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META – Interview

Professor Meta Grosman was one of the most influential teachers at the Department of English studies even before she became the head of the Department of Germanic languages and literatures in 1988. Her students have always known her as an energetic and enthusiastic, understanding but not undemanding, self-reflective and persuasive teacher. When meeting her at conferences or seminars, Slovenian teachers of English of all generations always wistfully claim that “Meta hasn’t changed a bit.” Indeed, she hasn’t.

Let’s start with a few rather personal questions. How did you become a reader? Do you remember any of the books you liked as a child?

It is difficult for me to remember how and when I became a reader. Books and reading were always taken for granted in my family. In my teens I had to sleep for several years in my father’s library which, besides the first prints of new Slovene authors and translations, included over a thousand books of my grandfather in German. I was always read to and read fairy tales, Slovene translations by my grandfather, and lots of picture books. At school, however, I had to read and translate Latin poets and historians and Homer in ancient Greek. At that time it was incomprehensible to us why we got negative grades when we managed to secretly copy the official translations of Homer. It was recommended that we read several Slovene authors, but since there existed no readers with extracts, we mostly read integral texts when available.

How did you become interested in reading and reading theories? Who are the authors that have influenced you most?

When I was appointed to teach English literature at the department of Germanic languages, books in English were hard to get. The departmental library was burnt when an air plane dropped on the university library that housed the department and its library during WW II. At the time of my studies the remains of the library were in a small windowless room about 4 by 3 metres. However a colleague of mine, returning from Great Britain to teach the English language, was glad to swap his *Principles of Literary Criticism* by I. A. Richards for my *Language* by Bloomfield. I first read about different readings of literary texts in Ermatinger’s studies (Ingarden was not yet available and, accordingly, not on the reading list for the examinations in literary theory), but I was fascinated by reading and rereading Richard’s *Principles* and I still treasure my 1953 hard cover edition of it. Soon afterwards I decided to do my PhD on the reader as a critical category in British literary criticism.

And then there was another great figure, D. W. Harding, with whom your path literally crossed, and whose ideas still follow you.



That was later. In the 1970s, after my PhD and my habilitation thesis on T.S. Eliot's criticism on the *reader – poem relationship*, I realised there was more interesting research to be done on the relatively little known writing and early research of D. W. Harding. But my other work as the president of the *Council of Humanities of Slovenia*, along with my university teaching took too much of my time to engage in research. However, the invitation of the British Council in 1978 made it possible for me to meet D. W. Harding, to interview him and collect all his studies. Though I wrote two studies of his original theories on reading of fiction, I would still like to return to his work because it seems to me to be of new interest for the current problems with reading and literacy, but I had problems doing work in several fields of my interest, with intercultural reception attracting more and more of my time, including translation studies as well.

What enabled you to successfully pursue the course that initially caught your attention and interest? It must have been very difficult, if not completely impossible to find a supervisor and suitable bibliography for your MA and PhD here in Ljubljana?

An American research scholarship made it possible for me to study for my MA degree at Miami University, Ohio, and my supervisor there, Professor Almy, knew I. A. Richards personally and was glad to help me with my dissertation in 1965. He later sent a study of mine to I. A. Richards and so I got a very kind and interesting letter from the latter. My PhD in 1971 also dealt with the reader and processes of reading from a different and more critical perspective. Compiling the necessary bibliography in the British Library (then still in the British Museum), I became aware of the vastness of the topic; still I never fell out of love with the reader and reading.

Still, being in love with a topic and researching it is one thing, being able to pass your knowledge to your students is another. You 'officially' started teaching reading only about ten years ago. What about the previous generations? How did they benefit from your vast knowledge on reading?

Though I did not teach reading until 1997 (I started with the students at the Department of Translation Studies, not at the Department of English!), my permanent interest in reading has certainly been the most prominent influence on my teaching long before the reader response criticism. I have persistently – and, at the beginning, to my students' surprise – stimulated and supported my students in poetry classes and seminars on English novels to come up with their own meanings and interpretations and to reflect on how they have come to produce such readings.

This must have been a “road less travelled by” then – and definitely not as “safe” as explaining the texts to them and giving them the “ultimate answers”.

Probably not. But I hope that many of them came to enjoy their reading and our discussions, though they frequently took unexpected turns. Their readings have been a constant source of surprise for me, along with their emerging interest in their own comprehension of texts, so I have always enjoyed my work, loved my students and have never had a conflict with any one of them.

And this has brought you deep into the woods of intercultural studies ...

Yes, in a way I can say that my later interest and research in intercultural reading and reception of English and American literature grows out of my fascination with the rich possibilities of reading and the complex culturally specific factors shaping reader's interaction with literary texts. I got involved in intercultural studies and the reception (also in translation) of English literature in intercultural contexts in 1981. It also became obvious to me that I would not be able to avoid for ever some time-consuming responsibilities like heading our department. For the latter, however, I was quite sure my knowledge of linguistics had to be better and not limited to cognitive linguistics (reading) alone. So I decided to take a sabbatical year and spent 1987/88 as a Fulbright Professor at UC Berkeley. Remembering that year, Berkley's libraries, special cognitive linguistics collection, its Mark Twain collection, interesting colleagues and lots of films, makes me think it my most unforgettable year – the year I would like to live for a second time.

As far as I know, your stay at Berkley resulted in a rather influential book that made lots of Slovenians look at reading from a different perspective.

Yes, at Berkley I was able to finish my book *Bralec in književnost* (1989, *Reader and Literature*) and continue my study of the various aspects of intercultural reception. The book sold out within a year, and this encouraging response made me realise the demand for and interest in knowledge about reading literature. But in my absence I was appointed the head of the Department of Germanic languages, still unaware of what work this would involve. Therefore my other three books on reading only came out more than ten years later: *Zagovor branja (In Defense of Reading)* and *Književnost v medkulturnem položaju (Literature in Intercultural Contexts)* in 2004, and *Razsežnosti branja (Dimensions of Reading)* in 2006.

And then it snowballed. Not only were you the head of a large department at the Faculty of Arts, you also got appointed into various working bodies and were involved with the new curricula, and with the newly introduced *matura*.

Yes. It started with the constant demand for reforming study curricula at the Faculty, first from the existent 3 to 7 curricula in the beginning of the 90s, and then finally to 4. It all resulted in an independent Department of English and American Studies. Afterwards I was lucky to get a study leave for intercultural studies with DAF, University of Munich, which was made possible by DAAD, and which enabled me to 'armour myself' with new knowledge which I used straight after returning to Ljubljana when working in the very first *matura* committee. We started from scratch, so to speak, although we implemented all the knowledge we had on the latest research on testing, linguistics, and the teaching of literature. We were one of the first committees to mention and include various Council of Europe documents! At more or less the same time I was the chair of a group of authors working on the new curricula for English in Slovenian primary and secondary school.

But you reached once again across the borders of Slovenia, didn't you? It was in the nineties that you were invited to give a keynote address at a FILMM conference.

I have always believed in cooperation, especially with people who have the same interests, the

same orientation towards a better future – be it at school as teachers or students, be it in life. Therefore I always welcome new challenges, particularly those from which lots of benefits might spring – and in particular those which could improve the teaching of literature. In 1990 I was invited to the FILMM (Fédération internationale des langues et littératures modernes) conference in Novi Sad, where I met lots of people with different views and experiences, and which enriched me personally and professionally. I think it was about then when a new idea sprang to life, namely to organize a conference on American literature for non-American readers, which was eventually done in June 1992 under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio, Italy. The nineties were indeed a very demanding decade, but extremely fruitful. But I also enjoyed discussions with lots of colleagues and serving at FILMM Bureau as one of its vice presidents.

Even more fruitful because you started working more with teachers of Slovene? And cooperating with the leading scientists and researchers from other fields of research, like psychologists, librarians, teachers of other foreign languages?

Well, in 1994-97 I coordinated the TEMPUS project with the aim to establish the new translation studies programme with Slovene as the first language as a new department at the Faculty of Arts. It was a daring project, lots of verbal battles were fought, but in the end the group of people who believed that such a department is absolutely essential for Slovenia, then still a future member of the European Union, won.

Since 1995 I have been the President of the Reading Association of Slovenia. I firmly believe this association tries its best to fulfil its role as one of the strongest links in the chain of reading and general literacy education in Slovenia. Do you know that 77% of people in Slovenia apparently still do not reach functional literacy?

But then, one of your friends and colleagues, Roger Sell said that if people don't want to read novels, they don't need to read.

As dear as Roger is to me, I cannot agree with this view. It is a rather disputable statement, is it not? Can you accept the responsibility of letting people do harm to each other due to their lack of knowledge? And lack of self-criticism?

Whoever knows you, knows well that you have never kept quiet when you felt unhappy or dissatisfied with something. I am sure the future holds new challenges and many new goals for you. But let us finish this conversation with books and reading: do you read more about literature or more literature? And is there a book you haven't read yet, and wish you had?

My interest in the reader and later the immense knowledge of the processes of reading frequently makes me read more about the reader, reading and literary theory leaving less time for reading all the novels and poems I would like to read, let alone for following the incredible production of interesting literature in English. The day, however, has only 24 hours and I have already given up many of my previous interests to somehow realise all my professional interests and obligations. The number of the new novels I would like to read is too big to be listed and it is constantly growing and postponed because of my studying reading and literature and teaching the two.