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LITERARY PRAXIS: ENGAGING WITH TEXTS IN CLASSROOM SETTINGS

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'... text is an interactive event, a social exchange of meanings'

Ian Reid, *The Making of Literature: Texts, contexts and classroom practices*, Norwood, SA: Australian Association for the Teaching of English, 1984, p.57

Abstract

This article focuses on a small group of teachers as they reflect on the strategies they use to support their students in their efforts to interpret literary texts. We argue that the interpretation of literary texts within classroom settings is mediated in complex ways: by the social context of the classroom, the institutional setting of the school (including its curriculum and organization), as well as mandated educational policies. These dimensions shape the relationships between teachers and students as they engage in the 'social exchange of meanings' (Reid, 1984) that is prompted by the texts chosen for study. Students bring their own biographies to this exchange, drawing on their experiences outside school in order to make meanings from the texts they are required to read. Teachers, on the other hand, also bring their biographies with them into classrooms, including their beliefs about the value of a literary education. By exploring the reflections in which a small group of teachers of literature engage about their work, we ask questions about the value of a literary education, reaffirming its significance in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Literature education, literary development, teachers as researchers, international comparative research

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1. INTRODUCTION

Our essay arises out of a comparative research project in which we have been engaged for several years. At the core of this project has been a dialogue between teachers of literature in the Netherlands and Australia, in the course of which they wrote essays that tried to capture key aspects of their professional practice (see Gill & Illesca, 2011; Groenendijk, Pols & van de Ven, 2011). In the process of writing accounts of their teaching, they were prompted to identify the views and values at the heart of their work and to open them up to scrutiny. They also thought about the ways their professional practice was mediated by their respective policy settings. Although they shared many assumptions about the teaching of literature, their teaching was not fully transparent to each another. And this recognition led them in turn to revisit the beliefs that shaped their work and to view their pedagogies anew. The writing they produced as a result of these exchanges – which has since been published in a collection of essays entitled *Literary Praxis: A conversational inquiry into the teaching of literature* (van de Ven & Doecke, 2011) – thus has an intensely reflexive quality, showing a sustained engagement with the conditions of their work, including their autobiographies as students and teachers of literature. In addition, teacher educators from around the world wrote chapters for *Literary Praxis* in which they responded to the writing by the Dutch and Australian teachers, exploring the values and beliefs that shape their own professional practice as teachers of literature.

In this article we reflect again on the value of a literary education, revisiting the teachers' essays and the international responses to their accounts of their teaching. We shall firstly outline the basic impulse behind the project. We then locate a literary education within its social and political contexts, also describing the perspectives of the teachers involved in the project and their reflections on the aims, methods and constraints of a literature education. In our concluding section we return to the aims of a literary education, and affirm its relevance to the contemporary world.

2. A MODE OF INQUIRY

The comparative research project used writing as a vehicle for inquiring into the everyday life of classrooms (cf. Haug, 1990/2001; Smith, 1987). For everyone involved, the effort to explore their work as teachers of literature was a struggle with language, meaning, and representation. The linguistic edge of the inquiry was sharpened by the fact that, although the essay jointly written by Ramon Groenendijk and Mies Pons is published for an international audience in English, the classroom exchanges and reflections recorded by them originally happened in Dutch – something that we acknowledge by reproducing parts of their essay in *Lit-*

erary Praxis in their mother tongue (Groenendijk, Pols & van de Ven, 2011, p.46, p.53). Language, in short, was the focus of the inquiry and the medium in which it occurred. Thus we attempted to grapple with the interpretive complexities involved whenever anyone observes a teacher's classroom and writes an account of what he or she has experienced.

You might say that the people and events in the Dutch and Australian teachers' accounts of their work have been transformed in a manner akin to what happens in a literary work, when its content assumes a verbal form that resists any attempt to treat it as though it provides a direct window on 'truth' or 'reality'. We would go so far as to say that the hermeneutic process that we experience with such intensity when we engage with literary works applies to every attempt to give an account of our lives and the people and events around us. The essays written by the Dutch and Australian teachers require interpreting and re-interpreting. Whatever the reality of the flesh and blood individuals who participated in the classrooms that feature in the essays composed by these teachers, they are now only available to us in the snippets of conversation that these teachers recorded and the written reflections in which they engaged in order to understand their own practice. We simply have their words, traces of a here-and-now that time has left behind. But we know that words never simply name people and things, as though language provides a direct access to the world out 'there'. The words these teachers used are sites for dialogical play (Bahktin, 1981/87), conveying their intensely felt personal engagement with the lives of the students in their classrooms and the values that shape their work. When reading their stories, you cannot avoid becoming conscious of all that 'complicates the path of any word toward its object' (Bahktin, 1981/ 87, p.281). It is only possible to fully engage with their words from the standpoint of your own situation and the beliefs and values you hold. The 'truth' lies within this dialogue between the authors and readers of these essays, in the conversations that we hope that *Literary Praxis* will inspire, rather than in any judgment about the accuracy or otherwise of these representations of their teaching practice.

When we invited the Dutch and Australian teachers to write about their work, it had always been our intention to circulate their accounts of literature teaching amongst educators from around the world. The educators we approached then wrote essays from their own standpoints, offering interestingly varied readings of the classroom situations depicted by the Dutch and Australian teachers. By making the values and assumptions that shaped their readings of the Dutch and Australian essays explicit, they developed equally reflexive accounts of their own work as literary educators. So our 'conversational inquiry' into the teaching of literature assumed a form that matched its content. At a time when so much emphasis is being placed on the importance of measurement, when the rich complexities of classroom discourse have been reduced to calculations purporting to show the effectiveness of 'factors' affecting students' learning (cf. Doecke, 2006, p.197), it is vital to affirm the salience of other means of representing classroom communities.

A literary education generates its own forms of inquiry into social life, as teachers and students join in the 'social exchange of meanings' around the texts that provide the focus for study in classroom settings (Reid, 1984, p.57). By engaging in this exchange of meanings, in the 'interactive event' of the 'text' (Reid, 1984, p.57), we focus – to borrow again from Bakhtin – on the 'truth' of the situation as it presents itself 'to me as the one who is actively experiencing it' (Bakhtin, 1993, pp.36-37). We explicitly recognize the world that 'I' share with 'others' and the obligations inhering within that recognition, in order to support what we understand the text to mean.

Our aim in this essay, however, is not to précis *Literary Praxis*. This essay is meant to extend the 'conversational inquiry' in that volume by asking what it says about the nature of literary interpretation. Why do these teachers and teacher educators think that it is important for young people to engage in interpreting literary texts? *Literary Praxis* cannot be reduced to a set of findings about literary interpretation in classroom settings or a compendium about why reading literary texts is good for you. Still less does it comprise a set of tips and tricks as examples of effective pedagogy. That would be contrary to the dialogical spirit in which the original inquiry was implemented. In this essay we are self-consciously entertaining ideas about the nature of literary interpretation that remain provisional, as befits the process of interpreting and re-interpreting as it is enacted by Prue Gill, Bella Illesca, Ramon Groenendijk and Mies Pons, as well as the other contributors to *Literary Praxis*. We can only work with the textual evidence available to us, which means eschewing any pretence to capture the meaning of the classroom exchanges at the heart of the essays by the Dutch and Australian teachers once and for all. Rather than supposing that the meaning of the situations and episodes depicted by these teachers can be fixed, it is more productive to read the teachers' writing on their professional practice as contributing to an ongoing process of meaning making in which teachers of literature are collectively engaged, as they try to understand the nature of their work within the policy settings and traditions in which they operate. In this way, we hope that this essay will itself embody a dialectic between content and form, between the richly concrete details of the Dutch and Australian essays and the provisional interpretations we reach about the meaning of their work as literary educators.

3. TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

It should be obvious that we are not conceiving reading and interpreting simply as cognitive skills, as when standardized literacy tests purport to assess reading comprehension. 'Reading' as it is constructed by such tests has little to do with what we understand this word to mean, even when standardized literacy testing differentiates between literal and inferential interpretation, and pretends to map the reading skills of students against some kind of learning continuum that opens up the

prospect of their ultimately enjoying richer and more rewarding encounters with texts – when children supposedly do basic decoding first (i.e. consolidate their skills in using functional ‘literacy’), and then proceed to more complex levels of interpretation that we associate with reading ‘literary’ texts. Such learning continua no doubt have their value, but not if it is at the expense of recognizing the culturally mediated nature of learning to read, even when we are referring to the halting efforts of very young children to make sense of print. Those ‘ways with words’ are still grounded in the social and cultural relationships in which they occur (Brice-Heath, 1984). Yet standards-based reforms (Darling-Hammond, 2005) that promote drilling and skilling as some kind of moral imperative that can supposedly lift young people out of poverty, treating their home languages and cultures as rubble to be cleared away in order to gain proficiency in the standard language (as in rhetoric about ‘no child left behind’ or the statement made by the Australian Federal Education Minister – now Prime Minister – about resolutely rejecting teaching practices that create ‘happy illiterate children’ [Bita, 2009]) are unavoidably mediating our teaching, challenging our work and our understanding of ourselves as teachers of literature. This is so, even when we might be teaching articulate students in a relatively elite institutional setting who willingly embrace the complexities of interpretive analysis, as is the case with the class taught by Prue Gill, one of the Australian teachers who participated in the original inquiry (see Gill & Illesca, 2011), or in a rather homogenous middle class setting, as is the case in the daily practice of Ramon Groenendijk and Mies Pols, the Dutch teachers involved (see Groenendijk, Pols & van de Ven, 2011).

The teaching of literature is not unaffected by rhetoric about the need to improve literacy standards, no matter where that teaching occurs. This is not simply because the hysteria that the popular media has whipped up about declining literacy standards has become all-pervasive (cf. Sawyer, 2006; van de Ven, 2012). The work of teachers in elite private schools (such as those that have become such a prominent feature of the Australian educational landscape) is unavoidably marked by the inequalities created by governments that have been prepared to allow the state school system to become residualised in the interests of supporting so-called parental ‘choice’, not least because the literacy levels of students in state schools as measured by standardized tests are deemed to be inferior to those of students in private schools. Everyone is implicated in this momentous social change, even when they balk at consciously acknowledging how their work might be located within a larger network of social relationships that systematically produces such inequalities. In the Netherlands similar processes are taking place, although up till this moment mainly in the bigger cities. Besides that, the Dutch differentiated secondary school system leads many less privileged children into vocational education, from the age of twelve. Thus we hardly see any of these students in Mies and Ramon’s classes.

The contributors to *Literary Praxis* all give accounts of policy environments that feature pronounced differences between the schooling provided to socially disadvantaged communities and the education enjoyed by middle class pupils. Those differences have historical roots, reflected in attempts by 19th century governments to provide basic 'literacy' to working class populations, as distinct from the canonical knowledge and culture enshrined in educational institutions serving social elites (cf. Balibar, quoted in Bennett, 1979, p.158). Not to put too fine a point on it, the key difference might be characterized as one between all that is denoted by the word 'literacy' and what we usually associate with a 'literary' education¹. Yet it also seems clear from the essays assembled in *Literary Praxis* that this difference is inflected in a peculiarly contemporary fashion, due to socio-economic changes named by words like 'globalisation', 'corporate capitalism', 'neo-liberalism', or, indeed, 'standards-based reforms'. There is no gainsaying the discriminatory effects of schooling as they have long been experienced by minority groups, such as the African American students in urban settings in Pittsburgh and Toronto, mentioned respectively by Petrosky (2011) and Kooy (2011). But the way standards-based reforms construct 'literacy' – and indeed the difference between a 'literacy' and a 'literary' education – does more than disenfranchise whole sectors of the population by imposing drilling and skilling that completely alienates them, as when teachers implement lesson scripts that focus unrelentingly on phonics instruction or when they teach to the test (Taylor, 2003). The emphasis that is typically given by neo-liberal policy to the role that education supposedly plays in increasing economic productivity, and equipping young people with the skills they need to find a place for themselves in a 21st century economy, means that language and literacy are constructed in narrowly pragmatic, common-sense terms that marginalize richer understandings of the potential of language to embody our thoughts and feelings, our fears and desires, and to imagine our lives differently from the present – that is, understandings that are typically associated with a 'literary' imagination.

¹ *This concept of literature education is to a large extent similar to the European concept of Bildung. Originally the 19th century concept of Bildung referred to education for the social elite, who had to be prepared for social leadership. In this elite education literature had a prominent position. It focused on the full development of a human being, seen as an individual. Currently, the concept of Bildung has been reconceptualised and is seen as an important aim of all education in Europe, for all learners. It becomes perceived as enriched with components of social integration and social action, citizenship and empowerment of social agents within the community with a focus on both the individual as well as the cultural values of society. This, then, embraces the social and cultural dimension of any individual as well as sentient contact with different cultures, languages and identities. Bildung comprises personal growth and learning and acquisition with the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions, organised into competences and cultures of various kinds (Coste et al., 2007).*

Laila Aase, in her contribution to *Literary Praxis*, provides a sharp insight into this trend when she tells an anecdote about a young man in a vocational education course in Norway who remarked: 'If I ever find the need for short stories, I would know my life has gone to hell' (Aase, 2011, p.134). According to Laila, this young man had even taken the trouble to ask his parents what they thought about short stories, when 'they confirmed his assumption that short stories were something that he would never need' (Aase, 2011, p.134). Although the subject of Norwegian was part of the curriculum, the 'utilitarian character' of vocational training meant that students expected that everything they learnt in school 'should be of use later on' (p.134). Short stories and other literary texts did not fall into this category.

What should we say to this young man? When challenged about the value of their work, teachers of literature typically respond by pointing to the importance of empathizing with the characters in a novel of play, although they may embody experiences and emotions that are completely outside one's realm of possibilities (cf. Culler, 1997, pp.18-42; also Culler, 2007, pp.23-42). You thereby extend your world beyond what is familiar to you, developing a capacity to reach out to worlds and people who are strange to you, a capacity that supports your understanding of your own world and your place in it, a goal that is explicitly avowed by Prue Gill and Mies Pols in their respective essays. And this is not simply a matter of responding to the content of a literary work, as though that content can be grasped without engaging with the form in which it is presented. Crucially bound up with this recognition of others is a sensitivity towards the ways that language mediates your experience and social relationships. This focus on literary language is important in the lessons by Ramon Groenendijk. We are all 'inside' a language, and literary works make us peculiarly aware of this as an ineluctable condition of our lives (cf. Eagleton, 2007, pp.68-69). These and other familiar nostrums held by teachers affirm the benefits of a literary education as somehow bound up with what it means to be fully aware of the life around you and ethically responsive to others.

Yet as persuasive as such accounts of the importance of a literary education might be for teachers of literature, they would hardly serve to convince the young man in Laila Aase's story. And what should we say to his parents? By invoking the authority of his parents' life experience, this young man forces us to confront yet another discomfiting realization: that his resistance to short stories is more than a matter of his individual disposition, but reflects a certain upbringing, a certain set of beliefs and values that he shares with others in his community. Young people who are streamed into vocational training are usually classified as being unsuited to academic study (Blake & Bowling, 2011). They may be good with their hands, but they cannot match the intelligence and sensitivity of those students who are more academically oriented. As literature teachers, we easily slip into this way of talking about education and schooling without wanting to acknowledge the unpalatable truths that it conceals. For this young man's rejection of short stories might be read as a response to a certain type of culture and knowledge with which he cannot

identify. He occupies a recognizable standpoint that is not susceptible to persuasion to think otherwise, if by this we mean some kind of rational discourse that is unmediated by social and economic divisions. What, indeed, is the use of reading literature when your primary goal is to learn a trade? What is an education for if not to equip you to enter the workforce and find a place for yourself in the economy?

The question of where literature teaching sits within education systems that continue to perpetuate social and economic divisions, if not huge inequalities within Western societies, haunts all the essays in *Literary Praxis*. But, as we have just indicated, this does not refer only to educational institutions that blatantly discriminate against visible minorities, such as the urban schools in Pittsburgh (Petrosky, 2011), the schools in Toronto that cater for predominantly young black women (Kooy, 2011), or the situation of children from poor Pacific Island families in South Auckland (Locke, 2011). Such anecdotes arguably conjure up scenarios where the social divide continues to be experienced as a difference between 'them' and 'us', where the possibility of critique is paradoxically opened up by this very sense of difference. The force of Laila Aase's vignette derives from its image of a young man who has acquiesced in the position ascribed to him, who accepts the way he has been 'interpellated' or 'hailed' (Althusser, 1971/2008). Yet this involves more than identifying with his oppressors and accepting the lot defined for him. To the extent that his understanding of a mother tongue education precludes any recognition of the imagination or creativity, he is speaking the dominant discourse, the common sense of our era from which none of us can escape. What he says is underlined by educational policies that render all that we understand by a 'literary' education as being only of marginal value, a matter of 'taste' or 'refinement' perhaps, but hardly something that drives economic growth.

4. AIMS AND METHODS

The context that we have just sketched should not be conceived as something extraneous to our concerns as teachers of literature, as though it is somehow possible to teach literature and enact the values associated with a literary education without regard to the larger network of social relationships in which our practices are located. *Literary Praxis* enacts a situated inquiry, in which all the contributors are supremely mindful of the specific character of the classroom scenes presented by the Dutch and Australian teachers, as well as the particular nature of their own professional landscapes.

Yet to focus on the rich specificities of classrooms should not preclude trying to understand the events and exchanges that take place within them in the context of larger social structures or relationships. To the contrary, this rich specificity – or what Marx calls the 'concrete' (Marx, 1973, p.101)– can only be understood as 'the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse' (Marx, 1973,

p.101). The meaning of classroom conversations and activities by teachers and students can only be grasped when their 'here and now' is understood as the product of relationships that stretch beyond their immediate circumstances as they experience them from day to day. The negotiated and provisional nature of any attempt to interpret what is going on in classroom settings involves trying to grasp those larger determinants, including such dimensions as the school systems in which those classrooms are located, the traditions of curriculum and pedagogy that the teachers invoke in order to explain their approaches to the teaching of literature, and (as we have indicated above) the social and cultural divisions that are being played out in societies caught up in major economic transformation. We make our own history, even though the conditions of that making are not of our own choosing (Engels, 1970). We create our lives anew each day. Any attempt to understand our work as teachers must begin by positing reality as a social process. The 'truth' (to borrow again from Marx) must be understood as 'human sensuous activity', as 'practice', 'subjectively', not as an 'object' or 'thing' that exists apart from us, which we can only describe from a contemplative or 'scientific' distance (Marx, 1970, p.13). Or – to express this insight in terms that are closer to our work as literary educators – the 'truth' can only be understood as occurring as we interact with texts and with each other in our efforts to make meaning from those texts.

This kind of epistemological standpoint is reflected in the essay co-authored by the Australian teachers, Prue Gill and Bella Illesca, which tellingly foregrounds Bella's feelings on entering the gates at Prue's school. Bella has agreed to act as Prue's critical friend, observing her classes and engaging in dialogue with her before and after each lesson. Their conversation will extend over 2-3 weeks, with Bella returning to the school several times, producing rich insights into the complexities of teaching literature, as their chapter in *Literary Praxis* reveals. Yet on stepping into the school's precincts, she initially cannot escape a sense of contrast between the culture of this wealthy private school and the conditions she experienced at the state school where she had previously worked:

As I walk through the school grounds to meet Prue for our first meeting, it comes as no surprise to me that what I see and hear is very much governed by what was conspicuously absent from the government school where I last worked as an English teacher: students with laptops, a café style school cafeteria with an adjoining bookshop, art show postcards for an on campus art show exhibition and colourful consumer products around the school and in classrooms. I even walk past an area where professional photographers and artists are setting up, and I feel that there is something exciting and exclusive about it all. At a glance, what strikes me about the students whom I see here compared to the students that I taught at my old school is an almost intangible sense of place and social cohesion; it is in the way they talk, the way they walk, in their gazes, in how they make use of the school's physical resources and in how they wear their uniforms. In fact, the school prospectus markets the school in precisely this way: The caption on the front cover reads, 'I want to be' and goes on to tell us that at this school every child is encouraged to 'be free', 'be inspired', 'be surprised', 'be empowered', 'be involved', 'be creative', 'be bolder', 'be connected' and 'be at home', 'be with

us...always'. This school prospectus, the school website, the façade of the school - these are the externalization of particular values and interests that proclaim a nurturing of each individual (signified by the 'i' in lower case), and ultimately leading to an affirmation of the right of a certain 'I' to exist and name the world.

Whilst I try to mentally disentangle myself from the seductiveness of this seemingly civilized world of lively chatter and pleasant activity, I think about my students in a co-educational government school on the urban fringe and I wonder to myself, what about responsibility, responsiveness and commitment to justice?

Bella Illesca, in Gill & Illesca, 2011, p.26

It makes a difference as to whether you are working in a wealthy private school in one of Melbourne's leafy suburbs or in an underprivileged state school in Dandenong, one of the most ethnically diverse areas in Australia (to limit our frame of reference to Australia for the moment). And this difference must be understood as a function of the asymmetrical relationship between these vastly different social milieus, involving a recognition that the privilege reflected in one setting – where these young women assume 'the right of a certain "I" to exist and name the world' – necessarily involves a denial of the subjectivities and cultures of young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (Teese, 2011). A literary imagination does not float above the social structures that produce such inequalities, but is in some sense implicated in them. Notwithstanding the fact that anyone can go into a bookshop and purchase a novel, or the fact that the subject of Literature is part of the Victorian Certificate of Education, a state-wide curriculum to which all students supposedly have access, it is difficult not to equate the teaching of literature with an elite education.

But if, in the first instance, there appears to be a mismatch between Bella's commitment to teaching in a socially disadvantaged state school and the ethos of the school that she is now entering, in the course of her classroom observations and conversations with Prue, her concerns about inequality and injustice appear to be alleviated. Prue reveals herself to be engaged in a 'knowing practice' (Kemmis, 2005), fully aware of the privileged nature of the situation in which she finds herself in comparison with the conditions experienced by teachers elsewhere (Prue has, in fact, taught in both state and private schools, and has had extensive experience in developing innovative curriculum and pedagogy to meet the needs of young people from disadvantaged communities). She nonetheless affirms the value of a literary education as serving a larger educational purpose that holds out the prospect of transcending such social divisions, a vision of the potential of a literary education with which Bella herself identifies.

The chapter concludes with the voices of Prue and Bella (the essay is written in a way that preserves a sense of their individual voices and perspectives throughout), when they each use the first person plural to enunciate what they see as the value of a literary education. This is what Prue writes in the penultimate section of their essay, differentiating the language that 'Bella and I talk' from the language of

the prescribed syllabus and a competitive academic curriculum geared towards enabling her students to gain university entrance:

... as Bella and I talk about what we want to happen in the classroom we are using a different language. We want our students to read with greater awareness of the way we frame texts ourselves, we want them to develop their conceptions of the relationship between language and ideas, to confidently express their ways of seeing, to think in increasingly abstract ways, to be open to challenge, to understand the value of evidence and argument. We want them to marvel at the way people use language to help us see anew and to experience unknown worlds in intimate ways. We want them to step into the shoes of the other.

Prue Gill, in Gill & Illesca, 2011, p.37

For Prue, as well as for Bella, this familiar rationale for a literary education links to an educational project aimed at realizing a larger vision of democracy than that reflected in the ballot box and party-political election platforms. Prue continues:

School curriculum is insufficiently informed, it seems to me, by the idea that democracies must be continually reinvented rather than taken for granted, or unquestioned. My aim is that everyone develops a voice in the class, everyone knows that others will be attentive to their views. I hope to engender an attitude to authority that is respectful, but questioning. I do not wish to be the central voice in the classroom. (p.37)

Bella, in her concluding section, likewise affirms Prue's commitment as a teacher 'to help students develop a consciousness of the values, the responsibilities, the behaviour underpinning a democratic process' (Gill and Illesca, p.39; see also Doecke et al., 2009). And, as with Prue's statement about the need to reinvent democracy, Bella's judgment is a modulated one – she remains fully conscious of the paradoxes that inhere in enacting 'a democratic process' in an elite setting that is geographically and culturally removed from the 'down trodden government school' (p.39) where she last worked. She remarks, however, that everyone's position in society 'is a highly mediated one' (p.39), and thereby suggests that the possibility of critical insight and a transformative praxis can emerge in the most surprising ways, despite social mechanisms that are geared towards the perpetuation of the status quo.

Mies Pols, in her Dutch setting, teaches younger students (13-14 years of age) in reading youth literature. She is aiming at a similar critical insight by reading *Blue is Bitter*, a youth book in which a young girl is sold by her father into prostitution.

In my classes, I cannot help but emphasize the social context in books and stories, because it is exactly my goal to engage in a discussion of social topics by means of youth novels. I recognize that I am not so much interested in whether the students like the book, but rather that they identify with the main character. During the moment, at least, in which they engage with the text, the miserable situations that many of their peers are in should not seem light years away. I tell them 'What would you do were you in her situation?' and 'You should consider yourself lucky with the life you're leading!'

Mies Pols, in Groenendijk, Pols & van de Ven, 2011, p. 54-55

Her colleague Ramon bases his education explicitly on his own biography:

I have been shaped by my own education. I notice it in my teaching methods. Dutch and Literature studies have provided me with many different approaches for analyzing and grasping texts better. The various courses I completed taught me different ways to analyze a story, based on various literary theories that have been prevalent in literature studies over the years. Apart from an historical approach, I was taught how to look at a novel from a structural-analytical perspective. Reception theory, also called the reader-response theory, as well as sociological approaches and intertextual analyses were also a feature of my university education. From the knowledge I have gained from these ideas, I believe that combining these different approaches when reading and analyzing a text is most rewarding. I want to pass this capacity on to my students. I want to make sure that by the end of their secondary school education they are able to read a book in different ways and that they are able to use different approaches.

Ramon Groenendijk, in Groenendijk, Pols & van de Ven, 2011, p. 46-47

Although Ramon and Mies teach at the same school, they have slightly different ideas about the purpose of a literary education. Both ideas nevertheless fit into the Dutch curriculum, that comprises different traditions of literature education: cultural heritage, personal growth, literary analysis and societal insight. At present the examination rules emphasize the importance of focusing on cultural heritage and literary analysis. A third aim is 'literary development' that has become an increasingly pronounced one. This 'literary development' combines the different aims of literature education, focusing on the students' learning to use literary analysis and historical knowledge, as well as societal insight, in their reading. This emphasis on 'literary development' can also be seen as an answer to the growing participation during the second half of the last century of young people from non-elite backgrounds in higher levels of secondary education, involving the assumption that they lack a self-evident 'literary literacy' (and the matching assumption that the elite children do not lack this). Ramon is referring to this aim. Mies is questioning the empirical basis beneath the stages of 'literary development':

I want my students (2nd grade, 13-14 years old) to identify with the protagonist in youth novels as well. Many researchers believe that in the first three years of their secondary education, students like to read to escape reality. They are focused on plot and storyline, identify with the characters, and quite vividly imagine the fictional world that is described. Most of the time, these readers do not connect the text they read to elements of their own lives in order to gain new insights (...). I wanted to study whether this was true, and, if so, if it could be changed by choosing certain books, presenting engaging lessons and using a new didactic lesson plan.

(p.54)

The dominant motif of Bella and Prue's essay is one of travelling and entering new and unfamiliar spaces, a motif that is present in Mies's essay, as well. Bella's own entry into the school grounds is matched by the entry of these young women into new ways of talking about the books they read, as is similar to Ramon's sense that

his students need to be inducted into a range of interpretive frameworks for literary analysis. As Prue observes in an email she sent to Bella in the course of their dialogue with one another, at the beginning of the year her students 'are swamped by a feeling that it (Literature) is a hard subject, it is a bit mysterious, they're not sure what they're meant to be doing' (Gill & Illesca, 2011, p.40), a conclusion that is also reached by Ramon (see below). Prue articulates her aims in these lessons, which focus on a collection of short stories by the Australian writer, Beverley Farmer, in the following terms:

At this stage I am trying to get students to approach a discussion of the stories via a close examination of short passages – to increase their confidence in moving from the particular to the general – the approach they need to demonstrate in the passage analysis in the end of year exam.

Students have chosen a story from the collection and their task is to read it, to identify a passage for discussion – and to use that passage as the basis for a discussion of the whole story. The students will work in pairs or threes, and they are to make a class presentation.

My prediction is that this will be quite difficult for them, that they will not find a great deal to say via the passage, and that I'll have to move them along quite a bit. I'll be interested to see whether they draw on language and stylistic features of the writing in their discussions, as well as ideas.

I imagine that my role will be to ask the questions that help them move from passage, to story, to work as a whole.

(p.25)

Prue's planning conveys a different impression of the identities and aspirations of her students than the glossy advertising material that this private school typically produces in order to achieve a marketing edge. Rather than the coyness of 'i want to be', we sense a shy engagement with the text, and the beginnings of a capacity to weigh up the significance of the detail of a passage as it might open up new possibilities, new ways of constructing the meaning of the text as a whole. As Bella observes, 'through the conversations that take place in these lessons we can see that when students speak, they borrow words from each other and from elsewhere: the words they utter are both theirs and not theirs – showing how they are always involved in some kind of productive struggle with language and meaning' (p.39). This process of learning how to move 'from the particular to the general', of using a passage from the text 'as the basis for a discussion of the whole story', is illustrated by several excerpts from conversations between students that Prue and Bella include in their essay.

In her concluding reflections, Bella states that Prue 'is critically aware of the ideological work that she is performing, indeed that we all do as teachers when we teach – whether working in an elite private school or in a down trodden government school' (p.39). Yet although nothing in the classroom conversations that Bella and Prue record suggests that Prue has been able to transcend this role (how, in

any case, could she do this?), the attempts by her students to find the words to express their thoughts and emotions about the stories they are reading do more than simply illustrate their socialization as members of a cultural elite. Their conversations certainly serve as examples of that socialization, reflecting the social and cultural divisions currently being perpetuated by neo-liberal educational reforms in Australia, but as moments of insight, of hesitant conjecture about the meaning of words in the stories they are reading, they also reflect Prue's efforts to establish and maintain a social space where these young women can reflect on their own experiences and values in the course of engaging with the experiences presented to them in the literature they are reading.

5. CONSTRAINTS

The constraints that Prue experiences as a teacher are firstly felt by her as an awareness that these young women are entering into new and mysterious territory, that the patterns of responding to literary texts (of moving from the particular to the general, from the parts to the whole) that have become habitual to her are patterns that her students still need to learn. Prue questions them repeatedly, all in an effort to prompt them to find the words that might capture their thoughts and feelings about the text. She asks one group of students how we should interpret the fact that Adoni, the Greek husband in one of Beverley Farmer's stories, is shocked by the fact that his Australian wife, Barbara, dyes her hair. One student responds:

| | |
|--------------|---|
| Bec | That [for Andoni] it's what people think that matters. Not what you do ... it's what seems that matters. |
| Prue | What might Farmer think about this attitude? |
| Jo | Would Farmer be angry because of his lack of honesty? You can't judge a person because of dyed hair! There's a sense of where two principles are juxtaposed ... |
| Natasha | The principle of being a good woman ... |
| Clare | The principle of being the woman who is seen to be a good woman ... |
| Laura | The Greek is automatically a good woman. Barbara has to assimilate – to become good. |
| Stephanie | Her honesty and goodness [versus] keeping up appearances ... |
| Prue | For her, the openness is a virtue. For him it's ... |
| Prue/Natasha | A shame (Natasha and Prue finish the same sentence). |

(pp.28-29)

Prue persists in asking the students where they locate their ideas within the text - 'where, in this passage, can you pin down the way Farmer uses language to unset-

tle?' (p.29) - with the result that they gradually move beyond their initial opinions of the stories, which they had dismissed as 'anti-men', to a more refined understanding of the ways that Farmer depicts the experiences of women and the part that men play in their lives.

Ramon reaches the conclusion that he has not accomplished his aims. In one of his lessons students discussed in small groups a Dutch short story. Each member of a group has had to read from a different perspective: literary analysis, sociological analysis, a reader response approach, an author oriented approach. Ramon wanted his students to reach a joint interpretation of the text, one that embraced all perspectives.

Ramon presents parts of such group discussions (Groenendijk, Pols & van de Ven, 2011, p.49):

| | |
|--------------|--|
| Renske: | Everything comes back to that, yes, the bad view he has on the world. Of his past, especially. Because in his past, he was used to being less important and stuff. That's why he is now... well, sad. |
| Danique: | Yes, he thinks the world is bad and that everything goes wrong. |
| Aike: | Like with that friend of his or something, what's his name... The time they biked home and he would say: nothing wrong? So that kind of shows that he thinks everybody is that way, in a way. Everybody's boring and... come on, what's that word? |
| Danique: | A little like self-pity. ('zelfmedelijden') |
| Aike: | Yes, there is no fun really. Or when he describes that party. He's kind of saying that the party was no fun at all either. |
| Anne Wil: | Mariah Carey being played all the time... |
| Danique: | And that holiday on Cyprus. Yeah, outside there's like this war going on. |
| Anne | (laughing): Yeah, pieces of soldiers flying around! |
| Wil: | Yes, I mean if you talk about it like that, I don't think you really care that much. |
| Renske: | He was living in a mist or something. |
| Danique: | Yes, he really thought the entire world was a bad place. |

Ramon writes in his essay:

I was hoping *and expecting* that the students would see that there are different approaches, and that you gain more insight into a story when you put these perspectives together. Actually, I don't think I reached what I was hoping for. Why was that? I feel they get stuck at this point. Apparently, they are still at the level (...) of recognition or identification, where the reader tries to identify with the protagonist. But in this case the students do not understand the protagonist and cannot get past that point. So the story remains obscure for them.

(p.50)

Ramon wonders if he should take over some elements of the method used by Mies:

I wondered if perhaps I should put more emphasis on emotion and empathy. As far as that is concerned, I can learn a lot from Mies. The conversation with her and Piet-Hein has given me a clear view of the strong social engagement that is present in her way of treating literature. Students get involved in a text more easily, which may help them to find different interpretations faster and more effectively. If I have an opportunity to do my lesson on the five approaches to literature again, I will keep this in mind. At the end of the lesson, I will put much more emphasis on the reading experience. (p. 53)

Ramon is reflecting on Mies' approach, who by contrast is rather satisfied with the results of her lessons. Mies quotes one of her students who wrote (p.60):

You start looking at things differently. First, you have this opinion on something and then you read the book and it changes.

Mies concludes:

I have reached my goal, "schrick en mededoogen bewercken" – "to induce compassion and fear". And what is more, I have incited an actual willingness to get up and do something against social evils (p.62)

We will, however, resist recounting all the examples of classroom exchanges presented by Prue, Bella, Ramon and Mies. Our point is that a primary way in which the relationship between texts and their contexts is experienced in classrooms is in the social relationships that comprise those settings, requiring a sensitivity on the part of everyone involved – pupils and teacher alike – to the values and attitudes of others, in the course of participating in conversations like the one above. With respect to Prue's stance as a teacher, this means recognizing the multiple dimensions involved when students learn how to read more responsively, attending more carefully to the language used in a text. This is how Prue sums up her stance at one point, after presenting several instances of the interpretive conversations in which her students engaged:

I want even closer attention. I want them to use their own language with more particularity, to look for ease or eloquence, patterning or rhythm, sarcasm or grace, resonance, ambiguity, image, or figurative language. Their evidence lies in how they read, and I am challenging, because if such processes are to become visible to us, we must inevitably confront values and prejudices that are 'naturalized' in our thinking. (p.29)

Ramon concludes that he did not succeed in getting his students to pay a closer attention to the literary use of language. Finishing his lesson he utters his disappointment by repeating his aims for the lesson:

So what am I trying to say? When you read a book at some point, you will notice that your goal in reading requires a certain reading strategy. And being the smart people you are, you will have to gradually develop in order to be able to apply these different ways of reading, different ways of approaching literature. Basically you already do a lot

of these things automatically: when reading books for school, you pay attention to certain things. And realizing that can give you a lot of advantages. And actually, that is what I wanted to share with you today. (p.50).

Prue's students' growing sensitivity towards language entails a growing awareness of their own socialization, of the values they share as young women who belong to a particular community. It is noteworthy, however, that Prue only feels she can go so far. The students have initially reacted negatively to Beverley Farmer's stories, judging her as representing all men as 'evil'. One of the stories to which they pay close attention is 'A Woman with Black Hair', which is provocatively told from the point of view of a rapist, as he recounts the details of his victim's routine that he has observed over several days in the lead-up to assaulting her in her own home. The story might, in fact, be said to invert the values that we usually associate with reading short stories. The rapist himself has entered into his victim's life, imagining her thoughts and feelings as she experiences the familiar patterns of her life each day. And as readers we see the world from his standpoint, although this is a far cry from any sense of empathy, still less sympathy or affection for him. We are confronted, instead, by a rapist's desire, by a sense that his victim remains, after all, merely an object to him, an unnamed victim (a 'woman with black hair') over which he can wield his power. Prue is aware of the challenges posed by this story, and contemplates introducing her students to 'the feminist notion that the power of all men is reinforced by the fact that some men rape' (p.30). But she chooses not to intervene in their conversations, reserving this idea for a later discussion. She remarks that 'it is a challenging idea', but 'thinking about it in relation to this story, rather than in relation to their own personal world, provides a safe context for discussion'.

In this respect, we can perhaps sense that Prue is in a position to listen more attentively to her students, supporting and encouraging them in their ongoing explorations of literary texts, than Mies and Ramon are able to do (we shall have more to say about the actual constraints of the timetable under which the Dutch teachers are working in the next section). All these teachers, however, are supremely aware of the importance of tapping into the interactions between the students' values and beliefs and the texts that have been chosen for study, and of being sensitive to the struggle that students may experience when they encounter imaginative worlds that challenge the assumptions they bring to their reading.

6. CONCLUSION

Short stories, in Prue's hands, are not vehicles for proselytizing. She clearly situates her practice within a feminist perspective, but she remains mindful of the complexities of introducing students to new ideas, given the values and beliefs that they have formed. One Australian commentator has seen this handling of her

students' reactions to Farmer's story as a stepping back from any confrontation with 'gender differences'. The 'excesses of feminism are banished' in order to allow 'normalisation' to prevail (Gelder, 2011, p.243). This remark seems to us to fail to appreciate the subtlety of Prue's handling of the social relationships in this classroom, including the way those relationships are mediated by parental expectations and values, as an inescapable context for reading Farmer's stories and making meaning of them. Prue's reflections on the conversations in which her students engage, as they grapple with particular passages in the way she anticipated in her lesson plan, show her resisting any heavy-handed intervention that might steer them in the 'right' direction. But rather than amounting to a lost opportunity to raise the consciousness of these young women, exposing them to the truths about continuing discrimination against them, this reflects an educator's instinct that these young women must be open to such 'truths' before they can see them. Ramon and Mies's accounts of their teaching possibly show a greater propensity on their part to steer their students in a certain direction. In this respect, we cannot ignore the possible influence of the institutional setting. Prue has 7 teaching periods of 70 minutes every fortnight throughout the year. By contrast, Ramon and Mies have about 30 teaching periods of 50 minutes for the whole year.

Literary interpretation, as it is conducted in classroom settings, seems to us to be at its richest when it is anchored within the social relationships of the classroom. Otherwise it risks becoming merely a dry, academic pursuit. Very often the complexities of framing and interpretation, of texts and contexts, are treated primarily as a matter of encouraging students to explore texts from different theoretical standpoints, as with feminist readings that might show what it means to read as a woman or a post-colonial perspective that might be sensitive to the way Indigenous communities are represented in texts. Such strategies can be very generative, as Mies Pols shows in her lesson series on Bracke's story *Blue is Bitter*, in which she develops procedures for identification with the protagonist; as Ramon Groenendijk shows in his account of a series of lessons in which he organized his class into small groups, inviting each group to read Thomas van Aalten's short story, *Fam*, by paying attention to different approaches to reading (Groenendijk, Pols & van de Ven, 2011, pp.47-48). Yet, as Irene Pieper remarks in her generally sympathetic appraisal of Ramon's lesson, 'even literary critics would probably rather argue their own point than that of their colleagues or competitors; they are not necessarily able to detach themselves from their preferred approach but remain convinced of its rightness' (Pieper, 2011, p.195). Such a literary theoretical approach has its limits when it clashes with all the other ways in which young people's reading of texts is framed by classroom settings, including the often unacknowledged framings that derive from students' out-of-school experiences, most notably the social networks in which they participate.

So we return – inevitably – to the young man in Laila Aase's anecdote. What do we say to him? The conundrum, it seems to us, is that the rationale for reading stories that we typically give as teachers of literature, such as the value of empathy and recognition of others, still has the potential to produce the kind of obfuscation that 'preachers of culture' (Mathieson, 1975) have been accused of perpetuating, when they pretend to possess some special capacity within themselves that takes them beyond any class affiliation or sectional interest. Matthew Arnold's vision of culture famously involves transcending class conflict, and recognizing 'a common basis of human nature' that exists 'under all our class divisions' (Arnold, 1932/1969, p. 103, p.105). It means moving beyond a conception of 'happiness' as 'doing what one's ordinary self likes, which 'differs according to the class to which one belongs' (p.107), and giving ourselves over to 'our best self' (p.109). This disposition takes people 'out of their class', making 'their distinguishing characteristic' not their membership of a particular class, but their 'humanity' (p.108).

Needless to say, debates over past decades have exposed the problematical nature of such claims, not least amongst literary theorists themselves. Jonathan Culler's eloquent account of why a literary education 'matters', for example, hardly involves assertions of this sort. To the contrary, he signals his distance from old fashion notions that literature promotes a 'feeling of universal humanity' (Culler, 1997, p. 38), acknowledging key critiques that highlight the ideological work that has historically been performed by proponents of the value of a literary education (Culler, 1997, p.39). He acknowledges the force of Terry Eagleton's quip that 'throwing the workers a few novels' might 'keep them from throwing up a few barricades' (Culler, 1997, p.39; see Eagleton, 1983). The issue is (to borrow from another Eagleton text published in the 1980s) the way a literary education has been used to cultivate a 'subjectivity' that is 'radically depoliticised' (Eagleton, 1985-86, p.99), involving a misrecognition of social and economic conditions, and a delegitimation of any political action that might bring about change. We might also think of the critiques that have emerged from a post-colonial standpoint of the work that a literary education has done as part of an educational apparatus designed to enable people in colonial settings to identify with the civilizing mission of empire and thus to consent to their oppression (cf. Ashcroft et al., 1989).

Yet we can surely acknowledge this history as part of our own making as literary educators without denying the value of the imagination and a sensibility that is attuned to the way language mediates our experiences and engagement with the world around us. To the contrary, through enhancing our sense of life and its possibilities, literary works have proved to be powerful vehicles for social critique of the very kind that we have just alluded to. Our key responsibility as literary educators is to see how we might open up such dimensions through engaging with young people as our interlocutors, recognizing their voices and the standpoints from which they are speaking. The young man in Laila Aase's anecdote has a legitimate grievance – literature has been reified into something with which he cannot connect,

and so its function in promoting a critical engagement in society (in promoting the kind of 'democracy' that Prue and Bella invoke) has been radically undermined. His denial of the value of reading short stories strikes at the core of our own claims as literary educators to be engaged in a socially valuable pursuit. Our task is to find ways of engaging with him on his terms, in much the same way (however paradoxical this statement might seem) that Prue works with the attitudes and values of the young women in her classroom, in an effort to see what we can learn through our conversations with one another.

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