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Promoting the teaching of European literature

Report

Committee on Culture, Science and Education

Rapporteur: Mr Jacques LEGENDRE, France

Summary

The Parliamentary Assembly wishes to encourage the transmission – throughout the education system – of European literature in all its wealth and diversity. Knowledge of a language involves more than just mastering it as a means of communication. Knowledge of great works of literature enriches thought and enhances life itself.

Learning of the mother tongue and its literature plays a major part in forging a national consciousness. Learning other European languages and learning about their literature can help to inculcate European citizenship. It is necessary to go beyond a strictly national conception of literature teaching and offer schoolchildren at all levels a transversal approach to Europe's heritage, highlighting the common link of respect for cultural diversity.



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A. Draft recommendation

1. The Parliamentary Assembly is concerned to ensure the transmission – throughout the education system – of European literature in all its wealth and diversity, whether in the form of the written heritage built up over the centuries or in the form of contemporary writing. This preoccupation with the teaching of literature prompted a colloquy on the subject at the French Senate in Paris on 11 December 2007.
2. The Assembly has already stated its position in [Recommendation 815 \(1977\)](#) on freedom of expression and the role of the writer in Europe, [Recommendation 1043 \(1986\)](#) on Europe's linguistic and literary heritage, [Recommendation 1135 \(1990\)](#) on literary translation, [Recommendation 1383 \(1998\)](#) on linguistic diversification, [Recommendation 1539 \(2001\)](#) on the European Year of Languages and [Recommendation 1740 \(2006\)](#) on the place of the mother tongue in school education.
3. Knowledge of a language involves more than just mastering it as a means of communication. Knowledge of great works of literature enriches thought and enhances life itself.
4. Learning of the mother tongue and its literature plays a major part in forging a national consciousness among schoolchildren. Learning other European languages and learning about their literature can help to inculcate European citizenship.
5. The Assembly notes that some successful transnational experiments have taken place, particularly with regard to history teaching.
6. It is necessary to go beyond a strictly national conception of literature teaching and offer schoolchildren at all levels a transversal approach to Europe's heritage, highlighting the common link of respect for cultural diversity.
7. The Assembly recognises that the Internet has become an important means of access to knowledge and in this connection welcomes the European Parliament's proposal to establish a European digital library in the form of a single, direct and multilingual point of access to Europe's cultural heritage.
8. Accordingly, the Parliamentary Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers encourage member states, and especially their education authorities:
 - 8.1. to spark a desire to read in young people by promoting the teaching of Europe's literary heritage in all types of primary and secondary education and by devising appropriate syllabuses for all levels;
 - 8.2. to provide this teaching in addition to, and not instead of, the teaching of mother-tongue literature and the learning of foreign languages;
 - 8.3. to strengthen existing approaches to the teaching of literature in Europe that emphasise the European dimension;
 - 8.4. to present the teaching of European literature as an integral part of education in European citizenship, having regard to cultural diversity, in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights, and to the linguistic pluralism of our continent;
 - 8.5. to support the translation of texts past and present, especially the masterpieces of European literature, into and from the languages spoken in Europe, paying special attention to less widely used languages;
 - 8.6. to consider producing anthologies and teaching material for European literature appropriate to the various levels and practices of European school systems;
 - 8.7. to develop websites on Europe's literary heritage where all the citizens of Europe can find texts, bibliographies, literary history, courses and web links.

B. B. Explanatory memorandum, by Mr Jacques Legendre

1. Introduction

1. I should like to thank Mr Guy Fontaine, co-editor of *Lettres européennes – Manuel d'histoire de la littérature européenne*, for his contribution to the drafting of this report.
2. In 2005, the Czech novelist Milan Kundera wrote in his essay *The curtain* that Europe had not succeeded in thinking of its literature as a historical whole and that he would forever repeat that this was an irretrievable intellectual failure.
3. "What would remain of Europe, that old lady with a weak heart, if the political and institutional ligaments holding it together for over half a century suddenly disappeared overnight?" asks the literary critic Raphaëlle Rérolle.
4. Encouraging people to learn about Europe's literature seems to be one method of giving life and expression to what 800 million Europeans too often think of as merely an administrative framework, endowed with a strictly rhetorical and technocratic language: European literature will be a discipline, within the humanities, creating "connoisseurs of the human condition", to use Tzvetan Todorov's expression.
5. There are, however, many obstacles to be removed before we can make progress towards the teaching of citizenship and venture to regard learning about Europe's literature as a schooling in European cultural diversity. This was the tenor of the discussions held in the Senate in Paris on 11 December 2007 by experts brought together on the initiative of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which I have the honour of chairing (see AS/Cult(2007)35).
6. The introduction, in all Council of Europe member states, of an innovative method of teaching literature that takes account of its European dimension is not intended to substitute the teaching of a supranational "Eurocentric" canon for the often ethnocentric teaching of native language and literature.
7. Promoting the teaching of European literature means:
 - a. Recognising the openness of our continent's literature to influence, together with its contribution to the global spread of ideas;
 - b. Protecting the pluralism of the languages in which it has been created;
 - c. Taking account of existing educational practices in each of the countries concerned;
 - d. Encouraging literary translation of both the literary heritage and contemporary writing;
 - e. Publishing and fostering creative writing, accepting the dizzy challenge of the new technologies, and protecting authors.

2. Recognising the openness of our continent's literature to influence, together with its contribution to the global spread of ideas

8. Geographically, it is Asia and Mediterranean Africa, the cradle of our European culture in many respects, which stand out as having provided the basic template for our continent's literature: from Israel and ancient Egypt to China and Japan, from Hans Bethge, Malraux and Ezra Pound, by way of Indian fables and Kipling's India and without forgetting *Floris and Blanche fleur* or the Arabic poets (of Spain), who might have inspired the Provençal troubadours. It is above all through poetry, theatre and stories that the Asian influence is apparent. As for Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe had only a very sketchy idea of it before taking root there in the 19th century, even though the 18th-century French philosophers had been interested in the slave system. Later, "Negro art" was a powerful influence in helping the literary and artistic avant-garde to get away from mimesis and create a new vision of reality. More recently still, the African novel had an enviable vogue in Europe, as is still the case for Latin America's "magic realism" and the poetry of Neruda and Paz. The reception of these influences in the United States deserves an exposition in its own right, for their impact spread over a century and a half: from Poe and Melville to Baldwin and Roth. Last but not least, the Malay Archipelago and the South Sea Islands are present in the works of Diderot, Conrad and a number of other English-language authors.
9. The pattern revealed by a chronological approach is scarcely clearer. Obviously, it all depends on how far back existing contacts and influences can be traced. While there is no point in drawing up a common chronology, we can at least distinguish three (not necessarily overlapping) phases in what are processes that

sometimes lasted for centuries. The fact is that these phases were the result of Europe's double movement through overseas territories (advance, then retreat), a movement which was far from being accomplished everywhere at the same time and in the same manner. Moreover, decolonisation, which began in 1774 (in the United States) and gathered pace after 1945, has not been completed even today, especially in economic terms.

10. The first phase might be termed colonial. Its early stages were scarcely conducive to literary activity. Before people could write they had to live, dig themselves in and hold their own. Once settled, the diaspora whites who devoted themselves to the literature modelled themselves on the codes in force in their home countries, which were familiar to them. On the whole, pre-independence literary output in North America remained provincial, largely imitating British models, and we find a similar attachment to the Dutch example in Indonesia and South Africa. Colonists tended to think in terms of imported norms, and their attention was focused more on their own class than on the world of the native. Nevertheless, some of the more clear-sighted settlers exposed the abuses of the colonial system (for example, "Multatuli" in *Max Havelaar*). Historically, this phase coincided with the building of empires. Its sole culmination was in Africa, with the Berlin Conference of 1885, which saw the triumph of European imperialism; elsewhere, military expeditions took place in China, Tonkin and Cuba during the same period.

11. Next came a transition stage (whose limits are hazy), during which the belief in Europe's superiority was attacked on two fronts: domestically and abroad. Relativism, and the doubts that had made their appearance with Montaigne, eventually led to celebration of other peoples and lands that were deemed superior to an Old World that had become a spent force. Meanwhile, the colonised elites were becoming aware of their dignity and proclaiming their rights, even in the language of their conquerors.

12. It is above all from the third, post-colonial, phase that the counter influence mentioned above dates. In terms of literature, political independence finally put an end to imitation of the European models taught at school. Key ideas such as the American dream, Negritude and "magic realism" were then able to unfold in their full splendour. Whether it comes from descendants of white emigrants or the descendants of their former subjects, this extensive literature has come to diversify and revitalise the major European languages and give them a truly global dimension, as long demonstrated by the North American novel and, closer to home, Senghor, Naipaul, Brink, Nadine Gordimer, Patrick White, Carpentier and Gabriel Garcia Márquez, of whom no educated reader can be unaware. Europe has certainly not been repaid with ingratitude. Quite the contrary. The caravels of its seafarers and soldiers have returned without their cannons, sailing before the inspiration of the mind.

3. Protecting the multiple voices of the languages in which European literature has been created

13. Talking about "European literature" and touching on teaching methods for such a subject does not in any way mean repudiating national literature or entail merging the linguistic code of each country into the deadly Utopia of a universal language. Every prospectus for every university in Europe offers students an introduction to "Latin American literature" if they so wish. And the teaching of this subject covers all the languages in which literature is written today in some 20 or so countries of South America, without neglecting the fact that writing in Spanish and Portuguese is predominant. Why deny the European continent a classification that is accepted for the American continent?

14. The temptation to slough off one's mother tongue (Conrad, Kafka, Maeterlinck, Nabokov, etc.) or to "debalkanise" oneself in order to become "European" (Cioran) is still identifiable, even today: in Amsterdam in 2006, during a symposium entitled "Writing Europe now", the Romanian writer Simone Paupescu mentioned the advice that she gave to her creative-writing students, which was that if they wanted to be well known, they should write directly in American English.

15. Another global language has made its appearance with the "Internet generation", which has seen writing proliferate chaotically (outside books): an entire community, unlettered in the literal sense of the word, communicates in a purely phonetic code, thus retreating into tribal behaviour, impervious to surrounding cultural references.

16. Mindful of the multiple voices of the languages in which works of literature have been created, the teaching of European literature, because it will be based on respect for linguistic, historical and cultural diversity, will allow a cross-cutting approach that highlights the obvious existence of a common bond. To quote the Spanish novelist José Manuel Fajardo: "The teaching of European literature will become an incontrovertible tool for consolidating a European consciousness."

4. Taking account of existing educational practices in each European country

17. Although the course titles may seem comparable, the reality of literature teaching varies greatly from country to country across our continent, probably because the subject-matter itself, “literature”, is interpreted in different ways: the idea of a literary canon, for example, is currently being challenged in the Netherlands, and a recent controversy in Poland has shown how difficult it is to establish a corpus, even of national literature, and how sensitive and emotional a subject this is.

18. Before determining the purpose of teaching, it is therefore the very concept of literature that must be defined. Moreover, the issue is far from being the same in every country, for the teaching of literature is closely bound up with the historical development of the region in which it takes place. Some European states particularly encourage the teaching of national literature because they fear being assimilated into a supranational society that would obliterate identities. This is the case in Ireland, for example.

19. For the sake of simplicity, the differences between education systems in Europe from north to south may be described as follows. By teaching the native language and literature, Scandinavia, the British Isles and the German-speaking countries today set out to foster the learner’s intellectual development.

20. Mediterranean Europe (including France) emphasises the communication of a culture through the teaching of literature.

21. The desire for Europe, and therefore for the teaching of European culture and literature, is most obvious in the countries formerly behind the Iron Curtain: all the “western” authors banned during the Soviet period – and even the cultural heritage of Greece and Rome, which was widely rejected between 1945 and 1981 – are considered a valuable discovery, appropriate teaching of which should be of benefit to young people.

22. In the light of the above, two conclusions are possible: the first is that Europe does indeed have a “common treasure trove”, which we wish, in varying degrees and by various teaching methods, to pass on to pupils. It is therefore legitimate to prepare and distribute teaching material inviting them to explore this “common treasure trove”. (However, a change in the teaching of literature in Europe will not be dictated by a central authority but rather be encouraged step by step. It is for this reason that any plan to promote teaching of European literature must put the accent on broadening the options for literature teaching within each country.)

23. The second conclusion is that it would be a good thing, at the same time as encouraging exploration of Europe’s literary heritage, to examine each country’s know-how in terms of literature teaching: it would be rewarding for any European teacher to make room in his or her teaching not only for foreign literature but also for different educational practices; however, it should be understood that the object is not to draw up league tables for effectiveness.

5. Encouraging, across Europe, literary translation of both the literary heritage and contemporary writing

24. The Berlin Wall was not just watchtowers guarding barbed wire. Ideologically, culturally and linguistically, Europe was radically divided. There was a genuine rift, from which the scars and after-effects will live on in people’s minds, attitudes and knowledge if we are not careful. It would be utopian to believe that the elite – scientists, scholars, politicians, and often writers – that worked for the reconstruction of Europe has succeeded in communicating its knowledge of Europe and its culture to populations deprived of free access to knowledge since 1945. The fact that literary texts did not circulate freely was a pernicious part of an ideology that still has resonance and which imposed fallacious books and ideas (authors and literary movements were passed over in silence or falsely idealised, forced correlations were drawn between historical events and literary production, etc.).

25. Besides these omissions dictated by the Marxist regime, we may find gaps that can be filled only by a systematic policy of translation into all European languages: basic major authors such as the Spaniards Lara and Espronceda are not translated into Polish at all. And while Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is easy to find in translation, there is no Polish version of *Les contemplations* to date.

26. For its part, the old “western” Europe is also displaying a regrettable ignorance of major writing in the old “eastern” Europe. Intercultural communication between eastern European countries and countries such as the United Kingdom and France is far from balanced: the latter’s literature has been widely translated, but relatively little has been translated from the former, especially into English.

27. “Is literature currently being produced in the east of Europe?” the Dutch journalist Michel Krielaars ventured to wonder aloud in 2006 at the “Writing Europe now” symposium in Amsterdam, clearly pointing up the divide between “major” and “minor” literature. Literary translation is one of the keys to ensuring that works written in “minority” languages are no longer undervalued.

28. Speaking as a translation specialist, Professor Maryla Laurent went even further: “My experience of literary translation shows me every day that a great writer, even if read in a bad translation, is unsettling precisely because he or she is ‘other’, and therefore both alike and different. Literature must be written in all languages, including those without the status of an ‘official’ language, and we must work on tools to translate these languages into one another without losing the specific differences.”

6. Publishing and fostering creative writing, accepting the dizzy challenge of the new technologies, and protecting authors

29. The production of teaching materials certainly represents progress towards the knowledge and “sharing, by Europe’s inhabitants, of the priceless literary heritage which is theirs” (to quote Professor Peter Schnyder), but it brings with it a disturbing question.

30. Why are there so few reference books to introduce Europe’s 800 million citizens to the roots, history and current state of literary production on the continent where they live?

31. The teaching of European literature means fostering literary output in all media and strengthening the intermediation chain for European literature and books (authors, publishers, booksellers, librarians and teachers).

32. The work accomplished in Poland and Switzerland by the Editions Noir sur Blanc publishing house is a step in this direction, the idea being to foster intercultural dialogue through works translated and distributed in French and Polish, with publication of the literary works of contemporary writers from 20 different linguistic areas of Europe.

33. Today’s books speak to Europe’s pupils about their own lives. So too do the books of the past; this is the idea behind the work being done by the Les Classiques du Monde series, amongst others, in publishing works considered to be classics in their countries of origin.

34. Collecting these classics in a large digital library – the European process inspired by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France with its Européana project springs to mind – is a means of pooling and providing access to major works of cultural and literary reference.

35. Taking advantage of the wider options offered by the new technologies, educational initiatives have proliferated at national and international level (as in the plan to produce, under the auspices of a European committee of experts, an online guide called “Theatre, the cement of Europe”, and to network international theatre festivals for the benefit of European pupils): they include initiatives by the French Ministry of Education for teachers of arts subjects, and the networking, for European pupils, of experimental theatre by the International Festival of ClujNapoca in Romania and the Schultheater der Länder Festival in Germany.

36. A Europe which is ready, after all, to consider systematic methods for teaching European literature must, when taking up the dizzy challenge presented by the new technologies, respect the unassignable non-pecuniary rights protecting the essence of the work and the specific personality of its author, whether or not it is published in paper form.

37. The coexistence of paper and digital editions will make a valuable contribution to the teaching of our literature: promoting the teaching of European literature means contemplating a comprehensive project supported by a Europe-wide political commitment and encompassing authors, publishers, translators, librarians, schools, teachers of various subjects, and pupils.

38. It is only if we do this that the image of the old lady with a weak heart will begin to fade and another mythological figure, dear to every amateur of classical antiquity, will take its place: Princess Europa, a desirable young woman.

Reporting committee: Committee on Culture, Science and Education.

Reference to committee: [Doc. 10667](#) and Reference No. 3194 of 30 March 2006.

Draft recommendation unanimously adopted by the committee on 22 January 2008.

Members of the committee: Mrs Anne **Brasseur** (Chairperson), Baroness **Hooper**, Mr Detlef **Dzembitzki**, Mr Mehmet **Tekelioğlu** (Vice-Chairpersons), Mr Remigijus **Ačas**, Mr Kornél Almássy, Mrs Aneliya **Atanasova**, Mr Lokman **Ayva**, Mrs Donka Banović, Mr Rony **Bargetze**, Mr Walter **Bartoš**, Mr Radu Mircea Berceanu, Mr Levan Berdzenishvili, Mrs Oksana **Bilozir** (alternate: Mrs Olha **Herasym'yuk**), Mrs Guðfinna Bjarnadóttir, Mrs Ana **Blatnik**, Mrs Maria Luisa Boccia, Mrs Margherita Boniver, Mr Ivan **Brajović**, Mr Vlad **Cubreacov**, Mrs Lena **Dabkowska-Cichocka**, Mr Ivica **Dačić**, Mr Joseph Debono Grech, Mr Ferdinand **Devínsky**, Mr Daniel **Ducarme** (alternate: Mr Hendrik **Daems**), Mrs Åse Gunhild Woie **Duesund**, Mrs Anke Eymer, Mr Relu Fenechiu, Mrs Blanca Fernández-Capel, Mrs Maria Emelina Fernández-Soriano (alternate: Mr Iñaki **Txueka**), Mr Axel **Fischer**, Mr José **Freire Antunes** (alternate: Mr José Luis **Arnaut**), Mrs Ruth **Genner** (alternate: Mrs Doris **Fiala**), Mr Ioannis **Giannellis-Theodosiadis**, Mr Stefan Glävan, Mr Vladimir Grachev (alternate: Mr Igor **Chernyshenko**), Mr Raffi **Hovannisian**, Mr Rafael **Huseynov**, Mr Fazail ibrahimli, Mr Mogens **Jensen**, Mr Morgan **Johansson**, Mrs Liana Kanelli (alternate: Mrs Rodoula **Zissi**), Mr Jan **Kaźmierczak** (alternate: Mr Dariusz **Lipiński**), Mrs Cecilia **Keaveney**, Mr Ali Rashid Khalil (alternate: Mr Donato **Mosella**), Mr Serhii Kivalov, Mr József **Kozma**, Mr Jean-Pierre Kucheida, Mr Ertuğrul **Kumcuoğlu**, Mr Markku **Laukkanen**, Mr Jacques **Legendre** (alternate: Mr Philippe **Nachbar**), Mr Yves Leterme, Mr van der Linden, Mrs Jagoda Majska-Martinčević, Mrs Milica Marković, Mrs Muriel Marland-Militello (alternate: Mr Alain **Cousin**), Mr Andrew **McIntosh** (alternate: Baroness **Knight of Collingtree**), Mr Ivan Melnikov, Mrs Maria Manuela **Melo**, Mrs Assunta Meloni, Mr Paskal **Milo**, Mrs Christine Muttonen (alternate: Mr Albrecht **Konečný**), Mrs Miroslava **Němcová**, Mr Edward **O'Hara**, Mr Kent Olsson, Mr Andrey Pantev, Mrs Antigoni **Papadopoulos**, Mr Azis **Pollozhani**, Mrs Majda Potrata, Mrs Anta **Rugāte**, Lord Russell-Johnston (alternate: Mr Robert **Walter**), Mr Indrek **Saar**, Mr André **Schneider** (alternate: Mr Frédéric **Reiss**), Mrs Albertina Soliani, Mr Yury Solonin (alternate: Mr Anatoliy **Korobeynikov**), Mr Christophe Spiliotis-Saquet, Mrs Doris **Stump**, Mr Valeriy **Sudarenkov**, Mr Petro Symonenko, Mr Klaas de **Vries**, Mr Piotr **Wach**, Mr Wolfgang **Wodarg**, N... (alternate: Mrs Rosario **Velasco Garcia**).

NB: The names of those members present at the meeting are printed in bold.

See 17th Sitting, 17 April 2008 (adoption of the draft recommendation); and [Recommendation 1833](#).