of analysis and to highlight some important issues, such as the need for critical and creative use of theory. Theory should be considered not as a rigid model or a recipe, but as a medium towards the interpretative assimilation of literary work.

Exercises on narratology based on the autobiographical genre through interpretations and comparisons of texts could also prove useful to the student. If we present, for example, several texts written in different ways (first person narration, omniscient narrator, dialogues, interior monologues, etc.) and ask students to interpret and compare them, we would offer them a field for the application of literary theory as well as the basis for the assimilation of the notion of intertextuality, a concept with which students should also become familiar.

In conclusion, we think that such texts and exercises could be introduced in the course either in printed or electronic educational material. This material could also include an anthology of major theoretical texts and a dictionary of critical theory terms. We believe that by these means, which should be used in conjunction with a broad overview of literary history, theory would be efficiently related to interpretation and creative reading, while the students' understanding of literary texts would become significantly clearer.

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