

Bogdan Bogdanov: About the Goals of this Seminar

There is an etymological sense of the word *seminar* which, uncharacteristically, still lingers in the modern meaning of the word, although very few foreign words retain such a link between etymology and modern meaning¹. Words which have preserved such a link are also *culture*, *literature*, so that their modern meaning has some correspondence with a historical, archaic sense, however, these are, so to say, living words, or rather words-living terms, which is why I take the liberty of reminding you of the Latinate word *seminarium*, which, in effect, means literally ‘seed-plot’. Naturally – a seed-plot of knowledge. And that is what the word used to mean in classical Latin, where the word belongs: a place of learning. However, the learning takes place not via systematic teaching as the basic slant of the instruction, but via a range of forms which include numerous discussions, considerably more than is accepted nowadays – such a meaning is given to the word now, and such is my intention with this seminar.

The aims of our joint efforts here will be: to accumulate facts, realia and concepts from the field of ancient Greek literature, this is our first assignment; secondly, we need to develop and decipher the meaning of concepts from a number of vast areas which are mutually related: the field known as ‘literature’ - which is not attractive at all - the field familiar as ‘culture’, a huge field explored by several disciplines called ‘text’, and an equally extensive field dubbed symbolically ‘cognition’. Cognition is the subject matter of several discrete theories: some of them - more specific, others – more general; it is also the subject matter of a major branch of theology called hermeneutics, which has its roots in classical philology. Apart from these types of knowledge in the three areas outlined earlier, we will also be developing skills – to speak, converse and write - skills inseparable from those of cognition. What we do here will need to turn into an instrument. Incidentally, now is the time to define the meaning of the word ‘professor’ – another Latinate word. ‘Professor’ derives from the Latin root *profiteor*, which means ‘I profess that I have knowledge and will teach the person to whom I make this promise of action’. Well, the verb *profiteor*, or the simple verb *fateor* is a lovely root which links, on the one hand, with a word such as *fatum*, which means ‘fate’, i.e. something which has been promised to take place, and on the other hand – to words which have been borrowed into Bulgarian as well – such as *fibula*, *fama* and *famosus* - the person everyone is talking about that he is whatever, via a special meaning.

Do not be off-put by order! Order is the way for a group of people to complete a task together. Order is good not because it is right. Remember this sentence! Order makes it easy to communicate and achieve concrete results. Sometimes, however, one type of order can be absolutely wrong, or even pernicious. For instance, when one remains entrenched in it.

We shall be looking for something broader than ancient Greek literature. Broader than literature itself even. Bordering on what we call ‘culture’. Culture has often been understood in various different ways, and even more frequently – in various wrong ways. Likewise, in everyday speech there are things we believe we understand, but when asked about them, we realise that we know nothing. But – back to culture: it is an array of objects and instruments which surround people in their human environment. The human environment, for its part, is an objective medium. But this piece of

¹ This is the text of the opening lecture of professor Bogdan Bogdanov’s seminar LBRB 100 "LITERATURE, TEXT, COGNITION" at the New Bulgarian University for the academic 2009/2010 Year. The set reading texts for the seminar are: Homer’s *Odyssey*, Borges’ *Death and the Compass* and Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe*. The inaugural meeting took place on October 29th 2009.

knowledge is easy. There is more difficulty in another type of knowledge that already resembles theory. Why on Earth would a man need all these objects; why did he not remain stark naked, as he was before he became human? For a number of reasons but one of these reasons is never voiced and it is because man lives in society and living in society requires a lot of intermediaries to make a person's existence possible in a broader environment. Some of the intermediaries are animate; others are objects and things, belongings and tools. We dress because we are cold, but man never does something for a single reason – he also dresses to assume a social status. Our environment is one where intermediaries are essential. And objects are our intermediaries.

The cultural environment, or culture, is also a set of texts. All sorts of texts – printed texts, written texts, oral texts and many others. On the one hand, we have a text but a literary work is not the same as a literary text: it is something that builds on it.

The literary text is a specific type of text which has a multi-layered structure and a message that operates on many different levels; and this is what causes the greatest difficulty in understanding the literary text. Because when we say 'understanding', we mean 'clear understanding' and nothing is easier than saying what a literary text says clearly. For instance, 'love'!

I have already come across many people who have no doubt that they know what love is. However, I want us to feel the pleasure of those great literary texts which seem to give one message, but in this one message a number of others is inferred, messages which are too complex to present because part of them have already been inferred in the original text. For instance, with Herodotus – do we understand what Herodotus did not say, but was evident for everyone who heard him speak? Meanings ingrained in the text, but also - in the course of my own reading of the text and as I read, I think that the text means this and, I have no doubt in what I understand, so I say: "This is what the text says – and that is that". If you say something different, my reply is: "Believe what you will, we are different, each of us has their own right to form an opinion" and that is it, end of conversation. Culture is a system of texts, where each text is a constellation of meanings needed for the use of the person who understands them and employs them to create his own construct – that is what a text is about.

In order to have a literary text, we need a context which brings the text into existence and which remains quite discernible in the literary text. However, the context is also a text – it is a set of important issues taken for granted by a majority. We live in a human environment to the degree that this environment has an array of commonly valid conditions which can be expressed as a text, but we are aware of them and so they form our contextual environment. About the cultural environment we live in today – we can speak of it in terms of a context. This contextual environment constantly generates texts. And now I am going to say something that you have not heard before: literature is the way that a man escapes from his contextual environment and thus becomes somehow more universal. Of course, that is when a strong literary text has been created. Homer's *Odyssey* is connected with one type of context, pertaining to those times, and even - to later ancient times, however, it presents a powerful mechanism for escape from antiquity, before the rest of the world has taken place – and in that text the universality I mentioned becomes available. Each literary text is linked to its own historical context – this is true. Each literary text is unique. These two statements now stand in isolation from one another, but this should not stay so. Each quality literary text is simultaneously embedded in its own time and an escape mechanism into another time, because the above statements are the ones that create the temporal dimension. This is a principle which we shall try to get you to adopt. One can only adopt something that he has experienced personally.

There is no difference between the literary text and the living person. The person is not amenable to any environment in any historical context, which is why he is always seeking to escape from it – not in any negative sense, but in a positive one. What we are about to do here should implement a model of knowing, not any universal model – but a New Bulgarian University model of knowing. In order to know, particularly if you know a lot, there is no way that you do not rebel against certain orders of concepts, because concepts are a way of knowing and seeing, a specific way – when you know a lot and connect many more things and areas, you realize that individual concepts have little value. The fact that certain concepts are valueless can also be seen through the usage of words in everyday language. For instance, the concept ‘virtue’ – you can listen for uses of the concept to see whether any person speaks of virtue today. Not a single one. This is a concept that has lost its value. Research concepts also lose their value because when they enter a new system and here comes an innovative meaning which says “Stop! Enough of this research area, it is boring, unrelated to reality – let us discontinue it!” Precisely this is the case with classical philology – however, we say that this cannot be like that, in classical philology there is something indispensable for the personality. What matters is the contagion between the words and the stories of the words, like that of ‘seminar’ or ‘professor’. I also think of Bulgarian words in a historical fashion and when I use a word, I can lean on a story of theirs, and the contagion of such a story gives an immense exposure to a person, specifically in the modern world where words are used as things and objects which clearly denote one thing, without an opportunity to denote a different meaning. You will understand what I insist for – such a usage of language that is rooted in history and the user’s awareness of these historical roots naturally leads to the realization that the word is a convention and this convention inevitably denotes more things because many people operate with this word – and if you can master all these things, you can better employ the word to achieve a practical goal.

Therefore, we need to try and extricate from a text meanings – those embedded within the text, and the others which come from our reading of the text.

Literature functions as something which creates representations. It represents a world, a place, a situation. Representing in literature is one of its major strengths in essence. However, literature is something which – having become a representation – there comes a person and says “enough of representations – we will now have a different literature” – i.e. there will be no representations, all will be speech and a flow of symbols like music, which means next to nothing, but still is literature.

Numerous definitions of literature exist.