Exploring Literariness
in Language Teaching*

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Literature and Literariness

Recent articles of *The English Teacher* bear witness to a reappraisal of the role of literature in language teaching (e.g. O'Sullivan, 1991; Sithamparam, 1991; Leong, 1991; Talif, 1992; Malachi, 1992; and McRae 1992). This reappraisal may be seen in the context of a wider exploration of the nature of literature, how it should be studied, and its relation to language teaching (see, for example, McRae 1991; Montgomery, Durant, Furniss and Mills, 1991; and Widdowson 1992). These works and others have offered many fresh insights to the teacher of English. However, there is still a danger that "literature" will be fenced off, that literary texts will still be regarded as different in kind from other texts. In this article I hope to show that by linking literary and non-literary texts, the relevance of literature to language teaching will be made all the more obvious.

Talif (1991: 22) hints at this linking technique by suggesting that

> texts such as newspapers, broadcasts of current affairs, political cartoons, talk-back radio discourse, magazine articles and popular fiction should be scrutinized alongside the treatment of literary works.

The argument in Talif's paper is that "literary" features are evident in non-literary texts, and so the definition of literature should be broadened to encompass a wider range of texts. I am in partial agreement with Talif's conclusion. I accept the distinction between "literature" and "literariness" (cf Brumfit and Carter 1986). "Literariness" refers to the use of features of language often associated with literature (such as rhetorical patterning, linguistic deviation, striking metaphors, puns and dramatic description), often in nonliterary texts.

It is important to note that the presence or absence of "literary language" does not define a text as literature or non-literature. It is more accepted that a text is defined as literature if we read it as literature (cf. the distinction between "representational" and "referential" texts in McRae 1991). In other words, when we identify a text as a poem or a story, we bring to it certain expectations and read it m a particular way.

Newspaper reports, then, are not usually regarded as literature, although in some situations it is conceivable that they might be. Similarly, current affairs broadcasts would not usually be regarded as literature, although they may demonstrate qualities of literariness. This concept of literariness has obvious relevance to EFL learners, in that to be more effective communicators, they should be able to recognise and respond to linguistic exponents of literariness. Furthermore, they should be able to employ these exponents, where appropriate, in their own literary and non-literary writing.

A Genre Based Approach

In the case of more advanced students, an effective way of sensitising them to aspects of literariness is to require them to compare, in a systematic fashion, related examples of literary and non-literary texts. This idea is not particularly new: Widdowson (1975) compares character descriptions in stories with invented passport details. Other writers play with surprising textual and thematic correspondence (e.g. Carter 1982 invites comparison between Edwin Morgan's science fiction poem "Off Course" and an everyday shopping list). However, if we are to put "literariness" into the syllabus in a systematic way, then we need to recycle standard procedures for textual analysis regularly over an extended period of time.

The task, then, is (a) to select appropriate texts, literary and non-literary, which are related in some way, and (b) to formalise a set of "attack procedures" which can be used by students to analyse the texts with the result that their "literariness" is made explicit. A genre-based approach can help us in this.

The word "genre" has acquired a multiplicity of meanings in recent years. One view of genre which has gained influence in recent years has been that of Swales (1990). Although devised in order to account for features of academic English, genre analysis may be more applicable to the description of other text-types. To summarise Swales' position:

1. Speakers and writers have certain communicative purposes for producing texts, e.g. to make a report, inform the public, profess adoration, etc.
2. This set of purposes will normally constrain the linguistic features of the discourse produced, e.g. profession of adoration will usually contain declarations of love, fidelity, and so on.
   The purposes will also constrain the schematic structure of the discourse e.g. adoration might be expressed in different formula from Valentine message to Elizabethan sonnet.
3. The resulting discourse will probably be acknowledged by expert members of the discourse community as a legitimate member of the set of communicative events which comprise the genre.

In brief, then, "genre" refers to a set of communicative events which share some purpose. This purpose may influence (but does not determine) the form of language which realises any particular communicative event.

The form of language can be described with reference to the functions long ago formulated by register analysis (e.g. Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens 1964). In register analysis, language variation can be related to *field* (i.e. the subject matter of the discourse), *tenor* (ie the relationship between the interlocutors) and *mode* (the type of text employed: spoken or written, letter or editorial, etc).

There is a tricky relationship between communicative purpose and the linguistic exponents of field, tenor and mode. The writer or speaker can manipulate the language to produce a certain point of view, which the readers or listeners will match with their knowledge of the world, and accept or reject accordingly. So a full model of genre might look like this:

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                            field
Communicative purpose influences tenor to produce point of view.
                            mode
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The reason for offering this diagram is that it can actually be helpful when selecting and analysing texts in class, If possible, one or more variables (e.g. **field** and **mode**) should be kept stable, while others are altered. The effects on the language and point of view are then explored. Similarities and differences between texts should then become apparent, along with a motivation which would be less evident if the texts were studied in isolation.

A Case Study *The Charge of the Light Brigade*

The ways of combining and recombining the variables of **purpose, field, tenor** and **mode** are obviously legion. I wish to give a fairly simple example of a lesson which focuses on similarity in field. Field can be a broad concept: McRae and Boardman's (1984) textbook **Reading Between the Lines** is largely organised around broad similarities in field (i.e. topics or themes such as family, environment and war). But in some cases we can narrow

field down to a specific topic. Famous historical events are an obvious source of textual "clusters", events such as the Charge of the Light Brigade.

Tennyson's poetic celebration of this act of suicidal heroism is still part of the English language culture of the twentieth century ("Ours not to reason why/Ours but to do and die"), even if we might dispute its literary merits, and perhaps question its military ethos. It certainly seems strange today that Tennyson had a thousand copies of the poem distributed to soldiers fighting in the Crimea, presumably hoping to boost their morale.

We can compare Tennyson's poem with the eyewitness report on which it is based, written by William Howard Russell, for *The Times* of 14 November 1854. This is reprinted in Carey (1987), an excellent anthology of reportage through the ages. The communicative purpose of this text is not so much celebration of the event, but simply to give an account of the disaster as he saw it from his vantage point above the scene of the battle.

Added to this pair of related texts might be a passage from a more recent history book, such as Hibbert (1961). Published over a hundred years after the battle, the purpose of this account is to give a more comprehensive overview of the events leading up to and culminating in the ill-fated Charge.

The final extract is a little different. Widdowson (1988; reprinted in Widdowson 1990), gives a very brief account of the Charge in an article on the importance of grammar. Here the field remains stable (the subject matter is still the Charge) but the communicative purpose is quite different. Widdowson argues that 409 men died needlessly because of a misunderstanding about the use of a definite article.

I find that once you start collecting texts on a specific subject and establish a "cluster", other texts suggest themselves almost magically. Even on this apparently obscure topic, I could easily add further extracts. However, we shall concentrate on these four. All of them share a very specific field, but have different purposes and varying tenors and modes. Each creates an individual point of view. Only one is a literary text, but the others may well exhibit features of "literariness". How might they be tackled in class?

Procedure for Analysis

Different sets of texts obviously suggest different questions; nevertheless there is a standard set of questions that can usefully be asked of many related groups of texts, to revealing effect. They include the questions given below, which might be varied in wording according to the ability of the students and their familiarity with this kind of activity. The same ideas might be probed less directly.

(a) What is the Communicative Purpose?

The four texts have a similar field, but some have different purposes. In Swales' terms, these belong to different genres. We can ask how the purpose of the text affects the linguistic forms used.

Upon investigation, we find that the two texts which have a similar purpose both use similar linguistic forms: the newspaper and the history book both inform the reader of events, and both use past-tense narratives. The poem is more of a dramatic celebration: it uses hortatory exclamations and rhetorical questions to engage and stimulate the reader's emotions. The grammatical illustration uses present tense narrative, which is associated both with informal storytelling (the so-called dramatic present), and with summaries. We might argue that by using the "storytelling" forms, Widdowson's account exhibits "literariness" to some degree.

(b) What is the Field?

This is the variable which is kept stable in this cluster. All four texts share the subject matter of war, and of the Charge of the Light Brigade in particular. The most obvious linguistic outcome of this is the shared military

vocabulary: *soldier, cannon, sabres, battery, volley*, and so on. Although not in evidence here, we should be alert to vocabulary transferred systematically from other fields, e.g. war and sport are often intermixed.

(c) What is the Tenor?

This discourse function deals with the attitude of the speaker or writer to (i) the listener or hearer, and (ii) the text itself. Evaluative language, modal verbs and adverbs, comment clauses, and so on, are all relevant to this function.

Compare the reports of the Charge in the newspaper and the history book. Which is more "objective"? How is this objectivity achieved? We might find that Russell's newspaper report is more explicitly evaluative, using modal adverbs like "surely" and exclamations such as "alas" to demonstrate the writer's attitudes directly. Hibbert is less involved in the story he tells: for example he uses the impersonal "there could be no doubt" rather than an adverb like "surely".

We might look then at Tennyson's poem: what is his attitude to the Charge, and what is his perception of the reader's attitude? On what linguistic grounds do we make our judgement? As noted earlier, the use of rhetorical questions ("When can their glory fade?") expresses emotional engagement, and also presupposes the reader's answer: "Never." Exclamations such as "O the wild charge they made!" are similar to Russell's "Alas!" - this direct appeal is also an aspect of "literariness". Both would be inappropriate in Hibbert's "academic" report.

Widdowson glosses over the whole episode of the Charge in two phrases: "they attack - with disastrous consequences". We might ask why the Charge itself is given so little space. The obvious answer is that Widdowson's focus is on the grammatical misunderstanding before the disaster; to him the disaster is secondary information.

(d) What is the Mode?

As a text-type, the poem stands out from the three prose narratives. A discussion of the poem can focus on the effect of the metre, rhyme, repetitions, parallel sentence constructions, and so on. On a more subtle level, Tennyson and Widdowson presumably share the assumption that the reader already knows about the events they describe (whereas Russell and Hibbert report them as if for the first time). We might argue that the assumption of prior knowledge affects the "literariness" of the Tennyson and Widdowson accounts: they are more dramatic in form.

(e) What is the Point of View?

Although the point of view embodied in a text will be a product of purpose, field, tenor and mode, it is worth considering as a separate issue. An investigation of tenor will reveal explicit value judgements expressed by certain linguistic features. But aspects of field will also contribute to a point of view. For example, we can ask what kind of processes the verbs express: Do they express physical or mental states or actions, verbal processes, or states of being? To what degree are processes nominalised? Are the agents of processes made explicit? If so, how are they represented? The answers to such questions will reveal the point of view towards, for example, the responsibility for any actions described in a text. In the case of the Charge, compare:

> *Someone had blundered*
> (Tennyson, cf textual variations)

> *The general has made an unwarranted assumption about shared knowledge*
> (Widdowson) *What Lord Raglan might have said, and what afterwards he did say, was that Lucan had misinterpreted the order...* (Hibbert)

From these different points of view, whose responsibility was the military disaster?

Patterning of semantically-related descriptive language (i.e. "imagery") is another aspect of field which can contribute to point of view. We might point out the light imagery associated with the Light Brigade in Tennyson's poem ("Flash'd all their sabres bare/Flash'd as they turn'd in air"), but this "literary" effect is actually used more extensively in Russell's eyewitness report. Here we read of cavalrymen "glittering in the morning sun", their sabres "a halo of flashing steel" or "like the turn of a shoal of mackerel". In contrast the Russian artillery is seen as infernal in both poem and report: "the mouth of Hell" in Tennyson echoes the "flood of smoke and flame" reported by Russell.

Such obvious, politically-motivated language is not so evident in Hibbert or Widdowson, neither of whom is so partisan as Tennyson or Russell. The sympathies of the contemporary writers are evident also in the labels: the British are "our ranks", while the Russian gunners are "miscreants".

Analysis into Action

Does all this analysis help learners improve their English? I believe it does, as I believe that (in the current jargon) "raising to consciousness" rhetorical and structural features of the language can help students to develop an active knowledge of how the language works. However, analysis for its own sake can seem sterile, and so I shall conclude by suggesting three extension activities which might be used with the **Charge of the Light Brigade** texts.

The first would be simply to extend the textual cluster. Students might be encouraged to read and review a novel such as George MacDonald Fraser's **Flashman at the Charge**, or they might watch and review one of the various films made on the subject (Tony Richardson's is available on video).

Secondly, the episode of the Charge might lead to more intensive language work, perhaps based on the question: who in the end was responsible for the calamity? Malachi (1992) suggests a classroom trial as a possible role-play based on **Animal Farm**; equally Raglan, Lucan, Cardigan and Nolan (or their ghosts!) might be called to defend themselves in a court martial. Students would prepare briefs, detailing the events of the Charge **from a particular point of view**. In this way the techniques analysed would be put into action. The defendants' versions might be attacked by prosecuting lawyers. Witnesses such as Russell, and the men and women who "watched from safety" might give evidence, along with some of the ordinary soldiers.

Finally, one or more of the texts can lead into another textual cluster, and be re-examined from a different perspective. This might be done, for example, by keeping the mode stable but varying the field. Thus Tennyson's poem might be considered alongside other war poetry, ancient and modern. Or Russell's report might be compared to the accounts of other war correspondents (again, Carey's 1987 anthology is a useful source).

It takes time and a magpie instinct to collect literary and non-literary texts which cluster around related topics. The reward is in gathering a body of texts which, partly by their demonstration of different degrees of "literariness", offers a stimulating source of language enrichment. As I have shown, even texts on an offbeat topic can encourage analysis and production of the target language, and may spread a network of connections far beyond the immediate subject matter.

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APPENDICES

1. *The Charge of the Light Brigade*
by Alfred, Lord Tennyson
(Written 2 December 1854, and published
9 December 1854.)

I

Half a league, half a league
  Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
  Rode the six hundred.

"Forward the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!" he said:
Into the valley of Death
  Rode the six hundred.

II

"Forward the Light Brigade!"
Was there a man dismay'd?
Not tho' the soldier knew
  Someone had blunder'd:
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

III

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
  Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell
Boldy they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death
Into the mouth of Hell
Rode the six hundred.

IV

Flash'd all their sabres bare,
Flash'd as they turn'd in air
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
  All the world wonder'd
Plung'd in the battery-smoke
Right through the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian
Reel'd from the sabre stroke
  Shatter'd and sunder'd
Then they rode back, but not-
  Not the six hundred.

V

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon behind them
  Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell
While horse and hero fell
They that had fought so well
Came through the jaws of Death,
Back from the mouth of Hell,
All that was left of them,
Left of six hundred.

VI

When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
  All the world wonder'd.
Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred!

2. From William Howard Russell's eyewitness report in *The Times* (14 November 1854)

They swept proudly past, glittering in the morning sun in all the pride and splendour of war. We could hardly believe the evidence of our senses! Surely that handful of men were not going to charge an army in position? Alas! it was but too true - their desperate valour knew no bounds, and far indeed was it removed from its so-called better part - discretion. They advanced in two lines, quickening their pace as they closed towards the enemy. A more fearful spectacle was never witnessed than by those who, without the power to aid, beheld their heroic countrymen rushing to the arms of death. At the distance of 1200 yards the whole line of the enemy belched forth, from thirty iron mouths, a flood of smoke and flame, through which hissed the deadly balls. Their flight was marked by instant gaps in our ranks, by dead men and horses, by steeds flying wounded or riderless across the plain. The first line was broken - it was joined by a second, they never halted or checked their speed an instant. With diminished ranks, thinned by those thirty guns, which the Russians had laid with the most deadly accuracy, with a halo of flashing steel above their heads, and with a cheer that was many a noble fellow's death-cry, they flew into the smoke of the batteries; but ere they were lost from view, the plain was strewed with their bodies and with the carcasses of horses. They were exposed to an oblique fire from the batteries on the hills on both sides, as well as to the direct fire of musketry.

Through the clouds of smoke we could see their sabres flashing as they rode up to the guns and dashed between them, cutting down the gunners as they stood. The blaze of their steel, as an officer standing near me said, was "like the turn of a shoal of mackerel."

3. From Hibbert, C. (1961)
The Destruction of Lord Raglan
Harlow: Longman

For the first fifty yards the Light Brigade advanced at a steady trot. The guns were silent. Lord Cardigan in his splendid blue and cherry coloured uniform with its pelisse of gold-trimmed fur swinging gently on his stiffly thin shoulders looked, as Lord Raglan afterwards said of him, as brave and proud as a lion. He never glanced over his shoulder, but kept his eyes on the guns in his front.

Suddenly the beautiful precision and symmetry of the advancing line was broken. Inexcusably galloping in front of the commander came that 'impertinent devil' Nolan. He was waving his sword above his head and shouting for all he was worth. He turned round in his saddle and seemed to be trying to warn the infuriated Lord Cardigan and the first line of his men that they were going the wrong way. But no one heard what words he was shouting, for now the Russians had opened fire and his voice was drowned by the boom and crash of their guns. A splinter from one of the first shells fired flew into Nolan's heart.

The pace began to quicken, and there could be no doubt now that most of these seven hundred horsemen were riding to their death. From three sides the round shot flew into the ranks and the shells burst between them, opening gaps which closed with so cairn and unhurried a determination that men and women watched from the safety of the hills with tears streaming down their cheeks, and General Bosquet murmured, unconsciously delivering himself of a protest against such courage which was to be remembered for ever, *'C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre.'*

4. From Widdowson, HG (1988)
Grammar and Nonsense and Learning

The scene is the Battle of Balaclava. On high ground, at a customary safe distance from the action, the British general Lord Raglan is directing troop movements by sending his orders by messengers on horseback. From his vantage point, he sees in one part of the field the enemy trying to retreat with their artillery, and he sends a message to his brigade of light cavalry. It reads as follows: "Lord

Raglan wishes the Cavalry to advance rapidly to the front, follow the enemy and try to prevent the enemy carrying away the guns."

The cavalry commanders, Lord Cardigan and Lord Lucan, receiving this message, recognize that the definite articles signal a particular front of battle and particular guns which both they and Lord Raglan are supposed to know about. But they are in the valley. Lord Raglan is upon the heights. The commanders cannot actually see what Lord Raglan intends to refer to. They do not in fact share the same context. The general has made an unwarranted assumption about shared knowledge. The only front that the cavalry commanders can see is right at the end of the valley, where the main Russian army is massively assembled, secure behind their heavy guns. For them, this front and these guns are the only possible ones indicated by the definite articles. So, since theirs is not to reason why, they attack - with disastrous consequences. And that is how the Charge of the Light Brigade, the most celebrated and glorious calamity in British Military history came about: all because not of a horseshoe nail but a failure in the effective use of grammar to make an appropriate connection with context. Not all failures, of course, are as historically momentous. But they are of very common occurrence.