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**Conversation in the Classroom: Investigating the
1999 Stage 6 English Syllabus**

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the theoretical underpinnings of the NSW Stage 6 1999 English Syllabus. It is assumed that each syllabus is undergirded by theoretical assumptions about text and the hermeneutical process of reading, and this thesis investigates the ways in which Theory – in its various forms – has practically impacted on the English classroom. Deconstruction, cultural materialism, feminism and postcolonialism all receive attention in this thesis, not so much in and of themselves, but in terms of how the reading habits of these theories find feet in real classrooms. Alternative readings of specific texts are offered throughout the thesis, to suggest that there are, perhaps, other models of reading to be considered in the creation of a state wide English syllabus. This done, this thesis investigates rhetoric as a pedagogical and hermeneutical alternative to “critical literacy,” suggesting that models of learning and reading that promote conversation must also constitutively promote democracy. It is on the basis of establishing conversation in the classroom that any critique of theory or promotion of any alternatives is undertaken.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

No teacher can work properly without a college, a real college. We all need the constant give-and-take of colleagues and students working on the same texts or the same experimental lines, all together engaged in mutual philosophical critique of what we are doing. When instead we work “on our own,” we become protected, frozen monosophists: in word, either overt or secret dogmatists. Working with colleagues, we have a chance – perhaps a slim one – of improving our capacity to criticize what we do.¹

Wayne Booth

¹ *The Vocation of a Teacher* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p.302.

I am, primarily, a full time high school English teacher. My aims, my sentiments, and ultimately my allegiances are to my classroom and to the students that walk into that space every day, whoever they may be. Therefore, what follows lies at the curious intersection between pedagogy and English, between practice and theory, between reflection and research. My thesis has come from my experience in the classroom, and ultimately, I write this thesis in order to serve the classroom. Therefore, the brief excursions that I take into theory and into conversations with other teachers and thinkers always have in view the teenagers who cross the threshold of my classroom.

This intersection is a tough place to be for many reasons, not the least of which is that it is an extremely public place to take up residence. As anyone who has been reading the national newspapers or had anything whatsoever to do with the teaching of high school English in the past six years will know, any comment on or investigation into the syllabus that drives English teaching in New South Wales is nothing short of a political minefield. I have wished, on many an occasion, that I was researching the left fibula of Shakespeare's decayed bones with its attendant academic audience rather than the very public, very polarized debate that is the New South Wales English syllabus. This debate, which has raged since the syllabus was introduced in 2000 for year 11 students sitting the Higher School Certificate in 2001, has typically been fought between what I shall call – loosely – the “postmodern left” and the “traditional right.” In national newspapers, both the “postmodern left” and the “traditional right” have claimed that the aims of education are to create critical, sensitive thinkers, and both sides have claimed that the other agenda is responsible for declining or underdeveloped capacities in our students to reason and think critically and literately. At times, the debate has descended into good old fashioned mudslinging, with very little engagement from either party with the other, and very little recognition of the common ground that both clearly share: that is, the assumption that education in New South Wales should turn out thinking, sensitive, imaginative, critical adults.

I cite these skirmishes because I would like to begin, candidly, by explaining that I feel compelled by neither the “postmodern left” nor the “traditional right” in the debate over the English syllabus. This does not mean that I am politically indifferent; far from it. In fact, I believe that my political tendencies become, whether I intend it or not, pretty clear throughout this thesis as I read and reflect on reading and classrooms. The ethic driving my research became clearer to me the more I interacted with theorists, other teachers, and students. I believe that concern for the other human beings around us – and I use the term “other” with all its attendant baggage – is

paramount to a moral life. It is this ethic that drives me to teach and it is this ethic, finally, that has led to this thesis.

This commitment to ‘the other’ of the text and of the classroom puts me in a peculiar situation. Like those who support the syllabus because it is designed to develop an ethic of the “other” and to resist forces that would seek to dominate the other (for example, Wendy Morgan who employs Paulo Freire’s “critical literacy,”) ² I applaud the development of this ethic in our students. However, it is on precisely those terms that I take issue with the syllabus and its practical effects on English high school classrooms: its inability to support particular teachers and particular students to enter into a dialogue flexible enough to allow the unexpected other – be it text, student or teacher – to speak. And it is here that I fear that I will disappoint both “the postmodern left” and “the traditional right” in one move. Along with Derrida, ³ I cannot support an inflexible view of ‘the other’ such that it inadvertently snuffs out conversation. And so, I disappoint the “postmodern left.” I also see, like Derrida, no point in uncritically upholding tradition for the sake of tradition, of reading Shakespeare just because he is Shakespeare. And so, I disappoint “the traditional right.” What I ultimately hope for is a conversation at this intersection between left and right. I hope, in offering this thesis, that both the “postmodern left” and the “traditional right” will engage in order that we may develop a syllabus that is truly liberatory and emancipatory for our students.

My confession that I am primarily a high school English teacher and not an academic in the Department of English would raise the question that Kelli McGraw first posed to me: why have I chosen to work through the English department, and not the Education department? Syllabuses for high schools are, after all, usually within the realm of Education rather than English. Kelli’s question sparked a process of reflection for me that illuminated my own methods and assumptions, enabling me to articulate what formulates my method and drives my research. I write within the walls of an English department because I have found it almost impossible to *theorise* about reading *outside of the act of reading*, and apart from the particularity of

² Morgan writes that Freire’s critical literacy encourages a “collectivist, student-centred method in which learning emerges out of a joint negotiation of needs and interests, and blooms in a critical consciousness. This pedagogy has two aspects: first, students learn to perceive social, economic and political contradictions in what they know and what they are told. Second, they learn to take action against the oppressive and dominant elements within those contradictory situations.” *Critical Literacy in the Classroom: The Art of the Possible* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 5-6.

³ Derrida says that “to act in a liberatory or emancipatory way, it’s not enough to claim to be deconstructionist or to apply deconstruction. In each situation you have to watch, and I can imagine (of course I try not to do so) *someone using deconstruction with reactionary and repressive effects or goals*. That’s why you can’t stop watching or analyzing. You can’t simply rely on names, titles, or claims.” (my italics) “Jacques Derrida on Rhetoric and Composition: a conversation,” *JAC* 10.1 (1990), <http://jack.gsu.edu/jac/10/articles/1.htm>, accessed 21.5.02.

particular texts. Just as I have found it impossible to theorise about teaching apart from my lived experience of working with my students, so I find it necessary to constitute my theorizing in particular acts of reading.

My decision to write this thesis from the position of a practising teacher and reader also affects how and what I term “the syllabus.” As Kelli McGraw rightly pointed out to me, the syllabus is indeed a discrete document and commentators need to be clear about what they are referring to when we engage in discussion about it. I could not agree more; if we cannot agree upon this most basic of foundations, then dialogue will be impossible. So, for the sake of clarity, my definition of “the syllabus” is largely governed by my lived experience teaching within the directives of the syllabus document. When I discuss the syllabus, I oscillate between the discrete document, where I interpret the assumptions and intentions that the syllabus declares, and the lived experience of implementing that syllabus. That lived experience necessarily includes all the accoutrements that come with teaching Higher School Certificate English: exams (which are also set by the Board of Studies; the “author” of the syllabus,)⁴ supporting documents; text lists; articles from the English Teacher’s Association’s professional journal *mETaphor*; and so on. This thesis makes no pretensions to being an empirical or historical study of the syllabus document. It is the reflection of a practising teacher and thus my definition of the syllabus must be necessarily – and perhaps infuriatingly for some readers – amorphous and anecdotal at times. In some senses, this thesis takes the shape of “reporting back” from the trenches to colleagues in positions of policy creation and curriculum design – it describes, reflects and analyses the effects of the syllabus document in a real classroom.

In addition, because I have chosen to write this thesis from my teaching experience with the syllabus, I run the risk of amalgamating the many pressures on the high school teacher, student and classroom into the single issue of the syllabus. Among those pressures are the almost oxymoronicallly termed “outcomes-based learning,” the push for assessment and accountability, diminishing funding for public schools, and finally and most importantly the dominance of the examination system. All of these factors – and I am sure I have forgotten to mention all of them – bear on my experience of the syllabus as a teacher. The sheer lack of time that teachers have to move students through the massive document that is the syllabus is mind-boggling. Short-cuts have to be made. And I admit, at the outset, that all of these factors could be counted in the failure of the syllabus. However, it is my belief that these factors exacerbate the shape of learning that the syllabus outlines, and that the lack of time

⁴ I recognize that the syllabus document is authored by many people from many different backgrounds.

that teachers have tends to force us to pick and choose the *most salient* features of the syllabus to teach well, so that our students rank well come marking time. Therefore, while I admit that the syllabus cannot be held accountable for all of the struggles that I mention throughout this thesis, I maintain that the reading habits and pedagogy that I take issue with are latent in the syllabus itself.

This thesis has been a mammoth undertaking over the past five years, and I am only too aware of the debt I owe to those around me. Since this is a thesis that was conceived in the classroom, it seems only right to acknowledge those people that sparked my interest in the first place; the enormously varied and gifted teenagers who are the students I teach. Teaching high school students is a most exhausting, most exhilarating and most refreshing vocation, and I am honoured by the classes that inspire me to brave the exhaustion and keep teaching. I would like publicly to thank all of my students to date for their vibrant conversations, their willingness to spar with me, to challenge me, to learn from me and finally to teach me, in one student's words, "that the conversation in an English classroom cannot be replaced." What a privilege it is to teach you all. Thank you especially to:

- 8T in both 2000 and 2001 who were so eager to discuss life, death and the meaning of existence that facilitating a conversation left me utterly spent, but so eager for more.
- My year 9 class in 2002 who showed me the magic of a diverse classroom.
- My year 10 class in 2001 who were bursting at the seams with ideas, mischief, and fun. Thank you especially to the "bad boys."
- My year 10 class in 2002 who are, I am sure, changing the world with their wonderful, nuanced thinking and compassion. To partake in your conversations was a privilege and I still miss you all dreadfully.
- My year 9 class in 2006, who showed me just how quickly fourteen year old boys can move from profundity to toilet humour. You are a joy to teach.
- Finally, to all my senior students who have traveled with me, from both schools. I have tried faithfully to reflect our experience here, to record our conversations and observations that we made in and around the boundaries of the mammoth task of the HSC before us. My thinking would not be possible without the generative, fresh conversations that we had throughout your senior years, and I thank you for your candid and honest participation in our classroom and, consequently, my life.

Beyond this group of fine people, I am firstly grateful to my family, who have given me their unflinching support throughout the writing of this thesis and listened ad nauseum to my teaching stories. Their belief in me sustained me when I wanted to give up. Thank you especially to my parents: Anne Golsby-Smith, who first taught me about talking back to institutions, and who looked after my beautiful baby son while I edited this thesis, and to my father, Tony Golsby-Smith, who has been my mentor and my inspiration in the world of reading and writing since I can remember. If it were not for him, I never would have kept reading all those years ago, when I wanted to shut up shop forever. It was he who first introduced me to poetry, to novels, and finally, to rhetoric.

Secondly, my supervisors along the way have been invaluable in their support of this project. Rob Jackson, my first supervisor, was first my teacher and his inspiration and compassion ensured that I finished my bachelor's degree in one piece. He is one of the finest teachers I have ever been privileged to come across. David Brooks first introduced me to Gadamer, and his enthusiasm for my classroom is deeply appreciated. Susan Thomas provided me with encouragement, and her warmth and optimism has inspired me to be a better teacher and a better practitioner of rhetoric. And finally, I cannot thank Will Christie enough for his time and patience with me. His steadiness in the face of my work schedule and fluctuating emotional state, and his belief in the art of writing well, has been invaluable to me. He is an exceptional teacher and friend, and I am privileged to have known him and learnt from him, both in my first degree and in the process of writing this thesis. I could listen to him talk about books, poetry and theory all day and never tire of his take on things.

I am also very thankful to the people I have worked with over the last six years, from Cherrybrook Technology High School and St. Andrew's Cathedral School. Steve Henry, Jenny Weal, Therese Stark, Paul Thornhill and Brenda Proudfoot need especial mention from Cherrybrook. They were always so complimentary about my teaching, but the truth is, it was the humour, honesty and professionalism that characterised this group of teachers that enabled me to become the teacher I am today. From St. Andrew's, thank you to Caroline Brehaut for reading and editing sections of this thesis. Thank you especially to Themie Oud, Emma Argall, Jane Carter, Jessica Hughes, Ern Carter and Wendy Christie for hours of invigorating conversation. We will change the world yet.

I also need to thank Phillip Heath and Graeme Kightley, the principal and deputy principal respectively from St. Andrew's Cathedral School, who generously

gave me leave to finish this thesis before my baby arrived. Thank you for believing in me enough to provide time and space for me to write. It is rare to find a workplace so supportive of individual endeavour, and I have sincerely appreciated it.

Thank you to two important conversation partners, Clare Britt and Jill McLachlan, over ten years of thinking about teaching, children, and books. These two women are two of the most inspirational and responsive teachers I have ever met, and have joined with me on this vexed but exhilarating road of reflective practice. Their interest in this thesis has been important in keeping it alive.

I would also like to thank those Canadian folk who sustained me and my project in my three years there. Thank you to “the Ranch,” who gave me a “room of my own.” Ever watchful of those that have need, they knew what it was to have a creative space, and sure enough, writing in that room was the first time I hit my stride. Thanks also to Jesse Carlson, one of the smartest people I know, who called me occasionally and listened to my musings.

Special mention needs to be made of three teachers I had while in Canada: Loren and Mary Ruth Wilkinson, and Charles Ringma. It is difficult to explain how much Loren and Mary Ruth give to their students to those who have not lived their hospitality, and I was one of the recipients of their never-ending blessing. They gave me a space to talk at their house on beautiful Galiano Island, and Loren and Mary Ruth both talked me through the most difficult times in the writing of this thesis. Your lives have been an inspiration to both Jonathan and I. Charles Ringma taught me the art of reading sensitively, of allowing two or three things to be true at one and the same time. Like Lorén and Mary Ruth, he took time out of his official teaching schedule to spend time with a student not officially his own, from a university entirely unaffiliated with his workplace, and gave generously of his advice and encouragement. Charles first elaborated Gadamer’s hermeneutic to me in a way that made finishing this project seem possible.

Thank you also to the late Wayne and Phyllis Booth, who invited me in to their home on a very cold Chicago day, and offered me a cup of tea. Wayne Booth has given me a wide theoretical space in which to think, wonder and converse about how we might do this thing called English and education a little bit better. His generosity, attention and kindness to me and to all he agreed with, disagreed with and theorised with was and is, I have come to understand, the precursor and proviso to all true conversation. I hope to emulate that ethic here in this thesis and in my classroom.

Lastly, and most importantly, I want to thank my husband, Jonathan Meisner. Jonathan once stood at my door, while I was frozen with writer's block, handed me a cup of tea, said "I believe in you," and left. That belief has kept me writing ever since. A paragraph of thanks will never be able to capture what Jonathan has done for me, but I want him to know that I know. Thank you especially, love, for keeping the tea hot and making me finish this thesis while we waited for our son to arrive.

SGS

Postscript:

Just as I heard the welcome news that this thesis had passed examination, I heard some hard news. Charles Ringma, my great teacher, was diagnosed with cancer. This thesis is dedicated to him. I hope, some day, that I will make the kind of difference in the world that Charles has made.

Note

For the interviews contained within this thesis approval has been gained from the University of Sydney Human Ethics Committee.

Introduction

The choice is not between, on the one hand, a search for some grand, all-compassing “story” that can defeat all others in open combat and, on the other hand, a skepticism that dissolves all efforts to appraise mythic strengths and weaknesses. We can adopt a third set of assumptions: first, that each “going” myth must have some truth in it – if it did not, if it failed to explain some part of the experience of believers, it would have long since been discarded; second, that no single myth can give any culture all that is needed both to ensure its survival and to enable its individual inhabitants to build rewarding life stories for themselves ... third and finally, that though blindly inherited or freshly invested mono-myths may at some moments in human history serve life better than critically appraised myths, most of us in our time are so thoroughly entangled in rival myths that only a rigorously pluralistic ethical criticism can serve our turn.¹

Wayne Booth

To act in a liberatory or emancipatory way, it’s not enough to claim to be deconstructionist or to apply deconstruction. In each situation you have to watch, and I can imagine (of course I try not to do so) someone using deconstruction with reactionary and repressive effects or goals. That’s why you can’t stop watching or analyzing. You can’t simply rely on names, titles, or claims.²

Jacques Derrida

¹ Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An ethics of fiction*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 350.

² Jacques Derrida, “Jacques Derrida on Rhetoric and Composition: a conversation,” *JAC* 10:1 (1990), <http://jack.gsu.edu/jac/10/articles/1.htm>, accessed 21.5.02.

Last year, I had one of those moments that a teacher always treasures, storing it away for those days when teaching becomes too tiring even to be able to articulate what such bone-rendering fatigue feels like. I met an old student of mine, May, for coffee. I had taught her in the most vibrant, intellectually deft class that I have taught to date, and had had the privilege of teaching these students in both year 8 and year 10. Their conversations were unruly and marked territory that – in the conscientious, nervous planning hours that a beginning teacher puts in – I could never have anticipated. I vividly remember one day when May, then in year 10, pored over Shakespeare’s sonnet, “When my Love Swears She is Made of Truth,” and asked me whether I thought there was a recurring metaphor of sewing in the sonnet; if the double connotation of “habit” really suggested a garment, she reasoned, and if the first line says that this “maid” is “made of truth,” then perhaps the “making” – which is to say sewing – of truth *makes* “lies.” May, along with all those in her class, was an exceptionally creative and analytical thinker. She was also deeply passionate about politics, freedom of speech, social justice, and ethics and I was keen to find out what had become of her.

May had been so successful in her Higher School Certificate that she had won a prestigious scholarship to the university where I now write. Here she was, this bright, articulate woman whom I first met as a thirteen year old girl, making it! Being a relatively young teacher, this was one of the first experiences where I had been able to see what those exhausting hours had meant to my students, where I had been able to see what they had become and were becoming. There is nothing quite like the confirmation that those conversations in our classroom had meant something, that education mattered.

And sharing a passion for English as we did, our conversation turned to her senior years. I was keen to hear her stories and discoveries, as I had been overseas and had not been able to see her move through that time. What had happened, I asked? How did she find it? May’s response was chilling to me, a teacher who had so thoroughly prized and encouraged the unchartered conversation that the junior classroom had allowed at the time.³ While she had enjoyed much of her study in years 11 and 12, and enjoyed the challenge of the syllabus, she related a pattern of learning that suggested that those unchartered conversations that we had had as a class could no longer take place. She said that her study of Coleridge’s poetry, in the Area of

³ The 7-10 syllabus has been overhauled in recent years, and is now a mirror of the 11-12 syllabus. At the time I taught 8T, in 2000, I had almost complete authority to choose to teach texts in any way I chose. The current 7-10 syllabus bears the same theoretical and practical marks as the 11-12 syllabus, it is just not examined publicly or externally, bar the School Certificate.

Study, had been hamstrung by the directives given her: “it stopped me from exploring.”⁴ She related an instance where she had become fascinated with Coleridge’s poetry and had done some extra research and read some critics. May came back to her teacher – who is a teacher I respect immensely – and told him what her discoveries were. He said, no doubt with the exam deadlines in his mind, “That’s great, but it’s not relevant.”⁵ She then went on to talk about how she had done so well. She suggested that she had mastered a formula. She had said to herself, “May, just write the essay. You’ve got your techniques, you’ve got your quotes, just write the essay.” I then asked her how she had become so blasé about sacrificing those ideas that she had researched, and adopting what was clearly a form of rote learning. She said, “well, if a topic is boring, if it’s closed, then you’ll do that ... because the learning was directed, it became methodological.” And then later on, as I was pondering this, I saw May’s comments in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, explaining how students can expect to gain maximum marks. She said that, “as long as you mention what’s in the syllabus, you can’t go wrong.”⁶ How was it that the conversations that had ricocheted off the walls of my classroom had been reduced to “mention(ing) what’s in the syllabus”? I believe tenaciously in the power of young minds to think for themselves. To hear May confess how she arrived at such good marks was, I confess, a disappointment.

What May articulated was a pattern I had already become uneasy with as I had taught senior years under the English syllabus for years 11-12. How was it that my junior class, that had taught me the generative and unexpected nature of conversation, had had to scour a syllabus in order to get marks? How was it that her ideas about Coleridge’s poetry had been effectively hemmed in by the rubric “Imaginative Journeys,” and that May’s curiosity and creativity could not be honoured and honed in our school system? And how was it, in particular, that a postmodern syllabus that had sought to allow for more student authorship and discovery had encouraged the kind of theoretical straitjacketing that I recognised in May’s preparation for her Higher School Certificate?

⁴ SGS conversation with May, 20th October 2005.

⁵ I have said, almost verbatim, the same thing to a student of mine. I chronicle this incident in Chapter Six, on feminism. Both May’s teacher and myself, I believe, wanted our students to explore but were too aware of the time constraints of the Higher School Certificate to encourage our students to explore beyond the syllabus’s suggestions just for the sake of learning. All learning, in year 11 and 12, is circumscribed by the syllabus purely because teachers have little or no time for anything else.

⁶ Anneli Knight, “Top five tips for success,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 29 2004.

Scripted Conversations: Teaching and Reflecting upon theoretical directions of the Stage 6 English syllabus

Early on in my teaching career, I had registered some unease with the 1999 syllabus, but was a little unsure as to why. After all, what could be wrong with more critical thinking and more “rigour,” which was the catch-cry of the new syllabus.⁷ The first time I remember registering this unease was in the first year that the 1999 English syllabus was examined, when I crowded around the 3-unit Extension paper along with the other teachers in my staffroom. The question set for the elective “Postmodernism” was as follows:

You have been asked to speak to students who are about to decide which Elective to choose for next year’s HSC English Extension course. Persuade them to choose the Postmodern Elective by drawing attention to the adventure of postmodernism as a way into thinking about texts.

As all the teachers crowded around to read the paper as their students sat that exam, I remember wondering what a strong directive this was in the name of free thinking. What, I wondered, was a student supposed to do if they *didn’t* think postmodernism was an adventure? Would they fail? How was this a model of democratic thinking if students were being told what to say?

When the NSW English syllabus was introduced in 2000, it was heralded as a syllabus that would encourage students to become citizens who engage in a democracy. Mark Howie, the president of the NSW English Teacher’s Association, says in an article on the Stage 6 English syllabus that “teacher educators working in our universities teach their students how to be subject experts in a rigorous and responsible way [that helps them] make a positive contribution to healthy democracy.”⁸ Howie makes an implicit connection here between the syllabus and “a healthy democracy.” The syllabus wants students to respect other people, to listen to minorities, to read knowing there are other people in the universe beside themselves. It wanted conversation, wherein students could listen to other voices from other socio-economic backgrounds, other genders, and other races. And this, in and of itself, can hardly be debated as an admirable and important goal, particularly in the present political climate where exigent dissent in either major Australian political party is so minimal and political apathy so prevalent.

⁷ As an example, Melina Marchetta says that “the type of higher-order thinking required under HSC exam conditions can be very challenging” and that the new HSC English syllabus requires “sophisticated and legitimate analysis.” “HSC English is tough and smarter, not dumb and dumber,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 1 2006.

⁸ Justin Norrie, “Deconstructing Buffy leaves Nelson clueless,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 6 2005.

Importantly, amongst the debates that have flared in the various national newspapers over the English syllabus, there is an implicit connection between the students' ability to inspect the assumptions of a text and their ability to engage politically, thereby promoting democracy. Justin Norrie paraphrases Dr. Croke, the Executive Director of the Catholic Education Commission, as saying that "rather than leaving children 'rudderless,' ... the NSW high school English syllabus encouraged students to adopt a more thoughtful consideration of values than in the past."⁹ Building on Mark Howie's hope that the study of English will promote democracy – a hope that I share – Croke suggests that the ability to critique the values embedded in the text will build politically and critically engaged students. Their ability to see behind a text, to assess the value set from which the text comes, will build the skill to be able to see behind political propaganda, and thus to be able to engage with politics and hopefully contribute to a fairer society. Stephen Bonnycastle, whose book *In Search of Authority* helped many of the teachers in my staffroom at the time make sense of literary theory and the new syllabus, says of literary theory that "it helps us in our quest for maturity ... It helps us to see that authority is a social construction, that we all play a part in establishing it, and that it is potentially accessible to us all."¹⁰

In these examples, Howie, Croke and Bonnycastle all, implicitly or explicitly, outline a hope for a civic education and all of these men pose the introduction of what I shall loosely term "Theory" as the site of this civic education. And, importantly, all three men hope that the subject English will be the vehicle through which Theory can work to prompt this democratic civic education in our students.

There are two assumptions in these three examples, one that I share and another that I question. The latter forms the problem that I seek to wrestle with in this thesis. Firstly, I wholeheartedly agree and hope to support the sentiment that English is a subject that engenders and supports a civic education, that builds the capacity to think, to listen, to argue and to develop, as Martha Nussbaum describes it, the capacity to embark on "excursions of sympathy" with those whom we do not understand.¹¹ I hope that English is the primary vehicle through which students encounter 'the other.' However, the second assumption, one that I struggle with, is

⁹ Justin Norrie, "Catholic backs English syllabus," *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 23 2005.

¹⁰ Stephen Bonnycastle, *In Search of Authority: An introductory guide to literary theory*, 2nd ed. (Canada: Broadview Press, 1996), p. 229.

¹¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, "James' *The Golden Bowl*: Literature as Moral Philosophy," *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 142. I go into Martha Nussbaum's thinking in Chapter 7 of this thesis, and particularly into the notion of "excursions of sympathy."

that Theory, *in and of itself*, will bring about the cultivation of a civic education.¹² After all, if I provide my students with a moral “rudder,” as Croke suggests, before a conversation begins, then am I not promoting a value that exists outside of conversation? And if social values can be formed *outside* conversation, then are we not paving the way for a social program, rather than civic education? In May’s case, she was provided with the “rudder” of Imaginative Journeys before she approached Coleridge, and far from “adopt[ing] a more thoughtful consideration of values than in the past,” May was actively discouraged – by the rudder itself! - from asking her own questions and initiating her own conversation with Coleridge. Her conversation was scripted from the outset.

As a related and important aside, the syllabus also wanted to prevent students from rote learning, from sourcing their ideas from past papers and trotting out the same tired ideas that the crib notes prescribed, year after year. Influenced by the constructivist model of learning and working against the transmission model of learning, the syllabus attempted to create a situation that would empower the reader to construct meaning rather than transcribe somebody else’s truth and regurgitate it into traditional essay format.¹³ Sue Gazis, the head of the New South Wales English Teachers’ Association, explains that “we can’t have a situation where kids pick up a study guide – this is what was happening in the past – and learn things off by heart.”¹⁴ She implies that the new syllabus, because of its new theoretical direction, avoids this problem. This issue, clearly, is related to the political agency that the syllabus hopes for. If students are encouraged to develop their own ideas rather than repeat knowledge that has been “transmitted” to them, then it follows that the potential for political agency is increased. Hopes for democracy, then, are closely linked to hopes for socially constructed knowledge. As Gazis makes clear, the syllabus sought to remedy what was clearly a problem in the past: that students were simply learning past papers and trotting out the same ideas, year after year.

¹² I am by no means suggesting that Theory has no place in a syllabus. I hope it becomes clear that what I am suggesting is that Theory does not *inherently* promote a civic education.

¹³ Jean Piaget’s constructivist model of learning stands in contradistinction to what has been dubbed as the “transmission” model of learning. Piaget viewed the child as an active part in the learning process, wherein the learner constructs new knowledge from new experiences, changing the learner’s mental framework as a result. The constructivist model of learning also views knowledge as constructed rather than discrete. Whereas a “transmission” model of learning might view the child as passive, and knowledge as discrete, constructivist learning believes that the child is an active participant, that the teacher is a facilitator of the learning process and that knowledge is what results from the learner’s experience. *The Psychology of Intelligence*, (New York: Routledge, 1950). In addition, Lev Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development” built upon this notion and facilitated a radical shift in the way that educators thought about learner, teacher and knowledge, since it suggested that the teacher’s primary task is to set tasks appropriately for the learner in order that the learner appropriate new experiences into their knowledge. *Mind and Society: The Development of Higher Mental Processes*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1978.

¹⁴ Noonan, Gerald, “The Medium is the Message,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 28 2001.

I am at one with Sue Gazis as she laments rote learning. The stale regurgitation of the same ideas, expressed in the same tired way, is a disease that plagues senior level English in high schools. And this is not to mention the covert and overt plagiarism that occurs in assessment tasks, which is a closely related issue. However, just as I question Theory's power to overcome the dissolution of political engagement in our students, I question whether Theory, in and of itself, can help to overcome this mammoth problem. Plagiarism and rote learning are necessarily related to the reification of knowledge and knowing. However, if I return to May's comments and my own experience of teaching this syllabus, I wonder if Theory does not become just so much more content to cover, rather than becoming a catalyst for a conversation that would – necessarily, due to the inherent properties of conversation – revivify the reification of knowledge and knowing that has occurred “in the past.” Contrary to Croke's hopes for emancipatory rudders, May's perception was that directed learning led not to discovery, but to rote learning: “well, if a topic ... is closed, then you'll do that ... because the learning was directed, it became methodological.” And, as I suggested previously, if learning is theoretically directed, then the potential for a true civic education diminishes in one and the same moment. This is especially the case if the student wants to contradict these theoretical directions at the potential expense of a UAI¹⁵ rank, a rank that allows a student to pursue the degree and career of their choice.

The Politics and Ethics of Civic Education: Tradition and Theory

The major unexamined assumption of critical literacy and of the syllabus is that Theory is itself the bastion of fairness, sensitivity to the other, and thus of democracy. Rightly enough, the commentators that I have so far mentioned either explicitly or implicitly see postmodern theory in its many forms as a *protest* against the status quo. Therefore, Theory has become associated with a civic education, as it has become associated with protest. Theory has most certainly and unequivocally been that, and many of the thinkers that have sparked the various movements in the amorphous reading habits of Theory have openly embraced protest as their vocation. Protest has always been a sign of a healthy tradition. What Gazis, Croke and Bonnycastle have missed, however, is that good Theory has always been a part of a larger conversation with tradition. It has, as Jacques Derrida makes very clear, been a kind of answering back. If we ask students to embrace Theory without understanding the place of

¹⁵ The UAI stands for the University Admissions Index, and is a rank calculated in order that universities can select the top students for their course, based on the popularity of that course and university. The UAI is what most students are interested in, above and beyond their discrete HSC marks for each subject.

Theory within a tradition of dissent and disagreement, then students are hearing one side of a conversation.

Theory, then, cannot save anyone from anything unless it is seen in the larger picture that includes tradition as its alter ego. Derrida explains his own methods as a teacher, and specifically, a teacher of deconstruction:

I call my students in France back to the most traditional ways of reading before trying to deconstruct texts; you have to understand according to the most traditional ways of reading before trying to deconstruct texts; you have to understand according to the most traditional norms what an author meant to say, and so on. So I don't start with disorder, I start with the tradition. If you're not trained in the tradition, then deconstruction means nothing. It's simply nothing.¹⁶

And, to fortify his comments, Derrida says later, “there's no deconstruction without the memory of tradition.”¹⁷ Deconstruction rests on the tradition that it answers. It may disagree with the tradition it works against, it may deconstruct, it may reform and reconstruct, but Derrida's point of reference is unrepentantly “the memory of tradition.” To divorce Derrida's deconstruction from its roots in tradition not only goes against the express wishes of its first practitioner, then, but renders our efforts with text as “nothing.” In fact, it renders impotent its vital position as a protest, in the act of that divorce, since protest is necessarily a contingent act. If we want our students to protest – and I confess that this is one thing I do want as an English teacher – then our students need to be invited to mimic this master of protest and to see tradition as the instigator of a conversation, rather than as a theoretical monologue.

To embrace Theory as a vehicle to usher in “critical literacy” and a civic education fails to make the vital distinction between open tradition and closed tradition, between open theory and closed theory. If we want our students to remain open then we must be able to make this distinction lest we uphold Theory – or tradition, if it comes to it – uncritically. It is possible that the reading habits of some theorists seek the kind of divorce from tradition that Derrida ultimately rejects. I deal with what I see as some instances of this kind of reading later in this thesis. I attempt to show the ways in which to read apart from tradition – which is to say to read as closed Theory does – runs the risk of becoming closed tradition. In this case, then, theorists cannot help but to begin to uphold one doctrine over another as the protector

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Jacques Derrida on Rhetoric and Composition: a conversation,” *JAC* 10.1 (1990), <http://jack.gsu.edu/jac/10/articles/1.htm>, p. 13. Accessed 21.5.02.

¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 15.

and generator of truth and justice. Since this act of divorce necessarily cuts one off from “others,” it undercuts its own efficacy as protest.

We begin to see a difference, then, between the ethic driving the syllabus and the ethic encouraged by the syllabus in its reading habits, text selections and exclusions, and its structure. I do not mean by this that the syllabus makers were covert or conspiratorial in their creation of the syllabus, that they professed one thing and actively pushed a secret political agenda that embraced another. Far from it. In some instances, however, Theory professes an ethic of the other, and yet predetermines who that other is and undercuts its own admirable assumption. If we are to reflect on how this might practically affect the development of civic responsibility, efficacy and action in our students, then we must take into account Theory’s reading habits as reflective of the ethic that it finally upholds as true and good. Put another way, if we are upholding truth, justice and a concern for ‘the other’ and yet constitutively upholding divorce from tradition then we are effectively undermining the ethic that we maintain is the reason for the divorce in the first place.

All of this talk of constituted ethics as opposed to professed ethics obliges me to defend why it is that I choose to privilege the constituted ethic of the syllabus over against the professed ethic and the Theory that it rests on. As a reflective practitioner, I find myself less concerned with the politics of pure Theory (or pure English, for that matter) and more concerned with what all of this looks like in a classroom with thirty teenagers sharing a common text. To some degree, the ethical import of the syllabus becomes “real” for me in that incarnate form, as it takes shape in my classroom. In a lesson learnt from Theory itself, I see the importance of the syllabus not in the intentions of the Author, but in the practical ramifications and outworking of the document itself, in real time, in real minds and in real bodies. Thus I privilege the constituted ethic over and above the professed ethic in this thesis – although I hope that I respect the integrity that forms the professed ethic of the syllabus – and I hope that my allegiance to my classroom explains my clear prejudice and interest throughout the thesis.

For this reason, the second part of my thesis consists primarily of an investigation of the reading habits of four examples of Theory: Derrida’s deconstruction, Tony Bennett’s cultural materialism, Gilbert and Gubar’s feminism, and Chinua Achebe and Edward Said’s postcolonialism. I approach these readers and theorists as examples of the way in which Theory has approached text, and critique them from the perspective of a school teacher observing the effects of these reading habits evident in the syllabus. Almost exclusively, I have attempted to reflect on the

effects on the high school student and their conversation with the text, with occasional reference to the position in which the syllabus places the teacher. Once again, my interest in these examples of Theory is not so much in the Theory itself, as in its constituted effect in the syllabus and in the classroom. In addition, I have approached these theories as they are adapted in the syllabus, to the teacher and thence to the student, which is to say, often without the context of the larger conversation with Tradition that I discussed earlier. As a matter of fact, I hope it is clear that I have developed great respect for the writing of master theorists like Derrida in the course of this thesis, as his writing has indelibly marked me. Often, my critiques cannot be read as a critique of Theory per se (although sometimes they are that) but of its incarnate form *in the syllabus*.

Rhetoric, which informs both my critique and my alternative suggestions in Part III for a truly civic education, suggests that there are different kinds of truth according to the task that the questioner undertakes. Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest, in their book *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, that the Cartesian mindset mistakenly subsumes all problems of truth under the rubric of Descartes' logic, which assumes that Truth can exist universally for all problems: "A rational science cannot indeed be content with more or less probable opinions; it must elaborate a system of necessary propositions which will impose itself on every rational being, concerning which agreement is inevitable."¹⁸ The problem with this, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca make very clear, is that this approach does not acknowledge the difference between what Aristotle termed "scientific knowledge" and "practical wisdom."¹⁹ How best to teach Australian teenagers, then – post-Leavis and post 9-11 – is not a question of what is universally true according to Theory or to tradition, but a question of what practical wisdom can be brought to the particular situation we find ourselves in. This does not mean a groundless relativism, but what Wayne C. Booth – to whom much of my thinking is indebted – termed "rigorously pluralistic ethical criticism."²⁰ My forays into Theory, therefore, are not meant to take part in some cosmic combat that seeks to uphold one metaphysic truth as triumphant over an imposter. The truth that I deal with when I wrestle with the Theory that has impacted on the syllabus is a practical truth, it is a truth that has human dimensions and thus must have human – rather than universal – solutions. And, if this is the case, my solutions and thus my pedagogy need to be as

¹⁸ C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1969, 2003), p. 2.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk VI, trans. J.A.K. Thomson (England: Penguin Classics, 2004), p. 113.

²⁰ Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An ethics of fiction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press), 1988, p. 350.

variable as the teenagers that cross my doorstep each morning, and as *particular* as each unique person that takes part in those conversations with *particular* texts in each *particular* classroom.

Conversation in the Classroom: Constituting civic responsibility and agency

I began by comparing my experience of teaching May's class in junior years with hearing May's experience in her senior years. In those junior years, what characterised the class was the unruly conversation that took place day in and day out. I have no doubt that May's class continued talking their way through their senior years, as they were a group that loved to talk! However, what May suggested was that their discussion had become prescribed by the syllabus, to a large degree. Still further, May's own conversation with the text, as typified by her interaction with Coleridge, was hemmed in by the syllabus's determination of what that text would say to her. It was simply May's job to work out "how" that text said what the syllabus had already decreed. Therefore, the difference between my memory of May's class and her recount of her senior years, which were dominated by the demands of the syllabus, was that conversation, in the rhetorical sense, could not and did not occur in what are traditionally the most intellectually developed years of her adolescence. The question that I stalk in this thesis is really, then, how can we form a syllabus that allows that questioning and conversation to continue in such a way that students can determine and re-determine what it is *they* think a text is saying? Still further, how can we craft a syllabus that allows students to converse *with each other* about what they believe a text is saying? If conversation is the bedrock of democracy in its radical interaction with the other, then surely we need to make room for the movement and surprise of conversation – that is, a conversation that we do not script for our students – in our English classrooms.

In my pursuit of this question, rhetoric and ethical criticism have largely provided the vocabulary and the tradition in which I have found an inspirational canon. As Wayne Booth says in the excerpt that opened this introduction, rhetoric and ethical criticism seek a "third set of assumptions," one that is not bound by the extreme and cosmic "open combat." Rhetoric offers a way to engage in practice and theory that sees truth as provisional and dependent upon particular instances and particular humans. And because, ultimately, I am committed to the particularity and otherness of each and every human that I teach, and I am committed to seeing that particularity develop within the orbit of interaction with the "other" particular human beings around us, I find in rhetoric and ethical criticism a refreshing tool with which to enter this debate.

And if I have not emulated the tradition that I profess, then let it here be said that I aim to begin a conversation here, even as I conclude this thesis. I aim not to have the last word on the education of Australian teenagers in the subject English, but to offer some ancient, perhaps neglected rubrics in rhetoric in which to think about what we do and how we do it. I answer back, in the tradition of Theory as protest, back to a bigger institution, back to academia, back to whomever might listen, and tell the story of what it is like to replay and enact the script of a conversation that has already taken place and in which I have had no part. In this sense, perhaps I attempt to capture some sense of what it must feel like to study English as a teenager in our high schools. Thus, to the teachers and to the students that I have presumptuously attempted to represent, I say in the words of F.R. Leavis, “This is so, isn’t it?”²¹

²¹ F.R. Leavis, *English Literature in Our Time and the University* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969), p. 47.

PART I: The Syllabus

Chapter One

Writing History: The Context of English Syllabuses in New South Wales from 1911-1982

The 1999 syllabus did not come about in a theoretical, political or historical vacuum. It is this essential conviction that leads me to consider the previous syllabuses in New South Wales. I attempt here to consider the ways in which previous syllabuses have influenced the 1999 Stage 6 syllabus, and concomitantly, I consider the ways in which each of the syllabuses since 1911 has been influenced, in turn, by the previous syllabus, and by the theoretical and philosophical movements around it. In this chapter, I lean very heavily on two theses on the history and constitution of English syllabuses in New South Wales, both of which are specifically dedicated to education. Paul Nay-Brock's Ph.D on the history of the English syllabuses¹ and Wendy Michaels' Ph.D on the constitution of the English syllabuses² both deal with the syllabuses in far more detail than I am able to here. My intention, in this chapter, is not so much to adopt the posture of the historian or education theorist as to pinpoint and observe some of the philosophical, theoretical and historical influences on the 1999 Stage 6 syllabus which is my principal concern. I aim to find out where the 1999 Stage 6 syllabus comes from in terms of the theoretical and pedagogical influences that it absorbs and those that it sets itself against. I assume that, as with the other syllabuses, the 1999 syllabus has responded to the hermeneutic, political and social assumptions of the time it was drafted and written. In order to shed light on these assumptions, I have sought to investigate and suggest some of the historical assumptions of previous syllabuses, as well as the contexts from which each syllabus has come.

I am also interested in how English syllabuses in high schools have reflected the changing views of what the study of literature is in the wider realm of literary criticism and philosophy. When it hit the high schools, the 1999 syllabus carried with it the sense that it was catching up on what the universities had been doing and thinking over the last twenty years, attempting to cover the ground that Theory had made since F.R. Leavis had dominated the practice of literary criticism. Specifically, there was the sense that the 1999 syllabus was an attempt to make room for the advent of Cultural Studies, and that the "new" concepts in the syllabus could be traced back to the perceived advances made by Cultural Studies in universities across Australia and internationally. Idiot's guides to literary theory and Cultural Studies were not uncommon additions to the crammed bookshelves on a teacher's desk in the staffrooms I worked in. Since my interest in the 1999 syllabus is in the ways in which conceptions and theories of the best practice of English have shaped classroom

¹ Paul Nay-Brock, *A History of the Development of English syllabuses in N.S.W. secondary education: 1953-1976* (Unpublished doctoral thesis: University of New England, 1984).

² Michaels, Wendy, *The Constitution of English in NSW Syllabuses 1953-1994* (Unpublished doctoral thesis: Macquarie University, 2001).

experience, I am interested in the ways in which dominating theories of English and literary criticism have influenced the creation of curriculum and syllabuses in high schools, finding a home in the practical pedagogy of practicing high school English teachers.

School Syllabuses and the University: the demands on the subject “English”

High school English, though, has more than recent theoretical trends in university level English to be concerned with. The subject English is also, as the politicians regularly remind us, considered the guardian of literacy in our students. Therefore, in all the syllabuses, there is the question of grammar and just how literacy is to be taught. Is grammar a function of expression or do we need to know the fundamentals of grammar in order to express ourselves? Where a syllabus falls on this question informs the policies and directions of every syllabus, a position influenced by differing trends and theories on education. Because my interest in literary criticism and philosophy leads me to an altogether different body of research, I have neglected to investigate this particular aspect of syllabus construction and constitution. Paul Nay-Brock and Wendy Michaels more than adequately cover this ground in their work, so outside the occasional reference I have chosen to steer clear of this particular part of the constitution of the syllabus.

In recent decades, however, the word “literacy” has taken on a broader meaning than perfunctory parsing and correct sentence structure. It does still mean that students should be able to read and write succinctly, correctly, and fluently and it most certainly means that students know how to use full stops and capital letters. However, in recent times, particularly with the last two syllabuses, the word “literacy” brings with it the sense that students should be “culturally literate,” understanding what shapes and makes a culture. In addition, the notion of “critical literacy” has become prevalent in the 1999 syllabus, which is the idea that students can read sceptically as well as for the intended meaning, thereby suggesting that a critically literate student can “get behind” a text and ascertain the values, culture and politics driving a text and author. According to Graeme Turner, educationists borrowed and transmogrified Richard Hoggart’s phrase “critical literacy,”³⁴ and Wendy Morgan

³ Graeme Turner, “Cultural Literacies, critical literacies, and the English school curriculum in Australia,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10:1 (2007), 105-114.

⁴ It is, perhaps, ironic that “critical literacy” has set itself in opposition to the Leavisite approach to text, in that Hoggart’s book “converses,” as it were, with Q.D. Leavis’s book, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932). Indeed, Cultural Studies owes much to the Leavises, as much of the early work on texts written for and from mass ‘culture’ was undertaken by Scrutiny writers. A good example of this is the seminal Leavis’s and Denys Thomson’s book, *Culture and Environment*.

suggests that the notion came from the pedagogy of Paulo Freire.⁵ A critically literate student, then, can decide what values to take on, can decide what text to submit to, and what texts to reject, presumably on political or broadly ethical grounds.⁶ A very advanced student might even be able to take parts of a text as questionable, and uphold other parts as good and true, thus reading sceptically and traditionally at one and the same time. In writing this history, I attempt to place this interest in “critical literacy” in context with other syllabuses, thus observing the way that the notion of literacy and its ethical efficacy has been previously considered.

Meaning and Texts: the hermeneutics of understanding

The notion of critical literacy brings with it attendant notions of how a text means. Each syllabus makes hermeneutical decisions, either implicit or explicit, that reveal how it believes meaning comes about, who controls meaning and for what purpose. This is, of course, inextricably linked with theories of English and hermeneutics, which have always dealt with the politics of how human beings understand the world and, consequently, respond to it. I am interested in the ways in which each document assumes a student will make sense of what they read; does the syllabus assume that a student finds meaning in the discrete text, or does it assume that biographical and classical study of an author yields meaning for the student? Or, still further, does the syllabus encourage the student to be the centre of the hermeneutical process? Each of the syllabuses makes assumptions about how meaning unfolds in the reading process – and the two more recent syllabuses move beyond reading itself into listening, writing and speaking – and each reveals a dominant hermeneutic that governs the choices that it makes. Since this is the predominant way in which I have approached the 1999 syllabus – that is, assuming that its choices reveal a hermeneutic of reading and of understanding – I attempt to investigate how closely the 1999 syllabus resembles its predecessors in its conception of meaning and the way in which understanding occurs.

Related to this is the way in which each syllabus approaches the notion of truth. Since we are dealing with syllabuses crafted in the 20th century, for the most part each of the syllabuses contends with Cartesian notions of truth – the idea, that is,

⁵ Wendy Morgan, “Critical literacy,” *Reviewing English in the 21st Century*, eds. Wayne Sawyer and Eva Gold (Melbourne: Phoenix Education, 2004), p. 107.

⁶ Of course, the notion that students should be critical of texts, and should consider which texts are “good for them” and which “bad” is not a new concept; F.R. Leavis made copious lists of good guys and bad guys. *The Great Tradition* and parts of *The Living Principle* are indeed dedicated to pointing out the superiority of one text – and by extension one author – over another, and Leavis makes clear that those that he champions are *ethically* superior to those that he derides. I attempt to outline Leavis’s troubled and indelible imprint on the study of English later on in this chapter.

that truth is something that is identifiable, discrete and, importantly, metaphysical. As I mentioned in the Introduction, Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts Tyteca maintain that Western thinking has largely been dominated by Cartesian thinking, which claims that truths are self-evident:

Now Descartes' concept, clearly expressed in the first part of *The Discourse on the Method*, was to 'take well nigh for false everything which was only plausible.' It was this philosopher who made the self-evident the mark of reason, and considered rational only those demonstrations which, starting from clear and distinct ideas, extended, by means of apodictic proofs, the self-evidence of the axioms of derived theorems.⁷

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest, then, that the conception of truth as reliant on "apodictic proofs" has overtaken the sciences and come to dominate the entire Western model of thinking, in such a way that the arts have had to work within this model of truth. Of course, if Descartes' conception of truth as apodictic is invoked in a subject like English, all sorts of problems arise. As readers of fictional texts, we are always dealing with the "only plausible." If what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest is true, English must have trouble justifying what it does. The prejudice for "proofs" is accepted as theorem rather than theory and so the "only plausible" becomes obscured as a viable and separate way to deal with truth.

Each syllabus formed in New South Wales has had to deal with the prevalence of this Western model of truth and of understanding the truth. Each syllabus struggles to determine whether students should study *material*, which suggests that texts are clearly and distinctly quantifiable, or whether English is a *mode of inquiry*, in which case texts are not "self-evidently" discrete or true. Some syllabuses maintain that students should learn "about" literature and others maintain that students should learn the skills with which to read and understand any kind of literature, thereby attempting to engage a student's imagination and thus engage faculties of reason. Interestingly, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca see the anti-rationalist, Romantic reaction against the Cartesian model of truth as paying inadvertent obeisance to the dominance of the Cartesian myth: "But, whether we consider rationalist or so-called 'anti-rationalist' philosophers, they all carry on the Cartesian tradition by the limitation they impose on the concept of reason."⁸ When I approach different syllabuses, therefore, I am interested in how each syllabus defines the notion of truth, given that the Cartesian mindset circumscribes Western thinking to a large degree. When I approach the 1999 syllabus in the next chapter, I hope to ask the same question of this syllabus, and set

⁷ Ch. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1969, 2003), p. 1.

⁸ *ibid*, p. 3.

the choices of the 1999 syllabus in context with other conceptions of English, of truth, of text and of reading.

I would also like to approach each of these syllabuses with a different kind of question. It seems evident that one of the issues that raises consternation and controversy with the recent 1999 syllabus is its attention to ethical consequences and responsibilities in teaching English. Some who have objected to the syllabus do so on the grounds that it over-politicises the teaching of English literature, arguing instead that the subject, English, is a purely aesthetic enterprise.⁹ Since this appears to be a point of division between commentators on the syllabus, and since I take a view that English is neither a purely aesthetic enterprise nor a political flag to wave, I ask the question how has each of these syllabuses thought of the subject English in terms of its efficacy in promoting good ethical practice or diverting attention from “vulgar” or “un-educated” activity? How has the subject English positioned itself as an educational instrument to impart values to the high school students of New South Wales?

The 1911 and 1948 syllabuses

English teaching in New South Wales grew primarily out of a British and Scottish tradition in literature. From 1911 to 1944, the English syllabus rested heavily on the canonical study of literature, grammar and academic essays. The 1911 and 1944 syllabuses were very similar to one another; the 1948 syllabus made almost no changes to the 1911 syllabus save the specific recommendations that teachers focus on formal grammar and make allowances for Australian literature.¹⁰ That these two syllabuses rested on a traditional view of literature was not necessarily a result of British control, or even of the direct control of the Australian universities, but was more a case of teachers teaching what and how they had been taught. Australian teachers, in New South Wales, were left largely to their own devices. As Paul Brock¹¹ notes, many of the teachers teaching the 1911 English syllabus did not see an English syllabus in their entire teaching career.¹² The majority of the instruction

⁹ Luke Slattery, reporting on the English syllabuses in Australia, says that the new approach to English “politicis[es] the study of books, films and emails, now grouped under the catch-all of ‘texts’” and reports critics of the syllabus argue that “the approach deprives students of the joy of reading for pleasure” and “excludes classical texts and ignores basic literacy skills.” “This little pig goes post modernist,” *The Australian*, 23 July 2005.

¹⁰ Paul Nay-Brock, “Changes in English Syllabus in New South Wales, Australia: Can any American echoes be heard?” *The English Journal NCTE*, 73, 3, 53.

¹¹ Paul Nay-Brock and Paul Brock are the same person; he changed his name from one publication to the next. When I reference his work, I keep to the title he gives himself.

¹² Paul Brock, “Processes involved in curriculum change: a case study of New South Wales, Australia,” *Timely Voices: English Teaching in the Eighties*, ed. Roslyn Arnold (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 178.

regarding what was to be taught and how it was taught was governed by the teacher's own learning experience and the formal exam. In addition, teachers also had Tutorial Guides published monthly by Martin and MacGregor, which Nay-Brock describes as being "filled with grammatical exercises and potted histories of English Literature."¹³ Despite this formal direction, English teachers in New South Wales were not actively audited with regard to the syllabus and were left to craft their own pedagogy, based largely on their own conceptions of what literature and what this subject "English" was.

Since English was effectively taught on the basis of the teacher's belief systems and his or her own education, it is perhaps instructive to consider the movements in English in universities, which, both directly and indirectly, have tended to influence the teaching of English in high schools. The subject English, as Terry Eagleton makes very clear, was and is a relatively new phenomenon. There is much debate about how and why the subject came about, but Robert Crawford makes a very interesting case for the development of the subject English as an essentially Scottish invention, suggesting that English always had its roots in a move for social improvement for the marginalised masses. The Scottish, feeling their social marginalisation from the English and particularly from London, wished to further their social standing by breeding out "Scottishisms" and replacing the local dialect with language and tastes more English than the English. Crawford suggests that the subject English, as a Scottish invention, was "nothing less than a huge attempt at cultural restructuring."¹⁴ He goes further and outlines the process more clearly:

The emphasis ... came to fall on 'English literature' as bound up with the culture of England; the emphasis also fell on the teaching of English Literature as a useful implement in the attempted conversion of provincials or the lower classes to an acceptable metropolitan standard.¹⁵

According to Crawford, then, the conception of the subject English always had acculturation as its purpose and, consequently, a set of values was always at the core of the discipline. Among many commentators on the same phenomenon, Jo McMurtry notices a similar trend when she notes the simultaneous rise in popularity of the subject English with the induction of women into the university. She suggests that, keen to improve social rank and efficacy, women quickly filled classes on

¹³ Paul Nay-Brock, *A History of the Development of English syllabuses in N.S.W. Secondary Education: 1953-1976* (Unpublished doctoral thesis: University of New England, 1984), p. 21.

¹⁴ Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p38.

¹⁵ *ibid*, pp. 42-3.

English as a means both to secure better social standing and to further their moral and ethical development.¹⁶

In both of these instances, the study of English literature is seen, somewhat paradoxically, both as the guardian of culture and social improvement and as a lesser subject than the classics like Latin and Greek. Interestingly, although I concur with Nay-Brock in his suggestion that teachers taught according to their own agenda independent of the syllabus document, the *document itself* reflects a conception of English as a means of social improvement and acculturation:

The works included in the Literature course have been chosen, not merely for their value as a means of information, but as a source of *higher pleasures*, as a means of *knowing life*, and for their *ethical or their literary value* ... the *special educating power* of Literature lies in its effect in *developing the mind*, filling it with *high ideals*, and in its *influence in refining and ennobling character*.¹⁷

Clearly, this syllabus echoes the movement of the subject English in universities, in that the document echoes the sense that English is a subject that furthers moral and ethical development. Literature, in particular, is seen as having peculiar pedagogical advantages since, as Crawford suggests in his work on Scottish literature and the development of English, literature teaches the margins, the provincials and the colonials and lower classes how to be more English than the English. It is an equalising and democratising activity. Thus, in terms of the conception of English as an ethical force – and particularly English that centralises the reading of literature in its practice – this syllabus takes on the theoretical and philosophical assumptions of the time in that it assumes that reading literature has the ability to transform the mind and “character,” enabling the student to be upwardly mobile.

The 1911 syllabus assumes that some degree of scholarship was needed in order to be able to read literature. Its hermeneutical assumptions were that, for reading to be meaningful, a student needed to be able to establish literary history before the student could access the text itself. In its “potted histories,” the syllabus attempted to improve students’ knowledge of where literature had come from, both in terms of its historical period and in terms of its authorship. Having said that, the syllabus assumed that students would not understand a text unless they enjoyed it first: “Literature cannot exercise this [ethical] power unless the works are understood and enjoyed by the pupils, [thus] it follows that the true end and aim of the teacher

¹⁶ Jo McMurtry, *English Language, English Literature: The Creation of an Academic Discipline* (London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1985), pp. 11-13.

¹⁷ New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, *Courses of Study for High Schools* (Sydney: William Applegate Gullick, Government Printer, 1911), p. 18 (my italics).

must be to rouse interest and create enjoyment in the books read.”¹⁸ This syllabus seemed to conceive of understanding as a peculiar, almost mysterious moment in the ethical and moral development of the student. This is particularly clear in its discussion of how and why poetry should be taught:

As the study of poetry scarcely comes within the sphere of the exact intellectual activities, it does not lend itself to treatment by any prescribed method ... often the mere understanding of a passage is so closely connected with emotional experience that in attempting an explanation its delicate beauty is lost. Something should be left to the pupil’s feeling and imagination.¹⁹

Understanding is seen as “closely connected with emotional experience,” and the aim of English is seen as the cultivation of the sensibility and of a superior ethic.

Interestingly, when the 1911 and 1944 syllabus came under review, it was criticised for encouraging formulaic responses. The Chief Examiner, Professor A.J. Waldock, found that students had a dogged tendency to regurgitate essays and found that these “emotional experiences” had become reified into stock responses. He was particularly critical of the ways in which students answered questions on poetry, where they either took “refuge in a catalogue of poetic devices” or “ballooned into a positive aurora borealis of ecstatic paraphrase.”²⁰ It appears that students did not develop and interiorise this superior ethic or sensibility so much as take refuge in poetic devices, which could be rote learnt and rolled out for any exam. In terms of how the syllabus conceived of truth and meaning, it appears that, even if the syllabus had intended that students develop a personal, organic response to a text, these potential experiences had been reified by the time Waldock came to review the syllabus.

In the Shadows of Cambridge and Harvard: I.A. Richards, the New Critics and F.R. Leavis

A large part of the history of English in the 20th century derives from the theory and criticism of I.A. Richards, the American New Critics and F.R. Leavis. There are many similarities between the three (as well as, it should be noted, many differences) and their combined impact has shaped English as a discipline and English pedagogy to a foundational degree. I discuss I.A. Richards together with the New Critics, and then

¹⁸ New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, *Courses of Study for High Schools* (Sydney: William Applegate Gullick, Government Printer, 1911), p. 18.

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 19.

²⁰ Quoted from Paul Nay-Brock, *A History of the Development of English syllabuses in N.S.W. Secondary Education: 1953-1976* (Unpublished doctoral thesis: University of New England, 1984), p. 21.

move on to the paradoxical contribution of Leavis to the constitution of the English syllabuses in New South Wales.

I.A. Richards was one of the most influential literary critics of the 20th century, and his thought lies at the foundation of the New Critics and of F. R. Leavis.²¹ He was a lecturer at the Cambridge School of English which was set up in 1917. Cambridge stood in contradistinction to the Oxford School of English, with its emphasis on the historical study and editing of traditional literary texts.²² Conversely, Cambridge English was concerned with the intricacies and power of the text itself, and I.A. Richards was as much a part of this movement as he was an instigator of the modern Cambridge English movement. Indeed, his emphasis on “close reading” as both a hermeneutical philosophy and a method of reading literary texts became synonymous with the Cambridge School of English. A friend of T.S. Eliot’s, his influence was felt across both North America and England, after he took up an appointment at Harvard University. In the face of the tumult of the beginning of the 20th century – with The Great War and the growing dominance of the industrial revolution over the lives of the Western world – I.A. Richards and the New Critics formed a view of criticism that was a kind of protest against the direction of the values of their societies. I.A. Richards attempted to restore order and beauty to otherwise “chaotic” and threadbare lives through the discipline of “close reading.” While he conceded that Science had its own claims to “Truth” that were empirically and unassailably true, he maintained that poetry and art provided a way for society to be able wisely to choose its ethical path:

The arts are our storehouse of recorded values. They spring from and perpetuate hours in the lives of exceptional people, when their control and command of experience is at its highest, hours when the varying possibilities of existence are most clearly seen and the different activities which may arise are most exquisitely reconciled, hours when the habitual narrowness of interests or confused bewilderment are replaced by an intricately wrought composure. Both in the genesis of a work of art, in the creative moment, and in its aspect as a vehicle of communication, reasons can be found for giving to the arts a very important place in the theory of Value. They record the most important judgments we possess as to the values of experience. They form a body of evidence which, for lack of a serviceable psychology by which to interpret it, and through the

²¹ It should be said that Leavis was to later dissociate himself from Richards’s ‘scientism,’ notably in his article “Dr. Richards, Bentham, and Coleridge,” reprinted in *The Importance of Scrutiny*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: University Press, 1964), pp. 360-377. While the syllabuses in English have grouped the thinking and writing of Leavis, the New Critics and Richards together (and so I necessarily group them together), there are significant differences in their theorising.

²² E.M. Tillyard outlines the differences between the Oxford approach to literature and the Cambridge School of English in his book *The Muse Unchained: An Intimate Account of the Revolution in English Studies at Cambridge* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1958), p. 31.

desiccating influence of abstract Ethics, has been left almost untouched by professed students of value. An odd omission, for without the assistance of the arts we could compare very few of our experiences, and without such comparison we could hardly hope to agree as to which are to be preferred.²³

I.A. Richards' call, then, was for the arts to be restored to the centre of society so that "intricately wrought composure"²⁴ could be brought to bear on both the individual and society at large. It was a composure that could not be achieved by Science and that discipline's claim to truth, and could not, specifically, be achieved by "abstract Ethics," since these two disciplines lack the claim on "experience" that poetry provides. While the sciences can provide maxims for truth, according to Richards they cannot provide any useful conduit for the organising or managing the "terror of the loneliness of the human situation."²⁵

Poetry, on the other hand, assumes a different role from that of the sciences, providing a way for order to be restored to social chaos, allowing human beings to share and commune over the common experience of what it was to be human. Indeed, I.A. Richards claimed that the language arts – and poetry in particular – offered another type of language entirely to that offered by Science. He claimed that:

The distinction which needs to be kept clear does not set up fictions in opposition to verifiable truths in the scientific sense. A statement may be used for the sake of reference, true or false, which it causes. This is the scientific use of language. But it may also be used for the sake of the effects in emotion and attitude produced by the reference it occasions. This is the emotive use of language ... for what matters is that the series of attitudes due to the references should have their own proper organization, their own emotional interconnection, and this often has no dependence upon the logical relations of such references.²⁶

At its most powerful, then, poetry employs metaphor to point to an array of complex feelings and emotions to which the individual might not otherwise be able to give voice. Employing recognisable images, the poet gives expression to the quandary of the human state and in so doing unites an otherwise disparate society. Metaphor – which is the primary means of communication that poetry employs – is capable of communicating what no other type of language can, since it can deal with the complexity, difficulty and paradoxical nature of human existence as well as the attendant feelings that go with this existence.

²³ I.A. Richards, "Communication and the artist," *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1972), p. 110.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁶ I.A. Richards, "The two uses of language," *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1972), p. 112.

The unification and “composure” that Richards seeks is both individual and civic. Richards was as much a rhetorician as a literary critic, and rhetoric has traditionally demanded a civic outlook. Richards was no exception. His interest in poetry was, as he makes explicit, that it could order the individual’s experience so that society itself could be ordered and peaceful. Poetry can engender “humane, sympathetic, and friendly relations between individuals,”²⁷ primarily because it allows us to give voice to experiences that might otherwise separate us from each other. As a rhetorician,²⁸ Richards takes the view that poetry is less a means of convincing or persuading a public audience of a particular truth, than a means of unifying impossibly diverse experiences in such a way that conversation can begin: “We pass as a rule from a chaotic to a better organized state ... typically through the influence of other minds.”²⁹ His use of the word “state” is particularly suggestive of Richards’ civic aims in promoting poetry as a means by which things might be “ordered.” Since we have no access to each other’s minds apart from language, and language that seeks to communicate experience is not directly “referential” but is “emotive,” then the metaphorical nature of poetry alone has the power to restore order to otherwise disparate and conflicting experiences.

Richards’ method for securing this “order” and for overcoming the chaos of misunderstanding was a rigorous and disciplined “close reading” of the text at hand. In particular, Richards saw the reading of short, abstract poetry as particularly worthy of the kind of close reading he espoused, since this kind of poetry (over and above narrative poetry, say) could leave the experience of poet and reader as complete and complex. His “practical criticism” – a phrase he borrowed from Coleridge – entailed understanding the difference between “sense,” “feeling,” “tone,” and “intention” in a poem. In order to establish any of these parts, one must limit one’s attention to the material and discrete poem itself – and in this sense Richards’ approach was deeply and unapologetically a-historical. The “sense” of the poem is the “state of affairs” to which the poet speaks, the “feeling” is both the poet’s and the reader’s feeling about that state of affairs, the “tone” the poet’s “attitude to his listener” and the “intention” is the speaker’s “aim, conscious or unconscious.”³⁰ The reader’s difficult hermeneutical task is to read, with respect to each of these four categories, *the material poem itself*. Importantly, grasping and balancing these four categories would

²⁷ I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 53.

²⁸ Thomas Connolly gives a convincing account of I.A. Richards’ standing as a rhetorician, and pays particular attention to Richards’ understanding of the “new” rhetoric, which strives for conversation rather than for persuasion. *Rhetoric in the European Tradition*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 267.

²⁹ *ibid*, p. 57.

³⁰ I.A. Richards, “The four kinds of meaning,” in *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman Group, 1972), p. 116.

only yield the integrating experience that Richards' hoped for if the reader attended to the particular syntax and style of the work.

Richards' contribution to the teaching of English was that, like the New Critics and F.R. Leavis, he championed English as a way in which order and civilisation could be restored and maintained. In the tradition of Matthew Arnold, Richards believed that English – specifically poetry – was a way to safeguard culture against itself. This would become important for schools as they set up their curriculum, already conscious as they were that they were responsible for the development of civilisation through education.

Richards' impact can be felt right through until the present day, with his insistence upon close reading as the principal hermeneutical method to attain understanding. This emphasis would be taken up by the American New Critics and by F.R. Leavis, and would eventually become commonplace practice in English syllabuses in New South Wales. This emphasis on close reading has a concomitant, however, that has also become a legacy in English syllabuses throughout this century, and that is the a-historical nature of the close reading that Richards espoused.³¹ In resistance to the Oxford school of English, the Cambridge emphasis on close reading meant a philosophical and methodological resistance to justifying one's own assumptions in the reading.

Like I.A. Richards, the American New Critics positioned themselves over against the chaos that industrialisation and capitalism had initiated in the Northern United States.³² In this sense, their stance was ethically charged: they viewed scientific rationalism as essentially depraved, as missing the core of life and humanity. Cleanth Brooks, one of the most prominent of the New Critics, suggested that the essential problem with scientific rationalism and the lifestyle that it created was that it was, by the very nature of scientific reason, fractured. When the world is approached scientifically, instead of poetically, ethics and good living become reduced to empty maxims and cute idioms. In his assessment of John Donne's "The Canonization", he attempts to demonstrate that poetry, by contrast, is a unifying, organic "urn" that provides an experience more real to life – and more relevant – than

³¹ The parallel with F.R. Leavis is a provisional one here, as Leavis's own position on the context of the text was, actually, attentive to history. Leavis was trained in history, and was interested in the continuities between 'history' and 'literature' – although he did maintain that they were *two different disciplines*. For an example of Leavis's thought on literature and history, see "Literature and Society" and "Sociology and Literature" in *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), pp. 182-194 and pp. 195-203.

³² Terry Eagleton attributes much of the theorizing of the New Critics to this context. See his chapter "The Rise of English," in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (United States: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 40-43.

the realest of scientific facts. Poetry achieves this, he argues, through paradox, which he views as a kind of organic unity:

The poem is an instance of the doctrine which it asserts; it is both the assertion and the realization of the assertion ... The poem itself is the well-wrought urn which can hold the lovers' ashes ... I submit that the only way by which the poet could say what "The Canonization" says is by paradox ... Deprived of the character of paradox with its twin concomitants of irony and wonder, the matter of Donne's poem unravels into 'facts', biological, sociological, and economic.³³

Both I.A. Richards and the American New Critics felt that the arts are a "special" kind of communication that has the power to restore value to the valueless individual and to the valueless society. In this way, poetry is both a protest against the social order established by scientific rationalism in the 20th century, and a blueprint for an ethical social order that fosters peace among disparate peoples.

However, both were distinctly a-historical when it came to their methods of criticism. This meant that their position became a-political, which of course in recent times has come to be seen as the most "political" position of all, by virtue of their refusal to admit political affiliation. Since the point of reading poetry was to elucidate a set of values that "Great Men" had managed to constitute in the material poem, the New Critics in particular shunned the context of the work in their literary criticism and also shunned a political party line. Indeed, such a position would detract from the ethical activity of the aesthetic and close appraisal of poetry. Like F.R. Leavis, the New Critics required that poetry be read *closely*. The New Critics hoped, in this close reading, that the unity of the text, shimmering with the internal structure of paradox, be revealed. Indeed, Brooks' essay "The language of paradox" is an extremely *close* and *technical* analysis of several poems and makes little to no reference to the context of the poems or the poet. In this way, the poem becomes a "phoenix" – a discrete experience that can be separated from author, the author's intent, and (of especial concern for more recent literary critics) from the reader's context:

The urn to which we are summoned, the urn which holds the ashes of the phoenix ... is the poem itself ... The phoenix rises from the ashes; or ought to rise; but it will not arise for all our mere sifting and measuring the ashes, or testing them for their chemical content. We must be prepared to accept the paradox of the imagination itself; else 'Beautie, Truth, and Raritie' remain enclosed in their cinders and we shall end with essential cinders, for all our pains.³⁴

³³ Cleanth Brooks, "The language of paradox," *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1972), p. 300.

³⁴ Cleanth Brooks, "The language of paradox," in *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1972), pp. 302-303.

According to Brooks, Donne's poem here takes on a life of its own, apart from the author or his intent, and apart from the reader or her context. A kind of sublimation takes place where the poem becomes de-historicised and thus dematerialised so that it can "summon" us as readers, demanding our complete attention, lest we be left with "essential cinders."

The net effect of the New Critics on the teaching of English was, then, both deep and troubled. Likewise, the effect of F.R. Leavis's thought – or part of it – has reverberated through the teaching of English and the constitution of English syllabuses, to the point where the reverberations are no longer recognisable as essentially Leavisite. As Terry Eagleton has acknowledged, "English students ... are 'Leavisites' whether they know it or not, irremediably altered by the historic invention."³⁵ George Steiner expresses the same sentiment as he attempts to grapple with the breadth and depth of the impact of Leavis on the discipline of English and its place in education:

The assertion that after the decline of the epic and of verse drama the prose novel has concentrated the major energies of western literature ... is now a common place. It was not so when Leavis first focused on a chapter in *Middlemarch* or a paragraph in *Nostramo* the same kind of total apprehension exhibited in relation to Shakespeare ... The mere suggestion (at present nearly a cliché) that there is in *Heart of Darkness* a realization of evil comparable to the study of diminishing moral awareness in, say *Macbeth*, has behind it a revolution in criticism. More than any man except James, Leavis has caused that revolution.³⁶

Leavis's impact reverberated through the discipline of English and education through several means: through his teaching (and Steiner stresses the importance of his teaching as his primary conduit of influence and genius),³⁷ through the controversial journal *Scrutiny*, and through his books. As both Steiner and Eagleton make clear, Leavis's personal quirks and style quickly created dismissive enemies so that it is possible to miss the effect of the particularity of Leavis's thinking on syllabuses from 1948 onwards.³⁸ Even now, what we sometimes term common sense in the reading, critique and teaching of literary texts is often a direct inheritance of Leavis's thinking.

The son of a musical instruments dealer and a veteran of The Great War as a medical orderly, F.R. Leavis was not of the elite. Like Raymond Williams and I.A.

³⁵ Terry Eagleton, "The Rise of English," *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (United States: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 27.

³⁶ George Steiner, "F.R. Leavis," *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman Group, 1972), p. 628.

³⁷ *ibid*, p. 624.

³⁸ Steiner is unflinchingly clear that Leavis himself helped to create these "enemies," and indeed set himself up against several people and organisations polemically.

Richards, his background ensured that his assuming the role of don was not a birthright. Thus, F.R. Leavis's influence was very much in keeping with the Scottish roots that Robert Crawford named as the birthplace of modern English studies; it was the movement of the marginalised masses into the realm of academia.³⁹ And, like the Scottish, one of Leavis's main contributions to thought on the study of literature, was that it was primarily a civilising and moral activity. As Steiner says, "The commanding axiom of Leavis's life-work is the conviction that there is a close relation between a man's capacity to respond to art and his general fitness for humane existence."⁴⁰ Leavis claimed that the critic – and that is how Leavis would have positioned the high school student of English – not only has the right to approach literature as judge, but has a moral obligation to do so with sincerity and feeling.

On the one hand, then, Leavis's thought influenced the ethical import of the high school classroom by positioning the reader as a central moral force in the creation of culture, through the "rigorous" reading of literature. In terms of agency, this meant that Leavis opened the way for the high school student to be efficacious in the formation of ethics and, by extension, politics. On the other hand, so strong were his arguments on the formation of the canon that they sometimes had the unintentional effect of silencing any contribution to the debate that did not mirror his own thoughts on the matter. This, of course, puts the high school student in a very awkward position: she is both invited to partake in close and rigorous assessment of literature (without the classical training that may have been previously required), and yet is fairly well trounced if her interpretation dare swerve from or contradict Leavis's own conclusions. A.S. Byatt wryly captures the student's quandary in her novel *Possession*: "Leavis did to Blackadder what he did to serious students; he showed him the terrible, the magnificent importance and urgency of English literature and simultaneously deprived him of any confidence in his own capacity to contribute to, or change it. The young Blackadder wrote poems, imagined Dr Leavis's comments on them, and burned them."⁴¹

George Steiner suggests that the reason for Leavis's undoing was that his increased sense of the importance of the critical enterprise led him to create "contrived dragons" that then prompted the "hectoring" tone that is somewhat reminiscent of his hectoring hero, D.H. Lawrence. He suggests that Leavis "conjured up a detailed melodrama of persecution and neglect, or conspiracy and betrayal ... though he claims that he invites no more than qualified, challenging assent, Leavis has

³⁹ I am aware that there are degrees of marginality. Leavis was by no means the poorest of the poor, and was decidedly middle class. I merely mean to make the point that he was not the upper class.

⁴⁰ George Steiner, "F.R. Leavis," *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1972), p. 623.

⁴¹ A.S. Byatt, *Possession* (Great Britain: Vintage, 1991), p. 27.

come to demand, perhaps unconsciously, complete loyalty to his creed. The merest doubt or deviation is heresy.”⁴² If – and I assume this to be the case – syllabuses after 1945 were created on Leavis’s assumptions, then the high school student is left in just such a quandary.

The idea of canonicity and its hallowed place in the study of high school English has often been attributed to Leavis, and there is much truth to the claim. Leavis’s critical activity indeed focuses on judgements that decide who is in and who is out – although it is well worth examining Leavis’s “list;” his lists are actually not the orthodox “dead white males” that some would like to think they are.⁴³ *The Great Tradition* is, at the very least, a ranking exercise that heralds one novel as greater than the next, and is critically silent on other novels, signalling Leavis’s decision that those lesser novels are “out.” *The Living Principle* critiques three poems⁴⁴ and ranks them in order of greatness, thereby upholding the concept of the canon as right – and even morally right, if one considers the core of Leavis’s claim to be that the reading of literature is a moral activity. He says, in *The Great Tradition*, “Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Conrad, and D.H. Lawrence: the great tradition of the English novel is *there*.”⁴⁵ Leavis’s critical activity, then, was unabashedly concerned with the creation, maintenance and recognition of the canon. In addition, his claims of canonicity are intensified, ethicised and politicised by his strident assertions of the morality of each of his decisions to include or omit one work over another – although it should be said that his critical activity was intended to be a *contribution to an ongoing debate* rather than impermeable theorems. Leavis recognised that the act of judgement is at the core of ethics and thus of ethical reading. Thus, the canon loomed large as the vestige of proper, right and moral living.

Accompanying his view of the importance of the canon and the maintenance of the literary tradition was his view that critics of English literature were to be

⁴² George Steiner, “F.R. Leavis,” *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman Group, 1972), p. 630.

⁴³ For example, his canon of novelists in *The Great Tradition* includes, in order, two women, one American, one Pole and one solitary Englishman. *Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (Great Britain: Penguin Books in association with Chatto and Windus, 1977), p. 39.

I say this not so much to assert that Leavis did not have a fierce sense of canonicity or of Englishness but to suggest that it is perhaps worth reading Leavis with some generosity – lest we commit the same sin that his critics accuse him of. As I earlier suggested, it was Leavis and the Scrutiny school who introduced all sorts of “non-canonical” writing into schools in English.

⁴⁴ Leavis reads “Barbara” by Alexander Smith, “Cold in the earth” by Emily Brontë and Hardy’s “After a Journey,” and eventually decides that “After a Journey” is a case of “sentimental debauch,” that Brontë’s poem is a “notable achievement” and yet does not quite make the cut, while “After a Journey” “has an advantage in reality (in that) it represents a profounder and completer sincerity.” “Reality and Sincerity,” in *The Living Principle: ‘English’ as a Discipline of Thought* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), p. 127.

⁴⁵ F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (Great Britain: Penguin Books in association with Chatto and Windus, 1977), p. 39.

inculcated into the *discipline* of criticism. Far from the secondary importance that was accorded literary criticism prior to the 20th century, Leavis imagined an academy of critics who were ascetically and religiously committed to the creation of the canon so that culture itself might thrive and the people might not perish from ignorance and cultural impoverishment.

Leavis's ascetic commitment to canonicity, however, was mitigated by his commitment to the value of disagreement as a necessarily creative moment in the formation of the canon. As he says in the introduction to *The Great Tradition*, "The only way to escape misrepresentation is never to commit oneself to any critical judgement that makes an impact – that is, never to say anything. I still, however, think that *the best way to promote profitable discussion* is to be as clear as possible with oneself about what one sees and judges, to try and establish the essential discriminations in the given field of interest, and to state them as clearly as one can (for *disagreement*, if necessary)."⁴⁶ The early impact of Leavis's work, then, was not only that there was a moral obligation to read and appraise literature seriously, but that this process was to be undertaken in a community of readers. A community of readers, for the high school student, essentially means that an invitation is made to the student to take part in defining just what the outcome of this reading shall be. In short, the community of readers implies inclusion, and if the point of reading is to be ethical, then the high school student is to take part in the formation of the ethical values of her culture.

Leavis also contended that the critic and reader of literature can in no way be a philosopher, a contention that had an enormous impact on the teaching of English in high schools, and to some degree has affected decisions made by the present syllabus in reaction to Leavis's position. Leavis's commitment to close reading and the particular living experience that close reading recreated meant that his stance became "most decidedly *not* philosophical."⁴⁷ In his famous encounter with René Wellek, Leavis makes clear that the ideal reading of literature is a profoundly anti-philosophical or (as we would say) anti-theoretical activity. The critic's business is to respond particularly, closely, and sensitively to the text at hand – to the concrete poem. He positions English as an entirely and essentially different discipline from that of philosophy, arguing that philosophy approaches literature on abstract terms, while the critic approaches literature as concrete:

Philosophy, we say, is 'abstract' (thus Dr Wellek asks me to defend my position 'more abstractly'), and poetry 'concrete'. Words in poetry invite

⁴⁶ *ibid*, p. 9 (my italics).

⁴⁷ F.R. Leavis, "Mutually Necessary," *F.R. Leavis: The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*, ed. G. Singh (London: Chatto and Windus, 1982), p. 192.

us, not to ‘think about’ and judge but to ‘feel into’ or ‘become’ – to realize a complex experience that is given in words ... The critic – the reader of poetry – is indeed concerned with evaluation, but to figure him as measuring with a norm which he brings up to the object and applies from the outside is to misrepresent the process. The critic’s aim is, first, to realize as sensitively and completely as possible this or that which claims his attention; and a certain valuing is implicit in the realizing. And the organization into which it settles as a constituent in becoming ‘placed’ is an organization of similarly ‘placed’ things, things that have found their bearings with regard to one another, and not a theoretical system or a system determined by abstract considerations.⁴⁸

When Wellek took issue with Leavis’s criticism, he suggested that Leavis’s choices were indeed theoretically charged and that Leavis had failed to acknowledge this: “I could wish ... that you had made your assumptions more explicitly and defended them systematically ... [and] become conscious that large ethical, philosophical and, of course, ultimately, also aesthetic choices are involved.”⁴⁹

That Leavis should refuse theoretically to justify his position illuminates Leavis’s “theoretical” position; to hover abstractly above the critical process and ascertain the theoretical assumptions driving one’s criticism would diminish the “direct evocative power”⁵⁰ of a particular encounter with a text. Leavis’s refusal to adopt an explicit, abstract philosophical position – to declare his assumptions – also rests on a commitment to the changing nature of the “standards” which the critic applies to the act of close reading. If the text always speaks particularly, and the critic attends particularly, then it follows that no general, exterior standard can be applied to the text that will not silence the particularity of the encounter. In his last essay before his death, entitled “Mutually Necessary,” Leavis says

A literature entails a literary tradition, and a tradition entails continuity and what we have to refer to as ‘standards’ (which, as one of the crucially important words, can’t have its meaning fixed by dictionary definition) ... Standards relate to criteria, and are always changing. They are changed for subsequent creative writers and for critics by every great writer; this is true of the vital changes – the changes in which vitality manifests itself.⁵¹

Crucially, Leavis maintains that, where it concerns literature, standards cannot have “meaning fixed” – and this includes an abstract examination of assumptions driving the decision to refuse philosophical examination. Leavis is first committed to the concrete text, and his belief is that this encounter is a living experience which can

⁴⁸ F.R. Leavis, “Criticism and Philosophy,” *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), pp. 212-213.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 211.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 217.

⁵¹ F.R. Leavis, “Mutually Necessary,” in *F.R. Leavis: The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*, ed. G. Singh (London: Chatto and Windus, 1982), pp. 191-192.

have no predetermined assumptions lest that reading become inauthentic and reified. In the excerpt just quoted, it is clear that Leavis begins, not with philosophical or theoretical assumptions before considering the text, but with the text itself: “(standards) are changed ... *by every great writer.*” Here, the “great writer” could almost be replaced with “great texts,” since it is the particular poem, novel or play that breaks and modifies the standards that might have existed before the act of close reading.

It follows that, while Leavis insists upon the canon, his canon shifts and changes as each act of great reading of a great text changes the standard that existed before this hermeneutical event. In fact, as he makes clear here, it is the shifting and changing that is a sign of life itself: “this is true of the vital changes – the changes in which vitality manifests itself.” Consequently, since Leavis is committed to the organic and particular experience of close reading for the individual, and the consequent, communal act in creating the subsequent canon, he is squarely set against outlining any immutable philosophy or theory by which these processes may be reified.

Of course, the net effect of this for the student is that their critical attention is turned to the “concrete” text itself rather than to the assumptions that drive the reading or writing of the text. Leavis’s legacy is a profoundly anti-theoretical stance – one that refuses to justify itself on theoretical or ideological grounds, claiming that “there *isn’t one.*”⁵² Syllabuses in the wake of Leavis institute this particular facet of his work in their attention to close reading. In addition, subsequent syllabuses – until the 1999 syllabus – do not stipulate that a student study a particular philosophical movement out of which a poem might arise in an effort to facilitate and frame the close reading. Quite the contrary. Subsequent syllabuses begin with and emphasise the student’s organic and responsible engagement with the particular text itself. If a student does study “Romanticism,” then, it is only so as to illuminate particular choices that a particular poet makes to vitalize the particular reading moment. A student does not begin with Romanticism and read different poets as an example of that period. Of such a system, Leavis is quite dismissive:

‘The romantic view of the world’, a view common to Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and others – yes, I have heard of it; but what interest can it have for the literary critic? For the critic, for the reader whose primary interest is in poetry, those three poets are so radically different, immediately and

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 189.

finally, from one another that the offer to assimilate them in a common philosophy can only suggest the irrelevance of the philosophic approach.⁵³

While a philosophical approach might, as Leavis suggests, try to assimilate texts or authors so as to find a common philosophy, a Leavisite program of study would be far more interested in identifying and engaging with what is particular about a text.

The syllabuses after Leavis's literary criticism began to permeate the Academy and thence the schools were all inflected and informed by this anti-theoretical stance. These syllabuses, coincidentally, stand in sharp opposition to the strong theoretical position that the 1999 syllabus takes in its structure and content.

The 1953 Syllabus

The 1953 syllabus, after all of this movement in literary criticism, was born out of a growing concern that literacy standards in New South Wales schools were falling and that this needed to be remedied through syllabus reform. This syllabus was regarded as different from its predecessors because it was the first to be structured by a consistent rationale affecting all parts of the syllabus and examination.⁵⁴ This rationale was that English "give pupils an experience of their language as a means of transmitting thought. Thought – its expression and its comprehension is therefore the foundation of the syllabus."⁵⁵ This syllabus conceived of English as inextricably linked with the development of thought in students.⁵⁶ In this sense, it was different from its predecessors. This syllabus, influenced by the Newbolt committee, took the line that growth and development in English was concomitantly growth and development in thought. English teachers were foundational to the degree that their work supported the work of other teachers; and, since English was a foundation for thought, English was necessarily the foundation of every subject. Indeed, having stated its foundations in thought, the syllabus explicitly says that this emphasis "may serve to remind teachers of English that they have an obligation to the teachers of all other subjects in the curriculum."⁵⁷ The 1953 syllabus positioned English as both culturally and developmentally central for the student, since it acted as both the bastion of civilization and the cornerstone of all other subjects.

⁵³ F.R. Leavis, "Criticism and Philosophy," *The Common Pursuit* (London: Penguin Books in association with Chatto and Windus, 1969), p. 216.

⁵⁴ Paul Nay-Brock, *A History of the Development of English syllabuses in N.S.W. Secondary Education: 1953-1976* (Unpublished doctoral thesis: University of New England, 1984), p. 27.

⁵⁵ Board of Secondary School Studies, *Syllabus in English* (Sydney: Board of Secondary School Studies: 1953), p. 1.

⁵⁶ Paul Nay-Brock gives a very good overview of the 1953 syllabus and the effects of the Newbolt committee on that syllabus in his article, "Changes in the English Syllabus in New South Wales, Australia: can any American echoes be heard?" *The English Journal NCTE*, 73, 3, p52.

⁵⁷ Board of Secondary School Studies, *Syllabus in English* (Sydney: Board of Secondary School Studies: 1953), p. 1.

The 1953 syllabus laid a heavy emphasis on the formal teaching of grammar, on comprehension and, of course, on literature. In the interpretation of literature, the student was invited to demonstrate an *understanding* of the text, but was not invited to *interpret* the syllabus for herself or for himself. As Nay-Brock notes, this specific invitation did not surface explicitly in a syllabus until 1965.⁵⁸ The 1953 syllabus stipulates that “comprehension is the analysis and ultimate grasp of material communicated.”⁵⁹ When a student under the 1953 syllabus approached literature, then, their task was to “comprehend” rather than to interpret, which suggests that dues had to be paid to traditional, canonised interpretations of a text. That the syllabus terms texts “material” is also suggestive of the way in which the syllabus conceives of the students’ task: they are to “grasp” a discrete body of knowledge already created. Thus the 1953 syllabus is characterised by a paradox: on the one hand, students are both required to develop fluid thought independent of subject matter and, on the other, to master a discrete body of knowledge about that subject matter before they are invited to think.

The literature section of the 1953 syllabus is, in sentiment, reminiscent of the New Critics and of I.A. Richards in the sense that it views literature as an ethical force to shape culture for the better. It espouses the virtues of literature as a conduit for culture and professes that students should “like reading”⁶⁰ at the close of their studies. At the same time, it does not allow for students’ own responses to literature, claiming rather that they could not respond because of a lack of experience and scholarship:

General written appreciations are possible at this stage of the pupil’s school life to those who are so gifted as to be able to write with sincerity about a poem. It is unwise to expect such written appreciations as a general exercise. But most pupils are able to gain some appreciation of poetry, and good responses can be obtained when written answers are required to questions on specific points.⁶¹

When the syllabus stipulates that students should not interpret the text for themselves, but should learn material already created and agreed upon, it is deeply at odds with the New Critics’ demand for essential “close reading.” The conviction that undergirded this syllabus was that students could not make judgements about literature until they had received enough information from scholars and critics to be able to justify their choices and sentiments. Students who were permitted to make

⁵⁸ Paul Nay-Brock, “Changes in the English Syllabus in New South Wales, Australia: can any American echoes be heard?” *The English Journal NCTE*, 73, 3, p. 54.

⁵⁹ Board of Secondary School Studies, *Syllabus in English* (Sydney: Board of Secondary School Studies: 1953), p. 17.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 31-33.

judgements were “gifted,” while the majority was relegated by necessity to rote learning. They could answer only on “specific” points.

The suggestion of the syllabus that it is unwise for “non-gifted” students to make judgements indicates a lack of trust in the culture and intelligence of the students and their teachers. On the other hand, it elevates the “wisdom” of the learned few who are the possessors of that culture. The student’s task, therefore, became one of learning a discrete body of interpretations. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Chief Examiner’s comment was that students’ responses were “boring.” The 1953 syllabus was characterised by its paradoxical nature in wanting students to develop integrity in their responses to language and literature while not trusting them to do so.

Thus, despite the express wish of syllabus makers that students not lapse into rote learning and stock responses, this syllabus effectively invited the reification of English in its insistence that literary texts were “material” to be learnt. Moreover, this syllabus assumed that meaning came from the text and, secondarily, the teacher. That the students’ perspective and “horizon,” as Hans-Georg Gadamer calls it, enables the process of making meaning was not a part of the hermeneutic driving this syllabus.⁶² Thus, students returned, as before, to stock responses that had so infuriated the first inspector of the 1911 syllabus.

The Wyndham Scheme

In 1953, the Wyndham report began. Asked to report on the state of English education in New South Wales, Wyndham’s primary suggestions were both structural and pedagogical. He recommended that high school be restructured and that the junior school be lengthened from three to four years. In addition, senior school should have two years. Wyndham believed that this would separate students who wished to continue with tertiary study and, still further, that it would allow students who wished to pursue tertiary study to specialise. This was an attempt to accommodate those students interested in vocational education as distinct from more classical education.

Wyndham also suggested that the English syllabus remain suggestive rather than prescriptive, so that the child, rather than the text, could be the centre of the syllabus. This was a radical departure from the 1953 syllabus which clearly saw the student as marginal and the text, and the scholarship surrounding that text, as central. Even at this early juncture, the concept of the student as the centre of the syllabus is perhaps indicative of Leavis’s tacit suggestion that the reader and critic – regardless of

⁶² *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), pp. 302-307.

everything literary scholarship might offer – were central to the authentic critical moment.

1961-1965

The syllabuses that appeared in the 1960's were the first syllabuses to feel the effects of the Wyndham report, although there is some argument as to whether these syllabuses truly took stock of Wyndham's recommendations. Firstly, there were two separate and discrete documents created for the high school: the junior syllabus for years 7-10 and senior syllabus for years 11 and 12. The junior syllabus appeared in 1962-1963 and the senior English syllabus appeared in 1965. Both syllabuses took on some recommendations that Wyndham had made while at the same time taking directions that pointedly ignored his suggestions. The 1961 junior syllabus took stock of Wyndham's recommendations by attempting to move toward the active and ethical participation of the student in the study of literature; in the senior syllabus the section on literature suggested that students should "present a personal understanding and response to [literary texts.]"⁶³ Contrary to the previous syllabus, which had emphasised the need for historical and classical scholarship before ethical judgement could be attempted, this syllabus encouraged students to engage with the text itself – a distinctly Leavisite demand. In fact, it made explicit its commitment to the text itself over and above the historical study of texts:

In each area of work, the opportunity should be taken of studying texts from different literary periods, and of experiencing literature in its various modes ... Although the student would thereby gain some sense of English literature in its historical perspective, he should not be absorbing mere information about "The Augustan age" or "the development of the ode". This would be to misplace the emphasis of the course. Such acquaintance with periods and forms as a student might have gained by the end of Fifth Form should be a by-product of his study of specific literary works.⁶⁴

Later on the syllabus reiterates this point: "the main intention of the course is to develop the student's own response to the text before him. Historical knowledge must be ancillary to this, never a substitute for it."⁶⁵ From this it is clear that the 1965 syllabus placed enormous emphasis on a close reading of discrete texts, and concomitantly invited the particular and personal response of the student. This was, as Nay-Brock noted, a significant break with the 1953 syllabus. In fact, the 1965 syllabus explicitly warned against the student finding their "personal response" from

⁶³ NSW Department of Education, *Syllabus in English, Forms V and VI* (Sydney: NSW Department of Education, 1965), p. 7.

⁶⁴ NSW Department of Education, *Syllabus in English, Forms V and VI* (Sydney: NSW Department of Education, 1965), p. 5.

⁶⁵ *ibid*, p. 6

some exterior authority and passing it off as their own, instead placing importance on the student establishing an organic, authentic response to “the work itself:”

The student’s response should in the first place be honest, based upon his own experience of the work, and not a mere repetition of supposedly “acceptable” views about it. Equally it must be more than a mere assertion of opinion, and therefore it should be constantly justified by reference to, and analysis of, the work itself. Intelligent criticism requires close attention to *what is said* in the poem.⁶⁶

To evaluate the success of literature in a close reading, this syllabus consciously invited the ethical participation of students in the formation of a canon through reading literature. Such an invitation, without reference to classical or historical scholarship, echoed Leavis’s tendency to approach the text as a discrete entity and upheld the critical task of reading the text *closely*.

Moreover, the stress upon close reading and personal encounter without reference to historical or classical scholarship also reflects an anti-theoretical stance that is directly derivative of Leavis’s position. That the syllabus expressly states that the student will approach the text on its own terms – “by reference to, and analysis of, the work itself”⁶⁷ – suggests that this syllabus had consciously adopted Leavis’s thinking with regard to literary criticism. The authentic encounter, one not marred and reified by the adoption of “acceptable” interpretations, is the one that approaches the text a-historically, a-theoretically and, it would seem, a-politically. The syllabus makes the assumption that “what is said” can be contained and understood without reference to the historical or ideological assumptions of the author, of historical interpreters or of the student interpreter. Indeed, as Leavis suggested, to make reference to these assumptions would be to render the act of interpretation lifeless.

Wendy Michaels argues in her Ph.D on the constitution of the syllabuses that the 1965 syllabus, instead of inviting students to participate in the ethical and political act of judgement, sanctioned particular readings and judgements of literature. Michaels captures the more recent uneasiness generated by Leavis’s anti-theoretical position in general, and in particular by the forcefulness with which he established the moral position of the critic. Instead of seeing the process of reading as a dialogue between writer and reader, the syllabus (and, notably, the examination papers) stood as a kind of filtering agent of unacceptable responses. According to Michaels, “The 1965 English syllabus distinguishes itself from its predecessor in the way ... each text invites the reader to accept its version of the truth, and what is particularly notable about this document is the level of vehemence with which it establishes its regime of

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

truth.”⁶⁸ Michaels suggests that, far from allowing students to make judgements and experience language for themselves, this syllabus expects students to adopt an “agreed” interpretation of a text, and thus the syllabus actively prohibits them from the authentic participation that it decreed as its goal. Inadvertently, what in practice and constitution it invites – or demands – is acquiescence; one that was expressed in rote learning. Michaels’ comments shed light on the perceived paradox that characterised Leavis’s work: that students were invited to participate, and yet brow beaten if they arrived at a different interpretation from the expected or anticipated one.⁶⁹ Leavis’s insistence on the importance and morality of criticism effectively snuffed out the amateur, organic response. If the student, for example, were to respond with an aberrant interpretation, she would and could be censored by the examination system.⁷⁰ Therefore, while personal interpretation is called for, and the democratisation of interpretation is concomitantly suggested by the syllabus, the constitutive state of affairs suggested that there was a right way and wrong way to interpret text.

Michaels’ observations capture the more recent uneasiness generated by Leavis’s anti-theoretical position in general, and in particular by the forcefulness with which he established the moral position of the critic. Once a student is given lee-way to interpret a text closely, without reference to historical, theoretical or philosophical assumptions, the student is both liberated from classical scholarship but also framed by the assumptions that Leavis makes – not least, the assumption that approaching a text “closely” is without assumptions. Just as Crawford claims that English was always already a politically charged exercise in the Scottish establishment of English as a discipline in universities, this syllabus reveals the ways in which students’ participation or prohibition marked the fraught relationship in English between classical, traditional education and the marginalised masses.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Michaels, Wendy, *The Constitution of English in NSW Syllabuses 1953-1994*, (Unpublished doctoral thesis: Macquarie University, 2001), p. 153. It is not entirely clear here whether Michaels is arguing that canonical texts establish their own regimes of truth or whether the syllabus establishes a regime of truth about those texts. I take her to mean that the syllabus establishes a regime of truth about those texts.

⁶⁹ As I earlier noted, however, George Steiner is at pains to point out that Leavis’s own students were never brow-beaten, but were encouraged to debate with him.

⁷⁰ Interestingly, Leavis himself was categorically opposed to examinations. See Leavis’s Introduction to *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge*, (London: [s.r.], 1950).

⁷¹ I make this distinction between the two camps with my tongue in my cheek. While I have no doubt that in some situations, like Latin America in the 1980s or Germany during WW2, the line between tradition and the marginalised is crystal clear, it is clear that in the study of English, this line is far from clear. Indeed, its very ambiguous nature demonstrates my point; that English has always been politically and culturally charged, but that often the terms of conflict are not easily defined in terms of “oppressor” and “oppressed.”

What is clear, though, amidst the muddy ambiguity of ethical alliances, is that English was and is seen as a cultivating and civilising force. Whether this syllabus actively encouraged judgement or actively inhibited judgement in its teenage judges is a moot point to some degree; both positions suggest that English has always been characterised by an ethical investment in education. If the syllabus invites students to “judge” literature, then that invitation admits the agency of the student to engage in ethical – and by extension, political – debate. Then again, if the syllabus prohibits student participation, then it inadvertently acknowledges the efficacy that that participation would have on the cultural contribution of literature to society, and bans that participation for fear of its inerrancy and unorthodoxy. Either way, politics was and is at the heart of the subject English and the formation of English syllabuses.

The Dartmouth Conference and the 1971 syllabus

In keeping with this fraught debate over where the high school student stands in relation to literature and culture, the 1970s saw an increasing interest from both English and education theorists in viewing the reader as an integral part of the process of making meaning. There was significant movement in the United Kingdom and the United States to make the reader the hermeneutical centre of interpretation. English teaching in the USA had been deeply influenced by John Dewey’s *The Child and the Curriculum*,⁷² and the Americans attending the Dartmouth conference had already incorporated student-centred learning into their pedagogical assumptions.⁷³ Michael Halliday’s functional grammar reverberated throughout the thinking at the time, which saw language as a function of the need and will to express thought, rather than thought being determined by the form.⁷⁴ In the United Kingdom, the influence of James Britton and James Moffett’s work grew, which also placed the child at the centre of learning.⁷⁵ Increasingly, learning was seen as more student-centred than content-centred, and the hermeneutical ramifications of this were clear: that the interpreter was a generative part of the process of creating meaning, rather than a passive sponge taking in a discrete message.

Theorists like Douglas Barnes, James Britton, James Moffett and Harold Rosen worked together to form ideas on what they termed communicative learning, which held that students learned language by using it. Their main contention was that meaning was not necessarily synonymous with words, and that the learner was an

⁷² (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

⁷³ Paul Nay-Brock, *A History of the Development of English syllabuses in N.S.W. Secondary Education: 1953-1976* (Unpublished doctoral thesis: University of New England, 1984), p. 219.

⁷⁴ M.A.K. Halliday, *Explorations in the Functions of Language* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973).

⁷⁵ James Britton, *Language and Learning* (London: Allen Lane, 1970) and James Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

integral part of the hermeneutical process. James Britton builds on the work of developmental psychologist Vygotsky, maintaining that:

Direct communication between minds is impossible, not only physically but psychologically. Communication can be achieved only in a roundabout way. Thought must pass first through meanings and then through words.⁷⁶

This assertion came in reaction to what was dubbed “the transmission model of learning” and the “cultural heritage model of learning.” Britton’s assumption here is that, since meaning is not discrete, the learner must be an active participant in the hermeneutical process. Britton, Rosen, Moffett and Barnes emphasized the value of talk in learning, and of small group work facilitating the process of communicative learning.⁷⁷ The strategies they employed and espoused increasingly assumed that meaning was not discrete, and did not lie in a text alone (or, for that matter, in the gilded halls of academia) but was a negotiated field between text and student interpreter. This meant that the syllabuses were being challenged to create opportunities for students to develop agency in the hermeneutical process, giving them key roles in the development of ethics and culture in the act of reading.

The Dartmouth Conference was held in 1966 and played an important part in the development of the 1971 syllabus and of the syllabuses following the 1971 document. Nay-Brock suggests that the major impetus behind the 1971 document, Graham Little, was profoundly impacted by the Dartmouth Conference.⁷⁸ From this conference, John Dixon published his book *Growth Through English*.⁷⁹ This book attempted to synthesise the thought generated at that conference, which was centred around the child learner. While English had defaulted to content in the previous syllabus, this conference attempted to place the learner at the centre of the subject. This Dartmouth Conference was also a significant conflation of American and British thought on education and the subject of English.

This conflation constituted a paradox. The British were discovering student-centred learning and were adamant that English teachers should avoid placing any authoritarian restrictions on students. Their focus was on agency, and the attendant ethical and political empowerment that this gave the student learner.⁸⁰ American resistance to this stemmed from the concern that cultural anarchy could result if

⁷⁶ James Britton, *Language and Learning* (London: Allen Lane, 1970), p. 64.

⁷⁷ Martin Nystrand, Adam Gamoran, and Mary Jo Heck, “Using Small Groups for Response to and Thinking about Literature,” *The English Journal*, 82:1 (1993), 14.

⁷⁸ Paul Nay-Brock, *A History of the Development of English syllabuses in N.S.W. Secondary Education: 1953-1976* (Unpublished doctoral thesis: University of New England, 1984), p. 204.

⁷⁹ John Dixon, *Growth Through English*, 3rd ed. (London: N.A.T.E./O.U.P., 1967), 1975.

⁸⁰ Paul Nay-Brock, “Changes in the English Syllabus in New South Wales, Australia: Can Any American Echoes be Heard?” *The English Journal NCTE*, 73:3 (1984), p. 55.

English teachers “over-reacted” to traditional models of teaching that sought to place classical scholarship before the act of interpretation in the hermeneutical process. The American concern was that if the student is placed at the centre of all learning and interpretation, then the parameters and expectations of the subject English were in danger of being muddled and ultimately abandoned. Paul Nay-Brock suggests that this disagreement stemmed from the fact that American educators had been influenced by John Dewey almost fifty years before the British were affected by Britton and Moffett, and were therefore discovering what the Americans had already incorporated and were seeking to temper.⁸¹ Not only did this disagreement capture the persistent problem of defining English as a discipline, it also constituted the recurrent theme in the history of English in the 20th Century. That is, it highlighted the tension between traditional culture and the marginal interpreter and also suggested that English had *always* been marked by the politics and ethics of exclusion and inclusion. Just as the middle class Scottish initiation of English studies was, according to Crawford, a pretension to upper class “Englishness,” and just as F.R. Leavis maintained that “moral” criticism was open to everybody as long as they were morally discriminating, so the student is invited to participate in interpretation only after an initiation into the canon and into the great hall of traditionally correct responses. In this sense, the paradox that characterised English studies from the beginning represents itself in the Dartmouth conference and in the resulting 1971 syllabus.

This syllabus made efforts to make the learner the hermeneutical centre of learning and of reading. It made an attempt to enable the student to become a part of the cultural contribution that reading literature would offer society. In this sense, it was influenced by the then commonplace views of the critical act made popular by Leavis, the New Critics and I.A. Richards. In addition, it attempted to take account the innovations of education theorists like Britton and Vygotsky, in that it attempted to place the learner in an active and communicative role, rather than a passive role:

This syllabus assumes that English for twelve to sixteen-year-olds should be an active pursuit: a matter of pupils developing competence to engaging in an abundance of purposeful language activities, enjoyable because they are appropriate to needs, interests and capacities. The competence sought is not mere utilitarian skill, but involves essentially human qualities of thought and feeling, because it is by language that we organise our human experience.⁸²

⁸¹ Paul Nay-Brock, *A History of the Development of English syllabuses in N.S.W. Secondary Education: 1953-1976* (Unpublished doctoral thesis: University of New England, 1984), p. 219.

⁸² NSW Secondary Schools Boards, *Syllabus in English Years 7-10* (Sydney: NSW Secondary Schools Board, 1971), p2.

The syllabus's debt to relatively recent thought on hermeneutics and linguistics is especially clear when it claims that students develop linguistic and cultural "competence" only when they are using language, as opposed to simulating language use in a hypothetical situation or by rote learning grammatical rules to apply to a real or simulated situation. Once again, this places student inquiry and curiosity at the centre of the hermeneutical process. It is also clear that this syllabus owes a debt to the thinking of the Cambridge school of English when it claims that the reading and writing that students would undertake would not be a "mere utilitarian skill" but would "involve essentially human qualities of thought and feeling." That the syllabus sets up this organic, student-centred *experience* over against utilitarianism is strikingly reminiscent of the ways in which the New Critics and I.A. Richards, after the Romantics, set themselves against scientific rationalism, rampant New World capitalism and mechanisation.

The syllabus goes further when it suggests that the qualities that make English so important are "essentially human qualities," here making English a central civilising and civic activity within the school curriculum. Critically, the syllabus does not outline an ethical or political curriculum for the students, seeing this activity instead as implicit in the development of "thought and feeling." In this sense, the syllabus clearly harks back to the ways in which Richards, the New Critics and Leavis thought about the power of literature to effect a civic revolution. As Richards makes clear, far from providing a way for the individual to enter personal response to the text that is unconnected with wider social responsibility, the cultivation of thought, feeling and happiness was, as he saw it, central to the establishment of a peaceful and harmonious social order.

To strengthen the claim that the syllabuses in the 1970s were heavily influenced by Richards, Leavis and the New Critics, Wendy Michaels notes that there are repeated references to "the text itself" as a "meaningful whole."⁸³ Indeed, the syllabus makes explicit and detailed stipulations that the student's business is attending to the discrete text, and not beyond that:

The class [should] test different interpretations against the evidence of the text itself. Such a teaching approach should help students to realise that there is no one "right" approach to literature, and that a response that is honest, perceptive and firmly based upon the text establishes its own right

⁸³ Wendy Michaels, *The Constitution of English in NSW syllabuses (1953-1994)* (Unpublished doctoral thesis: Macquarie University, 2001), p. 161. She refers to the syllabus on page 2 and page 3 of the 1971 document. New South Wales Department of Education, *Syllabus in English Forms V and VI* (Sydney: New South Wales Department of Education, 1971).

... Students should have a surer grasp of the text, and should come through discussion to a deeper discrimination of its qualities.⁸⁴

Like the 1965 syllabus, the 1971 syllabus had a distinct Leavisite emphasis on “close reading,” suggesting that the critic’s business is to assess the material poem in front of her rather than examine the historical or ideological assumptions surrounding the creation of the text. In this way, it explicitly adopted the “anti-theoretical” approach for which Leavis was so famous (or notorious). Indeed, the student that this 1971 syllabus imagines needs to justify responses “firmly based upon the text,” which means an examination of the “qualities” that can be found in the material and discrete text. These qualities that the syllabus refers to are expressly not the theoretical assumptions that such a hermeneutical method might make.

Moreover, this method had particular emphasis on the kind of “life” or vitality that such an approach would inevitably bring. In this sense, the 1971 syllabus reflected the Leavisite belief that close reading would reveal the “living principle” of criticism; that the anti-theoretical, close approach to poetry in particular would unearth the living qualities of the poem and so at once appeal to and release the living qualities in the reading individual. This meant, concomitantly, that the student would be expressly warned against a perfunctory approach to criticism, but instead should position herself to “experience” humanity:

The separating of the “prose sense” of a work from its “techniques” can lead to the error of regarding imaginative literature as just a dressing-up of arguments or ideas or emotions in “effective” ways, to be evaluated in terms of “technical skill” or of the writer’s intention to “communicate a message”. The student should be encouraged to see how vacuous is an approach that prevents him from experiencing a work of art and trying to define what he makes of it, and that offers him no way of distinguishing between a trivial work, however “effective”, however successful in doing what the author “intended”, and one with a capacity to enlarge and vivify his experience.⁸⁵

The syllabus clearly accepts the New Critics’ belief that good poetry became sublimated in the act of reading. The effect on the reader, once the “effect” was established, is that the student’s experience of what it was to be human would be enlarged and vivified.

The use of the word “vivify” is especially telling, since it draws on the Leavisite sense that a reader’s interaction with poetry brought *life*, both to the reader and to the canon. In addition, this particular passage from the syllabus reveals a deep

⁸⁴ New South Wales Department of Education, *Syllabus in English Forms V and VI* (Sydney: New South Wales Department of Education, 1971), p. 3.

⁸⁵ NSW Department of Education, *Syllabus in English Forms V and VI*, (Sydney: NSW Department of Education, 1971), p. 3.

antipathy toward paraphrase, which is a direct heritage from Cleanth Brooks, who declared it a “heresy.” Indeed, to separate what was being said from how it was being said was to reduce the material text – in all of its life-giving paradoxes – to a linear and flat set of maxims that could do no better than grace a Hallmark card. This syllabus takes the view that poetry is not just the “dressing up” of philosophical ideas, but is philosophy in action – theory in action – and thus its a-historical and a-theoretical approach to close reading was deeply reflective of its Leavisite idea that poetry at once constituted and drew on ‘life.’

Wendy Michaels’ objection to such an approach again highlights the modern resistance to such an approach, revealing as it does the relatively new assumption that theory is an inextricable part of criticism. Michaels maintains that the references to the “text itself” indicate a willful neglect of the context of the text, the context of the author and the context of the reader in the hermeneutical process.⁸⁶ She then goes on to maintain that this reduces the potential for the student to be a part of the hermeneutical process as the text becomes dematerialised and dehistoricised.

In essence, according to Michaels, the text becomes fetishised since it has been disentangled from the history and cultural values from which it has emerged. Michaels goes on to suggest that if cultural values are ignored in the reading process, student interpretations are effectively censored, since traditional interpretations are invariably held to be sanctioned truths in the reading of texts.⁸⁷ The significance of Michaels’ observations is twofold: firstly, they reveal the extent to which Richards, Leavis and the New Critics have influenced the reading of texts. The mark of “close reading” is clear. Secondly, it adequately captures the critique of those critics that suggested that close reading fetishised and idolised the discrete text. Through the Cambridge conviction that close reading – as opposed to the Oxford school which promoted the reading of literary history, biography and classical scholarship as a pre-requisite for reading a literary text – would bring about meaningful reading, the text became separated from its context. In this way, when the methods that were meant to provide some measure of liberation for the middle class critic – or student – were translated into a syllabus, they actually acted as a kind of censor for aberrant interpretations.

⁸⁶ Wendy Michaels, *The Constitution of English in NSW syllabuses (1953-1994)* (Unpublished doctoral thesis: Macquarie University, 2001), p. 161.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

1982

The syllabus that emerged in 1982 was both a continuation of the previous syllabus, and an attempt to assimilate the theorising that had occurred in the 1970s.⁸⁸ While still heavily influenced by F.R. Leavis in particular, this syllabus also represented the shifts in literary theory created by cultural studies, feminism, and postmodern literary theory. While the 1982 syllabus made reference to the “text itself” and sought to keep the central place of literature, it also made significant attempts to re-historicise the text and to widen the texts set for study to include “non-literary texts.” In both the initial courses set for study – the 2 unit General and 2 unit Related course – the syllabus breaks with its predecessor by making special reference to non-literary texts and their importance for study. Both syllabuses stipulate that

Students should encounter a variety of spoken and written material outside the literary texts ... in a variety of forms: in books, periodicals, magazines, weekly and daily newspapers. Advertisements, newspaper reports and editorials will also deserve study. Attention should be paid to the function of graphics (cartoons, illustrations, diagrams, graphs etc) wherever they are significant.⁸⁹

The 1982 syllabus attempted to account for the culture from which its students came, and it also attempted to account for cultural studies and its emphasis on the value of all texts, rather than just those that were sanctioned by the “cultural heritage model.”⁹⁰ In addition, both syllabuses also make mention of the context from which texts come, and suggest that students take account of this in their reading: “The study of both the spoken and written language should be based on an awareness of the context and of the intended audience.”⁹¹ In this sense, this syllabus breaks with the forms of criticism and hermeneutics that the previous syllabuses had endorsed. Rather than pulling culture “forward,” this syllabus attempted to accommodate present culture as worthy of study, thus reflecting some of the theorising that had begun to impact on the literary world in cultural materialism and postmodern literary theory.

The fact that the 1982 syllabus was split into two courses, however, allowed it to develop a somewhat schizophrenic character. In some senses, the 1982 syllabus accommodated the moves made by recent literary criticism and in other senses it

⁸⁸ I have not canvassed the literary theory that developed in the 1960s and the 1970s here purely because the majority of the thesis that follows deals in detail with those theories and the way in which these theories hermeneutically place the reader. In Part Two of this thesis, I deal with literary theory that approaches text and suspicion from a philosophical perspective, and then deal with literary theory that stems from gendered, ethnic and cultural materialist perspectives.

⁸⁹ NSW Board of Studies, *English 2 Unit (General) Years 11-12 Syllabus* (Sydney: Board of Studies NSW, 1982), p. 7. See also NSW Board of Studies, *English 2/3 Unit Years 11-12 (Related) Syllabus* (Sydney: Board of Studies NSW, 1982), p. 3.

⁹⁰ Jack Thomson, “Post-Dartmouth developments in English teaching in Australia,” *Reviewing English in the 21st Century*, eds. Wayne Sawyer and Eva Gold (Melbourne: Phoenix Education, 2004), p. 18.

⁹¹ NSW Board of Studies, *English 2 Unit (General) Years 11-12 Syllabus*, (Sydney: Board of Studies NSW, 1982), p. 7.

actively encouraged the kind of literary criticism practiced by Leavis, Richards and the New Critics. The differences between the two are telling: the 2 Unit General course attempted to cater for a broader candidature than did the 2/3 Unit Related course. This difference was made even more pronounced by the introduction of the 2 Unit Contemporary Course in 1989, which attempted to cater for students for whom English was their second language and those who had struggled with the 2 Unit General course. Both the 2 Unit General course and the 2 Unit Contemporary course suggest that students may struggle with the inaccessibility of literary texts and thus should be provided with easier means of entering into discussion: "In the study of literature, the initial problem is usually one of access. A reader may be cut off from a novel or poem or play by the apparent remoteness of its concerns, the unfamiliarity of its use of language, or by an inability to relate to it in a first cursory reading."⁹² In response, this course made its texts set for study a mix of popular texts and literary texts, and made no stipulation, for example, that students had to study Shakespeare.

In contrast, the 2 Unit Related course assumed that its candidature would be primarily interested in literature: "This is a course designed for those with a particular interest in English, who wish to study plays such as *King Lear*, or the poetry of Donne, or the novels of Jane Austen or Patrick White."⁹³ So, while the one course made room for the emerging theories that demanded that the cultural heritage model be revised, the other course upheld an aesthetic criticism with a view to promoting a canonical, cultural heritage. In fact, one of the distinguishing features of the 2/3 Unit Related course was its commitment to close reading in general and to close reading of poetry in particular: "A grasp of the general movement of a play or novel or poem should in the 2 Unit Course be strengthened by 'closer reading'. The study of poetry, especially, will often call for an awareness of the force of a particular word."⁹⁴ This meant, in essence, that the division between the courses became socially and theoretically charged: the more able students tended to take the Related course, while the students that were less able took the General course. This, of course, strengthened the critique of those who felt that the 2 unit Related course was indebted to a model of hierarchical social control due to its reliance on the canon and on the cultural heritage model.

In terms of the way the syllabus positioned the student hermeneutically, both syllabuses attempted to keep the learner at the centre of an experience that was to develop their individual sensibilities. Both syllabuses maintain that, while writing

⁹² NSW Board of Studies, *English 2 Unit (General) Years 11-12 Syllabus* (Sydney: Board of Studies NSW, 1982), p. 6.

⁹³ NSW Board of Studies, *English 2/3 Unit Years 11-12 (Related) Syllabus* (Sydney: Board of Studies NSW, 1982), p. 2.

⁹⁴ *ibid*, p. 3.

essays was important, students learn that writing was essentially a communicative activity, rather than a perfunctory exercise to pass exams.⁹⁵ In writing, then, the syllabus communicates an intention to place the student at the centre of learning activity and the hermeneutical act of written communication. Likewise, in reading, both syllabuses maintain that the “individual response” to text is important, and thus attempt to encourage students to develop an organic sense of what and how a text means.

In terms of the theoretical direction of this syllabus, it is clear that it attempts to fuse directions that at first seem diametrically opposed to one another. The cultural studies model, based on the assumption that the cultural heritage model was essentially hierarchical, would suggest that the special attention to literature that the 2 Unit Related course promoted merely served to turn out students who engaged with texts aesthetically but had no sense of what it was ethically and politically to engage with the text or with the world around them. On the other hand, the contribution of Leavis, Richards and the New Critics would suggest that literature served a civic function in the sense that it engaged the individual in a complete and organic living act, and thus sought to promote discussion of ethics and good living. The assumption here, particularly where it concerns Leavis and Richards, was that this discussion would then make the reading of literature a civic – and consequently, decidedly ethical – act.

Conclusions

Syllabuses over the last century in New South Wales have all reflected or reacted against the theory and criticism of the time in which they were created. Whether the syllabus reflected the anti-theoretical approach of Leavis – which was, in essence, deeply “conscious;” whether the syllabus adopted an Oxford model of English which suggested literary scholarship; or whether the syllabus adopted a modern literary critical approach that is deeply theoretical – all syllabuses reflected the thinking of their period. The syllabus that we have now in New South Wales schools adopts the latter viewpoint: that all criticism is by default theoretical, inescapably assuming philosophical and ideological positions in the act of reading. Such a position actively declares the ethical responsibility that English believes it has. In fact, Wendy Morgan – a key voice in the direction of English in New South Wales at the moment – suggests that an actively theoretical model of English encourages teachers to “participate in those cultural conversations about our world and our place in it, and

⁹⁵ NSW Board of Studies, *English 2 Unit (General) Years 11-12 Syllabus*, (Sydney: Board of Studies NSW, 1982), p. 7. See also NSW Board of Studies, *English 2/3 Unit Years 11-12 (Related) Syllabus* (Sydney: Board of Studies NSW, 1982), p. 4.

therefore model for our students our commitment to raising our voices in the service of inclusiveness and social justice.”⁹⁶ Her theorising and pedagogical suggestions have in view the world at large – and, as I see it, rightly so.

It is perhaps worth our while, however, to see in this current syllabus the context just canvassed. Like my counterparts in education, I do see the assumptions of each syllabus as largely governed by the theoretical context in which they are created. No text is created in a vacuum. It seems only right, therefore, to consider that the discipline of English has historically always been theoretically active, and has always considered its purpose as ultimately civic. From the Scottish “invention” of English literature, to I.A. Richards’ “better organized state,”⁹⁷ to Cleanth Brooks’ “intricately wrought urn,”⁹⁸ to Leavis’s “living principle” and finally to Morgan’s “social justice,” English in New South Wales schools has always thought of itself ethically. Just how it has positioned itself theoretically to achieve that ethical participation and efficacy is dependent upon the hermeneutical assumptions that the critical theory driving each syllabus makes.

⁹⁶ Wendy Morgan, “Critical literacy,” *Reviewing English in the 21st Century*, eds. Wayne Sawyer and Eva Gold (Melbourne: Phoenix Education, 2004), p. 112.

⁹⁷ I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 53.

⁹⁸ “The Language of Paradox,” *20th Century Literary Criticism*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman Group, 1972), p. 302.

Chapter Two

The Stage 6 1999 English syllabus: Hopes of Social Reform

I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform. All reforms which rest simply upon the law, or the threatening of certain penalties, or upon changes in mechanical or outward arrangements, are transitory and futile ... But through education society can formulate its own purposes, can organise its own means and resources, and thus shape itself with definiteness and economy in the direction in which it wishes to move.¹

John Dewey

If we don't transcend the idea of education as pure transference of a knowledge that merely describes reality, we will prevent critical consciousness from emerging and thus reinforce political illiteracy.²

Paulo Freire

¹ "My Pedagogic Creed," originally published in *The School Journal*, LIV, 3, (Jan 16 1897), cited from <http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/e-dew-pc.htm>, accessed 15.12.06.

² *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*, trans. Donaldo Macedo (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 104.

The 1999 syllabus explicitly positions English as a vehicle through which students develop the ethical capacity to tolerate and respect others in a diverse society. Quite rightly, it sees itself as concerned with developing the capacity to empathise in the students who sit the Higher School Certificate, preparing them for civic participation in society when they leave school. In the debate on the syllabus conducted in the public press (most notably in the *Sydney Morning Herald*), proponents of the syllabus have cited this as the most important change in the syllabus, suggesting that this ethical and civic goal makes the syllabus relevant in a modern world: Sue Gazis writes that “the English syllabus allows [students] to find a place for English in their lives, no matter what direction it takes,”³ and Melina Marchetta claims that the syllabus provides “skills of comprehension, evaluation and synthesis in order to participate meaningfully in an increasingly complex world.”⁴ As I have already suggested, this in itself is not a particularly new direction in the discipline of English; previous syllabuses had all attempted to come to terms with what they saw as the responsibility of English to develop an ethical and civic consciousness in students.

When the 1999 syllabus explicitly stated its commitment to the ethical development of its students, some commentators hostile to the syllabus declared that this in itself was a radical departure from the 1982 syllabus, claiming that the ethical tendentiousness of the syllabus amounted to a willful neglect of the aesthetic values that had shaped the 1982 syllabus. Miranda Devine quotes Christopher Koch critiquing the direction of the new syllabus as saying “if the barbaric tide identified here is not held back, more will be lost than the ability to understand what human genius is about. What will be lost will be true civilisation and the understanding of beauty.”⁵ Still further, some critics have maintained that the syllabus’s motives are explicitly political, again claiming that this is a departure from the ways in which English had previously been taught: Linda Doherty reports Kevin Donnelly claiming that “schools have been hijacked by ‘new-age class warrior’ teachers more committed to promoting homosexuality, multiculturalism and Aborigines than teaching the three Rs.”⁶ However, as I have argued, insofar as Leavis and the New Critics saw the

³ Sue Gazis, “Syllabus opens minds to ideas,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 4 2002, p. 13.

⁴ Melina Marchetta, “HSC English is tough and smarter, not dumb and dumber,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 1 2006.

⁵ Miranda Devine, “A toxic twist in the learning curve,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 4 2004.

⁶ Linda Doherty, “Government staffer says new-age warriors waging culture wars in class,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 3 2004.

aesthetic study of literature as implicitly ethical, this commitment to the ethical development of students in New South Wales was in keeping with commitments made by previous syllabuses.

The syllabus opens by promoting this ethic in a way with which few could disagree:

The purpose of the Higher School Certificate program to study is to ... foster the intellectual, social and moral development of students, in particular developing their ... capacity to work with others ... [and their] respect for the cultural diversity of Australian society [and to] provide a flexible structure within which students can prepare for ... full and active participation as citizens [and to] provide a context within which schools also have the opportunity to foster students' physical and spiritual development.⁷

It then goes on to discuss the ways that English, in particular, serves this general purpose of education:

The study of English is central to the learning and development of students in NSW ... the importance of English enables students to take their place as confident, articulate communicators, critical and imaginative thinkers and active participants in society ... The English Stage 6 syllabus is designed to develop in students the faculty to perceive and understand their world from a variety of perspectives, and it enables them to appreciate the richness of Australia's cultural diversity.⁸

By making specific reference to "Australia's cultural diversity," the 1999 syllabus makes an attempt explicitly to allow for what a variety of literary theories call 'the other.' Rightly and justly, it understands its role as developing the capacity in the students of New South Wales to allow for what they do not understand; to make room for "others" of different religions, different genders, different ethnic backgrounds, languages, histories and politics. In short, it attempts to encourage students to be flexible and to consider other perspectives as they read in the hope that this act of reading will then foster a society that considers pluralism the norm. Such a program, clearly based on the civic virtues of tolerance and understanding, is an admirable epistemological starting point.

Implicit in this move is the view that there is a connection between the way a student reads and the way she relates to human beings outside the fictional world that reading creates. In other words, the syllabus takes the view that reading in an English classroom is formative in a students' ethical development and can be so powerful as

⁷ Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Syllabus 1999* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 1999), p. 5.

⁸ *ibid*, p. 6.

to shape civic life after her education has concluded. If we can encourage a sense of “the other” in our students as they read, then the hope would be that this capacity to leave room for what one does not understand or has not experienced extends to the workplace and finally to a civic consciousness.

The rationale for the English syllabus states that “English involves the study and use of language in its various textual forms, encompassing written, spoken and visual texts of varying complexity, including the language systems of English through which meaning is conveyed, interpreted and reflected.” The syllabus refers repeatedly to “various textual forms,” fostering the idea that texts come in all shapes and sizes, depending on who has written the text, in what context, and for what audience. In acknowledging that English is a “language system,” the syllabus acknowledges that reading is a deeply “cultured” activity – in the sense that a reader and writer are embedded within a history and culture that both shape and enable composition and interpretation. In so doing, the syllabus implicitly acknowledges *other* systems of language and of valuing and so situates the study of English within a pluralist society.

Related to this is the syllabus’s emphasis on context as a determining factor in the process of interpretation. The rationale spends an entire paragraph outlining the importance of context in the act of reading:

In Stage 6, students come to understand the complexity of meaning, to compose and respond to texts according to their form, content, purpose and audience, and to appreciate the personal, social, historical, cultural and workplace contexts that produce and value them. Students reflect on their reading and learning and understand that these processes are shaped by the contexts in which they respond to and compose texts.⁹

Context is a foundational consideration in the hermeneutical process that the 1999 English syllabus endorses, and it is here that the 1999 syllabus begins to distinguish itself from its predecessor in the 1982 syllabus. Wendy Michaels and Eva Gold – who are both very influential voices in syllabus construction, review and direction – aptly observe that, when the previous syllabus advocated close reading as the starting point of the hermeneutical process, it simultaneously made that act of reading a-historical and a-contextual: “The previous set of syllabuses (particularly the 1982 documents) were at pains to assert their neutral, theory-free position: but they were

⁹ Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Syllabus 1999* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 1999), p. 6.

not neutral and implicitly supported a theoretical paradigm that, *inter alia*, posited meaning as fixed within the ‘text itself’.”¹⁰

The 1999 syllabus responds to what Michaels and Gold see as an omission in the 1982 syllabus by recognising the situatedness of interpretation. If the act of interpretation allows a student to see that others have arrived at different interpretations, then it follows that the student will then reflect upon the differences between the determining context of her interpretation and that of the student next to her. In this sense, the study of context encourages a celebration of difference and otherness. In fact, Michaels and Gold suggest that the reverse is the case if we remove the act of interpretation from the study and recognition of context: the “unarticulated theoretical and ideological position [of the 1982 syllabus] gave rise to particular pedagogical approaches – not least of which was the emphasis on a single (correct) dominant reading of the text.”¹¹ Once context is taken out of the hermeneutical process, Michaels and Gold argue, authoritarian readings are encouraged to surface, most likely from the teacher or critic whom the student is then obliged to mimic. For Michaels and Gold, if the emphasis on context disappears, the capacity to allow for the validity of other interpretations disappears along with it. This domino effect is not limited to the classroom; the potential for a civic state wherein we can tolerate each others’ views is concomitantly diminished because of the implicit connection between our reading practices and the way in which we relate to each other in our schools, streets and parliaments.

To ensure that solipsistic and authoritarian readings do not become the order of the day, then, the syllabus outlines its hermeneutical position:

Meaning is central to the study of English. The study of English makes explicit the language forms and processes of meaning. English Stage 6 develops this by encouraging students to explore, critically evaluate and appreciate a wide variety of the texts of Australian and other societies, in various forms and media, including multimedia. The study of English involves exploring, responding to and composing texts in and for a range of personal, social, historical, cultural and workplace contexts (and) using a variety of language modes, forms, features and structures. *Meaning is*

¹⁰ Wendy Michaels and Eva Gold, “As Time Goes By or Read it Again, Sam,” *Metaphor*, 3. (2006), p. 90.

¹¹ *ibid.*

*achieved through responding and composing, which are typically interdependent and ongoing processes.*¹²

Contrary to the 1982 syllabus's implicit theoretical position, this syllabus "makes explicit" its view of meaning and how it occurs. Rather than seeing meaning residing in "the text itself," this syllabus sees the process of interpretation as fluid: "Meaning (is a) ... typically interdependent and ongoing process". Meaning resides in the relationship between author, interpreter and text, rather than in the discrete text itself. Therefore, the hermeneutical task of the student becomes very different from the tasks required of students who sat the 1982 syllabus; if the students sitting the 1982 syllabus were required to articulate the meaning of a discrete text, then the 1999 syllabus requires students to articulate the way meaning moves between author, text and interpreter. Since context plays such an integral part in the hermeneutics of this syllabus, the syllabus requires that students study the context of both author and interpreter so as to keep open the possibility of a "range" and a "variety" of perspectives. The declared hope of the syllabus is therefore one that articulates a vision of tolerance and openness to the other, prising open what was apparently closed to parts of the New South Wales candidature of English students. Michaels and Gold articulate this hope when they cast the 1982 syllabus against the 1999 syllabus:

Let's consider this shift in relation to the understandings of the previous syllabuses. In those documents, texts (or at least canonical literary texts) were considered as ahistorical documents not influenced by context, and meaning was posited as fixed within "the text itself". For the New Critics whose values permeated those documents the author's intention and the reader's emotional reaction were irrelevant to the meaning. The new syllabus dismantled these notions before our very eyes and gave us instead a notion of meaning as a construct, flexible and responsive to the context of both the composer and the responder.¹³

Whereas the previous syllabuses had allowed meaning to become reified in the discrete text, this syllabus strove to promote meaning as a fluid process that exists in a social relationship between text, "composer" and "responder."¹⁴ Further still, in the syllabus's definition of meaning, there is no sense in which one of these players in the

¹² Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Syllabus 1999* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 1999), p. 7.

¹³ Wendy Michaels and Eva Gold, "As Time Goes By or Read it Again, Sam," *Metaphor*, 3 (2006), p. 91.

¹⁴ The terms "responder" and "composer" are terms that the syllabus originally proposed as a replacement for the terms "reader" and "author." This move was an attempt to suggest that the nature of text had now changed – a text could be a website, song lyrics or novel and thus the term "composer" sought to reflect this change. The term "responder" suggested both the changed nature of text, but also the active role that the syllabus hoped students would adopt.

hermeneutical process is more powerful than the other, rendering the process truly dynamic. In its emphasis on meaning and its explicit articulation of the way it believes that the hermeneutical process occurs, this syllabus attempts to invigorate the student's sense of social responsibility to the other. Its intentions are clearly ethical.

In addition, this explicit emphasis on the process of meaning is also an attempt to invigorate the passive learner. The syllabuses that preceded the 1999 syllabus had all been hounded by an epidemic of rote learning and stock responses. Inevitably, this phenomenon feeds into the "one right way" of reading a text, as students buy study guides, mimic teachers and critics and regurgitate the discrete meaning of the discrete text. This syllabus, in an attempt to free students of this hierarchical process of interpretation – if it can even be called interpretation – asserted that meaning was fluid and therefore expected students to play a more active role in the process of making meaning. In fact, in reaction to some critics of the 1999 syllabus, Sue Gazis defended the syllabus by drawing explicit attention to the ways in which the syllabus has sought to prevent rote learning. She says that criticisms of the new syllabus

have come from a small group of teachers who've taken a really conservative approach to English and are probably a little out of touch with their own students ... We can't have a situation where kids pick up a study guide – that is what was happening in the past – and learn things off by heart.¹⁵

When the syllabus emphasises its social conception of the process of making meaning, it not only promotes an awareness of 'the other' but attempts to free a student into open interpretation of the text.¹⁶ It attempts to proof the process of reading against rote learning, so that the student can personally express themselves in that process of interpretation. Essentially, in promoting this "typically interdependent" process, the syllabus hopes that the student will be freed from the vestiges of hierarchical academic interpretation.

Few teachers would disagree with such a declared hope for their students. Nonetheless, the syllabus has been attacked for refusing to adopt a commitment to aesthetic values alone, and preferring instead this explicit ethical agenda in the

¹⁵ Gerald Noonan, "The medium is the message," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 28 2001.

¹⁶ There is an irony in the syllabus's insistence that, in recognizing that interpretation is "bounded" in context, students will be "freer" in their interpretations. One must assume that these "free" interpretations capitulate to the social context (which is – in part, at least – determined by the syllabus) of the student.

teaching of English.¹⁷ Barry Spurr mounted an attack on the syllabus early on in its career, publishing in both *Sydney's Child* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. He says that what the student “really needs from English studies (and which was once supplied in the early high school years) is a good training in spelling, grammar and expression ... signs of the dissolution of the discipline are most pronounced ... In fact, [the syllabus is] woefully depriving students of the opportunity to be introduced to the bounty of literary study, to transcend the passing preoccupations of today and engage imaginatively with the great themes of human existence, as explored and unforgettably inscribed by the artists of literary language, through the centuries.”¹⁸ His critique rests on the inclusion of contemporary texts in the texts set for study, but also in the ethical agenda that the syllabus sets for its students. He later contends that there are “far too many texts of ephemeral relevance and little literary distinction” in the syllabus and that such a syllabus is bent on the “dissolution of the discipline ... to socio-political concerns.”

This critical view of the syllabus fails to acknowledge the allowances that the syllabus makes for aesthetic appreciation of texts, and also fails to acknowledge the ethical contribution that the discipline of English has always wanted to provide to a civic society. Along with its declared hope that this syllabus will support a culturally diverse Australia, the 1999 syllabus explicitly states that “the English Stage 6 courses develop in students an understanding of literary expression and nurture an appreciation in aesthetic values”¹⁹ and the syllabus’s insistence on reading a text according to “textual forms and features” supports this. It hopes, in short, to promote both an aesthetic appreciation of texts in its students and a keen sense of ‘the other’ in the reading process. Very few teachers would challenge the worthiness of these intentions for the subject English in high schools.

The declared ethic and the constitutive ethic: investigating the structure of the syllabus

There is, however, an important difference between what a syllabus claims to do, and what it actually does. Supporters of the syllabus have suggested that the problems with the syllabus amount to a misunderstanding of the syllabus’s objectives. The

¹⁷ “English Going the Way of Latin and Greek,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 30 2001, p. 12.

¹⁸ “The Death of English,” *Sydney's Child*, April 2001, p. 16.

¹⁹ Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Syllabus 1999* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 1999), p. 6.

NSW Board of Studies president, Gordon Stanley, suggests that “maybe the intention of the syllabus is not being faithfully rendered in schools.”²⁰ Still further, Eva Gold, a vocal proponent of the critical literacy approach in the syllabus, suggests that those who have resisted the syllabus have not only misunderstood the claims of the syllabus, but have done so because they are too old to grasp these new concepts: “Most [teachers] think it’s fantastic. A few older teachers complained that they didn’t understand it – a small handful, but not many. I think they are louder sometimes because they worry that what they’ve been teaching for the past 30 years is suddenly discredited, when it’s not.”²¹ However, as I made clear in the Introduction, my position as a teacher means that my interest is in what effect the syllabus has on my classroom and on my students rather than what the syllabus aims and claims to do, although I hope that I respect that claim in my investigation.

In the structure of the syllabus and in the hermeneutical choices that the syllabus makes, the syllabus constitutively undermines its declared efforts to create a space for ‘the other’ and to free the student as reader to interpret texts emotionally and personally. Despite repeated mandates that students “respond personally,”²² the syllabus may inadvertently become an inflexible interlocutor both of the texts set for study and of the hermeneutical position that a student will adopt. Despite the declaration that meaning be “interdependent and ongoing,” the syllabus document itself becomes the authority on just how a text will mean for a student, and thus forecloses on any authentic or surprising questions that a student may potentially ask of a text. Ironically, in an attempt to dissolve the hierarchy set up when an authoritarian reading dominates a student, the syllabus inadvertently sets itself up as meta-reader, and thus constitutively undercuts what it declares as its admirable ethical goals. If a student learns, constitutively, that they must “play the game” and submit to the hermeneutical terms of the syllabus in order to win marks, then the civic goals of the syllabus that work toward giving students agency are hamstrung before a student begins the process of reading.

²⁰ Justin Norrie, “Alas, poor students,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 15, 2005.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² In recent examination years, the emphasis on “personal response” has become heavier. This emphasis has come from the marking centre, however, rather than from the syllabus document itself. The phrase “personal response” is nowhere in the document, but has become a phrase that dominates the examination of Module B in particular. The talk in staffrooms is that this new emphasis sought to rectify the disturbing habits that students were exhibiting; habits like reading critics instead of texts and regurgitating a critic’s response without ever clearly interacting with the text itself.

This inadvertent ethic declares itself most clearly in the structure of the units set for study. Very early on, I discovered a clear difference between teaching this 1999 syllabus and teaching the one before it when I noticed that teachers had begun photocopying pages from the syllabus for their students to read before their classes had even laid a hand on the text set for study. It soon became very clear, as my student May made clear,²³ that it was imperative for a student's success that they understand the rubric clearly *before* they embarked on reading the text set for study. In an epistemological hierarchy, the syllabus won out over the text. When describing the modules set for study for the Advanced course, the syllabus states that students will study "modules which emphasise particular aspects of shaping meaning and representation, questions of textual integrity and ways in which texts are valued." This mandate applies to all modules and all texts that are set for study. In other words, it remains inflexible in the face of differing texts and vastly varying candidature. Wendy Michaels and Eva Gold note the same epistemology, without any sense of alarm:

The focus of learning in English at Stage 6 is the processes and products of meaning making. Texts serve as particular examples of these processes and products. They are not an end in themselves – that is texts are not what students learn about but they are the vehicles through which students learn about how meaning is made.²⁴

Michaels and Gold articulate beautifully what it is like to teach the 1999 syllabus. They go even further when they suggest what this means practically for a classroom: "Most of class time should be spent approaching the text *according to the key concerns of each module* rather than spending all the time on imparting to students our view of 'the meaning' of the text."²⁵ Indeed, as a teacher, one must use texts as "particular examples" of rubrics that the syllabus outlines. The teacher is discouraged from emphasizing her or his particular reading, effectively silencing the potential voice of authority. However, the syllabus then acts authoritatively to form a student's thinking.

Michaels and Gold here articulate, albeit inadvertently, the connection between the aesthetic and ethical criticism. If a text is 'other,' and the ethical

²³ I began the Introduction with a conversation I had with May, who attributed her high marks to knowing "what's in the syllabus."

²⁴ Wendy Michaels and Eva Gold, "As Time Goes By or Read it Again, Sam," *Metaphor*, 3 (2006), p. 91.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 93, my italics.

commitment of the syllabus is to the theoretical rubric over and above the text, then the syllabus is asking students to transgress the very ethic driving the theoretical assumptions of the syllabus. If a text is human communication – as Virginia Woolf puts it, “the form of a human being”²⁶ – and we ask students to privilege the theoretical at the expense of the text, then we are asking students to use this “form of a human being” for their own ends (or, more precisely, for the syllabus’s own ends.) According to Michaels and Gold, we do not value the text for what it communicates, but rather for its ‘use’ value. Surely using an ‘other’ to serve one’s own agenda transgresses the ethical program that the syllabus proposes as essential?

Area of Study and the Particularity of Text

Let me follow my students in 2005-2006 through their course of study, using them as an example. My students would be representative of a large proportion of students sitting examinations in New South Wales, as the controversial scaling of English has meant that most students take Advanced English rather than Standard. All students studying in New South Wales, whether they take the Standard, Advanced or ESL course, must undertake the Area of Study. The Area of Study stipulates that students will study as follows:

In the Area of Study, students explore and examine relationships between language and text, and interrelationships among texts. They examine closely the individual qualities of texts while considering the texts’ relationships to the wider context of the Area of Study. They synthesise ideas to clarify meaning and develop new meanings. They take into account whether aspects such as context, purpose and register, text structures, stylistic features, grammatical features and vocabulary are appropriate to the particular text.²⁷

While the syllabus makes allowances for “the individual qualities of texts” and “particular texts,” the overwhelming rationale of the Area of Study is that students “explore and examine relationships between language and text, and interrelationships among texts.” Indeed, the syllabus stipulates that students study a core text, seven texts from a Stimulus Booklet that the Board of Studies publishes, and several texts of their own choosing, and the overwhelming skill that the student must possess to pass this part of the Higher School Certificate is the skill of synthesis. In order to

²⁶ I canvas Virginia Woolf’s conception of reading more fully in Chapter 7.

²⁷ Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Syllabus 1999* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 1999), p. 50.

synthesise these texts, the 1999 syllabus stipulates the rubric that the student will use to read their texts.

So, in 2006, my students studying the Area of Study investigated “Journeys,” and then interpreted their texts through this Area of Study:

This Area of Study requires students to explore the ways in which the concept of the journey is considered and expressed in and through texts. In their responses and compositions students examine, question and reflect on:

- Their observation and understanding of the portrayed events, people, ideas and societies that they encounter in and through the prescribed texts and texts of their own choosing related to the Area of Study
- The assumptions underlying the representations of journeys
- The ways in which they perceive the world through texts and speculate about it
- The ways they consider and express their own journey experiences.²⁸

When my students “read” or interpreted *The Tempest*, then, they did so according to the Area of Study stipulated here. Any investigation of the text that students undertake is with respect to the “imaginative journey.” I remember one particular instance when one of my students broke out of role as the drunken Trinculo and asked, “Miss, is it just my imagination, or is this play all about power, or what?” As a teacher under the 1999 syllabus, my obligation to this student – so that he in turn obliged the syllabus – was to answer that, yes, this play could be seen in terms of power, but that, no, we could not use his question *as an organising principle*. The arch-reading had been supplied for us and if we were to explore power as a salient question in the play – which we did – we must either find a link back to “imaginative journeys” or we must ditch the question of power as salient.

So, the syllabus both determines how a text will be read and determines what has been read. Not only this, since the syllabus requires attention to a number of texts in the Area of Study, students must use the stipulated Area of Study in order to see connections between texts. They cannot, for example, pursue the question of power as their organising and salient question that connects texts, and then investigate how, say, Arthur Miller pursues this same question. Their conclusions must be organised around the ironically named “imaginative journey.” In addition, when individual and varied texts are submitted to the one lens with which to view the text, the syllabus

²⁸ Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Prescriptions: Area of Study, Electives and Texts, Higher School Certificate 2004-2007* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 2002), p. 9.

necessarily homogenises students' responses to those texts. A student can only ever say that *The Tempest* reflects aspects of imaginative journeys, in the end, and therefore cannot explore any other option that the text invites or that the student proposes. In this way, the students' voices are silenced.

Module A: Reading in the Context of Meta-Reading

Students studying Advanced English then move on to Module A, which is entitled "Comparative Study of Texts and Context." The syllabus outlines this rubric as follows:

This module requires students to compare texts *in order to explore them in relation to their contexts*. It develops students' understanding of the effects of context and questions of value ... *Students examine ways in which social, cultural and historical context influences aspects of texts, or the ways in which changes in context leads to changed values being reflected in texts*. This includes study and use of the language of texts, consideration of purposes and audiences, and analysis of the content, values and attitudes conveyed through a range of readings.²⁹

This module is very clear about its objective that students use texts as an example of a guiding hermeneutical principle. The words "in order to explore" suggest that the particular texts serve as exemplars of a predetermined template, and this means that any particularities of the text that do not serve this over-arching template must be elided. While such an alternative investigation is hypothetically possible, the syllabus's marriage to the examination and to the assessment procedure makes this a liability for students preparing to enter university on the basis of the marks they receive. So, according to the rubric for Module A, the primary understanding that my students are to take away from their reading *is that context influences text*. The particularities of the text and of the student's individual response to the text must be sidelined for this objective to take precedence.

Writing their exam in 2006, my students were required to read *Bladerunner* and *Brave New World* for their Module A elective, two immensely dense texts, and their study was constricted by this rubric alone. The text list does attempt to make their study a little more responsive and particular to the two texts we had chosen:

A significant concern for humanity is its relationship with the natural world and nature's influence on human behaviour and human interaction.

²⁹ Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Syllabus 1999* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 1999), p. 51.

The quality and importance of humanity's relationship with the natural world, or its response to the absence of the natural world can vary across different times and cultures. Students should explore definitions of the wild as appropriate to their texts. In this elective students select a pair of texts and consider the ways in which human understanding of and relationship with the wild is shaped and reflected.³⁰

The prescribed text list attempts to take into account the particularity of the two texts, and the similarities of the concerns of the two texts has obviously been considered:

Bladerunner and *Brave New World* are both prophetic dystopias that reflect on the use and abuse of technology in the world and the concomitant demise of the natural world.

The critical thing here, though, is that, epistemologically speaking, the syllabus has declared the route for study a priori: "A significant concern for humanity is its relationship with the natural world and nature's influence on human behaviour." This declaration comes from a position of already having read the two texts and surmised this concern through the hermeneutic process. For the student, however, the syllabus has hurdled this primary and critical part of the interpretation process, and handed the initial interaction to the student already complete. The student's questions are effectively silenced since the interpretation process has been completed. The student's job, as Michaels and Gold note, is to evidence the claim made by the syllabus – that context reflects the values of the world in which the composer writes (or in the case of these two texts, reflects the composer's resistance to these values). The student's job is not to question *what* the text may mean. They may not explore alternative ways to interpret the text, or even spend too much time investigating the primary claim set up by the syllabus, lest they neglect their "hermeneutic" task of explaining *how* a text means.

In an Advanced class that sat the Higher School Certificate in 2006, I did have one student who became fascinated with *Bladerunner* in particular, to the neglect of the directives given him by the syllabus rubric. Jack had begun his senior studies tentatively, and was usually very quiet during class discussions. A transformation took place when this particular text beckoned him into active investigation. Jack printed articles that he had found at a university and brought them to me and investigated other projects Ridley Scott had taken on. He knew every line off by

³⁰ Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Prescriptions: Area of Study, Electives and Texts, Higher School Certificate 2004-2007* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 2002), p. 17-18.

heart, and I remember one instance when I realised the depth to which his renegade investigation had led him. Discussing the reference to Blake in the film, Jack raised his hand and corrected me, reciting with ease Blake’s “America: A Prophecy” and the intentional misquotation of Blake in the film. He then went on to explain why he believed an understanding of Blake was significant to understanding the film as a whole. His interest, in other words, became *what* the text had to say. He was not really interested in *how* the text was saying it, except insofar as it supported his interest in what the text was saying. As his teacher, with my eye ever on Jack’s examiners at the end of the road, I attempted to steer his investigations back to the rubric by discussing literary contexts. I never quite succeeded. Jack’s written compositions on *Bladerunner* were always superb, always masterful and thoughtful, but they never fulfilled the demands of the rubric for two reasons. Firstly, his investigation of *Bladerunner* led him beyond the syllabus’s paragraph on “In the Wild,” and he never had enough space to write about what he had actually discovered. Secondly, his interest in what the text was saying drew him away from what Michaels and Gold described as Jack’s primary task: to outline how the context of the composer reflects the values of the time.

However, even this meta-hermeneutic task of explaining the relationship between text and context as it is given to the students is already theoretically positioned. They are to source the claim that “the quality and importance of humanity’s relationship with the natural world, or its response to the absence of the natural world can vary across different times and cultures.” The syllabus here encourages students to see that there is a variation in human experience that is dependent upon context. They are encouraged to investigate an author’s context to weigh up the differences between contexts. What is not negotiable, however, is that students may not pursue another hermeneutical theory in their investigation of these texts, nor may they *discover* the truth of the claim that the syllabus makes that a composer is always already influenced by history and culture. They are *told* that this is the case. If a student postulated, for example, that a text’s meaning came from *both* the intrinsic structure³¹ and form of the text *and* from the way an author’s context had

³¹ The syllabus calls this “textual integrity,” which it defines in the glossary as “The unity of a text; its coherent use of form and language to produce an integrated whole in terms of meaning and value.” Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Syllabus 1999*, (Sydney: Board of Studies, 1999), p. 145. Importantly, whenever the syllabus talks about “textual integrity” in terms of the way that an interpreter

shaped the writing of that text, then there would be no format for the student to pursue this theory within Module A.

In effect, then, my students were told *what* the text meant and *how* the text meant, even before they had viewed and read the texts set for study. Ironically, when the syllabus declares that it intends to demonstrate how context can “vary across different times and cultures,” it homogenises any variation in student interpretation in the diverse New South Wales candidature.

Module B: Self Conscious Interpretation

If Module A requires students to explain the way context can influence an author, then Module B requires students to explain the way context can influence a reader.

Entitled “Critical Study of Texts,” this Module has received the most attention in the press because its emphasis on variations in interpretation has given rise to students’ investigating different literary traditions and their habits of interpretation. My students looked at two different kinds of feminisms, and at Marxism, psychoanalysis, and Romanticism as ways of interpreting the poetry of Gwen Harwood. The media have taken issue with this particular module, touting it as evidence that this syllabus gives undue and biased emphasis to postmodernism and draws a student away from the basics of reading a text.³²

This Module carries on the syllabus’s emphasis on context as a determining factor in the way meaning is made, wanting students to be able to appreciate a range of interpretations among which to position their own interpretation. The syllabus states:

This module requires students to explore and evaluate a specific text and its reception in a range of contexts. It develops students’ understanding of questions of textual integrity ... Students explore the ideas expressed in the text through analysing its construction, content and language. They examine how particular features of the text contribute to textual integrity. They research others’ perspectives of the text and test these against their

might make meaning, it uses the phrase “questions of textual integrity,” suggesting that form and language are questionable as a way to yield interpretation. (See particularly Module B, *ibid*, p. 52.) This vexed phrase reflects the syllabus’s aversion to the “context-less” study emphasised by the previous syllabus, where students relied on close, aesthetic readings alone to arrive at their conclusions.³² As an example, Justin Norrie reports that “some students have complained of being made to give feminist and Marxist interpretations of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Freudian deconstructions of poems by Gwen Harwood. One student said he was obliged to give a ‘feminist, then a structuralist, then a Freudian reading of most poems – it’s crap but you’ve got to play the game.’” “Deconstructing Buffy leaves Nelson Clueless,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 6 2005.

own understanding and interpretations of the text. Students discuss and evaluate the ways in which the set work has been read, received and valued in historical and other contexts. They extrapolate from this study of a particular text to explore questions of textual integrity and significance.

Presumably, the syllabus wants students to be able to position their own reading among others so that they can develop tolerance and openness to other interpretations. Wendy Morgan, in an article on critical literacy, says that it is explicitly geared toward such an end:

Readings produce meanings. There is no single ‘author-ised’ meaning behind or prior to a text, which determines how it must be read; instead, readers in specific historical, cultural and language contexts can produce different, divergent and perhaps oppositional readings. When readers become aware of the choices of language, subject matter and representation that have been made in constructing texts, they may be able to ask critical questions about those choices, including who stands to benefit by such textual constructions.³³

So, while this module is the only one that requires the kind of close reading that the previous syllabus emphasized, the primary objective for students studying this module is to “explore and evaluate a specific text and its reception in *a range of contexts*.” Once students have developed their own reading of the text, they then move into researching the way other students have read this text, and thus come to the hermeneutical conclusion – again, provided a priori by the syllabus – that the context of a reader determines the way one reads. Once again, there is a fundamental ethical principle guiding this determination: if we can appreciate that there are other readings apart from our own, then we are more open to ‘the other’ in our lives.

My students studying in 2006 were required to read Gwen Harwood’s poetry and to fortify this claim by the syllabus. They were to use their own readings of Gwen Harwood and the research they undertook to prove what was already stated in the syllabus. While the syllabus does claim that it is interested in the student’s personal response to the poem, cultivated through a close reading of the text, it is clear that the primary hermeneutic task for the students is to arrive at the conclusion that a text can be received differently in a “range of contexts.” If and when they do arrive at a personal reading, then, it is only to serve the primary purpose of situating that reading among others, so that they can prove the point already articulated by the

³³ Wendy Morgan, “Critical Literacy,” *Reviewing English in the 21st Century*, eds. Wayne Sawyer and Eva Gold (Melbourne: Phoenix Education, 2004), p. 106.

syllabus. In this way, their “personal reading” has become a means to an inflexible end.

As in Module A, while the syllabus wants emphasis on the variation in personal responses to the text, it will not allow variations in the hermeneutical principles that inform the syllabus. It will not, for example, endorse an investigation of the form of a text that may lead a reader to conclude that, while context clearly informs interpretation, some interpretations give a fuller account of the text than others.³⁴ It will not, in other words, allow an investigation that endorses a judgment about good reading and better reading, even if a student proposes the idea. This proposal must defer to the hermeneutical principle articulated by the syllabus that differences in reading are not differences in sensitivity – or purpose, or skill – but differences in value alone. Once again, the student’s personal reading becomes subservient to the syllabus’s reading of how meaning works.

There are other problems with this module that compound the tendency of students to resort to rote learning, unable to form their own readings. These problems stem from the syllabus’s misunderstanding of the developmental age of most of its candidature, over and above its insistence on inflexible hermeneutical principles. The syllabus wants students to be able to arrive at a self-conscious reading, to be able to place their interpretations alongside the interpretations of others, and account for the differences through an investigation of value systems. The level of self-consciousness necessary for this task requires, in my experience as a teacher and a student, years of reading, growing and investigating that this age group typically does not yet have. René Wellek goes even further than I when he suggests that this push for self-consciousness is as stultifying for adult readers as for teenagers: “The recent attempts to increase our self-consciousness, to make us aware of our own situation in time and place ... can also have a paralyzing effect, turning us into the famous centipede that did not know which foot to put first and thus encouraging the suppression of personality, which, whatever its excesses, is after all the source of insight and judgement.”³⁵

³⁴ Interpretations of this module have shifted of late, to place emphasis on “personal response” from the students, rather than to show knowledge of other readings. This emphasis, however, has largely come from the marking centre, rather than from the syllabus itself.

³⁵ René Wellek, “Destroying Literary Studies,” *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, ed. Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 47. It is ironic, perhaps,

For example, my students first read Gwen Harwood, who is not an “easy” poet to come to terms with in the first place. Many of my students had never thought about art and its effects, let alone death, birth or transcendence. Those that did come to terms with her poetry – and not all did – were then asked to pit their readings against those of Stephanie Trigg,³⁶ Alison Hoddinott,³⁷ and Jennifer Strauss³⁸ among others, all of whom are professional critics. Importantly, they were not asked to use these critics to help them form their own understandings, they were asked *to identify the differences between them*. The reason for this, presumably, is the hope that students become self-aware and conscious of their own value systems. Wendy Michaels and Eva Gold suggest that students “must pose the question as to how ‘conditions’ in their own contexts shape their reading of the text and apply the same question to other people’s readings of the text,” arguing that “this study makes [students] alert to influences on the processes of meaning making.”³⁹

My seventeen year old students were mostly unready for this deeply self-conscious act, and capitulated to the demands of the syllabus by piggy backing onto one of the readings and adopting it as “their own.” In the face of such developed readings, students surrendered their fledgling readings to the authority of one of these critics. The disempowerment of a student’s reading was taking place just as in Module A, but this time it was taking place *both* as a result of a dominating hermeneutic principle *and* because of a developmental demand that is beyond the reach of most students in the state at seventeen years old. It is important to mention and draw attention to this disempowerment, though the issue is a developmental rather than being a hermeneutic concern, which is the interest of this thesis. I note the problem because it compounds the process I discussed earlier, and I leave the critique and investigation of alternatives to another investigation more dedicated to developmental theories of learning.

that Wellek concludes that the over-theoretical approach to literary studies can be “paralyzing,” in the light of his debate with F.R. Leavis, where he accused Leavis of not being theoretical enough. However, it is an irony that he himself recognises, and sees as evidence of needing a balance between theory and criticism (p. 49-50).

³⁶ *Gwen Harwood* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994).

³⁷ *Gwen Harwood: the read and the imagined world* (North Ryde, NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1991).

³⁸ *Boundary Conditions: the poetry of Gwen Harwood* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1992).

³⁹ Wendy Michaels and Eva Gold, “As Time Goes By or Read it Again, Sam,” *Metaphor*, 3 (2006), p. 97.

Module C: Powerplay

My students, then, moved to Module C, their last unit of study in the Higher School Certificate for English. Module C is entitled “Representation and Text.” The language of the title is very important in understanding the syllabus’s presuppositions in this unit, in particular its use of the word “representation.” The glossary states that a representation is “the way ideas are portrayed through texts.”⁴⁰ What this suggests is that an idea is portrayed in a text, but that the text does not constitute the idea itself. Drawing on elements of structuralism and its descendant in poststructuralism, the syllabus suggests that ideas themselves are distinct from their portrayal, and thus the syllabus draws attention to the *way* an idea is represented, rather than to the idea itself. The syllabus stipulates the following:

This module requires students to explore various representations of events, personalities or situations. They evaluate how medium of production, textual form, perspective and choice of language influence meaning. The study develops students’ understanding of the relationships between representation and meaning ... Students explore the ways in which different media present information and ideas to understand how various textual forms and their media of production offer different versions and perspectives for a range of audiences and purposes.⁴¹

The emphasis is not on the events, personalities or situations, but on the way these are portrayed in a text. Students should be more concerned about the “medium of production” than about what that medium of production communicates, although students must grasp the latter to discuss the former. This is a nod to the poststructuralist notion that language never refers to the thing itself, but defers to more language. That the syllabus requires students to support this particular theory of linguistics, without articulating the theory itself, inadvertently sets up this theory as unassailable.

My students in 2006 were given the following specific rubric for their prescribed text, the satiric television series *Frontline*:

In their responding and composing, students consider representations of the truth. They explore the processes by which statements come to be accepted as true, question who has the authority to make those statements,

⁴⁰ Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Syllabus 1999* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 1999), p. 144.

⁴¹ Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Syllabus 1999* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 1999), p.52.

and examine the ways in which those statements are explored, tested, and endorsed or refuted.⁴²

In effect, the syllabus asked my students to take an interrogative stance when they viewed *Frontline*, suggesting that they investigate, first, the ways in which truth is portrayed in current affairs programs and then the way the truth about those current affairs programs is portrayed in *Frontline*. When the syllabus explains that it wants students to “question who has the authority to make those statements,” it sets up its chief ethical goal, which is to encourage students to be critical of what they read so that they never accept uncritically what they are told “authoritatively.”

This is a goal, once again, that I cannot but endorse as a teacher. This module wanted my students to work on the assumption that current affairs programs offer the objective truth in their overwrought construction. My students investigated the satirical portrayal in *Frontline* of noddies, the careful construction of media personality, camera work, sensationalised music and so on. When the students have arrived at the conclusion that “objective truth” is a construction, they come to the concomitant conclusion that truth is not so easy to come by as current affairs programs would have us believe. Often, my students’ sense of outrage – at times sanctimonious – was palpable. Interestingly, when we then moved on to discuss why we believed the satiric attack rather than the current affairs programs, my students could never find a satisfactory answer. As a class, they settled on the conclusion that, since there was no objective truth, truth was simply a construction of the powerful. *Frontline* often portrays the mercenary power of producers to manipulate truth. With this particular module, my students well and truly fulfilled the demands of the syllabus, which was that we arrive at the way power works in representing ideas; they explored “the processes by which statements come to be accepted as true.”

As I was nearing the end of this module and the conclusion of English at secondary level, I remember a significant discussion that my class and I managed to conduct within the demands of the syllabus and the looming examination. We had managed to articulate the truth that the syllabus had wanted us to arrive at: the ‘truth’ that truth is a construction of the powerful. Moreover, we had arrived at the truth that the powerful had a mercenary rather than noble, disinterested investment in the truth. My class quickly moved on to a discussion of the difference between objective and

⁴² Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Prescriptions: Area of Study, Electives and Texts, Higher School Certificate 2004-2007* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 2002), p. 20.

subjective truth, which is a topic that I find fascinates teenagers, as their notions of truth become more nuanced the older and more experienced they become. Dissatisfied with this binary opposition, I posed the idea that truth could be more than either objective or subjective, and that this conception of truth was based on a scientific model of truth that we did not need to accept. I suggested that social truth – whether we should adopt capital punishment or not; whether we should have offshore detention centres; whether we should support the union movement – was in a realm that did not fit either of these categories. These issues cannot be “objective” since they are inherently social concerns, and yet they must be arrived at through consensus, suggesting that they are not merely “subjective” either. My students capably responded by suggesting that *Frontline* was a text that *not only* sought to suggest that truth was made by the powerful, but was *also and more importantly* a challenge for us to engage in making social truth. The “truth” they arrived at was that truth and the power to tell it could be liberating, beautiful and malevolent by turns – depending upon the reason for telling that truth and the type of truth that we were dealing with. In other words, they arrived at a conclusion that they could not write about in the examination, since it no longer fitted neatly into the paradigm that suggested that truth is always and only either subjective or objective, and always, and only, used by the malevolent powerful.⁴³

This problem becomes clearer when we consider another option that students could have taken studying this module. Another colleague of mine recounted her experience of teaching Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* in this module. Under exactly the same rubric as *Frontline*, her students were directed in the syllabus to examine “the processes by which statements come to be accepted as true” with regard to Ted Hughes’s poetry. She related incidents where her students went and researched Sylvia Plath’s writings, in an attempt to address what the syllabus demanded of them. The problem became, as she put it to me, that students could write about the notion of power and of “Telling the Truth” without any respect for or understanding of Hughes’s poetry. The myriad concerns of the text itself were lost in the overbearing

⁴³ Some of my students this year, however, managed to use the invitation to find texts of their own choosing to challenge the conception that those in power are necessarily corrupt. One of my students reviewed George Clooney’s *Good Night and Good Luck* and showed how, in this case, the media worked for a good that was detrimental to itself.

concern of the syllabus that students adopt an interrogative stance with regard to the texts they read, and that they work with a particular notion of the truth.

The fact that *Frontline* and Ted Hughes's poetry achieve exactly the same purpose as far as the syllabus is concerned is emblematic of the strictures that the syllabus inadvertently places on texts and students' response to texts. In my colleague's case, the problem of this module was that the concerns of the syllabus over-rode the concerns of the text itself and then over-rode the students' response to that text. It became apparent, ironically, that our students were being asked to adopt a notion of the truth that was already complete, already debated, and already decided upon. While the syllabus clearly wants the students to challenge accepted notions of truth and therefore to become critical, it inadvertently requires acquiescence in its own understanding of truth – which is that the truth is always told by the powerful.

Not only that, but the interrogative stance that the syllabus asks the students to adopt suggests that the syllabus implies that those who have power to construct truth are not to be trusted, which became a problem for my students when we discussed other forms of truth. What do we do, for example, when we throw Deitrich Bonhoeffer's letters, or Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches, or Gandhi's speeches into the equation? If we subject Ted Hughes's poetry to the inflexible rubric that the syllabus requires us to accept, then it is reasonable to suggest that if we had read Bonhoeffer or Gandhi with respect to the syllabus, then we must mistrust these texts also. This, then, leaves students with nothing but their own mistrust of texts and their knowledge of how these texts are constructed. Ironically, it does not leave them with "different versions and perspectives" of the truth, but with the syllabus's poststructuralist understanding of linguistics and of the concomitant notion of truth that attends upon that particular theory of language. As in the case of the Area of Study, Module A and Module B, in an effort to emancipate students into a flexible and sensitive ethical approach to text, the Module C requires acquiescence from its students, such that the declared ethic is suffocated by the constituted ethic of the syllabus.

Pedagogy: innocent theory or guilty practice?

In all of the units set for study by the syllabus, the consistent problem has been that the constitutive ethic that is practised in classrooms undermines the declared ethic that

the syllabus sets up as its *raison d'être*. In the Area of Study and the three modules that students sit in the Advanced course – and the Standard course, ESL and Extension course all reveal a similar irony in their construction – the texts are *examples* of a hermeneutic principle that the syllabus has set up a priori, without reference to individual teacher or student dialogue. When the text is silenced like this, the student's individual response is concomitantly and inadvertently suffocated since the student cannot respond to the text in any way other than the meta-reading that the syllabus demands. Ironically, if the discrete text is not respected as unique and 'other,' then a student's response cannot also be unique and other, and the very worthwhile ethic of 'the other' is silenced. As Derrida notes, one cannot simply trust what a theory declares, one must investigate what a theory actually does.⁴⁴

Since this syllabus elides the particularity of the text and of the student in the hierarchy of theory that it sets up, it is well worth investigating those theories – *in particular* – that have influenced this kind of thinking and this kind of pedagogy. Do these theories exhibit similar habits of reading to the syllabus? I ask this question because, in accordance with Wendy Michaels, I propose that a syllabus cannot be theoretically innocent, but must necessarily be clothed in the culture and history of theory. However, on Derrida's advice, in order to create a curriculum where students are liberated and emancipated, we must think through not only the theoretical justification for what we do, but also the practical implications of these theories. My assumption, of course, is that the practical implications – which is, of course pedagogy – will reflect the true ethic of a theoretical position.

This is emphatically not to suggest that those who create the syllabus or those who write literary theory are somehow covert authoritarians or have malevolent motives. Such an accusation is profoundly unhelpful and is one I cannot endorse. Such accusations against the makers of the syllabus have been made: Miranda Devine says that "the creed of political and cultural correctness has poisoned our school system"⁴⁵ and Kevin Donnelly writes that the new direction in curriculum reform

⁴⁴ Derrida says that "To act in a liberatory or emancipatory way, it's not enough to claim to be deconstructionist or to apply deconstruction. In each situation you have to watch, and I can imagine (of course I try not to do so) someone using deconstruction with reactionary and repressive effects or goals. That's why you can't stop watching or analyzing. You can't simply rely on names, titles, or claims." "Jacques Derrida on Rhetoric and Composition: a conversation," *JAC* 10.1 (1990), <http://jack.gsu.edu/jac/10/articles/1.htm>, accessed 21.5.02.

⁴⁵ Miranda Devine, "A toxic twist in the learning curve," *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 4, 2004.

“enforce[s] a politically correct, black armband view and feminists and left-wing advocates of the gender agenda argue for the rights of women, gays, lesbians and transgender people.”⁴⁶ Metaphors of poisons, viruses and war have only served to fuel the polemicism that has characterised the debate over the syllabus. My point is simply this: that when it comes to school children, our interest should always be in their learning rather than in the theoretical purity of any suggested program for study or literary theory. And the kind of learning that I want to promote is the kind of learning that protects and encourages the agency of a student’s responses to the text and a student’s ability to speak to other students. This kind of learning is inherently committed to listening, also, since to respond to a text means first to listen to it. Not only that, but the kind of learning I want to encourage would invite students to speak back to a syllabus and thus constitute the kind of ethical and civic agency in students that the syllabus hopes for, but in its present state is clearly not achieving.

⁴⁶ Linda Doherty, “Government staffer says new-age warriors waging culture wars in class,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 3 2004.

PART TWO

Chapter Three

Deconstruction and the Politics of Arbitration in the Classroom.

You have been asked to speak to students who are about to decide which Elective to choose for next year's HSC English Extension 1 course. Persuade them to choose the Postmodern Elective by drawing attention to the adventure of postmodernism as a way into thinking about texts. Write out what you would say to them ... draw on what you have learned from your study of this Elective.¹

2001 Extension HSC question

Whoever wants me to take deconstruction to heart ... stands at the beginning of a conversation, not its end.²

Hans-Georg Gadamer

¹ Board of Studies, 2001 *Higher School Certificate Examination, English Extension 1* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 2001), p. 7.

² *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, eds. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press), p. 6.

Jacques Derrida's deconstruction has provided some of the theoretical impetus for the Stage 6 1999 syllabus. Of course, to use a phrase like "Derrida's deconstruction" is problematic, given that Derrida's philosophy is extremely varied across his career and across the genres that Derrida takes an interest in. There is a broad but important difference between Derrida's early philosophy and his later work, and to use a phrase like "Derrida's deconstruction" runs the risk of disregarding the differences in Derrida's thought across time. Not only that, Derrida's work is also translated from the original French, leaving Anglophone readers beholden to typically Anglophone translators. The translation of Derrida's philosophy into English has been notoriously problematic, as, particularly, American interpreters take license with a singularly Gallic style of philosophy.³ Broadly speaking, the syllabus has taken on some of the aspects of Derrida's early philosophy, and also taken on some aspects of American interpretations of deconstruction, which selectively emphasise notions of free play and of 'the other.'

Throughout his career, Derrida's deconstruction works from the perspective of what Martin Buber calls "The Thou"⁴ and what Derrida terms 'the other.'⁴ In an interview with Richard Kearney, he says that "deconstruction is always concerned with the 'other' of language."⁵ Derrida's use of the term 'other' denotes what is ultimately unknowable, and what, according to Derrida, stands outside of Western philosophies of linguistics. His position, then, as a philosopher, is on the margins of philosophy and is ultimately an ethical position. Both Jewish and Algerian and thus twice removed from white French culture, Derrida's philosophical commitment to 'the other' ultimately works for the emancipation of marginalised people. Like the 1999 Stage 6 syllabus, Derrida argues for space to be made for the marginal through

³ Michael Thomas's book *The Reception of Derrida* chronicles this process of Derrida's translation into English, and pays particular attention to his reception into the American context at Yale. Drawing on the work of Frank Lentricchia, he says that "American deconstructionists have misread Derrida's work by misplacing an emphasis on freeplay." (p. 25) He also suggests that much of this misunderstanding stemmed from problems with the translation of Derrida's work from French into English: "many of Derrida's own readings of literary texts were in fact published for the first time in English translation during the mid 1980s, and thus the literary translation derived its emphasis on play and *mis en abyme* from Derrida's philosophical readings of Saussure and structuralism ... Readings from the first wave tended to be highly selective, and there is a profound discrepancy between the early essays of the American deconstructionists and Derrida's own philosophical readings from this period." Michael Thomas, *The Reception of Derrida: Translation and Transformation* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 22-23.

⁴ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970, 1996).

⁵ Richard Kearney, "Dialogue with Jacques Derrida," *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 123.

the oblique reading that deconstruction provides. Since deconstruction is “always concerned with the ‘other’,” the epistemological starting point of Derrida’s early writing is with what has been shut out by traditional philosophy and traditional hermeneutics. Derrida’s deconstruction works toward creating a space for this textual and philosophical ‘other’ to announce itself and, in this important sense, Derrida’s work is deeply ethical.

The 1999 English syllabus has like-minded goals, as I have already suggested. That Derrida’s work – particularly his early work – concerns itself with ‘the other’ of text has been attractive to teachers keen to alert students to the material ‘other’ through the reading of texts, and this has been the case with the 1999 syllabus. The key facet of Derrida’s work that the syllabus has taken on, *inter alia*, is this privileging of the unknowable, inscrutable other in the hermeneutical process.

Saussure and Derrida: linguistics at play

The basis for Derrida’s work is the philosophy of language. A successor of Ferdinand de Saussure, Derrida builds on (or deconstructs) the radical linguistics of structuralism that suggests that language does not refer directly to the world, but rather to other signs. Saussure’s notion of difference, where a sign makes meaning only by differentiating itself from another sign, posits the idea that language does not refer to existents so much as to itself. Derrida sees the major contributions of Saussure as breaking with tradition. He says that, “by desubstantializing both the signified content and the ‘expressive substance’ ... by making linguistics a division of general semiology, Saussure powerfully contributed to turning against the metaphysical tradition the concept of the sign that he borrowed from it.”⁶ Derrida applauds Saussure’s move against a traditional linguistics purportedly occupied with language as “substance” and “content,” manifested in the metaphysical impulse to announce what is present over and above what is absent. What Derrida takes from Saussure is the notion that language is not a simple affair of words referring to reality. Instead, Saussure adopts a more sceptical stance when he suggests that meaning is not located in the sound of language, nor in its signified content, but is contingent on how this sound is used against how other, related sounds are used. The ramifications of this

⁶ “Semiology and Grammatology: interview with Julia Kristeva,” *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 18.

kind of thinking for studying texts is that texts can no longer be simply about the world (in the sense of an existent outside the self) because language does not refer to the thing but to other language.

Derrida, however, goes well beyond Saussure in his thinking on linguistics in two important ways. Firstly, Derrida questions Saussure's use of the term "sign" to begin with, on the grounds that it is borrowed from the Western metaphysical tradition that unthinkingly founds itself on the *presence* of meaning. Derrida quotes Saussure as saying that he chose to use the word "sign" because no other was available to him, and Derrida responds "Now, 'everyday language' is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system."⁷ Metaphysics is the term Derrida uses to denote anything that announces itself as an unassailable foundation, and, as he says, is a part of a rigid system that promotes and supports the powerful. To talk of the sign unthinkingly, therefore, because there is no better alternative, is to place oneself at the mercy of traditional metaphysics and to lock oneself into a "system" of power and repression. Metaphysics, for Derrida, is always violent.

Another critical difference between Saussure and Derrida is Derrida's objection to Saussure's privileging the spoken word over the written word. Derrida asserts that the written word has systematically been left out of the philosophical consideration of the sign, while the spoken word has been privileged because it is more "present." Conversely, Derrida privileges writing because it is "absent" and therefore leaves linguistic space for 'the other' to arrive.⁸ In Derrida's understanding, what is considered present is a "transcendental signified;" that is, an unassailable foundation or metaphysics. And since, to return to Saussure, a sign is determined by what it differs from, a sign is primarily significant by virtue of its *not being* something else. It signifies *because of what is absent* and therefore Derrida questions the idea of the privileging of speaking over writing, on the presupposition that to be present is

⁷ "Semiology and Grammatology: interview with Julia Kristeva," in *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p19.

⁸ Although, as I discuss later, Derrida makes clear that this moment never comes, because the other is always 'to come.'

concomitantly to chain oneself to metaphysics. It is precisely because the writer is absent that writing is more “authentic.”

Différance

While Saussure casts doubt on the idea that signs mean because they refer to reality, Derrida goes further and questions the binary opposition of signified and signifier. He stretches Saussure’s linguistics when he suggests that a signifier refers (or defers) to a signified, which in turn refers to another signified and so on to infinity. This essentially means that signifiers become signifieds and vice versa, thus making the process of signification not only infinite but, in Terry Eagleton’s words, “circular.”⁹ Not only do words no longer connect with reality per se, but words do not necessarily connect with their apparent meanings. When we make meaning from texts then we *make* meaning by tracing the constant movement from one signified to a signifier and so on. This occurs in the instant we read (that is, a comparison with other words on the page) but also across time. The “trace” of the movement of signification occurs across centuries. In addition, this play extends into the future, indicating that signification never stays in one place long enough for there to be a fixed meaning for any given word. And what this essentially means is that meaning can never and will never touch down, so to speak. It is always, to use Derrida’s oft quoted phrase, to come.¹⁰

It is here that Derrida begins to use his neologism “*différance*.” *Différance* is Derrida’s word to denote this incessant movement of signification, merging the two meanings of the French word *différer*: to differ and to defer. In other words, meaning is difference (in space) and is always deferred (in time). Derrida defines the basis for *différance* thus:

The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not present ... Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is

⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an introduction*, 2nd ed. (United States; University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 111.

¹⁰ One such meditation on the word “come” can be found in Derrida’s essay “Of An Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy,” trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 62-67.

anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.”¹¹

In contrast to a system of linguistics that would allow for “a simple element [to] function as a sign without referring to another,” Derrida sees language as a “web” where we can only see the “trace of traces” in the wake of the movement of *différance*. The task of the interpreter, then, is to observe and interact with these “traces” rather than to succumb to the Western metaphysical temptation to look for meaning in the discrete text. Just as Derrida rejects the notion that meaning announces itself in the text, so the 1999 syllabus works to reject the notion that meaning can be found through “close reading” alone. Derrida’s deeply philosophical and theoretical position when he interprets texts provides a philosophical basis for the choices made by the syllabus.

Derrida goes further with his notion of *différance*, asserting normatively that it exists prior to any other “thing.” M.H. Abrams notes the normative characteristic of Derrida’s *différance*: “Derrida sounds most like a transcendental philosopher when, from his theoretical position within language-in-general, he posits what he describes as a pre-linguistic and pre-conceptual non-entity ... [and] ascribes to it such essential features as “*différance*,” and “iterability.”¹² Derrida himself says of *différance* that

The activity and productivity connoted by the *a* of *différance* refers to the generative movement in the play of differences. The latter are neither fallen from the sky nor inscribed once and for all in a closed system, a static structure that synchronic and taxonomic operation could exhaust ... Nothing – no present and in-different being – thus precedes *différance* and spacing. There is no subject who is agent, author, and master of *différance*, who eventually and empirically would be overtaken by *différance*.¹³

According to Derrida, *différance* is radical because it is the genesis of the new. If words or texts cannot signify in and of themselves, then the only way they can signify is through the deferral to other words and other texts in their differences, and this, as Abrams noted, is pre-linguistic. *Différance*, although it is essentially nothing, is “generative.” *Différance* is the only way that a space (or non-space) can be made for signification, although Derrida is saying simultaneously that signification in a

¹¹ “Semiology and Grammatology: interview with Julia Kristeva,” *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 26.

¹² M.H. Abrams, “What is a Humanistic Criticism?” *The Bookpress*, 3:4 (1993), p. 13.

¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 27-8.

complete sense is impossible, since meaning is always “to come,” it has flickered on into the future and past.

Concomitantly, Derrida pits his notion of *différance* against what he sees as the traditional impulse to reify meaning into one of these static elements, shutting out the dynamic and generative movement of *différance*. He says that

At the point at which the concept of *différance*, and the chain attached to it, intervenes, all the conceptual oppositions of metaphysics (signifier/signified...) to the extent that they ultimately refer to the presence of something present – become nonpertinent. They all amount, at one moment or another, to a subordination of the movement of *différance* in favour of the presence of a value or a meaning supposedly antecedent to *différance*, more original than it, exceeding and governing it in the last analysis. This is still the presence of what we called above the “transcendental signified.”¹⁴

If *différance* is the genesis of the new, then anything that is otherwise forestalls or represses the radically new, exerting a traditional and oppressive force on the movement of signification. Derrida positions the “transcendental signified,” that which announces itself as unified and having meaning independently of any other element, as the antagonist of *différance*. Since *différance* is what is antecedent to everything else, anything that settles into a supposed present, unified and self-sustained meaning is an imposition on the delicate movement of *différance*. Derrida classes these impositions as part of the system of metaphysics and he can do this since any form of reification or truth that presents itself outside the movement of *différance*, no matter what the difference in these claims to truth, is an apparent attempt to freeze the movement of *différance*. Concomitantly, Derrida understands that these claims to truth freeze the play of language and its capacity for generating the new. Deconstruction, then, sets itself up as antagonist to metaphysics, which must include almost any other claim to the truth of language and meaning.

One important ramification of this theory of *différance* is that it brings with it the importance of context in the process of signification. This is one area of Derrida’s theory that the 1999 syllabus makes much of, as Module A in the Advanced course deals explicitly with “Text and Context.”¹⁵ To function as a word, a word must be

¹⁴ “Semiology and Grammatology: interview with Julia Kristeva,” *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 29.

¹⁵ The syllabus’s approach to “context” as a determining factor in making meaning shares more similarities with the way in which cultural materialism treats context than deconstruction per se.

repeatable in some sense.¹⁶ However, because of the infinite play of *différance*, context can change how a word signifies, even if it is still provisionally repeatable. Therefore, because words can never be used outside of context, they are continually subject to a certain slippage.¹⁷ This same process applies to texts, where meaning is not *present* in a text because the context can change what a text signifies so radically. After the much quoted phrase “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*,”¹⁸ Derrida says of the importance of context that “there is nothing outside the text”¹⁹ and then later goes on with the much stronger statement “there is nothing but context.”²⁰ For a high school student studying under a syllabus influenced by this thinking, then, reading for the discrete meaning of a discrete text is, ironically, meaningless. According to Derrida’s view of context and of metaphysics, if we were to undertake such a reading, we would be reading metaphysical presence of Western binary oppositions, not the text itself.

Another ramification of this theory of signification is that it places a heavy emphasis on the reader. Again, if signification is not resident in a text but is in constant flux with the movement and play of *différance*, then a reader becomes a player in the process of signification, rather than a passive receptacle receiving meaning that can exist in and of itself. Derrida’s thinking on context is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s thinking on the subject, which moves away from the idea of a text signifying something without the reader’s context or the play of meaning on the grounds that this understanding is metaphysical. J. H. Miller, an American deconstructionist and critic, says that “reading is never the objective identifying of a sense but the importation of meaning into a text which has no meaning ‘in itself’ ... Ultimately, man finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into

However, cultural materialism has taken this important cue from Derrida’s philosophical and linguistic treatment of “context.”

¹⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (United States; University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 112.

¹⁷ M.A.K. Halliday’s linguistics share territory with Derrida’s philosophy here, in that Halliday assumes that language becomes meaningful only in use, as opposed to meaningful in and of itself. Halliday’s linguistics have been very influential in education in Australia, and thus Derrida’s philosophy would concomitantly have traction here. See *Explorations in the Functions of Language* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973) and for Halliday’s influence in Australia, see *Reviewing English in the 21st Century*, eds. Wayne Sawyer and Eva Gold (Melbourne and Sydney: Phoenix Education, 2004).

¹⁸ “There is nothing outside the text.” *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158

¹⁹ “Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion,” *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 136.

²⁰ “Biodegradables,” trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry*, 15:4 (1989), 873.

them.”²¹ What Nietzsche, and Derrida after him, ultimately attack is this “in itself” of linguistic theory that suggests that meaning is *present* in a word or a text. For Derrida, something can never exist “in itself” because, in declaring itself as “present,” it also silences what is “absent” and is thus a part of the repression and oppression inherent in the system of metaphysics. Ultimately, this is why Derrida can never allow a text to mean anything in and of itself and why his understanding of context and the reader become elevated.

Intertextuality

If the constant movement of *différance* guarantees that there can never be any meaning “in itself,” then not only does context radically change what a text can “mean,” it also means that there can be no demarcations *between* texts. If the sign always refers or defers to another sign, then it follows that a text will always refer to another text. It is a part of the web of *différance*, rather than a text with a beginning and an end. To imagine that a text can exist in and of itself, according to Derrida, is to solidify it, to reify it, into the system of metaphysics that imagines that something can mean as its own foundation, independent of *différance*. Derrida, therefore, outlines the way he understands the word “text”. In an interview with Henri Rose, he says:

In what you call my books, what is first of all put into question is the unity of the book and the unity “book” considered as a perfect totality, with all the implications of such concepts. And you know that these implications concern the entirety of our culture, directly or indirectly. At the moment when such a closure demarcates itself, dare one maintain that one is the author of books, be they one, two or three? Under these titles it is solely a question of a unique and differentiated textual “operation”, if you will, whose unfinished movement assigns itself no absolute beginning, and which, although it is entirely consumed by the reading of other texts, in a certain fashion refers only to its own writing.²²

Derrida firstly makes note of the fact that the idea of the existence of a “perfect totality” outside the linguistic movement of signs is impossible in his thinking. Since a sign always refers to another sign and this is the only way a sign can function as

²¹ quoted from Abrams, “The Deconstructive Angel,” *Doing Things with Texts*, (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989), pp. 240.

²² Jacques Derrida, “Implications,” in *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 3.

language, a book can no longer function as a “totality”. It now becomes a part of other “books,” as this is the only way it can function as a meaningful thing.²³

Derrida implies that the idea of a “perfect totality” is evidence of the malevolent system of metaphysics which “concern(s) the entirety of our culture, directly or indirectly.” The deconstructive habit of reading, in contrast, positions the reader as writing in the margins of other texts, rather than creating a text that exists in and of itself. And this requires that if one wants to read Derrida, one must have some knowledge of the texts that he chooses to deconstruct, to write in the margins. He says, in the interview with Henri Ronsbo, that “above all it is necessary to read and reread those in whose wake I write, the ‘books’ in whose margins and between whose lines I mark out and read a text simultaneously almost identical and entirely other.”²⁴

Deconstructive writing, then, is not a discrete and independent corpus of work that attempts to exist apart from other texts but explicitly embraces intertextuality on the basis of the play of *différance*. This has important ramifications for the way in which we consider authorship, because if a book can have no totality it can have no one author also.²⁵ Indeed, “dare one maintain that one is the author of books”? The author is subject to context and is thus not the only font of signification.

And since Derrida’s conception of *différance* is infinite, then this web of intertextuality is not limited. If one “book” is flecked with other “books,” then we must leave room for the idea that other texts that we may not have considered as a part of textual play in a more traditional setting are indeed a part of the text that we read. Just as signs constantly refer and defer to other signs, so texts differ from and defer to other texts and this process is not hemmed in by traditional understandings of what a text is. Derrida says of the text that:

²³ In the interview with Julia Kristeva, Derrida notes that “in the extent to which what is called ‘meaning’ ... is already, and thoroughly constituted by a tissue of differences in the extent to which there is already a text, a network of textual referrals to other texts, a textual transformation in which each allegedly “simple term” is marked by the trace of another term, the presumed interiority of meaning is already worked upon by its own exteriority. [Meaning] is always already carried outside itself. It already differs (from itself) before any act of expression. And only on this condition can it constitute a syntagm or text. Only on this condition can it ‘signify.’” In *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 33.

²⁴ “Implications,” in *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 4.

²⁵ This is very much in sympathy with Roland Barthes’ famous essay, “The Death of the Author,” which claims that written work must necessarily abdicate the transcendental presence of the author. *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

A 'text' is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines) – all the limits, everything that was to be set up in opposition to writing (speech, life, the world, the real, history, and what not, every field of reference – to body or mind, conscious or unconscious, politics, economics, and so forth).²⁶

If the sign spins off to other signs, existing only insofar as it relates to other signs, then not only does the traditional “book” blur into other “books,” but every facet of life must exist in relation to what it is not. Therefore, the concept of text is widened to include “speech, life, the real, history, and what not.” Again, this is something that the 2000 syllabus has tried to explicitly take on, defining text as

Communications of meaning produced in any medium that incorporates language, including sound, print, film, electronic and multimedia representations. Texts include written, spoken, nonverbal or visual communication of meaning. They may be extended unified works or series of related pieces.²⁷

While Derrida's deconstruction would not support the syllabus's conscious effort to incorporate texts from popular culture with canonical texts – the texts that Derrida works with are all “high culture” – Derrida's views on textuality and the boundaries of text are an unmistakable part of the assumptions that the syllabus makes.

Writing (*écriture*) and the mark

There is a second sense in which the traditional understanding of authorship comes under siege in Derrida's theory of deconstruction and this begins with the *absence* of the author. The virtue of writing, as Derrida understands it, is that the idea of absence is a necessary precursor to any act of writing. Writing demands that I write something, then walk away and relinquish immediate contact with anybody who might read what I write. Since all language is built on absence, writing is more “honest” in the sense that the absence of the author is more marked. Derrida says in an interview with Richard Kearney that writing “is considered subversive in so far as it creates a spatial and temporal distance between author and audience; writing

²⁶ “Living On,” trans. James Hulbert, in Harold Bloom, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 84.

²⁷ Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Syllabus 1999*, (Sydney: Board of Studies, 1999), p. 145.

presupposes the absence of the author and so we can never be sure exactly what is meant by a written text; it can have many different meanings as opposed to a single unifying one.”²⁸

Furthermore, in Derrida’s understanding of how a text signifies, (if indeed it does), what we read is not *words* in the sense of signs that are present, but *marks*. In what Derrida considers a materialist move, he sees what is on the page as present only insofar as it presents itself to us as “white on black.”²⁹ Words on the page, unable to signify apart from *différance*, context and reader, become the material ink on paper because they do not signify in and of themselves. If they did, then they would be *present*. However, in Derrida’s understanding of language, authentic reading understands that what we read is not substantial. In “The Double Session,” Derrida makes the point that writing is written, as it were, on absence: “What ruins the ‘pious capital letter’ of the title and works toward the decapitation or the ungluing of the text is the regular intervention of the blanks, the ordered return of the white spaces, the measure and order of dissemination, the law of spacing.”³⁰ What makes the black (or white on a chalkboard) possible is the “blanks.” Thus, presence inheres within absence. If writing is conscious of its dependence upon absence, then for Derrida it is more authentic. And since the author has departed – is *absent* – writing is more authentic than speaking, which still has the semblance of an author *present*.

Derrida’s vision is reminiscent of Sartre’s *Nausea*, where Antoine Roquentin discovers that his “history” cannot refer to past or present, and is only “noir sur blanc,” even as the ink disappears into the white page:

I stayed there, my pen raised, gazing at that dazzling paper: how hard and brilliant it was, how present it was. There was nothing in it that wasn’t present. The letters which I had just written on it were not dry yet and already they no longer belonged to me ... the letters didn’t shine anymore, they were dry. That too had disappeared; nothing remained of their ephemeral brilliance. I looked anxiously around me: the present, nothing but the present ... we find it so difficult to imagine nothingness. Now I knew. Things are entirely what they appear to be and behind them ... there is nothing.³¹

²⁸ In “Dialogue with Jacques Derrida”, Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 116.

²⁹ “The Double Session”, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 177.

³⁰ *ibid*, p. 178.

³¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick (England: Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 139-40.

In this vignette, Roquentin understands that his “history” is not history in the sense that his writing refers to events in the past and brings them to life. He begins to see writing as a material thing, as words on the page. This is because, as he understands it, “behind them ... there is nothing.” Therefore, it follows that the words, or marks, that Roquentin has written “no longer belonged to [him].” An author’s name affixed to the front of a text becomes just another mark on the page, rather than indicating who initiated a meaning. If a text is material, then an author disappears once the ink has dried on the page.

Metaphysics and the Other

To sum up, then, Derrida sees metaphysical presence and *différance* as deeply opposed. If Western metaphysics is interested only in what is present, *différance* exposes what is absent while simultaneously exposing the conditions for metaphysical presence. Deconstruction understands that language is built on *différance* and suggests that Western philosophical traditions have forgotten the conditions for their own posture. Implicit in this notion of *différance* is the notion of ‘the other.’ When Western metaphysics exerts itself and forgets its inherence within *différance*, it suffocates ‘the other.’ Therefore, the relationship between metaphysics and the other is not what Derrida calls a “vis-à-vis,”³² but an oppressive one in which ‘the other’ is forced to prop metaphysics up so that metaphysics can announce itself. In Derrida’s understanding, if a theory announces itself without reference to what it is not and thus pays no heed to the priority of *différance*, then it is a theory built on metaphysics and is therefore violent in its suppression of ‘the other.’ Since all writing in the Western philosophical (and literary) tradition is shot through with metaphysics,³³ deconstruction must find a way to position itself that avoids such routine suppression. It must pay attention to *absence*. Derrida, as I argued earlier, argues that

³² In the interview with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta, Derrida says that “we must traverse a phase of overturning. To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful co-existence of a vis-à-vis, but rather a violent hierarchy. On of the two terms governs the other ... or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. “Positions,” in *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 41.

³³ Derrida’s critique of Saussure is quite clear that all language is “not innocent” in that it is imbued with the metaphysical assumptions of Western culture. “Semiology and Grammatology: interview with Julia Kristeva,” in *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 19.

“deconstruction is always concerned with the ‘other’ of language,”³⁴ and that it is ‘the other’ that has made the Western philosophical position possible. In such a fashion, deconstruction places itself in an antagonistic position vis-à-vis traditional philosophy. Derrida goes on to say in the interview with Kearney that “the critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the ‘other’ and the ‘other’ of language ... [deconstruction] even asks whether our term ‘reference’ is entirely adequate for designating the ‘other.’ The other, which is beyond language and which summons language, is perhaps not a ‘referent’ in the normal sense which linguists have attached to this term.”³⁵ Derrida hopes that ‘the other’ can be his reference point, a reference that is not present but is *absent*, since Derrida’s ‘foundation’ for his theory is that *différance* is prior to everything else. A deconstructionist reading, therefore, will be more interested in what a text does not say than in what it does. It will assume that what it does say inheres in what it does not. It will also be keen to show how a text rests on an illusory foundation that announces itself as a foundation unconnected to any other foundation, thus “philosophical discourse, blinded, founders on these shoals and is hurled down these depthless depths to its ruin.”³⁶

The Ethics of Deconstruction

The revelation then, the enlightenment, is that there is no foundation. In a sense, a Derridean enlightenment is a non-enlightenment. As he says later on, “non-truth is ‘truth.’”³⁷ If this is indeed “true,” then any response to a text other than deconstructing a text courts metaphysics, since the critical effort that tries to say that a text means something singular and discrete is simply asserting text as presence and, as such, is “hurled down ... to its ruin.”³⁸ To talk about, and perhaps even to discuss, what a discrete text means is a flawed undertaking. Derrida hopes that his deconstruction in its construal of ‘the other’ and the plurality of truth means that he is beyond the illusory categories of metaphysical truth and presence. Meaning, in the traditional sense, has no place in this kind of thinking.

³⁴“Dialogue with Jacques Derrida”, Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 123.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 123-4

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 51.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 48.

When we consider the ethical posture of deconstruction and its epistemological search for ‘the other,’ reading takes on broader ethical implications. If ‘the other’ is oppressed in our reading, then it follows that Western metaphysics also silences the material ‘other’ in the flesh and blood world. John Caputo makes the political implications of deconstruction very clear when he applies deconstruction to theology:

(Deconstruction) suspects that deep truths are purchased by deep violence, by excluding what contaminates the system of truth, by repressing what disturbs its unity, by swatting away those who trouble the guardians of truth with bothersome questions ... In theology, as elsewhere, deconstruction looks to the marginalized and excommunicated figures, not the classics; the forbidden sayings, not the eternal truths engraved in stone; the suppressed writings, not the ones that sit on the high altar ... Deconstruction thinks that the deep unutterable common faith of the tradition is the result of the fact that the traces of dissenters have been erased by the guardians of truth while the historical tracings that gave rise to the tradition in the first place were erased and the illusion created that we have to do here with ageless essences ... Derrida is on the lookout for the police state that inevitably accompanies theories of infinite wealth.³⁹

The countless martyrs and “heretics” of the Christian church are like Nietzsche’s woman, who gave man his premise for being “in the first place.” In this theological account of deconstruction, the trajectory from interpreting writing as essence to actual bloodshed is made explicit. Where language is treated as unified and as “ageless essences,” a “police state” is imminent.

Conversely, it is suggested, because deconstruction views language as splintered, there is always room for ‘the other’ and thus “dissenters” live. Politically speaking, this is a sweeping move, one that equates deconstruction with the “marginalized and excommunicated figures.” Although Caputo claims that he is

³⁹ To refer to theology may perhaps seem irrelevant. There are several reasons for the inclusion of Caputo here. Firstly, theology deals with most of the same issues as English when it comes to deconstruction. Text is pivotal in both disciplines, being not the ancillary to the discipline but the focus and indeed, the *raison d’être*. There are similar issues with the canon. However, what fascinated me most is that theology explicitly discusses author as Author and Creator, which is precisely the kind of thinking that deconstruction wants to “smoke out,” to use Caputo’s phrase. In addition, and perhaps most pertinently for this paragraph, theology must deal with historical political positions of tradition and thus makes the political implications of deconstruction more clear than an example based in literary studies. John Caputo, “Gadamer’s Closet Essentialism: a Derridean critique,” *Dialogue and Deconstruction: the Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 264-5.

“suspicious ... of clean breaks,”⁴⁰ there *are* loose but discrete groupings in his account of what deconstruction stands for. There are the “guardians of truth” and “the marginalized and excommunicated figures”. This is also the case in Derrida’s *Spurs*. While woman “differentiates herself from herself” she is still not man and is therefore a loose but discrete grouping apart from *what is*.

Deconstruction as Arbiter

According to Caputo’s account, deconstruction positions itself as arbiter, both hermeneutically and politically, protecting the marginalised from tradition. In a similar way to the 1999 Stage 6 syllabus, deconstruction wants tradition to become explicit about its own inherence in power relations. The epistemology that guides the decisions that deconstruction makes is governed by a commitment to stand with the oppressed, rather than to the oppressor, and deconstruction names this oppressed ‘the other’ and the oppressor, alternately, “metaphysics,” “tradition,” “teleology” and so forth. The problem begins, however, with *finding* ‘the other.’ How do we know who this other is, in order to conduct this process of arbitration? The arbiter must have criteria by which to judge who shall be ‘the other’ and who shall not. If we choose according to our own understandings of who ‘the other’ might be, are we not positioning ourselves as a kind of judge? Ironically, in an attempt to protect the marginalised from the unified forces of tradition, the arbiter runs the risk of smothering the marginalised anew with a different but equally totalising power. As Denis Donogue warns, “it appears that Deconstruction is offering itself as a political party like any other, but as a political party unlike any other; unlike, because of its more radical stance in epistemology. If we vote for this party, we are to give it the power of adjudicating on true and false, right and wrong.”⁴¹

For example, in his analysis of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Derrida works to destabilise the assumption of traditional philosophy that would see a direct and essential causal link between a thing and its name. He works on Juliet’s speech on

⁴⁰ John Caputo, “Gadamer’s Closet Essentialism: a Derridean critique”, *Dialogue and Deconstruction: the Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 262.

⁴¹ “Theory, Theories and Principles,” *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, ed. Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p120.

the balcony,⁴² and particularly her ruminations on the relationship of signifier and signified:

O be some other name.
What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title.

Derrida works to show that, since Juliet speaks into the “half-light,” she is speaking to what she believes is Romeo’s absence. When she “calls” to Romeo, she calls the person apart from the name – she asks him to “doff thy name” – hoping that he might drop his familial name and live by the “common name ... the common law of love.”⁴³ In fact, David Schalkwyk shows how Derrida’s treatment of Juliet’s naming of Romeo is an exemplar of *différance* in general:

Unlike a whole tradition of philosophy which seeks to found language on presence, whether as the presence of the object in consciousness, the indubitable adequation of ‘this’ to an object of immediate acquaintance, or the presence of word to world in truth-conditional semantics, Derrida argues that the possibility for the name to function in the absence of its bearer is no mere accident, but a necessary possibility: one that any worthwhile theory of meaning must confront full-on. It is also no accident that *Romeo and Juliet*, which would be relegated by that tradition to the marginal, the secondary, the etiolated, the non-serious, should exemplify that necessity through the name of its (always-absent) hero.⁴⁴

Derrida adopts the position of arbiter when he suggests that both Juliet’s naming of Romeo and the play’s fictional (thus, provisional) quality undoes the claims of traditional philosophy. As Schalkwyk later says, “one of Derrida’s chief philosophical targets is empiricism,”⁴⁵ as he works to demonstrate the contingent nature of language and to suggest that literature is able to evidence this more truly than does philosophy. Derrida works on behalf of the philosophical ‘other’ of language, against traditional and analytic philosophy. As if to fortify this claim, Schalkwyk also cites Derrida’s “Racism’s Last Word”⁴⁶ as an example of the way in which Derrida’s philosophical ‘other’ has ramifications in the material world. As

⁴² William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Arden edition, ed. Brian Gibbons (New York: Methuen, 1980), p. 129.

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, “Aphorism Countertime,” trans. Nicholas Royle, in *Acts of Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 429.

⁴⁴ David Schalkwyk, “‘What’s in a Name?’: Derrida, Apartheid, and the Logic of the Proper Name,” *Language Sciences*, 22: 2, (April 2000), 187.

⁴⁵ *ibid*, 188.

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Racism’s Last Word,” *Critical Inquiry*, 12:1 (Autumn 1985), p. 290-299.

Derek Attridge writes in the Introduction to *Acts of Literature*, “there has always been an ethico-political dimension to Derrida’s writing, manifesting itself particularly with respect for *otherness*, be it textual, historical, cultural or personal.”⁴⁷ Thus, when Derrida suggests that Romeo’s name is constantly deferred, he writes with not just the textual in mind but with the material oppression of bodies in real time and space.

However, in a solipsistic move, deconstruction appoints itself as arbitrator for ‘the other,’ but the epistemological grounds for determining ‘the other’ remain private, since deconstruction remains nervous of dialogue since its notion of tradition is itself so totalising. Ironically, it is no longer “the guardians of truth” that have the power, but the arbitrator. And the arbitrator becomes the inadvertent “unassailable foundation.” In *Nietzsche’s Spurs*, then, Derrida works deconstructively to show that man is inherent in woman and thus to restore power to woman, but the ultimate authority for the positioning comes from the arche-reading itself – from deconstruction. As Denis Donoghue explains, if we accept deconstruction’s assumption of the role of arbiter, “we are to give Deconstruction the right of becoming metapolitics, metaethics, metalaw, indeed metadiscourse.”⁴⁸ Of course, the position of arbitrator for the other is inherently a problematic one, because it assumes panoramic neutrality.

Miroslav Volf, in his reflections on the self and the other, notes that this neutrality is a misnomer:

Neither the perpetrators nor victims are innocent, I have argued; in their own way, each is a transgressor. Could not the “third party” – either as onlookers or activists – be the best candidate for innocence? Possibly. But are they innocent? Do they stand on some neutral territory, suspended above the agonistic world of noninnocence, surveying the struggle and then getting involved as appropriate? Are they not, rather, immersed in that same larger world inhabited by the parties in conflict? They themselves are perpetrators and victims, often both at the same time, and they project their own struggles, interests, and expectations onto the conflict they either observe or try to resolve.⁴⁹

One of the dangers of attempting to arbitrate for ‘the other’ against metaphysics, tradition, and unity is that the arbitrator can become immune to disagreement. In an encounter with Hans-Georg Gadamer, Derrida positions himself as both arbitrator and

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 5.

⁴⁸ Denis Donoghue, “Theory, Theories and Principles,” *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, ed. Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 115.

⁴⁹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 83.

other to Gadamer, viewing Gadamer as representative of philosophy as metaphysics. But as Gadamer rightly states, in such a move, Derrida guarantees his own outcome and is thus, indeed, unassailable: “Is he really disappointed that we cannot understand each other? Indeed not, for in his view this would be a relapse into metaphysics. He will, in fact, be pleased, because he takes this *private experience* of disillusionment to confirm his own metaphysics. *But I cannot see here how he can be right only with respect to himself, be in agreement only with himself.*”⁵⁰ Because the grounds for establishing who represents tradition and who represents ‘the other’ are not declared, but remain “private,” Derrida’s early deconstruction runs the risk of adopting an authoritarian position. As arbitrator between two parties, and with no declared or debated epistemological grounds for arbitrating, Derrida can have no alternative but to “be in agreement only with himself.” Thus, solipsism inadvertently paves the way for authoritarianism.

In fact it is “private experience” that will prove itself dangerous and as the beginning of a metaphysics that is indeed unassailable. Miroslav Volf builds on Paul Ricoeur’s notion in his book *Oneself as Another*, suggesting that the only way to approach ‘the other’ is through “embrace;” which is Volf’s metaphor for dialogue. Ricoeur says of the self and ‘the other’ that “selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other.”⁵¹ This is reminiscent of Derrida’s notion of inherence of the self in ‘the other,’ except that Ricoeur’s notion of the self and the other does not adopt a position of arbitrator but sees itself as a participant in a dialogue. Ricoeur’s notion of the construction of the self is entirely social, while Derrida’s insistence on privacy⁵² – driven by his notion of metaphysics as utterly totalizing – means that ‘the other’ and the arbitrator remain discrete from tradition.

⁵⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Reply to Jacques Derrida,” *Dialogue and Deconstruction: the Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane Michelfelder and Richard Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 56-57, my italics.

⁵¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 3.

⁵² In his conversation with Hans-Georg Gadamer, Derrida refused to engage Gadamer in conversation, and therefore kept his epistemology and ethical grounds for his philosophy apart from the conversation. After Gadamer’s second response to Derrida, Derrida responds with a “non-response:” he does not explicitly engage with anything that Gadamer proposes. Therefore, his “insistence” is evidenced by his refusal to engage with Gadamer’s supposed metaphysics. *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: SUNY, 1989), pp. 21-71.

Derrida says of deconstruction that “it is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference. Deconstruction is always concerned with the ‘other of language.’”⁵³ ‘The other,’ as the genesis of language (*différance*) is the point of reference for deconstruction. It is not that deconstruction does not have an epistemological point of reference that I take issue with here. By taking ‘the other’ as a reference point, the arbitrator cannot bring the relief brought by the self. The position of arbitrator can never hope to approach the other because it fails to become incarnate in the *self*, which in turn means that the other is never brought into relief. We are both creatures *in relation to* and distinct from one another, and these two simultaneous conditions allow dialogue to progress. However, if otherness is the sole condition for reference, as Derrida suggests, then selfhood is placed in a subordinate position, and this simply replaces one hierarchy with another.

Moreover, if Ricoeur is correct, (and I believe he is) when he suggests that in deconstruction the self is never allowed to enter into dialogue *as the self* for fear of contamination with metaphysics, then the other is impossible to know, let alone defend. In *Nietzsche’s Spurs*, ironically it is the process of deconstruction that is brought into relief rather than woman, who is ‘the other’ in the text. I would like to suggest that metaphysics as self, as tradition, as oppressor of ‘the other’ can only be “assailed” if one’s metaphysics are *risked in dialogue*.

The Politics of Tradition: Deconstruction as neo-metaphysics

When Derrida positions tradition as a force that snuffs out the marginalised “Thou,” he positions tradition as both unified and totalitarian. Such a position ironically fails to take into account the sheer variety of opinions and people *within* tradition, but it also does not acknowledge the arbitrator’s dependency on tradition and the impossibility of approaching ‘the other’ except through tradition. As Derrida’s later work and his interviews suggest – but the syllabus has failed to see – deconstruction is in fact shaped and enabled by a tradition. In an interview with Gary Olson in 1990, Derrida says that “there’s no deconstruction without the memory of the tradition” and perhaps more forcefully, “you have to understand according to the most traditional norms what an author meant to say ... I don’t start with disorder; I start with the

⁵³ Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers: the phenomenological heritage: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Lévinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) p. 123.

tradition. If you're not trained in the tradition, then deconstruction means nothing. It's simply nothing."⁵⁴ A theory of deconstruction that does not acknowledge tradition in its epistemology and its practice becomes neo-metaphysical, since it becomes its own reference point. I would go further than Derrida and suggest that, beyond being "nothing," this kind of deconstructive practice ironically snuffs out 'the other' that it so seeks to protect, since what is left behind is not the text nor the reader, but the imprint of deconstruction.

To place a hermeneutical position prior to a text, as the syllabus encourages students to do, mimics the kind of deconstruction that forgets its reflexive posture, its answering back to tradition. Ironically, this kind of severance from tradition does not enable one to see "the Thou," but disables our capacity to be surprised by what we did not expect. Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests just such a thing and defends his view of tradition⁵⁵ as useful and inescapable in his exchanges with Jurgen Habermas – who, like Derrida's early deconstruction, takes a radically sceptical view of tradition.⁵⁶ Gadamer has the tendency, like Derrida, to treat tradition as monolith, and this is a weakness in his hermeneutics.⁵⁷ I would level the same charge at Gadamer as I would at Derrida; that tradition is not a singular, predictable body of work. Where they differ is that Derrida wants to move away from, and position himself apart from tradition, while Gadamer sees this as impossible. He contends that to assume that one can move outside tradition and claim objectivity in arbitration fails to recognise one's own debt to and embeddedness in tradition itself. He says:

My thesis is – and I think it is the necessary consequence of recognizing the operativeness of history in our conditionedness and finitude – that the thing which hermeneutics teaches us is to see through the dogmatism of asserting an opposition and separation between the ongoing, natural "tradition" and the reflective appropriation of it. For behind this assertion stands a dogmatic objectivism that distorts the very concept of hermeneutical reflection itself. In this objectivism the understander is seen – even in the so-called sciences of understanding like history – not in relationship to the hermeneutical situation and the constant operativeness

⁵⁴ Gary Olson, "Jacques Derrida on Rhetoric and Composition: a conversation," *Jac*, 10.1, (1990), pp. 11 – 12. <http://jac.gsu.edu/jac/10/Articles/1.htm>, accessed 21.5.02

⁵⁶ Habermas's response to Gadamer's hermeneutic can be found in Albrecht Wellmer, *Critical Theory of Society*, trans. Joel Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1971) pp. 31-51.

⁵⁷ Paul Riceour, "Ethics and Culture: Gadamer and Habermas in Dialogue," *Philosophy Today*, 17 (1973), 153-65.

of history in his own consciousness, but in such a way as to imply that his own understanding does not enter into the event.⁵⁸

To move beyond tradition (and, by inference, metaphysics) is impossible if we acknowledge that we are formed within history and language, which is the tapestry of tradition. If one tries to remove oneself from tradition, on the radically sceptical assumption that tradition *is all bad*, then it becomes impossible to see oneself clearly, let alone ‘the other.’ Gadamer makes the point, which I shall expand later on,⁵⁹ that prejudice (or tradition,) far from being disabling, enables us to see:

That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither ‘neutrality’ with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. *The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias*, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings.⁶⁰

In order to see “alterity,” one must first acknowledge “the foregrounding and appropriations of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices.” The idea of neutrality, as Gadamer convincingly argues in *Truth and Method*, is a Cartesian assumption that “will itself prove to be a prejudice.”⁶¹ It attempts a-historical knowing that Gadamer shows to be impossible. In a bizarre reversal, radical scepticism of tradition runs the risk of becoming more tyrannical than the tradition it seeks to criticise, since its withdrawal from tradition means that it is incapable of encountering either itself or ‘the other’ and is thus only in contact with its own dogma. It can become hyper-rationalist in its dealings with text, just as scientific, Cartesian thinking becomes rationalist in its quest to be untainted by imagination and sensibility. In responding more directly to Habermas’ radical scepticism of tradition, Gadamer says:

Here indeed is operating a prejudice that we can see is pure dogmatism, for reflection is not always and unavoidably a step towards dissolving prior convictions. Authority is not *always* wrong ... Authority is by [Habermas’] definition a dogmatic power. I cannot accept the assertion that reason and authority are abstract antitheses, as the emancipatory Enlightenment did. Rather, I assert that they stand in a basically ambivalent relation, a relation I think should be explored rather than casually accepting the antithesis as a ‘fundamental conviction’ ... Now

⁵⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection”, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 28.

⁵⁹ I deal extensively with Gadamer’s hermeneutics in Chapter 7.

⁶⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 269, (my italics).

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 276.

the mere outer appearance of obedience rendered to authority can never show why or whether the authority is legitimate.⁶²

Gadamer suggests that to demonise authority or tradition a priori misunderstands the relationship between authority and those who “obey,” even if there were such a clean distinction. Because tradition is amorphous and is less the stable, unified affair that deconstruction makes it out to be, to claim irrevocably that tradition will *always* dominate and result in bloodshed runs the risk of turning into a dogma itself.

As M.H. Abrams says, “I believe [Derrida’s] conclusions are right – in fact, they are infallibly right, and that’s where the trouble lies.”⁶³ It also runs the risk of severing itself from a tradition or particular authority that is “legitimate,” as Terry Eagleton suggests in his general critique of postmodernism:

Some radical postmodernism tends to be pluralistic about political opposition but monistic about the system which it confronts ... its politics are thus a classic instance of the binary thinking it otherwise sees fit to chide. It takes this simplistic view of the dominant power partly because, as we have seen, it flirts with the naïve libertarian belief that power, system, law, consensus and normativity are themselves unequivocally negative ... but power and authority are of course excellent things; it all depends on who has them in what circumstances and for which purposes. The power to undo wretchedness is to be celebrated rather than derided, and the power to undo it absolutely is absolutely to be celebrated. Normativity is to be condemned if it means sexual strait-jacketing, but defended if it means, say, the routine agreement by which workers have a right to withdraw their labour in certain situations.⁶⁴

Besides being nervous about what it calls metaphysics, deconstruction is nervous about unified stories, as John Caputo takes pains to point out, and it is therefore nervous about any claim to truth other than the claim that *différance* precedes anything else. In both *After Theory* and *Illusions of Postmodernism*, Eagleton shows that postmodernism’s fear of the unified story means that it cannot possibly hope to have a basis from which to judge any regime, since it cannot have a unified ethics to describe the fulfilled human being.⁶⁵ As Derrida says, deconstruction works to splinter and disseminate, rather than to work toward a unified whole. Derrida sees the unified whole as the unequivocal object of metaphysics, which is in turn the oppressor

⁶² Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 32-33.

⁶³ M.H. Abrams, “The Deconstructive Angel”, *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Fischer (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989), p. 241.

⁶⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) p. 56.

⁶⁵ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 190.

of untold stories. A priori, deconstruction disqualifies itself from a position where it can engage with tradition on the terms of its own unified ethics, since anything unified is suspect before we even begin. Terry Eagleton takes issue with the postmodern tendency to vilify anything stable or unified as necessarily malevolent, claiming that this assumption fails to take into account singular situations and the common human condition.⁶⁶ The postmodern tendency to set itself apart from what is apparently stable, and consequently to see itself as idealist rather than materialist, becomes a-political rather than politically efficacious.

Derrida's early deconstruction remains idealist in its rejection of essentials and becomes the mirror image of Cartesian philosophy in its boundedness to the ideal. Perhaps in deconstructing the metaphysical man, Derrida welcomes the metaphysical woman. Eagleton questions the assumption that there is nothing common to human experience, suggesting that death, suffering, and culture unequivocally unite all humankind.⁶⁷ In posing these things as true across all human experience, Eagleton suggests that there are elements of human experience that are stable. Furthermore, Eagleton maintains that what is stable is not necessarily evil, and what is unstable is not necessarily virtuous. In line with Gadamer's objection to Habermas's simplistic understanding of tradition, Eagleton maintains that what is stable is in fact arbitrary:

Change is not desirable in itself, whatever postmodern advocates of perpetual plasticity may consider. Nor is it undesirable in itself ... there are many things, from plague to patriarchy, which cannot vanish quickly enough. There are also a good many aspects of our condition which we cannot in fact change, without our needing to feel especially dispirited about it. That human beings are always and everywhere social animals is an unchanging fact, but scarcely a tragic one. Much permanence is to be celebrated.⁶⁸

The claim that tradition, that the unified story, or that stability are somehow metaphysical and therefore malevolent fails to take into account instances where this is not the case. To claim that flux is a freer, more virtuous path is just the flip side of the Cartesian coin in its idealist dogmatics. In an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, a Year 12 student in 2001 showed how she viewed change as necessarily and a priori virtuous in an article entitled "Guinea pigs thriving on a rich diet of change." She says that "we don't need to cling to the safe, mediocre ways of the past. To

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 192-193.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 163-4.

become a Knowledge nation we must move with the times and have a little faith in the new HSC courses. We are still being taught the three R's but we are also learning to engage critically, analytically and imaginatively with a world that is getting smaller every day."⁶⁹ Her view on change as essentially good reflects the uncritical position that Eagleton takes issue with; she uncritically assumes that the past is essentially "mediocre" and that the future is essentially progressive. Far from helping students to engage "critically," such a position means that one need never think about the particular quandaries we are presented with; like the automatons in Huxley's *Brave New World*, we are only allowed think that past is bad, future is good.

Deconstruction in the classroom: rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic?

Insofar as deconstruction sets out explicitly to read in terms of 'the other,' it has proved extremely fertile ground for teachers that are keen to inculcate a sense of ethical responsibility in their students.⁷⁰ Moreover, because early deconstruction positions itself as completely resistant to tradition, those teachers (and I include myself as one of these teachers) who want their students to question their own assumptions and the assumptions of those who have authority over them have found in deconstruction a rich theoretical resource from which to re-draw pedagogical practice in the classroom. In an article on poststructuralism in the classroom that draws explicitly on Derrida's deconstruction, Ray Misson suggests that "at the very least, we need to add a theory of how people come to resist certain discourses, and we certainly need to insist on the extraordinary multiplicity of subject positions possible for any person."⁷¹

Misson suggests that deconstruction provides the tools with which to create a student who is sensitive to others and not easily duped by power structures. Jack Thomson is even more explicit about the rationale for including deconstruction in the theoretical make-up of curriculum: "to argue that a close reading of eighteenth century poems of William Cowper and James Thomson for aesthetic purposes is more valuable and useful for students than a deconstructive analysis of advertisements for a

⁶⁹ Monique McDonald, "Guinea pigs thriving on a rich diet of change," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 July 2001.

⁷⁰ For an example, see Sharon Crowley, *A Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction*, NCTE Teacher's Introduction Series (Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989).

⁷¹ Ray Misson, "Poststructuralism," *Reviewing English in the 21st Century*, ed. Wayne Sawyer and Eva Gold (Melbourne: Phoenix Education, 2004), p. 99.

McDonald's breakfast is the kind of nonsense we get from those with a vested interest in socialising students in compliance with prevailing consumerist patterns of thought."⁷² Unlike Derrida's close engagement with texts that he deconstructs, Thomson here caricatures those who undertake "close reading," making broad generalisations that inevitably become a straw man. Like Kevin Donnelly's 'new-age class warrior'⁷³ and Christopher Koch's "barbaric tide,"⁷⁴ Thomson does not engage with a particular opponent, thereby refusing the challenge of 'the other.' Ironically, Thomson's argument is presumably—like Derrida's—to position education as sensitive to 'the other,' but his caricature here has enlisted 'the other' to serve the interests of the self.

That aside, while Thomson does not acknowledge deconstruction's tendency to work with texts that are canonical, he does pick up on Derrida's hermeneutical habit of exposing a power structure in a deconstructive reading. The 1999 Stage 6 syllabus is no exception in its explicit wish to create students sensitive to cultural diversity and to question power structures that would seek to homogenise this diversity, it has drawn on some of the assumptions that Derrida makes about language and text and on the ethical posture that deconstruction adopts. In so doing, the syllabus has adopted some of the problems that ironically that plague deconstructionist practice.

Derrida suggests that deconstruction can provide a student both with a sense of the constructedness of language and the ability to recognise the embedded ideology of particular readings. He suggests that deconstruction can act as an emancipatory agent to diversify a student's reading habits:

[Deconstruction] does ... contribute something to literature. It does, of course, contribute epistemological appreciation of texts by *exposing* the philosophical and theoretical presuppositions that are at work in every critical methodology, be it Formalism, New Criticism, Socialist Realism or a historical critique. Deconstruction asks why we read a literary text in this particular manner rather than another. It shows, for example, that New Criticism is not the way of reading texts, however enshrined it may be in certain university institutions, but only one way among others. Thus deconstruction can also serve to question the presumption of certain

⁷² Jack Thomson, "Post-Dartmouth developments in English teaching in Australia," *Reviewing English in the 21st Century*, ed. Wayne Sawyer and Eva Gold (Melbourne: Phoenix Education, 2004), p. 15.

⁷³ Linda Doherty, "Government staffer says new-age warriors waging culture wars in class," *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 3 2004.

⁷⁴ Miranda Devine, "A toxic twist in the learning curve," *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 4 2005.

university and cultural institutions to act as the sole or privileged guardians and transmitters of meaning. In short, deconstruction not only *teaches* us to read literature more thoroughly by attending to it as language, as the production of meaning through *différance* and dissemination, through a complex play of signifying traces; it also enables us to *interrogate* the covert philosophical and political presuppositions of institutionalised critical methods which generally govern our reading of a text. There is in deconstruction something which challenges every teaching institution.⁷⁵

Derrida describes deconstruction as a benevolent, (anti)-didactic force that undoes “presuppositions,” and has an interrogative function. In the same way that Derrida’s deconstruction of Nietzsche shows how metaphysics upheld “man” over “woman” despite the fact that he inheres in woman, Derrida sees deconstruction as an intervention in an abusive relationship, where certain kinds of reading go unexamined in their presuppositions, and where particular ways of seeing a text are “enshrined” over and above other ways of seeing a particular text. Deconstruction exposes these presuppositions, thus allowing us to see the metaphysical foundations of each methodology.

As Derrida says, this has a fundamental impact on the epistemology of teaching English, forcing us to consider how a particular methodology asks us to understand a text. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, Derrida sees deconstruction as a way to introduce a suspicion of teaching institutions that work with these methodologies: “deconstruction can also serve to question the presumption of certain university and cultural institutions to act as the sole or privileged guardians and transmitters of meaning.” If they are “guardians,” then they are keeping something from their students and are maintaining a hierarchical control over their students and over the texts that they teach just as Nietzsche’s man held control over the woman; that is, until deconstruction *intervenes*.

Derrida suggests that deconstruction forces metaphysics to make explicit what was forgotten in the assertion of presence, forcing tradition to acknowledge its theoretical position. Firstly, it suggests that *différance* operates as the primary movement within language, asking the student to acknowledge the concomitant undecidability of literature. He argues that reading will inevitably expose what Derrida calls the “aporia” or abyss inherent within the text. Derrida calls aporia a

⁷⁵ Richard Kearney, “Interview with Jacques Derrida,” *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 124-5, my italics.

“disseminal abyss,”⁷⁶ suggesting that meaning will always become a kind of non-meaning. Taken from the Greek word *abyssos*, from a ‘without’ and *byssos* ‘depth,’ the abyss (or aporia) suggests that the interpretation of text will always reach an impasse in understanding a discrete meaning, because meaning is constantly on the move.⁷⁷ There will never be a resting place, and thus interpretation moves into an “abyss.” The text itself becomes radically unstable, offering the reader freedom in interpretation.

Ultimately, however, Derrida’s early deconstruction maintains stability *within deconstruction* that establishes authority over the reader and over the text. As M.H. Abrams suggests, deconstruction will always expose what deconstruction believes to be true; that texts arrive at aporia and that *différance* will always operate as the arche-truth of language; “deconstructive reading [is] not merely goal-oriented, but single goal oriented. The critic knows before he begins to read what, by deep linguistic necessity, what he is going to find – that is, an aporia.”⁷⁸ Despite the variety of texts that deconstruction works with, *différance* and aporia will continue to evidence themselves as normatively true as a result of an ironically invariable deconstructive reading. In this way, deconstruction undercuts its own goal of liberating readers and texts into radical otherness. The syllabus, in its insistence on the explicit acknowledgement of a theoretical position within each module, follows deconstruction and crafts for itself similar problems in which texts become material to be worked upon, rather than radically ‘other’ in and of themselves.

M.H. Abrams throws further light on this particular quandary when he questions the practicality of deconstruction in the classroom. He observes that, for the deconstructive reading to take place, a student must first read traditionally in order to facilitate this second reading. In order to deconstruct a text, one must construe the text in some way before one can work against this to bring on the “earthquake” of deconstruction. Tzvetan Todorov echoes Abrams’s sentiment here: “deconstruction is a ‘dogmatic skepticism,’ ... because it decides in advance what each text means – namely, nothing. Deconstructive readings are extremely monotonous, since the result is ‘always already’ known, and since only the means used to reach that result are

⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” in *Acts of Literature*, trans. Avital Ronell, ed. Derek Attridge (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 250.

⁷⁷ Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 92.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p330.

subject to variation.”⁷⁹ The primary task, of course, is the deconstructive task, just as the primary task set out by the 1999 Stage 6 syllabus is the explication of the theoretical position already articulated by the syllabus.⁸⁰ The first reading serves the second, or to be more precise, the text serves deconstruction.

In his essay “Construing and Deconstructing,”⁸¹ M.H. Abrams goes to some length to outline what deconstruction asks the critic to do. He describes the way in which J. Hillis Miller deconstructs Wordsworth’s “A Slumber” and notes that Miller can only achieve the latter by construing what Wordsworth may have meant in the first place. As he notes, a deconstructive reading is only strange “by tacit reference to the meanings of the text as already construed.”⁸² Therefore, English teachers will have to teach two independent sets of skills. They will have to teach their students the traditional set of skills to respond to the poem and they will have to teach their students how to deconstruct a poem *so as to show that the first reading was shot through with metaphysics*. In fact, Abrams notes that Miller actually suggests that institutions that teach literature explicitly take on this double-handed gesture in their teaching; “both [readings] can and should be incorporated into college and university curricula.”⁸³ Abrams criticises both Miller and deconstruction at this juncture:

And how are we to introduce Derrida’s theory and practice of deconstructing texts to novices at the same time that we are trying to teach them to write texts that will say, precisely and accurately, what they mean, and to construe, precisely and accurately, the texts that they read? ... I find it difficult to imagine a population of teachers of composition and reading who are so philosophically adept and pedagogically deft that they will be able to keep novices from converting this delicate equilibristic art into a set of crude dogmas; or from replacing an esteem for the positive powers of language by an inveterate suspicion of the perfidy of language.⁸⁴

Even apart from the practical implications of teaching deconstruction in the secondary classroom – and I suggested in Chapter 2 that I would not take on the developmental

⁷⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, “Traveling Through American Criticism,” *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, ed. Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 55.

⁸⁰ For example, the texts in Module A, *Bladerunner* and *Brave New World*, are there to demonstrate that context affects an author.

⁸¹ M.H. Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Fischer (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989), pp. 229-332.

⁸² M.H. Abrams, “Construing and Deconstructing”, *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Fischer (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989), p. 330.

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 329.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

difficulties of such a task – this type of reading privileges one reading over the other and subjects the individuality of each text to a conclusion that remains the same: aporia and *différance*. So, what a student ultimately learns is not heterogeneity, but the strong message as to which reading is the best, the most correct, the arche-reading. What they learn, in short, is that deconstruction is superior to any other way of approaching a text. Thus, a student does not approach texts as particular, but deconstruction as general theory. Ironically, this presents the student with a fairly monolithic model of reading.

The second problem that arises from privileging deconstructive reading habits in the classroom is that students become dissociated from tradition and are therefore unable to develop a sense of self with which to approach ‘the other.’ I have suggested that *interaction* with tradition (as opposed to *reaction*) is important because it brings the other into relief. The 1999 Stage 6 syllabus wants students to develop into compassionate and democratic citizens through the critical reading of texts, insisting that our students adopt a sceptical view of tradition. However, in doing so, the syllabus makes sure that students never come into contact with the traditional other, since “traditional” ways of reading texts are omitted from the syllabus. As I made clear in Chapter Two, an Advanced student does not read a text without an overarching rubric governing the direction of her reading. This means that, ironically, the potential for awareness of ‘the other’ is severely limited because students will not be able to see where compassion needs to be directed or to have epistemological grounds for developing a sense of justice. As Martin Buber notes, only through the self does “the Thou” come into view, just as the self comes into view through the encounter: “the concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter.”⁸⁵ Ironically, a student’s potential to see “diversity” becomes undermined if they are consistently required to homogenise texts in line with invariable theoretical positions.

Furthermore, the possibility of students becoming effectively political and engaging in a democracy is also hamstrung, since deconstruction demands that students maintain a splintered view of what it is to be human. As Eagleton suggests,

⁸⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 62.

an uncritical commitment to instability means becoming a-political. If we accept that any common ground for the human condition is somehow tied to Western metaphysics, then the grounds for standing against malevolent, stable forces like poverty and injustice are indiscriminately swept away, and a student's ability to argue against these forces is concomitantly splintered. Deconstruction invariably insists on the variability of the human condition, but in so doing disallows a student to appeal to any epistemological grounds for ethical engagement with texts and thence to engage politically with the world. To encourage students to read metaphysics as the dominant force in a text ironically undermines their capacity to make connections with characters or authors that would otherwise have engaged them emotionally, then ethically, then politically. Maya Angelou describes an early encounter with Shakespeare that enabled her to articulate the specific suffering of a black woman, through the articulation of the suffering of human beings in Sonnet 29: "Of course, he wrote it for me: that is the condition of the black woman. Of course, he was a black woman. I understand that. Nobody else understands it, but I know William Shakespeare was a black woman. That is the role of art in life."⁸⁶ What Angelou touches on here is the way her engagement with the text vivified her sense of suffering and the injustice of this suffering, and this enabled her to protest against the particular plight of a black woman. In Angelou's case, the text drew theory into focus, rather than text acting as an exemplar for an inflexible theory.

If reading a text deconstructively means always to arrive at aporia, whether those texts be Gwen Harwood's "The Violets" or the Wachowski Brothers *The Matrix*, then the text is always secondary to theory in a new hierarchy. Metaphysics is the bedrock of rote learning, of course, since if a thing is a thing and thus unchanging, then we can rote learn it. If it is *present*, then we can quantify it. There is in deconstruction an unchanging pattern of reading that suggests that there is a new canon, and a new set of skills to be learnt with this alternative theory, all of which is indicative of a new metaphysics replacing the old. As Margaret Lamond, one of my colleagues, put it so eloquently, "we're rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic."

⁸⁶ Maya Angelou, "Journey to the Heartland," Transcription of address delivered at the National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies Convention, 1985. Quoted in Lynne V. Cheney, *Humanities in America: A Report to the President, the Congress, and the American People* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Humanities), p. 15.

The net result of metaphysics is the end of dialogue and, as I have argued, some deconstructive practice works against dialogue when it will not offer *différance* up for review. Derrida's refusal to debate with Gadamer has been read by deconstructionists as a refusal to enter into a tainted philosophical discourse. In his essay "Gadamer's Closet Essentialism," John Caputo accuses Gadamer of trusting tradition too much and therefore colluding with the metaphysical forces that pave the way for oppression.⁸⁷ Dialogue, as Caputo sees it, rests on metaphysical foundations and so Derrida is right in refusing to "play" in conversation. However, what Caputo does not recognise is the danger of drawing one's prejudices into the "closet," so to speak. One's ideas never become provisional because they are never challenged by the process of dialogue, something that is made very clear in the question posed to the Year 12 students of 2001 studying the module "Postmodernism." When they were asked to write a speech, (the most didactic of the text types set for the HSC), they were locked into the prejudice that postmodernism is indeed an "adventure," so much so that they must go out and collect converts: "*Persuade them* to choose the Postmodern Elective." The chance to discuss, to question or to enter into dialogue with the assumptions of postmodernism (and deconstruction) is not there: tradition is by definition metaphysical and postmodernism offers freedom. In its a priorism and radically unforgiving hermeneutics of suspicion, deconstruction marks out the territory of a new metaphysics that is ironically as hyper rationalist as the Cartesian metaphysics it seeks to critique. The 1999 Stage 6 syllabus follows suit in its insistence on the priority of deconstruction over any particular text, reader or author. A teacher may only initiate conversations in the classroom *within the confines of the assumptions that deconstruction makes*. Far from liberating a student into being able to appreciate a variety of readings and into resisting power structures, this kind of reading habit demands acquiescence in a more powerful syllabus within our high school system. Derrida himself says that good teaching always responds to the particularity of different groups of people:

What we have to do, perhaps ... is to let each teacher have maximum freedom for his or her idiom in teaching, again, to the situation. And the situation depends on the audience and the teacher, and the situation is

⁸⁷ John Caputo, "Gadamer's Closet Essentialism: a Derridean critique," *Dialogue and Deconstruction: the Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

different in New York and Florida, even in some sections in New York and other sections. You have to adjust your teaching according to the situation.⁸⁸

In order to have maximum freedom to respond to the enormous variety of students in the classroom we need to be able to respond flexibly to different ways of reading, different avenues of interest, and different responses to particular and distinct texts. If the syllabus requires that we practice the kind of deconstruction that responds the same way to each of those different students' responses to these different texts, then it is a deconstruction that belies Derrida's own insistence on 'the other' and his articulation of good teaching practice. Instead, I would ask that deconstruction provide me with this maximum freedom:

Deconstruction should provoke not only a questioning of the authority ... Now, this new way is not simply a new model; deconstruction doesn't provide a new model. But once you have analysed and questioned and destabilised the authority of the old models, you have to invent each time new forms according to the situation, the pragmatic conditions of the situation, the audience, your own purpose, your own motivation to invent new forms ... In each situation you have to write and speak differently. Teachers should not impose a rigid scheme in any situation.⁸⁹

It is this kind of deconstructive practice that teaching needs.

⁸⁸ Gary Olson, "Jacques Derrida on Rhetoric and Composition: a conversation," *Jac*, 10.1, (1990), 11 – 12. <http://jac.gsu.edu/jac/10/Articles/1.htm>, accessed 21.5.02

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

Chapter Four:

Cultural Materialism: Theory, Context, and Meaning

All life therefore comes back to the questions of our speech, the medium through which we communicate with each other; for all life comes back to the question of our relations with one another.¹

Henry James, *The Question of Our Speech*

But once the Idea has entered into other minds, it will tend to reincarnate itself there with ever-increasing Energy and ever-increasing power. It may for some time incarnate itself only in more words, more books, more speeches; but the day comes when it incarnates itself in actions, and this is its day of judgment.²

Dorothy Sayers

¹ Quoted in Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: the Quest for Effective Communication* (Massachusetts USA, Oxford UK, Victoria Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 85.

² *The Mind of the Maker* (USA: HarperCollins, 1987), p. 111.

While the 1999 Stage 6 syllabus shares influences, it is cultural materialism and Marxist literary theory that are the driving forces behind its theoretical direction. My central aim in this chapter is to ask whether my classroom experience derives from a misapplication of cultural materialist theory, or from cultural materialism itself. I also ask the related question of whether or not there is anything intrinsic to the study of Cultural materialism that is essentially liberating. As in the previous chapter, I approach Cultural Studies in their theoretical implications, holding them up to my experiences in the classroom. My analysis, in other words, is both theoretical and materialist in its approach. I deal with the theoretical implications of cultural materialism and its assumptions, while at the same time reflecting on how these theories have manifested themselves in the classroom, in the everyday process of teaching teenagers and of creating lessons.

In “The German Ideology,” Marx details what he sees as a materialist as opposed to an idealist approach:

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process.³

As Marx says, “we set out from real, active men ... on the basis of their life-process.” And from here, I will attempt to reflect back on the theories that created the syllabus.

Marxist beginnings

Marxist literary theory demands that literary theorists acknowledge the politics of their analysis of texts. As Peter Washington says, theory must become political for moral reasons: “Marxism restores the social and cultural functions of criticism but only by revealing them as ultimately political. The critic as decoder (structuralism) and the critic as interpreter (deconstruction) are superseded by the critic as activist.”⁴ This is not to say that theorising before or concurrent with Marxist literary theory was not investigating morality. Derrida, as we have seen, reads philosophically for moral

³ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 656.

⁴ Peter Washington, *Fraud: Literary Theory and the End of English*, (Great Britain: Fontana Press, 1989), p. 116.

(if not political) resistance to what he sees as dominant, oppressive forces. Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis both theorise aesthetically for explicit moral purposes, in open resistance to the dehumanising effects of industrialisation. However, what appears different about Marxist literary theory is that it requires a political declaration from the theorist within the framework of Marxism's vision of the domination and oppression practiced by the bourgeoisie. It requires a political commitment from the theorist on the grounds that all reading is political. As Rivkin and Ryan point out, "a purely 'literary' examination of the works in terms of narrative irony or rhetorical eloquence would seem to ask a great deal of readers. They have to ignore the palpable political issues these works address in order for literary form to be the main topic of critical conversation."⁵

For Marxist literary theory and cultural materialism, to ignore the political climate in which an author writes, or to ignore the political climate in which a critic reads, are both political acts by default. To refuse to read politically is to accept the dominant ideology and, in doing this, a critic declares herself to be a political ally to the bourgeoisie. In her book *Critical Practice*, Catherine Belsey says of the process of ideology and reading that "there is no practice without theory, however much that theory is suppressed, unformulated or perceived as 'obvious.' What we do when we read, however 'natural' it seems, presupposes a whole theoretical discourse, even if unspoken, about language and about meaning, about relationships between meaning and the world, meaning and people and finally about people themselves and their place in the world."⁶ Therefore, if we try to read a text with our common sense – to decipher what texts may mean – we ultimately capitulate to the ruling classes, because it is the ruling classes that determine what common sense is. The practice of questioning our ideology and that of the text or author is one way to challenge this state of affairs. As a cultural materialist, Belsey offers this interrogatory reading as an antidote to bourgeois domination.

Ideology is the arch-system of Marxist thinking and is crucial to its trenchant critique of literary theory. Usually conceived as false consciousness, ideology is the context in which a subject moves and has her being. What a reader might take for common sense, therefore, is actually ideology, which is not a set of rigid, essential

⁵ Rivkin and Ryan, "Introduction: Starting with Zero," *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Great Britain: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 643.

⁶ Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (New Accents, London and New York: Methuen, 1980), p. 4.

truths but a construction. As Belsey says, it is “a way of thinking, speaking, experiencing.”⁷ Belsey takes her concept of ideology from Louis Althusser, specifically his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” Althusser builds on Marx’s notion of false consciousness to suggest that practice and institution can create the illusion of a subject’s relationship to the world. That is, he discusses the ways in which institution can determine the way in which a subject interacts with his material existence:

We commonly call religious ideology, ethical ideology, legal ideology, political ideology etc., so many “world outlooks.” Of course, assuming that we do not live one of these ideologies as the truth (e.g. “believe” in God, Duty, Justice etc ...), we admit that the ideology we are discussing from a critical point of view, examining it as the ethnologist examines the myths of a “primitive society,” that these “world outlooks” are largely imaginary, i.e. do not “correspond to reality.”⁸

If we are “critical,” then ideology’s illusions are dispelled and we are able to rise above “primitive society” to a more enlightened position.

The ideology of ideologies is an arche-system anterior to the ideologies themselves. For Marxism, there is a truth which is the space outside of these ruling ideologies; above or beyond belief. As Peter Washington notes, “this leaves the critic in the peculiar situation of knowing that he does not know.”⁹ Althusser’s comments on ideology and a belief in religion, ethics or justice suggests that willingly to immerse oneself in such ideal systems of thought is “primitive” because it is “imaginary” and not critical. In suggesting that this immersion is “imaginary,” in other words, Althusser suggests that there is a space that *is not imaginary*, a truth to be found once we accept the arche-system of ideologies *as true*, the ultimate condition of our knowing.

For Althusser, ideology is a way of keeping the working masses where they are, by propagating the illusion of relations between people and their material existence. It is not an innocent or neutral process, but is generated by “a small number of cynical men who base their domination and exploitation of the ‘people’ on a falsified representation of the world which they have imagined in order to enslave

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Great Britain: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 693.

⁹ Peter Washington, *Fraud: Literary Theory and the End of English* (Great Britain: Fontana Press, 1989), p. 124.

other minds by dominating their imagination.”¹⁰ They do this, according to Althusser, through social institution. Ideology becomes material and concrete through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA’s) that determine the subject to the extent that the subject confuses ideology with the truth. Indeed, she can see nothing else in order to make an alternative judgement, and repetition becomes “common sense,” as Belsey also points out.¹¹ Once this process has taken place, material domination is complete. Althusser describes this:

But the vast majority of (good) subjects work all right “all by themselves,” i.e. by ideology (whose concrete forms are realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses [ISA’s]). They are inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the ISAs. They “recognize” the existing state of affairs (*das Bestehende*), that “it really is true that it is so and not otherwise,” and that they must be obedient to God, to their conscience, to the priest, to de Gaulle, to the boss, to the engineer, that thou shalt “love thy neighbour as thyself,” etc. Their concrete, material behaviour is simply the inscription in life of the admirable words of the prayer: “Amen – *so be it.*”¹²

This is a most trenchant critique of the operation of ideology: the subject actually collaborates to secure his or her own prison within ideology. Social institutions both work to propagate ideology and to provide a space for the subject to enact ideology materially. According to Althusser’s thinking, therefore, the process is watertight. Once immured within the ISA, the subject will defend ideology as true.

Ironically, my critique of the Stage 6 1999 syllabus rests largely on the observation that students are framed within the literary theory prescribed by the Board of Studies, enforced by the exam at the end of their thirteen years at school. They operate within the parameters of a type of ISA; within the ideology that ideology is *necessarily* a disabling construct, preventing a reader from reading well (or living well). Althusser’s critique of ideology can help us identify what is problematic with the 1999 syllabus.

That Althusser’s description of the workings of ideology as primarily concerned with the material existence of the working masses or the subject is the essence of cultural materialism. Where New Criticism may have approached a text

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 694.

¹¹ Belsey writes that “common sense appears obvious because it is inscribed in the language we speak ... it is language which offers the possibility of constructing a world of individuals and things, and of differentiating between them. The transparency of language is an illusion.” *Critical Practice* (New Accents, London and New York: Methuen, 1980), p. 4.

¹² Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Great Britain: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 701.

with the expectation that it would approach a universal idea or a universal experience, Marxist literary theory maintains that “literature is in the first instance a social phenomenon.”¹³ Where New Criticism may proclaim the possibility of universal experience, Marxist literary theory looks on this claim with suspicion. The comparison with New Criticism is especially helpful because the values of the previous syllabus reflect the values of New Criticism. The previous syllabus expected that close reading would yield the essence of a text, without extensive study of the history of an author. The new syllabus, however would see this as just so much ideology purporting to be the truth. In the light of ideology, such a proclamation is another tool of the bourgeoisie to propagate its dominant ideology; the subject is being told that this is a universal experience and responds obediently with “Amen, *so be it*”. Marxist criticism, on the other hand, reads with ideology in mind in an attempt to demystify and undo the complete immurement in the material and ideological domination of the bourgeois. As Rivkin and Ryan explain, literature “cannot be studied independently of the social relations, the economic forms, and the political realities of the time in which it was written.”¹⁴ In an attempt to expose ideology, a materialist study pays particular attention to the milieu in which a text is written and read.

Cultural materialism as Arbitration

Reading for ideology is a move for intervention. Cultural materialism, in much the same way as deconstruction, intervenes on behalf of a powerless party. Derrida challenges a monolithic metaphysics, by suggesting that metaphysics, or presence, is held up by the scaffolding of absence. His philosophy works against presence, by adopting the posture of absence in an attempt to shake the “unassailable foundation” of metaphysics. Derrida’s philosophy is radically suspicious of metaphysics. Cultural materialism, likewise, sees the powerful group as deserving the greatest suspicion. In the same way that Derrida sees presence as inhering in absence, Marxism suggests that the powerful retain their position because they are given this space by the powerless.

¹³ Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, “Starting with Zero,” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Great Britain: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 644.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

Both deconstruction and Cultural Studies adopt a posture of intervention or advocacy on behalf of a group that has no power. And the aim of this intervention is similar in both cases: to shake the foundation of the powerful to enable the powerless group to operate and participate. Of course, Derrida's project is philosophic and linguistic, and so when his deconstruction "shakes the foundations" of metaphysics, it threatens traditional philosophy and traditional linguistics. Cultural Studies, although clearly indebted to the study of language and its constitutive nature, operates as a politics and its theorising challenges groups of people and institutions. In the first instance, as Fred Inglis says, it challenges the operation of the bourgeoisie: "Cultural Studies has typically solved this problem by hunting out coercive power, finding it through culture, and calling it names when it has done so."¹⁵

Canons: Cultural Materialism and Deconstruction

However, there are significant ways in which cultural materialism is radically different from deconstruction such that they work against one another. These differences shed as much light on the practice of cultural materialism as do their similarities. An anecdote sketches one major difference succinctly. In the film *Derrida*,¹⁶ a biographical sketch of Derrida and his ideas, Derrida is seen being interviewed by Andrea Stretton, an ABC reporter. Stretton asks how Derrida sees postmodernism in the collapse of belief in God as represented in popular shows like *Seinfeld*, "the show about nothing." Derrida does not respond at first, and looks at her quizzically. He then responds that he thinks people should stop watching television and read more books. The striking thing about this vignette is the fact that Stretton and Derrida may very well both be called "postmodern" but they are working from entirely different assumptions about text and canon. The syllabus is more indebted to the approach taken by cultural materialism than to that of deconstruction; it assumes that texts of popular and high culture are both equally important. Stretton's question assumes that studying *Seinfeld*, as a reflection on and constitutive of a postmodern culture, is a worthwhile exercise. Derrida, on the other hand, refuses the category of popular culture as being worthy of philosophical inquiry. As I said in the last chapter, Derrida's work presupposes a knowledge of philosophy and literature that is quite outside the category of popular culture. He writes on Rousseau, Nietzsche,

¹⁵ Fred Inglis, *Cultural Studies* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), p. xi.

¹⁶ *Derrida*, prod. Jane Doe Films, dir. Amy Ziering Kofman, 2002.

Heidegger, Mallarmé, Husserl, Levinas, Plato and Aristotle among others. In his canon of influence, all is either high philosophy or high art. Derrida makes no attempt to “level out the playing field.” Cultural materialism, on the other hand, works deliberately to mix the traditional canon of texts with popular culture on the assumption that there is nothing *inherently* valuable in a text. For cultural materialism, texts inform us about society through the way they are deployed in societies throughout history.

In this respect, the syllabus is faithful to Cultural Studies, since it is clearly working to mix the traditional canon of works set for English study with texts that would have traditionally been placed outside the canon in the category of popular culture. On the list of texts set for study, for example, a teacher will find Shakespeare¹⁷ alongside the 2001 film *Contact*, directed by Robert Zemeckis.¹⁸ Cultural Studies, according to Inglis, “would canonize the profanity and indecency of everyday life. It would include in the field of study the vast crowds of human actors always excluded, ignored and made invisible by the dead conventions of the bad old days.”¹⁹ He then goes on to be more specific: “In a ... guerrilla attack, Cultural Studies denounce the category of art as an instrument of class assertiveness, refuse the sacred status of art, and treat all symbolic expression as equally worthy of serious interpretation.”²⁰ When students study *Emma* and *Clueless* together, there are assumptions operating that clearly derive from Cultural Studies. *Clueless* is worthy of our attention in much the same measure as *Emma*. In fact, according to Inglis, the only reason that there is a distinction between *Emma* and *Clueless* in the first place is because the bourgeois decided, somewhere along the way, that *Emma* was “sacred” and therefore worthy of study. If we accept this ruse, it follows that once the illusion has been dispelled, all texts are equal. The object of study, moreover, is not the craft of the texts themselves, but *their function*. That is to say, the object is not to offer a judgement based on a writer’s craft, but to observe the operation of time and place on a writer. When cultural materialism makes its move against the formation of a canon

¹⁷ It is mandatory for Advanced students to study Shakespeare. However, Shakespeare may be studied in many different ways. The syllabus only stipulates that Shakespeare feature somewhere in the course of work.

¹⁸ Both *Contact* and *The Tempest* are set for the Area of Study, under the focus “Imaginative Journeys”. Board of Studies, *English Stage 6, Prescriptions: Area of Study, Electives and Texts, Higher School Certificate 2004-2007* (Board of Studies: Sydney, 2003), p. 10.

¹⁹ Fred Inglis, *Cultural Studies* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, US: Blackwell, 1993), p. 14.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 18.

based on tradition, it also makes its move against the study of texts in terms of aesthetic judgement.

Tony Bennett

Tony Bennett's *Outside Literature*, which is more narrowly defined as Cultural Studies, follows the contours of cultural materialism that I have been describing. The sheer variety of practitioners of Cultural Studies means that I cannot deal with the whole movement. So I will focus almost entirely on Tony Bennett in my close analysis. Bennett's work shares the theoretical direction of the syllabus in its emphasis on the function of a text, rather than the discrete meaning of a text, and so an investigation of the implications of his theory is pertinent. Stuart Hall notes that, while Cultural Studies is necessarily manifold in its applications and disciplines, it does have an impetus which has a particular shape:

Cultural Studies has multiple discourses; it has a number of different histories ... It always was a set of unstable formations. It was 'centred' only in quotation marks ... Although cultural studies as a project is open-ended, it can't be simply pluralist in that way. Yes, it refuses to be a master discourse or a meta-discourse of any kind. Yes it is a project that is always open to that which it doesn't yet know, to that which it can't yet name. But it does have some will to connect; it does have some stake in the choices it makes.²¹

Tony Bennett's work sets itself against aesthetics as a bourgeois illusion and this is important because the previous syllabus was principally formed on aesthetic principles. In order to engage Bennett on the subject of aesthetics and its materialist refutation, I ask three central questions of Tony Bennett's work. Firstly, what does Bennett understand as aesthetics? Secondly, why does Bennett so wholly reject aesthetic discourse as a valuable exercise? (The answer to these two questions throws light on why the syllabus underwent such change of theoretical direction between the previous syllabus and the present English Stage 6 syllabus.) The final question I ask of Bennett's study is: what does he suggest as a worthy alternative practice in literary studies? My aim is to understand the rationale behind the existing syllabus, based on parallels between the syllabus and Bennett's work.

²¹ "Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies," *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 263.

Bennett's understanding of aesthetics

Bennett understands aesthetics as a way of approaching literature that sees it as an essential category all its own. What aesthetics terms 'literature' transcends the time and space in which it was written. According to such theories, the beauty and mastery of 'literature' set it aside from the popular culture surrounding it, enabling it to transcend its historical milieu and become a part of the canon. Bennett quotes the aesthetic Marxist critic Herbert Marcuse disapprovingly:

The radical qualities of art, that is to say, its indictment of the established reality and its invocation of the beautiful image (*Schöner Schein*) of liberation are grounded precisely in the dimensions where art *transcends* its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behaviour while preserving its overwhelming presence.²²

The problem with this kind of approach, according to Bennett, is that the idea that art can transcend its social milieu undermines the materialist crux of Marxist and Cultural Studies analysis. "Indeed," as Bennett complains, "there is a sense in which the programme and procedures of aesthetic discourse, Marxist or otherwise, obviate the need for the concrete analysis of anything."²³ This approach undercuts the primary purpose of a staunchly materialist analysis to inaugurate change in a particular environ for a particular group of people. Even if the aesthetic approach has in view a vision of "liberation," as Marcuse suggests here, this liberation is based on essentialist terms that eschew materialist assumptions. Bennett sees this as entirely unacceptable, since liberation cannot be anything other than material and art as true intervention must necessarily be truly material.

Bennett also takes issue with the necessary inference of aesthetic discourse that there is an essential difference between great art and counterfeit art. He does not, interestingly, take the view that there is no such thing as literature: "I want to ... resist a conclusion which is sometimes drawn from this: that the category of literature should be abandoned. To the contrary, I shall argue that it is vital, both theoretically and politically, that such a category should be secured – but only on the condition that its specificity is conceived non-aesthetically."²⁴ Literature, that is, is a cultural construction. What Bennett takes issue with is the idea of great art conceived of in

²² Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. xii, quoted in Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 146.

²³ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 147.

²⁴ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 120.

essential terms. As Steve Giles explains, “Bennett’s intention is to dispel once and for all the idealist illusion that there is such a thing as the ‘text in itself’ which could adjudicate between its various readings and evaluations, in favour of the materialist notion that the text is dispersed into networks of intertextual and discursive relations, with the result that the text’s supposed self-identity is shattered.”²⁵ He rejects the category of literature as in any way special, as something which has achieved the status of great art because of its constitutive qualities. To study literature in Bennett’s terms means to study the ways in which literature has been formed as a cultural category and to ask the cultural question of why one work is privileged among others. For Bennett, literature is an exclusively *sociological and political category*. Bennett is so insistent on this point, that in his book *Outside Literature*, he makes no specific or close reference to any literary text. His argument is *about* literature, and he studiously avoids any close contact with the texts that would be deemed “literature.”

The syllabus shares Bennett’s conception of literature as a sociological category. In the Preliminary English Extension course, for example, in the Module Texts, Culture and Value, the syllabus stipulates that:

Students explore the ways in which aspects of texts from the past have been appropriated into popular culture. The module develops students’ understanding of *how and why cultural values are maintained and changed*.

Students examine a key text from the past and its manifestations in one or more popular cultures. Through close study they:

- Consider the *relationships between text and its culture*
- Explore the language of the texts and examine the ways in which language shapes and reflects values
- Consider the effects of different ways of responding to texts
- Consider the *ways and reasons the original and later manifestations of the text are valued*.²⁶

The syllabus here explicitly prevents students from reflecting on literature as essentially different from other types of writing, because its emphasis must be on “how and why cultural values are maintained and changed.” If they do consider how a text may be approached aesthetically, they do so under the auspices of the study of ideology. They may investigate the ways in which aesthetic discourse discusses a text, but only by implicitly reducing aesthetic discourse to ideology. When students

²⁵ Steve Giles, “Against Interpretation? Recent Trends in Marxist Criticism,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 28:1 (1988), 69.

²⁶ Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Syllabus 1999* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 1999), p. 87, my italics.

“consider the ways and reasons the original and later manifestations of the text are valued,” they adopt the position of an ideological critique. This position is prior to and subsumes literary discussion, scooping all other discourse into the category of the ideologically mistaken.

One of the reasons that Bennett rejects an aesthetic conception of great literature is because he believes the category of great art depends not upon any essential quality of the work of art, but upon the power and kudos of the critic. This, in turn, depends upon the sanction of tradition. Bennett condemns this whole process of critical judgement as circular: “the production of a corpus of ‘great literature’ is always a matter of establishing one text as ‘literary’ or of artistic value by referring it to other texts which, it has already been decided, exemplify the criteria of ‘literariness’ or artistic value. In other words, the question as to what constitutes great art can only be resolved provided that it has already been determined.”²⁷ According to Bennett, aesthetic theorising adds works to the “tradition” based on tradition and so is a circular, closed exercise at best, and a dangerous, right-wing move at worst.²⁸ Aesthetic discourse is dominated by tradition rather than superior judgement, because the task of establishing great literature must always begin with what has been called great literature beforehand.

Bennett’s position runs dangerously close to assuming that all tradition, on the grounds that it is bourgeois tradition, is by definition nefarious. I will move on to Bennett’s radically sceptical view of tradition later, but it is worthwhile noting, as I mentioned in the last chapter, that Eagleton warns against the totalising logic of such a position. It is clear that Bennett offers his own theory as a protest, in much the same way as Derrida offers his theory as protest. Eagleton warns that to assume that all aesthetic judgements that come from tradition are necessarily restrictive and totalising is ironically an uncritical position, as it does not require the interpreter to gauge the value of a particular text, but simply assumes that critical materialism will be by default emancipatory and aesthetic reading restrictive. So Gadamer make the same kind of point (again from the previous chapter): “here indeed is operating a prejudice that we can see is pure dogmatism, for reflection is not always and unavoidably a step

²⁷ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 147.

²⁸ Bennett says at one point that “to announce a requiem for aesthetics in toto would, no doubt, be premature inasmuch as, although its theoretical credentials are thoroughly tattered, it still has an undeniable political use-value – but only for the right.” *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 148.

towards dissolving prior convictions. Authority is not *always* wrong.”²⁹ What is missing from Bennett’s criticism is a reason as to why aesthetic discourse is *always* morally reprehensible.

Bennett’s critique of aesthetic discourse and its relation to tradition does not stop here. Not only does aesthetic discourse, as he sees it, depend on tradition, it also depends upon the subject who is called upon to judge between real and counterfeit art. The faculty of judgement, according to aesthetic discourse, is essential to a reader who can detect the value of a text and thus discriminate between high art and popular culture. Bennett explains how he believes aesthetic discourse operates:

By aesthetic discourse, I have in mind the many variants of philosophical aesthetics which exhibit related properties in their attempts to distinguish some unique faculty, lodged within and constitutive of human subjectivity, which would serve as a basis for establishing the potential, if not actual, universality of aesthetic judgement. Aesthetic discourse, that is to say, construes the aesthetic as a distinctive mode of the subject’s mental relation to reality.³⁰

According to Bennett’s understanding of how aesthetic discourse sees the process of judgement, the subject’s ability to judge is really based on “some unique faculty” that operates in and through subjective experience. In this Romantic way of thinking, the danger is that the subject (or reader, or critic) is not empirically accountable for the final judgement, but is instead entirely reliant on a sensibility that cannot be demonstrated materially. In this way, this subjective faculty or sensibility could and does provide the “basis for establishing ... universality of judgement.” It is this “universality” that clearly alarms Bennett, since if the judgement of a text is not susceptible to any objective measurement but only to the “subject’s mental relation to reality” then the judge holds power to sanction or jettison a text as worth studying, thereby implicitly sanctioning or jettisoning whole cultures. Understandably, Bennett sees a totalitarian state of affairs looming on the horizon, where the bourgeois academia can choose great texts that suit themselves and their own ideology, consciously or not.

When Bennett uses the word “aesthetic,” then, he calls on a specific notion of the bourgeois practice of admiring the beautiful works of art, with no respect to the

²⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (USA: Univeristy of California Press, 1976), pp. 32-33.

³⁰ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 150.

attendant political context of the work. This practice includes the close reading of texts, because, on this account of the matter, the type of close reading practiced by Leavis and the New Critics expressly and studiously avoided being politically committed or explicit.

Bennett engages with David Hume's work on the faculty of judging great art, and concludes that "crudely, the bourgeois public maintains a united front, the illusion of a universality, in face of the masses, conducting its disagreements behind closed – and barred – doors."³¹ According to Bennett, then, what aesthetic critics may promote as a unique faculty to appreciate beauty and truth is nothing more than a bourgeois illusion designed to maintain safety behind the "doors" of academia. Bennett goes into great detail to explain what he sees as the process by which arbitrary bourgeois values come to name classics as inherently classic. Firstly, he is adamant that there is no inherent aesthetic quality in the text, but that the subject brings the value to a text. He makes the point that aesthetic discourse itself recognises this as the case.³² The emphasis for aesthetic discourse, then, on Bennett's reading of it, is on the valuing subject and the qualities in a subject that allow a good judgement. Bennett explains how this "quality" then reifies itself into the object: "aesthetic discourse tilts on its axis as the properties of the subject which guarantee the universality of aesthetic judgement are transferred to the object."³³ So, if a subject reads a text and proclaims it as good, then the qualities of the subject that allow this judgement become smudged such that these qualities in the subject become confused with the properties of the text. As Steve Giles says of Bennett's hermeneutic, "the text's meaning is thus produced by criticism."³⁴ The text thus becomes a fetish and a commodity.³⁵ Bennett then goes

³¹ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 157.

³² "It is readily admitted in most forms of aesthetic discourse that beauty neither is nor can be a natural property of the object." Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 154.

³³ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 154.

³⁴ Steve Giles, "Against Interpretation? Recent Trends in Marxist Criticism," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 28:1 (1988), 69.

³⁵ Marx discusses this process in "Capital." He says that, "there is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of the things *qua* commodities, and the value relation between the products of labor which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race". In *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Great Britain: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 667-668.

on to suggest that “value, transfixed in the singular gaze of the universal subject, solidifies and takes form as a property of the object just as, once the universal valuing subject has been constructed, its active, value-constitutive role becomes passive: all it can do is to recognise the value that was already there, secreted somewhere in the dense folds of the object.”³⁶ And so, the singular judgement of the subject becomes transferred into the idea of a text that constitutes greatness, thereby justifying the subject.

Implicit in the Romantic idea of the aesthetic is the assumption that there are people who can detect great art and those who can't. Since Bennett has already made the point that there is no “great art” per se, but simply a “singular gaze” that is mistaken for a universal one, then the judging subject exerts bourgeois authority over the masses. Bennett says that “the ground for demonstrating that the principles of aesthetic judgement are universal is prepared ... via the initial disqualification of those whose judgments depart significantly from the standards of agreed taste.”³⁷ His objection, reasonably enough, is that if the criteria for judging a great text are not explicit and become projected onto the text, then there are people who will be left out of the conversation deciding what is worth our attention and what is not. His complaint becomes clearer when he says: “the definition of the relevant public, produced by disqualifying the judgements of the congenitally and culturally defective multitude, results in a cultural partiality that is ... arbitrary and authoritarian.”³⁸ We are back with the premise that the powerful decide on a selection of texts that promotes their own values and culture, thereby suppressing other cultures who never had a share in the conversation. Bennett goes on: “The universality of taste turns out, in effect, to be based on the most insubstantial and flimsy of foundations: the consensus of the drawing room.”³⁹ Great texts, then, are not great texts because they are great texts. They are counted great texts because the bourgeoisie choose texts that reflect and promote their own interests and culture and thus shut out the masses. His principal complaint, then, is that aesthetics is not fair.

Like some of the commentators on the syllabus, Bennett does not here articulate who exactly constitutes the bourgeoisie club that occupy the drawing room.

³⁶ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 154.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 155.

³⁸ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 157.

³⁹ *ibid.*

He combats a ‘universal’ bourgeois theory, and yet he does not ground his objection in a particular engagement with a particular bourgeois theory or theorist. Ironically, then, he transgresses his own assertion that, to be ‘fair,’ one must be *subject* to context and to history. When Bennett refuses particular contact with ‘the bourgeois,’ he inadvertently makes his theory ontological and thus ‘not fair.’

The syllabus evidences similar irony. Because the syllabus is so deeply indebted to the values that cultural materialism proposes, it shuts out similar dissent among students studying under it. Bennett objects to aesthetic discourse on the grounds that the bourgeoisie blocks participation in the choice of texts on the canon. What he asks for is a conversation that allows the masses to participate. In his insistence that conversation is imperative, he argues for democratic participation. However, insofar as the syllabus focuses a student’s attention almost wholly on *how* a text means, and even provides information on *what* a text means so that students can attain this concentration, the syllabus shuts out the kind of conversation that cultural materialism would see as necessary to eradicate cultural hierarchy.

Instead, it sets up a new select group, this time a group that sees the cultural materialist paradigm as absolute and true. There is no significant way that a teacher can contest the assumptions of this syllabus. A teacher certainly may not encourage discussion in a classroom that challenges the assumptions of the entire syllabus, except in the margins of the main task of the HSC. To allow students too much freedom would be to ensure the failure of students in the HSC and therefore prevent them from entering university, since English is a mandatory subject. The “consensus of the drawing room” still persists, it is just that the occupants have changed.

What does Bennett propose?

The closing paragraphs of Bennett’s essay “Severing the Aesthetic Connection”⁴⁰ list directions that he thinks appropriate. Interestingly, the syllabus clearly reflects these suggestions. I summarise these directions quickly, with a view to examining the ways in which the syllabus has adopted cultural materialism as part of its new theoretical direction.

⁴⁰ In *Outside Literature*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp117-142.

Firstly, Bennett suggests that “the term literature be used to refer to a particular socially organised space of representation whose specificity consists in the institutionally and discursively regulated forms of use and deployment to which selected texts are put.” In other words, Bennett argues that there is nothing inherent in a text that makes it literature, and so we should use the term as a sociological category. Bennett goes on to say that “the effect of this move is to rethink the ontological status of literature such that it is taken to refer to an observable set of social processes rather than to an (as it has proved so far) unfathomable essence.” His emphasis suggests that these social processes should be “observable,” meaning that they should conform to the empirical paradigm of reasonable, material evidence. Moreover, and more importantly, Bennett transfers the hermeneutical energies of the interpreter from the discrete texts to the context in which the text is created and received, a move that anticipates the structure of the syllabus. As Graeme Turner notes, the syllabus “see[s] the text only as a socio-political site, where meanings are installed, and where the politics that encloses the text can be unpacked or, as the syllabus documents invariably say, deconstructed.”⁴¹ The study of texts becomes social observation rather than an interaction with the aesthetic demands of particular texts. General questions may be asked of specific texts, only in order for the sociological questions of “use and deployment” to be empirically investigated.

Bennett then goes on to stipulate that “literature, so defined, be regarded as a historically specific set of institutional and discursive arrangements regulating the use and deployment of the texts it constitutes as its arrangements.” The point that Bennett makes here is that if literature is not a formal reality, then it is only a reality insofar as it has been arbitrarily set aside and “arranged” by a “regulating” body. He makes the point that this is a modern phenomenon, whereby aesthetic discourse has abstracted as essential literature ancient writings which were not considered in any way ‘special’ in their original context. And so, when we use the term “literature” in Bennett’s schema, we invoke the idea that the bourgeois regulate what literature is, and what it is not, and so when we study literature sociologically, we study this process of cultural regulation.

⁴¹ Graeme Turner, “Cultural literacies, critical literacies, and the English school curriculum in Australia,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10:1 (2007), 112.

Bennett's third suggestion is that "literature, so defined, be regarded as a set of social realities and processes which interact with other spheres of social practices *on the same level*."⁴² This is crucial to the separation between cultural materialism and aesthetic discourse because it denies literature a special category of its own. Websites⁴³ belong to the same ontological category as literature, the only difference being that the bourgeoisie elevates literature as essentially different and better. We do not study literature, then, to discriminate the specific contribution of a specific text, or question the way a literary text may constitute meaning which may be constituted in no other way. We study literature next to other regulated social and cultural practices because no text has meaning *in itself*, but is only representative of the ideological investment of the social milieu that regulates the reading of that text. Bennett goes on to make it very clear that "this is to deny those depth models of the social structure which support the hermeneutic project of deciphering literary texts in terms of the underlying realities they express." Rather than study a text "deeply," thereby implying that the text will yield meaning in its essential constitution, we study laterally because a text is a social production.

Alternatively, Bennett suggests that students focus on the "textual uses and effects" of a text. As Keith Jenkins suggests, Bennett's critical emphasis moves to the procedural, in an attempt to escape transcendental notions of the text: "this 'knowledge' cannot claim to rest on any foundation other than its own procedures, or claim to know anything other than the facts which such procedures produce and validate."⁴⁴ It is not a linguistic project, or even a textual project, since these projects run the risk of becoming idealist. Bennett makes the point earlier that studies that focus solely on the textual fail to achieve a material effect. He counts deconstruction among such projects, saying that deconstruction is "of little concrete assistance when it comes to examining how and why such changes in both a text's genre-belongingness and the constitution of genre systems may change. While, in resisting the closures of essentialising forms of analysis, deconstruction theoretically opens the

⁴² Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 141.

⁴³ In the Advanced Course in 2004-2007, Module B Critical Study of Texts, the ATSIC website is set for study alongside Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* and W.B. Yeats's poetry, among others. Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Prescriptions: Area of Study, Electives and Texts, Higher School Certificate 2004-2007* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 2003), pp. 18-20.

⁴⁴ Keith Jenkins, "Marxism and Historical Knowledge: Tony Bennett and the Discursive Turn," *Literature and History*, 3:1 (1994), 24.

door to new forms of historical analysis, it offers no means of passing through that door to produce new forms of historical knowledge.”⁴⁵

Bennett’s objection to deconstruction sheds more light on the Cultural Studies project, defining it more clearly. The distinction is between materialism and idealism. Cultural Studies shares common ground with deconstruction, in that it is radically sceptical of tradition and of institutional forms of power. However, inasmuch as deconstruction is primarily a study of the constant deferral of signification, which is a study of text (or textual unraveling), Cultural Studies diverges from deconstruction. It wants to make a material difference, one that is demonstrable in history, which is why Bennett’s work leans toward a sociological treatment of textual study.

Conversation and Authority

Underpinning Bennett’s argument is the binary opposition between Bennett’s own version of cultural materialism on the one hand, and aesthetics on the other. Bennett sets up this binary opposition as essentially antagonistic, as his reliance on military metaphors implies: “There is no ready-made theoretical position outside aesthetic discourse which can simply be taken up and occupied. Such a space requires a degree of fashioning; it must be organised and above all, won – won from the preponderant cultural weight of aesthetic conceptions of the literary.”⁴⁶ Bennett’s thinking is prevented by aesthetic conceptions of literature from “occupying” any space, and the “winning” is characterised as a much-needed revolution against a “preponderant” occupier.

Later on, Bennett extrapolates on his understanding of the relationship between the two embattled groups when he says that his own position “can only be organised by *prising* [foundations] away from aesthetic conceptions of literature.”⁴⁷ Later still, he characterises his own work specifically as a “process of extricating – wresting – from aesthetic discourse materials which might be of service in constructing a discursive space external to it.”⁴⁸ If “prising,” “wresting” and “extricating” are necessary, then it would seem that those who theorise aesthetically are assumed to be unwilling to give any credence to Cultural Studies.

⁴⁵ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 104.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 7.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

For Bennett, there is a limited space in which the theorist can operate. Indeed, the fact that this theorising space must be “won,” indicates that there is only one fixed space in which to move. He does not, in other words, characterise his reasoning as *discovering a new space* alongside aesthetic discourse. One must necessarily replace the other, as the title of his essay “Severing the Aesthetic Connection” makes abundantly clear.

As a matter of fact, Bennett concludes that those Marxist theorists who share space with aesthetic discourse do so at the risk of their integrity as Marxists. Bennett explains that “a Marxist aesthetic springs ready-made from a bourgeois aesthetic,” since both share the belief that literature could be a discrete category of works ultimately superior to popular work. A Marxist aesthetic is idealist in Bennett’s understanding, and thus cannot be accommodated by the basic tenets of Marxist materialist vision.

The problem with this is that, if there is no discussion, then there can be no way to challenge Bennett’s theoretical assumptions. If Bennett were successful, that is, and aesthetic discourse were jettisoned, there could be no way to create fruitful dialogue. The impossibility of another point of view within Bennett’s paradigm leaves his work open to becoming authoritarian in its turn. The syllabus makes the same mistake as Bennett does at this point, since it makes very few concessions to points of view contrary to the assumptions of cultural materialism. It is monistic in its approach, undermining its aspirations to create thoughtful, democratic citizens.⁴⁹ Indeed, far from empowering students, Stephen Adam Schwartz argues that to assume all knowledge under the arche-ideology of culture and power constitutes the biggest power play of them all: “If ‘all knowledge is a condensed node in an agonistic power field,’ the findings of researchers in cultural studies and the distinctions drawn by them are not themselves removed from power but are, rather, themselves a power play.”⁵⁰

Two assumptions implicit in Bennett’s theoretical position are, firstly that aesthetic discourse represents a discrete, organised consensus of theorists and

⁴⁹ “The purpose of the Higher School Certificate program of study is to ... foster ... respect for the cultural diversity of Australian society” and to encourage students to become “active participants in society.” Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Syllabus 1999* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 1999), pp. 5-6.

⁵⁰ “Everyman an Übermensch: The Culture of Cultural Studies,” *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, ed. Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) p. 267.

secondly, that aesthetic discourse is essentially bourgeois. If Bennett's materialist discourse must "wrest" space from aesthetic discourse then it follows that the latter must be organised and uniform enough for it to occupy a finite space available and organised enough to refuse to give up territory. On one occasion at least, Bennett does allow for differing positions within the literary tradition:

Let me be clear, then, that the literature which, in this study, I seek to distance myself from is not the whole of the existing field of literary practices, institutions and discourses. For these do not add up to a single and unified "inside" in relation to which an "outside" might be constituted. Rather, it is the particular way of thinking about these which proceeds from the assumption that literature comprises a special kind of writing that is to be understood aesthetically.⁵¹

But while Bennett does fleetingly admit that there are many and varied approaches to literature and its study, he still sees aesthetic discourse as a unified group. Of course, there must be a level of generalisation in every study in order to crystallise one's own position. It is impossible to theorise without groupings of some kind. But what is important about Bennett's position is that he not only groups aesthetic discourse as discrete and univocal but also announces that it is impossible, even immoral, to enter into dialogue with this bourgeois group.⁵² What is inherently bourgeois about aesthetic discourse is its a-historical approach to literary criticism, and the credence it gives to the possibility that there is something inherent in literature that transcends the social condition of both the writing and the reading of a text.

For Bennett, this is impossible. Aesthetic discourse must be a part of a bourgeois collusion to shore up its position. Bennett accepts the Marxist paradigm of ideological domination in and through literature, and his refusal to grant aesthetic discourse any space in the conversation rests on the assumption that this paradigm is *unassailably true*. As Peter Washington says of Pierre Macherey's theory, "it doesn't tell me why I should read literature in the way he suggests: that requires a prior decision about the meaning of history and an acceptance of Marxism's authority."⁵³

The same is true here. Bennett's refusal to enter into discussion with aesthetic

⁵¹ *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 5.

⁵² Bennett explains that his study engages "via a series of critical engagements with the ways in which literature has been theorised and organised as a site of *political intervention* within Marxist critical and literary-theoretical writings" (*Outside Literature*, p. 7). Insofar as Bennett intervenes in the intervention of Marxist writings, he is within the tradition of Marxist intervention.

⁵³ Peter Washington, *Fraud: Literary Theory and the End of English* (Great Britain: Fontana Press, 1989), pp. 128-9.

discourse is understandable within the Marxist paradigm, but it demands the reader accept Marxism's authority (or Bennett's) over and above the authority of any other discourse.

In terms of the syllabus, students are not being *asked* to accept this authority, but are *required* to accept it, if they want to study at university. I am quite certain that the Marxist critique of the literary tradition is often justified. However, because Bennett will not subject his Marxist account of literature to a discussion with aesthetic theory, he sets it up as an authority, in effect undoing the object of Marxist literary critique: to make things fairer. If the object of Bennett's critique is to dislodge forms of unassailable power, and he simply installs another form of unassailable power in the name of dislodging it, then he is being, surely, self-contradictory.

The problem of history and tradition

Since Bennett works from the Marxist assumption that ideology is necessarily total history becomes a problem for cultural materialist literary theory. Both Althusser and Bennett suggest that the purpose of reading literature is to unmask disabling ideologies in the text and so materially to influence the working of society in the present. To access ideology requires the theorist to unmask living history as opposed to a critic's notion of history. Marxism wants to be historical in the sense that it wants to provide concrete sociological interpretations of a text in the past and thus transpose these findings into lessons for the present, thence effecting concrete change in the present. History, therefore, is a problem to be solved, a puzzle to be put together.

The problem with this approach is that it attempts to be historical within an a-historical framework. That is, it forgets that the interpreter is historical in his or her reading and it also wants to impose an a-historical paradigm of ideology over the particularity of historical texts. While Bennett will claim that he does not share the same view of history as other Marxist literary theorists, it becomes clear that he merely exchanges one a-historical approach to history for another.

Inasmuch as Bennett grants the historicity of the interpreter and, indeed, the historicity of a Marxist concept of history, he sets himself apart from some traditional Marxist theorists like Lukács and Althusser.⁵⁴ He acknowledges that Marxist literary

⁵⁴ *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 60-62.

theory can deal a double hand in requiring historicity in interpretation and keeping Marxist paradigms anterior to that historicity: “It is, I think, this particular ordering of the relations between epistemology, ethics and politics ... which accounts for the reluctance to abandon the view that, at least in principle, history might be objectively knowable. For, if it is not, how might the attempt to acquire intellectual leadership over society be justified?”⁵⁵ Bennett’s alternative suggestion is that we should do away with attempting to access history as an ontological possibility at all, and that we should isolate a text’s “uses and effects” as the reliable way to shed light on ideology and thus to effect change in the present. Indeed, history is little more than the text, as Keith Jenkins’s interpretation of Bennett’s theory makes clear: “‘the past’ becomes not so much a real presence in ‘history’ but an effect of presence created by textuality, as notional a term as the ‘real world’ alluded to in realist fiction, only ever existing in those present discourses that articulate it.”⁵⁶ For Bennett, then, the literary text’s alterity in other historical milieus does not provide an impetus for interpretation, and is still a problem to be overcome. It obscures the functioning of ideology. The only way we can forge ahead with a sociological investigation, according to Bennett, is to assess a text’s “uses and effects” because history remains an interpretative hurdle. As Jenkins explains, since meaning is ultimately indeterminate in Bennett’s hermeneutic, the critic must then turn her attention to the procedural to establish some sort of empirical foundation: “Bennett takes it that rather than ‘reflecting’ the social world of which it is a part, language precedes and appropriates that world, carving it up according to its own (ultimately arbitrary) rules of signification and severing it from any necessary or intrinsic connection to external referents ... instead we are invited to ‘read the signs’; to read the past as a text in ways that always encourage a re-writing and to consider past social formations as a series of spectacles.”⁵⁷

Ironically, however, these “procedures” undermine Bennett’s own insistence that we remain historical, and therefore material, in our approach to literature and its study. When Bennett defines literature as a normatively social phenomenon, the phenomenon itself becomes a-historical. When he insists that literature *is* its “textual uses and effects,” he keeps literature historical while allowing his own criticism an a-

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

⁵⁶ Keith Jenkins, “Marxism and Historical Knowledge: Tony Bennett and the Discursive Turn,” *Literature and History*, 3:1 (1994), 17-18.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 17.

historical basis. Bennett hopes that these “textual uses and effects” are what Jenkins calls “an empty mechanism,”⁵⁸ but he fails to acknowledge that such a conception of text is of course loaded with Bennett’s own assumptions of good critical practice. In this longer passage, Bennett outlines how he sees literature functioning, while betraying his own insistence that his theories be a-historical:

Literature, so defined, consists not of a formally unified field of writing whose commonality is to be accounted for in socio-genetic terms. For the ‘texts assigned to the category’ may be ‘formally and temporally disparate’, displaying no essential commonality which has to be fathomed and explained. Its being consists rather in a particular ‘form of textuality’ – a socially organised field of textual uses and effects – that is to be accounted for in terms of the ‘ensemble of norms, practices, and institutional conditions’ which produce and sustain it. Literature ... is not something whose social underpinnings must be sought elsewhere; it *is* a set of social conditions and its analysis consists in identifying the effects of these conditions – on the uses and functioning of writings produced in earlier periods just as much as the uses and functioning of the forms of writing they support and call forth.⁵⁹

Bennett sets himself apart from other Marxist studies, where literature might be seen as a symptom of ideology, representing or reflecting the state of society. He asserts that literature *constitutes* society in its “textual uses and effects.”

According to Bennett, effective and moral study would refuse an a-historical approach because that would allow for the possibility of literature as an essential category. It would also reject a Marxist approach that seeks out representations of ideology in aesthetic terms, since this is capitulating to the bourgeois aesthetic. Bennett attempts ultimately to be historical in refusing “those depth models”⁶⁰ of aesthetic discourse that imply that literature might throw light on reality itself. In rejecting the claims of aesthetic discourse, Bennett attacks a normative, transcendent conception of literature.

Ironically, however, he concludes by saying, “literature *is* a set of social conditions,” thus placing his own position as a critic on a normative basis. It is not clear from Bennett’s position why literature may not be *both* socially conditioned *and* essentially different from other writing. By positioning the two as mutually exclusive

⁵⁸ Keith Jenkins, “Marxism and Historical Knowledge: Tony Bennett and the Discursive Turn,” *Literature and History*, 3:1 (1994), 29.

⁵⁹ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 284.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 141.

and cauterising discussion, Bennett places himself on a-historical grounds and thus his cultural materialism takes on the hues of the essentialism of which he is so critical.

Hans-Georg Gadamer says that “the idea of an absolute reason is not a possibility for historical humanity,”⁶¹ and by placing his idea that literature is solely a social construct outside the arena of plausible discussion, Bennett moves the conditions for his own discussion outside the realm of the historical. Gadamer says later that, “real historical thinking must take account of its own historicity. Only then will it cease to chase the phantom of a historical object that is the counterpart of itself.”⁶² Bennett proposes an absolute, and thus belies his own insistence on the historical and material study of literature. If literature is only and exclusively to be seen as a sociological category, set up to examine ideologies and their functions, then there is no ‘space’ to question the assumption *that literature can never “speak.”*⁶³ Indeed, we deliberately shut out the possibility that we might be “pulled up short by the text,”⁶⁴ an experience that would require an admission that we found *what we did not expect to find*. In the same way that Derrida’s early deconstruction uses literature as an exemplar of its view that *différance* and *aporia* always operate in the hermeneutical process, cultural materialism uses texts to support its own view that ideology necessarily paralyses interpretation. Texts remain within the paradigm set up by the theory, and cannot be particular and ‘other’ to the interpreter. Since Bennett expects to find a representation of ideology through the implementation of his technique (the analysis of “textual uses and effects”) when he reads literature, he is not open to a text’s alterity. In this fashion, Bennett’s theory becomes, as Valentine Cunningham says, Grand Theory, and as such snuffs out the otherness of the text:

The hermeneutic grip Theory desires to offer texts could not be larger. All literary Theory comes out of, it *is*, Grand Theory ... Literary Theory in fact diminishes the literary, diminishes texts, *by reducing them to formulae, to the formulaic, to the status only of the model, of models of literary functions, even of the literary at large, but still only a model*. The latest text to be analysed turns out to be only another illustration of this or that Theoretical position or line. There is a slot for this one, a box that fits, already made. The critical results, the outcomes of reading, thus keep on being the same, or

⁶¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 276.

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 299.

⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 377.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 268.

similar. Difference is annihilated in this modeling rush; it's unwelcome; it is ignored.⁶⁵

Far from ushering in emancipation, such reading habits suffocate the otherness of the text, and in so doing, suffocate the particularity of different readings in any given classroom.

In addition, if we set literature up as a set of “uses and effects,” what is to stop us from setting up theory itself as a set of “uses and effects?” Steve Giles articulates this problem effectively: “if Bennett’s position is correct, what is there to prevent us from taking him to mean whatever we like, or inferring his position to be the diametrical opposite of the one he advocates?”⁶⁶ Bennett’s theory sets itself apart as an ontological category in that it subjects texts to its own inflexible critique, and yet does not see itself as text. In the same way, the syllabus asks students to accept its cultural materialist assumptions as immune from the same type of sociological critique that it requires students to make of individual texts. Rather than engendering critical readings, this double handed gesture encourages students to become deeply inflexible and uncritical in their assumptions as they interpret texts.

Aware of the danger of historical work becoming ontological, Bennett attempts to separate his work from other Marxist endeavour. With his insistence on “textual uses and effects,” Bennett attempts to sidestep the difficulty that Marxists face when they attempt to illuminate history at the same time as operating outside of it. He sets himself apart from Jameson and Lukács, for example, when he makes the point that history for them becomes the supposedly objective, ultimate referent for literature.⁶⁷ For Jameson and Lukács, we read literature to illuminate the past and the ideology that informed the text. Bennett sees a slight difference in Althusser’s approach, who sees no such divide but sees ideology as a part of the material existence of the subject. However, Bennett still takes issue with all these Marxist theorists for their privileging of history in their analysis of the literary: “they share the view that literature and history belong to different realms of being ... the effect of this

⁶⁵ Valentine Cunningham, *Reading After Theory*. Blackwell Manifestos (Oxford, UK and Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), p. 122, my italics.

⁶⁶ Steve Giles, “Against Interpretation? Recent Trends in Marxist Criticism,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 28:1 (1988), 69.

⁶⁷ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 41.

dualistic ontology is to privilege history as both literature's source and its ultimate referent."⁶⁸

Bennett's solution is to do away with the "ontological difference" between literature and history altogether, and to approach literature as "textual uses and effects." This is a more objective approach that escapes the privileging of history. In this way, Bennett sets himself apart from mainstream Marxist analysis. He suggests

that there can be no general solution to the question of the relations between literature and history because there is no general problem to be addressed ... to study literary forms and functions 'historically', I shall argue means ... to study them in their own particularity, contingency and variability in the context of their variable and mutable relations to the other social practices with which they are temporally co-existent.⁶⁹

Later, he says that "the question to be posed in relation to literary texts is not how to *understand* them but what to *do* with them – that is, how to modify their forms of deployment within contemporary social relations."⁷⁰

At this point it is worth noting how similar Bennett's convictions are to the stipulations set by the syllabus. For example, the Critical Study of Texts in the Advanced course tells students that "this module requires students to explore and evaluate a specific text and its reception in a range of contexts"⁷¹ and then later in the Drama section it qualifies this statement: "values may be realised through production."⁷² The emphasis here is clearly not on how to *understand* the texts for study, but to study how these texts are *used* in particular societies. This means that the student must study the society in which each text is realised, or produced before they can answer the questions set for study. And this concomitantly raises the issue of how this history is to be accessed without imposing our own present pre-conceptions of that society. How are we to allow that history to remain 'other' and Thou? If we are unsuccessful in achieving distance between ourselves, and the otherness of history – which we inevitably will be if our task is not to understand a text – then what students inevitably end up studying is our own present, closed understandings of *ourselves*. We become a living example of what Bennett explicitly criticizes, quoting

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 45.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 68.

⁷¹ Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Prescriptions: Area of Study, Electives and Texts, Higher School Certificate, 2004-2007* (Sydney, Board of Studies: 2003), p. 18.

⁷² *ibid.*, p. 18.

Barthes approvingly: “on the subject of literature, say that it is literature ... they pretend to believe that it is possible to talk of literature and to make it the object of discourse but this discourse leads nowhere, since it has nothing to say of this object other than that it is itself.”⁷³

Bennett critiques the aesthetic study of literature for its narcissistic tendencies to approve literature on the basis of its being literature, and yet he approves theory on the basis of its being theory. On Bennett’s terms, and that of the syllabus, our study becomes entirely and necessarily solipsistic. Bennett sidesteps this issue by maintaining that all subjects must struggle with this problem anyway, since literature is not ontologically different from any other subject set for study. He also sidesteps this issue by upholding the technical efficiency of “textual uses and effects” and their “deployment” to tell us about the otherness of historical societies.

The central problem with Bennett’s approach, and thus the syllabus’ approach, is that it hopes that the study of “textual uses and effects” can escape the problem of history and yet is clearly a theory embedded within a history and a culture. Bennett hopes that this kind of study will achieve neutrality, and yet the lesson of Marxism teaches us that this kind of a-historical analysis is impossible. Bennett hopes that since history is not reliable, then textual uses and effects will surely produce what little history we need to challenge society to *change* the way it deploys texts. In fact, however, Bennett ends up capitulating to what Gadamer calls “the Cartesian impulse” by elevating technique and method above history. In Gadamer’s thinking, one cannot ever elevate oneself over history with method. He says that such an attempt is ultimately naïve:

Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted. Hence temporal distance is not something that must be overcome. This was, rather, the naïve assumption of historicism, namely that we must transpose ourselves into the spirit of the age, think with its ideas and its thoughts, not with our own, and thus advance toward historical objectivity.⁷⁴

By suggesting that our task is not to understand texts, but to *use* them by investigating their uses and effects, Bennett is attempting to make his technique immune to history.

⁷³ Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987), p. 53, quoted in Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 126.

⁷⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 297.

He suggests that this technique guarantees accurate information about societies without itself being subject to history. However, even if we ultimately read a text to intervene in a society, we must primarily read a text to understand it. For, only if we read a text to understand it can we respect a text's alterity, and *thus know what to do with it*, if we must do as Bennett suggests. The only way students of the HSC syllabus can learn anything new is if they read to understand a text's horizon against their own horizon. If they do not – and the syllabus does not encourage students to read a text to understand it on its own terms – then they are simply reading themselves. Or, more accurately, they are reading the ideology of the syllabus makers. It is not a respectful, politically correct reading of history and society that students undertake when they read *King Lear* to assess how the play is transposed or used in different societies, since students *must* impose their own sense of history on the text. When technique is elevated over a text's alterity, as it is in the Stage 6 syllabus, readings become narcissistic at best and authoritarian at worst. Moreover, the practical implication of elevating technique in the classroom is that, as students become immune to the otherness of the text and used to the sameness of the method of reading, they become bored. Graeme Turner remembers a moment when his daughter, upon inquiry into what she planned to write on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, responded with, "Oh, bloody Othering!"⁷⁵ If "othering" has become monotonous, then it has lost purchase in the emancipationist endeavour for the other.

Still further, Bennett actually hinders his own project when he insists on the complete materiality of the text in the hope that we could become politically aware and politically active. The problem is that, when Bennett sweeps away all foundation except the procedural and technical study of a text's effects, he loses any sense of *how* a critic should respond and *what to do* with the conclusions one could come to. In this sense, such a study becomes not politically efficacious, but politically paralysed. As Steve Giles says, "if the text is seen as a site for the production of meanings, does this mean that there can be no significant disagreement between proponents of conflicting or even opposing views of the 'same' text, so that radical politics degenerates into rhetorical posing."⁷⁶ Ironically, Bennett's insistence on the materiality of the text

⁷⁵ Graeme Turner, "Cultural literacies, critical literacies, and the English school curriculum in Australia," *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10:1 (2007), 109-110.

⁷⁶ Steve Giles, "Against Interpretation? Recent Trends in Marxist Criticism," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 28:1 (1988), 69-70.

prevents him from engaging materially, and sets such a position up as, as Giles says, an “idealist fallacy.”⁷⁷ Even those who endorse Bennett’s hermeneutic see this potential problem: Keith Jenkins acknowledges that Bennett’s insistence on privileging textual uses and effects eventually means that one does not have a political foundation from which to operate.⁷⁸

Therefore, if we set this critical model up for students in the hope that it will promote political and sensitive engagement with the world, we fail to give students a reason to engage. As Roger D. Sell points out, Bennett’s schema “does not tell us when such a coup could be deemed necessary, nor what the new power/truth symbiosis ought to look like.”⁷⁹ That is, Bennett’s schema insists on rejecting values so entirely that it sweeps its own values away in one and the same move. Later on in the same article, Sell makes the point that “although Bennett has so impressively combated the universalist narratives of Marxism, although he insists that each constellation of time, place, and interest has its own voice, he offers no clue as to how, in literary discourse, a voice can be recaptured within some different constellation.”⁸⁰ In other words, a “value-less” insistence on the study of procedural “textual uses and effects” will not produce politically efficacious students, because it has disallowed any foundation for action in the first place.

Graeme Turner notices this very thing in syllabuses that insist on the assumptions of critical literacy, which share much common ground with cultural materialism of Bennett’s ilk. Asked to examine the “language forms and features”⁸¹ of a text over and above the meaning of a text, students end up repeating the same “empty” processes over and over without ever critically examining the assumptions leading such exercises. He says that “students and teachers alike bewail the repetitiveness, predictability and pedagogic exhaustion of analytical exercises driven

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 70.

⁷⁸ “For it remains difficult to see how one can turn a formal disciplinary mechanism (which is by definition an empty mechanism) into a way of producing a substantive position which would, in its Marxist version, be politically pertinent and compelling by virtue of its method, no matter how reflexively acute.” Keith Jenkins, “Marxism and Historical Knowledge: Tony Bennett and the Discursive Turn,” *Literature and History*, 3:1 (1994), 29.

⁷⁹ Roger D. Sell, “Simulative Panhumanism: A Challenge to Current Linguistic and Literary Thought: A Review Article,” *The Modern Language Review*, 88:3 (1993), 551.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 552.

⁸¹ Board of Studies, *1999 English Syllabus Stage 6* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 1999), p. 43.

by a theoretical position where the end point is always already known in advance.”⁸² In the end, Bennett’s position and the syllabus’s position must be politically impotent, since the student critic must employ an analysis of “language forms and features” without varying such an analysis according to the particularity of the text, and without ever critically examining the assumptions that drive such a mechanical approach to textual study. Ironically, students are prevented from forming a political and passionate engagement with texts, in the name of establishing political efficacy. Steve Giles captures the problem of Bennett’s hermeneutic very succinctly, and in so doing captures the problem of the syllabus: “The problem is that Bennett also believes that there can be no rational grounds for preferring one political position to another either: in extinguishing the light of reason, he also eclipses Marxism as a coherent political and theoretical practice.”⁸³

⁸² Graeme Turner, “Cultural literacies, critical literacies, and the English school curriculum in Australia,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10:1 (2007), 109.

⁸³ Steve Giles, “Against Interpretation? Recent Trends in Marxist Criticism,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 28:1 (1988), 71.

Chapter Five:

Feminism

Feminism is another form of radical scepticism that needs to be considered in an investigation of materialism and its effects on the syllabus. Of course, feminism is not monolithic and nor is the effect of feminism on literary theory as a whole. And this is without considering sister disciplines like queer theory, gay and lesbian studies and gender theory. Patrick Fuery and Nick Mansfield's book *Cultural Studies and the New Humanities* considers itself a textbook on Cultural Studies, and its chapter on feminism and gender acknowledges manifold feminisms.¹ Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan date the beginning of modern feminist literary theory in the 1960s and 1970s, with Germaine Greer and Kate Millett, along with Adrienne Rich's address to the Modern Language Association in 1970.² Rivkin and Ryan maintain that this movement was formed principally against the dominant male rule in a society that had "silenced women's voices."³

In the study of literature, this naturally developed into a discussion of women as writers and readers and of the patriarchal canon. Jane Austen's character, Anne Elliot, captures this feminist position perfectly in *Persuasion*: "if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove any thing."⁴ Historiography shows the canon as male history, chosen by men with a patriarchal agenda, and excluding women in its formation and its study. Rivkin and Ryan ask, "were there no women writers, then, aside from George Eliot and Jane Austen, Willa Cather or Emily Dickinson?"⁵ Elaine Showalter attempts to prove that there were, with her book *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Showalter pads out the history between these canonical figures, providing evidence that women did indeed write. "If some of the writers I notice seem to us to be Teresas and Antigones" she says, "struggling with their overwhelming sense of vocation and repression, many more will seem only Dorotheas, prim, mistaken, irreparably minor. And yet it is only by considering them all – Millicent Grogan as well as Virginia Woolf – that we can begin to record new choices in a new literary history, and to

¹ Patrick Fuery and Nick Mansfield, *Cultural Studies and the New Humanities: Concepts and Controversies* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 184-5.

² Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. (Great Britain: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 765.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (England: Penguin Classics, 1985), p. 237.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 766.

understand why, despite prejudice, despite guilt, despite inhibition, women began to write.”⁶ What Showalter offers in her book is an alternative canon, with an alternative vision and an alternative aesthetic. If men chose a canon primarily exhibiting the works of men, Showalter writes a canon exhibiting the extraordinary work of women and their particular concerns, styles and success. In this way, her book is a corrective to the traditional canon that excluded women as a group from academic consideration.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* works for similar purposes to Showalter. Gilbert and Gubar work to reinstate women into the canon and to acknowledge the special hardship of literary women in English literature. Gilbert and Gubar, however, go further than Showalter by assessing the images that men as writers have projected of women as writers, readers and human beings. They maintain that men have overwhelmingly portrayed women as either monsters or angels, which are, of course, the inverse representation of each other. A woman writer, they maintain,

must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is, those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her “inconstancy” and – by identifying her with the “eternal types” they have themselves invented – to possess her more thoroughly. Specifically ... a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of “angel” and “monster” which male authors have generated for her.⁷

Gilbert and Gubar mount a convincing argument in their first chapter that women have largely been constrained by this double image of the angel and the monster, chronicling awful accounts of the expectations that the Victorian woman should be utterly selfless and completely devoted to the other people in her household, to the point where she no longer exists. Indeed, Gilbert and Gubar rightly note, “to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead.”⁸ Their description of the Victorian woman and her relation to the myth of the domestic angel is surely still relevant today: “At the same time ... the aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty – no doubt associated with the moral cult of the angel-woman – obliged ‘genteel’

⁶ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 36.

⁷ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 16-17.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 25.

women to ‘kill’ themselves ... into art objects: slim, pale, passive beings whose ‘charms’ eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead.”⁹ This description of the predicament that society creates for women is as undoubtedly true now as it was when Victoria reigned or when Mary Wollstonecraft wrote “The Vindication of the Rights of Women” at the end of the eighteenth century. Women do still “kill” themselves into objects of art for public consumption: “fragile,” “delicate,” “slim” and “passive.”

And for Gilbert and Gubar the flip side of an angel is always the monster. They also maintain that it is this that men fear; woman’s power is her secret and her “inconstancy.” They use Thackeray’s *Becky Sharpe* as but one example of how this might work:

Behind Thackeray’s angelically submissive Amelia Sedley, for instance ... lurks *Vanity Fair*’s stubbornly autonomous Becky Sharp, an independent “charmer” whom the novelist at one point actually describes as a monstrous and snaky sorceress ... As [Thackeray’s] passage suggests, the monster may not only be concealed behind the angel, she may actually turn out to reside within (or in the lower half of) the angel. Thus Thackeray implies, every angel in the house – “proper, agreeable, and decorous,” “coaxing and cajoling” hapless men – is really, perhaps, a monster, “diabolically hideous and slimy.”¹⁰

Thus, the inverse of the angel is the monster, which will turn out to be projection of the male dread of woman. Gilbert and Gubar are here not just arguing about the way society treats women, they are identifying the text as it stands as patriarchal.

Literature typecasts and imprisons women in the twin images of the angel and the monster. When a woman comes to write, she is up against these two images of herself that pass as universally true.

Gilbert and Gubar go on to record how they see women writers as working within this paradigm and finally subverting this paradigm. In so doing, they write against the oppression of women by men within the canon of English literature. They attempt to chronicle this feminine response to the male-inspired prison:

In their attempts at the escape that the female pen offers from the prison of the male text, women like Aurora Leigh and Mary Elizabeth Coleridge begin ... by alternately defining themselves as angel-women or as

⁹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 25.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 29.

monster-women ... Either they are inclined to immobilize themselves with suffocating tight-laces in the glass coffins of patriarchy, or they are tempted to destroy themselves by doing fiery and suicidal tarantellas out of the looking glass. Yet, despite the obstacles presented by those twin images of angel and monster, despite the fears of sterility and the anxieties of authorship from which women have suffered, generations of texts have been possible for female writers ... as self-conceiving women from Anne Finch and Anne Elliott to Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson rose from the glass coffin of the male-authored text, as they exploded out of the Queen's looking glass, the old silent dance of death became a dance of triumph, a dance into speech, a dance of authority.¹¹

Throughout their book, Gilbert and Gubar attempt to show how each woman writer they treat struggles with the same obstacles through the restrictive characterisation of an angel and a monster.

In this sense, the feminism that Gilbert and Gubar practise resembles the type of deconstruction that will always discover that a text manifests *différance* and aporia, and the type of cultural materialism that rediscovers that texts amount to the restrictive ideology of the context of reader and author. Gilbert and Gubar treat texts written by both men and women as the product of a particular ideology. They contend that the ideology that women are inferior to men and cannot write good poetry or novels, and will reveal themselves as either angels or monsters or both, permeates the whole of the English canon. This is not to say that they see *all* texts as necessarily propagating this ideology, rather that English literature in general either promotes this ideology as universal, or subverts it in reaction. Gilbert and Gubar read their chosen texts through this particular universal, as it were. In doing so, they deny the particularities of a text any power. The beauty, mastery or morality of a particular text is not so important as is how a text will exhibit or subvert the image of woman as angel or monster. As Valentine Cunningham explains, "in what has become a highly refined set of practices, Theory's textual refocusing become a sort of wilful overlooking. Texts are acknowledged as sites of meaning, only to be practically circumnavigated. They become places for the immediate displacement of attention elsewhere, for the instant relocating of the reading effort."¹²

¹¹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 44.

¹² Valentine Cunningham, *Reading After Theory*, Blackwell Manifestos (Oxford, UK and Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 75.

Feminism: the author and the critic

In the second edition of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar recall an occasion on which they met the poet Denise Levertov. The ensuing interpretation of this meeting sheds much light on the ways in which Gilbert and Gubar approach text, and the ways in which this approach aligns them with other materialisms in literary theory. Susan Gubar remembers:

For me, the most memorable event in that remarkably stimulating class was a highly paradoxical moment. Denise Levertov ... had graciously accepted a request to meet our undergraduates ... when in bustled a latecomer ... with a soft sculpture she had created, titled "In Mind," after Levertov's poem. A prooftext for us because it so succinctly expressed the split between a modestly compliant femininity and the energies of a rebelliously wild imagination, "In Mind" – now transfigured into its colourful fabric version – sat as a sort of offering at the feet of Levertov. "That's not what I meant, not what I meant at all,"¹³ she sniffed rather contemptuously, much to our astonished discomfort. "I've never considered myself a woman artist," she admonished her interlocutors, as (bewildered by her hostile reaction) we gazed meaningfully at our students. "Trust the tale, not the teller," we chanted at subsequent meetings of the class, praising the tactile sister arts and using the episode to instruct not only our undergraduates but ourselves as well in the vagaries of self-definition within the gender politics of a decidedly masculinist literary marketplace.¹⁴

Sandra Gilbert adds that

Certainly the eye contact Susan mentions was electrically exciting, an epiphanic network of understanding that passed among those of us who wanted to communicate agreement that "maybe Levertov didn't herself understand what she had in mind," in all her mind when she drafted "In Mind." Never trust the teller, trust the feminist analysis – at least for now.¹⁵

What is clear in their interpretation of the interaction with Denise Levertov is that Gilbert and Gubar place the rubric of feminist interpretation *before* the text, and therefore set up a hierarchy. Of course, the feminist rubric is normatively true for Gilbert and Gubar, as they make clear: "Once the scales fell from our eyes on the road to the attic, everything glowed with significance."¹⁶ Here, Sandra Gilbert talks about

¹³ Interestingly, Gilbert and Gubar make no reference to what is clearly an allusion to T.S. Eliot's "Prufrock," nor do they direct their students to a discussion on why Levertov may have employed such an allusion.

¹⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. xix.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. xx.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. xix

the experience of being converted to feminism – as the biblical image of scales and eyes and the reference to the road to Damascus makes abundantly clear – as one where she begins to see *what really is*. As Laura Donaldson notes, Gilbert and Gubar assume that their employment of the hermeneutics of suspicion ensures their access to the *true* state of affairs: “In their interpretation of a distinctively female literary tradition, Gilbert and Gubar follow the examples of Marx and Freud by constructing a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’ or the search for a deep truth buried beneath layer upon layer of social and cultural sediment.”¹⁷

When Gilbert and Gubar read, therefore, they do so with the feminist paradigm taking primary place, and the text themselves as secondary. If it seems, as it did with Levertov, that the poet or novelist had a different, indeed preferred agenda, then the problem of authorial intent rises. In her conversation with the authors, Levertov is clear that she had no feminist agenda when she wrote her poetry. Gilbert and Gubar respond by assuming that the feminist motive is still apparent over and above what Levertov had intended, and stands as primary. Levertov may not have had a full grasp of her own motives, but Gilbert and Gubar, as feminists, can recover what her poetry is really about.

This is, of course, not a new critical position. What is significant is that Gilbert and Gubar also set up a hermeneutical hierarchy in which their reading is not only more important than Levertov’s, but more important than the text itself. If we look at Gilbert and Gubar’s treatment of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* as feminist critics, we can see that they hover omnipotent over the text, with their view of the patriarchy enveloping the text completely. As Valentine Cunningham says, such hermeneutical hierarchies “are based in a thoroughgoing disrespect for the otherness of the author and his/her text. Theory suspects, bypasses, smothers, overcomes, belittles authors and texts. It doesn’t forgive.”¹⁸

The Madwoman and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*

Gilbert and Gubar read *Wuthering Heights* as a conscious attack on the patriarchy. They build on the polarities within the novel – the Heights with the Grange; Edgar

¹⁷ Laura Donaldson, “The Miranda Complex: Colonialism and the Question of Feminist Reading,” *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism*, 18: 3 (1998 Fall), 66.

¹⁸ Valentine Cunningham, *Reading After Theory*, Blackwell Manifestos (Oxford, UK and Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 141.

and Isabella with Catherine and Heathcliff; nature with culture – and arrange these polarities around the organising principle of a patriarchy and the resistant matriarchy. Gilbert and Gubar read *Wuthering Heights* as a reading resistant to a patriarchal Milton, who would have the ever-interesting Eve as evil, and the wooden God as good. They argue that, in *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë consciously inverts this hierarchy of the evil feminine and the benevolent masculine. They argue that the Grange represents the suffocating world of culture, and that the characters enclosed in the Grange are representatives of this enclosed world. Moreover, they argue that this world is *essentially* masculine in the sense that it is patriarchal.

In contrast, *Wuthering Heights* represents what is essentially feminine. The characters housed in *Wuthering Heights* - aside from Hindley, whom Gilbert and Gubar see as profoundly patriarchal since he will inherit the Heights – incarnate the feminine. Catherine and Heathcliff prove to be the feminine in that they represent the natural world, untutored by culture.

Most critics would agree that there is a polarity operating in *Wuthering Heights*, and that the Heights and the Grange are representative of this polarity. When Gilbert and Gubar portray the Heights as distinctly feminine and therefore *essentially good*, however, and concomitantly portray the Grange as *essentially patriarchal*, they reduce the novel *Wuthering Heights* to a manifesto for feminism. They characterise the Heights and the Grange as Heaven and Hell, respectively, and thus read obliquely to many critical readings that have gone before. This, they maintain, is to read across Milton's evident patriarchy:

[Catherine's] fall, says Brontë, is not a fall into hell. It is a fall from "hell" into "heaven," not a fall from grace (in the religious sense) but a fall into grace (in the cultural sense) ... Emily Brontë, in other words, is not just Blakeian in the "double" mystical vision, but Blakeian in a tough, radically political commitment to the belief that the state of being [that] patriarchal Christianity calls "hell" is eternally, energetically delightful, whereas the state called "heaven" is rigidly hierarchical, Urizenic, and "kind" as a poison tree. But because she was metaphorically one of Milton's daughters, Brontë differs from Blake, that powerful son of a powerful father, in reversing the terms of Milton's Christian cosmogony for specifically feminine reasons.¹⁹

¹⁹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 255.

Where readers may have seen Thrushcross Grange as heavenly – as indeed Catherine and Heathcliff do when they see the Grange from outside – Gilbert and Gubar invert this reading as patriarchal: “‘kind’ as a poison tree”. And where readers may have seen the energy at Wuthering Heights as malevolent, Gilbert and Gubar read this energy as feminine, “energetically delightful.”

A central part of Gilbert and Gubar’s argument is that Catherine and Heathcliff represent the feminine and are therefore the ‘heroines’ in this book. Again, there is a contradiction between their attack on the (male) assumption of an essential feminine and their own deployment of a different ‘essential feminine.’ They see the drama in the novel as unfolding around Catherine and Heathcliff’s fight to keep their feminine and natural existence alive in the face of encroaching culture, which would eventually snuff out the life of their femininity. Catherine’s rebellion is seen as evidence of her connection with a wilful nature that refuses to be cultivated by a masculine order. She is thus a model of feminist revision of the patriarchal order:

As [Catherine] gains in rebellious energy, she becomes Satanically “as Gods” in her defiance of such socially constituted authority, and in the end, like a demonic Cordelia (that is, like Cordelia, Goneril and Regan all in one) she has the last laugh at her father, answering his crucial dying questions “Why canst thou not always be a good lass, Cathy?” with a defiantly honest question of her own: “Why cannot you always be a good man, Father?”

It is important to note that Gilbert and Gubar portray Cathy as good. Her defiance of her father is justified, according to them, because her father is a microcosm of the patriarchy. Thus, instead of seeing her testy reply to her father as insolent and in fact astounding, considering a human being is dying in front of her, Gilbert and Gubar read this interlude as an example of Cathy’s raw, essentially feminine “energy.” Her diabolical energy is really an example of Cathy’s becoming an “ascendant self-willed female.”

Even more interesting is Gilbert and Gubar’s portrayal of Heathcliff as feminine, and therefore essentially good. He is essentially good in that he, over and above all the other characters, is the most raw, the most diabolical, and the most “energetic”. If we were to pick a Miltonic Satan, it would have to be Heathcliff. Gilbert and Gubar come to the conclusion that Heathcliff is a kind of synecdoche for the feminine. They contend that “on a deeper associative level, Heathcliff is ‘female’ – on the level where younger sons and bastards and devils unite with women in

rebellng against the tyranny of heaven, the level where orphans are female and heirs are male, where flesh is female and spirit is male, earth female, sky male, monsters female, angels male.”²⁰ To have Heathcliff as female makes Gilbert and Gubar’s reading coherent. It means that, if Heathcliff is the representative of the female, the novel’s obvious polarities can organise themselves neatly around the patriarchy and a struggling feminine resistance.

Brontë is most certainly working the poles against one another. That much is uncontended. However, the idea of Heathcliff as feminine becomes distinctly unconvincing when we remember Heathcliff’s treatment of Isabella, and indeed of Cathy herself. When Heathcliff and Isabella return to Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff ignores Isabella, neglects to give her lodging, and swears at her. Finally, when Nelly tries to intervene and to call Heathcliff’s attention to his neglect of this other human being in Heathcliff’s life, he responds: “She degenerates into a mere slut! She is tired of trying to please me uncommonly early. You’d hardly discredit it, but the very morrow of our wedding, she was weeping to go home. However, she’ll suit this house so much the better for not being over nice, and I’ll take care she does not disgrace me by rambling abroad.”²¹ Heathcliff’s behaviour at this point can hardly be described as anything but patriarchal. He calls his wife a “slut,” a traditional term for denigrating women into a mere function of their sexuality. He is clear that he sees Isabella’s role as pleasing him and that his complaint with her is not that she is cultured (as Gilbert and Gubar implicitly suggest) but that she “tired of trying to please [him.]” He goes further and describes the firm grip he has on Isabella’s life, confining her existence to the house and refusing her permission to go abroad. Indeed, his only concern is that she not disgrace him. In fact, this exchange and its hypocrisy betray misogyny in its basest and most blatant form. To describe Heathcliff as feminine both does a disservice to feminism and is patently distorted.

In addition, Gilbert and Gubar themselves admit that their vision of the patriarchy and of feminist resistance rejects the institution of marriage. Gilbert and Gubar describe marriage as a trap for women and as a part of the patriarchy: “Just as the similarity of Isabella’s and Catherine’s fates suggests that ‘to fall’ and ‘to fall in

²⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 294.

²¹ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights and Poems*, ed. Hugh Osbourne (London: Everyman, 1997), pp. 129-130.

love' are equivalents, so the bridle or bridal hook is an apt, punning metaphor for the institution of marriage in a world where fallen women, like the general mother Eve, are (as Dickinson says) 'Born – Bridalled – Shrouded - /In a Day.'²² However, this institution is one that Heathcliff happily takes part in, even if only for tactical purposes, which is clearly incongruent with the notion of Heathcliff as representative of the feminine. He takes part in the institution, it would seem, to take revenge on Catherine for her marriage to Edgar and to wreak havoc on Isabella. He is here using the institution for his own ends, principally to oppress and suppress two women.

Heathcliff, then, cannot be essentially feminine in Gilbert and Gubar's terms, and their feminist reading leaves much to be desired. Their reading of Heathcliff as essentially natural and feminine may well help to support the cause of feminism, but it is not a reading of *Wuthering Heights*. It is a reading of feminism to which *Wuthering Heights* become instrumental. Laura Donaldson argues, in an article arguing that Gilbert and Gubar fail to consider race in *Jane Eyre*, that Gilbert and Gubar are "blind" because they are so subservient to their feminist hermeneutic and so fail to see aspects of the texts they work with: "The true failure, then, is that of the inner eye – the hermeneutic eye – which selects some random elements of reality and foregrounds them as meaningful patterns but relegates others to a meaningless background."²³ A similar pattern is at work in their reading of *Wuthering Heights* when they force Heathcliff into a feminine mould, rather than reading the novel as a whole.

Another problem with Gilbert and Gubar's reading is what to do with Catherine the younger and Hareton. Gilbert and Gubar maintain that they end up representing the patriarchy: "[Catherine the elder] fragmented herself into mad or dead selves on the one hand [Catherine 2, Hareton.] The fierce primordial selves disappeared into nature, the perversely hellish heaven which was their home. The more teachable and docile selves learned to read and write, and moved into the fallen cultured world of parlors and parsonages, the Miltonic hell."²⁴ Catherine the elder, in particular, represents culture, violently opposed to nature: "With his almost preternatural sensitivity to threats, Heathcliff himself recognizes the danger Catherine

²² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 289.

²³ Laura Donaldson, "The Miranda Complex: Colonialism and the Question of Feminist Reading," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism*, 18:3 (1998 Fall), 69.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 303.

2 represents. When, offering to ‘forgive him,’ she tries to embrace him he shudders and remarks ‘I’d rather hug a snake!’ ... In the world’s terms, she is the opposite of these; she is virtually an angel in the house. But for just those reasons she is Urizenically dangerous to Heathcliff’s Pandemonium at the Heights.”²⁵ Gilbert and Gubar characterise the relationship between Hareton and Catherine the younger as one opposed to the feminine. Their claim is based on their assumption that Heathcliff is feminine; because Heathcliff damns Catherine and Heathcliff is “preternaturally sensitive,” Catherine must be a representative of her father’s house.

A more just reading of Catherine 2 would be that she is a combination of nature and culture. Read like this, she becomes impossible to confine to the patriarchy without ignoring the topography of large parts of the text. That Gilbert and Gubar do see Catherine 2 as representative of the patriarchy is an example of their eagerness to read *Wuthering Heights* – and consequently Emily Brontë – as consciously feminist. In so doing, they severely limit the scope of Brontë’s novel, and thus limit her achievement.

What is more likely is that *Wuthering Heights* is a novel without a central character, or ideological axe to grind. This is not to say that *Wuthering Heights* is unaware of its context, but rather that it has no unified ideological front. A fair reading, one that plumbs the depths of Emily Brontë’s achievement would be one that would take account of the whole of the novel before making assertions as to what it might be about. And this is an aesthetic reading, but a different conception of the aesthetic reading than the one that Bennett outlines. In this understanding of aesthetic reading, one would consider the whole text *before* weighing in with any questions of ideological culpability or superiority.²⁶ Since Gilbert and Gubar’s main characters, apart from Heathcliff, die half way through the novel, it seems more just to consider other options for interpretation than the one that Gilbert and Gubar present us with. Dorothy Van Ghent’s is an interesting example of a full and alternative reading of *Wuthering Heights*, and she is also interesting because Gilbert and Gubar use *a part* of

²⁵ *ibid.*, 300.

²⁶ Of course, this raises the question of what this ‘whole text’ is, since every reading must necessarily be selective and is informed by the milieu of the reader. This ‘whole text’ is, then, provisional and is always in flux. I go into greater detail on Wayne Booth’s notion of the ‘total act of discourse’ and Gadamer’s notion of horizon in Chapter 7, and both accounts help to articulate the provisionality of the ‘whole text.’

her reading to support their own.²⁷ Van Ghent sees *Wuthering Heights* as “the first germs of philosophical thought, the thought of the duality of human and nonhuman existence, and the thought of the cognate duality of the psyche.”²⁸ Her reading sees *Wuthering Heights* as a working out of the tension between primordial energy and form, which is of course a Romantic interest. Interestingly, she sees the form of the novel as intrinsic to its whole – and significantly, form is something that Gilbert and Gubar pay no attention to whatsoever. Van Ghent says of *Wuthering Heights*:

The inhuman excess of Heathcliff’s and Catherine’s passion, an excess that is carried over into the second half of the book by Heathcliff’s revenge, an excess everywhere present in language – in verbs and modifiers and metaphors that seethe with a brute fury – this excess is held within a most rigorous pattern of repeated motifs and of what someone has called the “Chinese box” of Nelly Dean’s and Lockwood’s interlocution. The form of the book then – a form that may be expressed as a tension between the impulse to excess and the impulse to limitation or economy – is the content. The form, in short, is the book itself.²⁹

If *Wuthering Heights* really is about the “tension between the impulse to excess and the impulse to limitation or economy,” then this not only helps to interpret the characters but also the novel’s form and structure. This reading notices and takes account of more of Brontë’s work in *Wuthering Heights* than does Gilbert and Gubar’s reading. In addition, with this reading, the union between Catherine 2 and Hareton would make sense. They are, after all, both the offspring of such tensions. And their union is another tethering of the polarities that created this tension.

All this talk of tensions begins to sound like Blake, whom Gilbert and Gubar accuse of being the “powerful son of a powerful father.”³⁰ He, too, talked of Heaven and Hell. And yet, it seems he is not Miltonic in the sense that Gilbert and Gubar accuse him of being; in the “Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” Blake maintains that, “without contraries is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy,

²⁷ Gilbert and Gubar say of Van Ghent that she “has shown windows in *Wuthering Heights* consistently represent openings into possibility, apertures through which subversive otherness can enter.” Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 278. That they register this part of Van Ghent’s reading and reject the rest of her reading, which her reading of windows serves, is further evidence of their over-eagerness to read *Wuthering Heights* as a feminist text.

²⁸ Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1953), p. 170.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 158.

³⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 255.

love and hate, are necessary to human existence.”³¹ What he is espousing, it seems, is the tension created by the yoking of two opposites, rather than championing one over the other. It would seem more fitting to talk about Brontë’s novel as an investigation and an incarnation of tension, rather than as a feminist manifesto. At the close of the novel, Brontë leaves us with an image of the graves of the very characters on which Gilbert and Gubar rest their reading:

I sought, and soon discovered, the three headstones on the slope next the moor: the middle one grey, and half buried in heath: Edgar Linton’s only harmonized by the turf and moss creeping up its foot: Heathcliff’s still bare.³²

In this image, Catherine the elder is caught in tension; her gravestone is “half buried” and the other half bare. On either side of her are the poles: Edgar Linton softened by foliage and Heathcliff still bare. This would also support Van Ghent’s reading of *Wuthering Heights*. Gilbert and Gubar, however, would have trouble dealing with the fact that Catherine is shown here as half nature and half culture, caught between Heathcliff and Edgar Linton. Catherine is surely better read as attempting to live, and failing to live, this tension than as a feminine warrior against the patriarchy. As she says to Nelly early on in the novel:

My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods: time will change it, I’m well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary.³³

Catherine calls both her feeling for Heathcliff and her feeling for Edgar “love,” she makes no bones about it. But as Brontë’s masterful image at the close of the novel suggests, Brontë situates Catherine at the centre of the tension that so obsessed Romantic thought. Gilbert and Gubar do acknowledge that Blake and Brontë both thought in polarities,³⁴ but they fail to note that Brontë may well have been Blake’s equal – if not his superior – in thought amidst the conversation that Romanticism generated. When Gilbert and Gubar read Emily Brontë as principally a feminist, they

³¹ William Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”, in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. ed. Duncan Wu, (Oxford, UK and Massachusetts, US: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 85.

³² Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights and Poems*, ed. Hugh Osbourne, (London: Everyman, 1997), p. 288.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁴ Gilbert and Gubar note that “like Milton and Blake, Emily Brontë thought in polarities.” Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 273.

neglect to read her as a part of her literary context; that is, as a part of the conversation that Romanticism inspired.³⁵ In this way, they circumscribe her with their feminism.

That Gilbert and Gubar do not recognise Brontë's participation in the Romantic conversation is a mark of their determination to read within the feminist project. In her biography of the Brontës, Lucasta Miller convincingly argues that the Brontë sisters were literate in both Romantic poetry and in philosophy, and were consciously thinking in that context. She notes that "Charlotte's early-established belief in the writer as an exceptional individual derived from her sophisticated childhood and teenage reading and continued into adulthood ... *Blackwood's Magazine*, and later *Fraser's* ... offered a mix of poetry fiction, satire, criticism, philosophy, history and political commentary."³⁶ Later, she goes on to describe Emily's influences more specifically: "Her poetry constantly questions and reformulates the Romantic model by which the imagination is able to 'lift the veil' of the phenomenal world and glimpse the spiritual reality which lies behind it ... whether or not the influence was consciously acknowledged, *Emily's visionary poetry shares its emphasis on nature and the imagination with Wordsworth, Coleridge, and other Romantic writers to whom she had access through Blackwood's and Fraser's.*" Unlike Miller, Gilbert and Gubar do not see the Brontës as participating in a discussion with Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Byron and the like, because this would mean that the tradition was not entirely patriarchal and oppressive, but, in part, conversational. If tradition is not entirely patriarchal, then the foundations on which Gilbert and Gubar theorise are shaken. I am not here arguing that women were not discriminated against. One of the successes of Gilbert and Gubar's rewriting is that they draw attention to the obstacles that women over centuries have faced as they sought to write. This much is absolutely uncontested. What I am contending, however, is that Emily Brontë was the equal of any of her Romantic counterparts: and as Lucasta Miller so rightly says, she was a "writer of staggering intelligence."³⁷ But Gilbert and Gubar read *Wuthering Heights* solely as a feminist text and do not entertain the notion that its concerns might have been with anything else. Perhaps Brontë was not aiming to be a woman writer, in other words, but a writer. A feminist position must make room for (amongst other things) the aesthetic to do justice to a

³⁵ *The Brontë Myth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), p. 3.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 193, my italics.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 190.

writer like Emily Brontë. This kind of aesthetic would be willing to take into account the entire work, in its context, and yet be willing to submit that reading *of the entire work* to questions that feminism might pose.

To return to Denise Levertov briefly. Levertov provides us with the perspective of a female artist on the issue of feminism. Nancy Gish, a feminist, interviewed Levertov with a view to linking her with a conscious feminist agenda. As with her meeting with Gilbert and Gubar, Levertov responded frequently to Gish with “that’s not what I meant.” Not surprisingly, the ensuing conversation is about conscious or unconscious authorial intent. In this scenario, Levertov and Gish are perhaps discussing the power of the author and the power of the critic as reader. As Levertov explains, if critics are given the freedom to use the argument that authors do not consciously intend what they write, then they are given wholesale privilege and power over the text and the author. Gish asks Levertov, “does it matter if you didn’t consciously intend that if historically that is what poets have done to females?” – to which Levertov responds:

I think it matters quite a lot because it’s a matter of reading a poem with precision and not hanging on to it, sort of manipulating it to mean what you want it to mean. And the syntax should give it the impression that I intended. It doesn’t say “when I am called the sky.” It says “when I am.” And I think that should be taken seriously. That’s why I really object to that interpretation, which I think is what people with an agenda tend to do to anything; they apply their own agenda to it, to the disregard of its own structure.³⁸

Levertov’s comment sheds important light on the kind of literary theory that informs the syllabus. She suggests that, when interpretation has an agenda, it does violence to the text as ‘other’ because it disregards the particularity of the text. Gish’s question to Levertov, in fact, gives primacy to a generalised version of history over and above the text’s structure: “historically that is what poets have done to females”. When reading a poem, it is suggested, ‘history’ comes first. Levertov responds by giving primacy to her own text, suggesting that her poem stands between herself and her readers: “it’s a matter of reading a poem with precision ... the syntax should give it the impression that I intended.” Levertov is here asking for an alternative reading of her poetry. She implies that if her “syntax” is read sloppily then the reader has wholesale power over

³⁸ *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p. 175.

her. Readers “manipulate it to mean what [they] want it to mean.” If readers can manipulate a text to make it mean what they want it to mean, then why read at all? As Francis Sparshott says, “a marginal reading that substitutes for the world with which the characters are seen to be coping an alternative world fabricated from an ideological a priori of the readers’ own is hardly a reading at all.”³⁹

If a text is always subservient to a cause, then how does the text help the cause if it becomes subsumed into what has already been said and established? One of my students studying the Standard course was particularly articulate about this when she was reflecting on the Area of Study, which had required her to read Gwen Harwood in the light of the concept “Change.”⁴⁰ The Area of Study is structured in a similar fashion, in that the conclusion is set up before the student can apprehend and articulate any questions that the text itself raises. It decides on its “cause,” its arche-meaning, and then adds texts afterwards. This requires the sacrifice of the particularity of the text. Bree here canvasses what happened for her:

Oh, see, I didn’t like it. What was the poet I studied? ... I was using the teacher’s words. I was recycling the teacher’s words and I hated that. I wanted to produce something of mine. I mean, the point had been made. I just said what I had to say. I was writing because I had to.”⁴¹

Bree suggests that she could not respond to the text as particular, her own response was determined before she began. As Bree makes clear; “I mean, the point had been made.” And this is the flavour of Gilbert and Gubar’s meeting with Denise Levertov and of their reading of Emily Brontë. Before Gilbert and Gubar even turn to Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, their point has already been made and the text only adds confirmation. The texts themselves do not alter or add to the conversation, they simply aid the cause of feminism and as such, cannot act as other to the reader.

The subsumption of *Wuthering Heights* and Denise Levertov’s poetry under Gilbert and Gubar’s feminist rubric, to the disregard of the nuances of the texts themselves, rings as a ‘patriarchal’ move in the sense in which they use the term. The individual text is appropriated by a more powerful ideology, and its particularities shaved off until it fits the shape of the movement. The text is tamed, domesticated and tutored to become feminist. As Levertov so strenuously protests, this is to the

³⁹ Francis Sparshott, “The View from Gadshill,” *Philosophy and Literature*, 20:2 (1996), 403.

⁴⁰ “Change” was the Area of Study set for 2000-2003.

⁴¹ Interview with Bree, 11.7.02

“disregard of the [text’s] structure,” which is to the disregard of its particularity and its individuality. Ultimately, subsuming texts in this way hamstring women writers. And this, ironically is precisely what Gilbert and Gubar are (rightly) working against – the hamstringing of women writers.

Levertov explains that she had no intention of being known as a woman poet, but as a poet, indicating that she sees herself as speaking to a general audience about humanity. Her vision is perhaps more ambitious than Gilbert and Gubar give her credit for:

Since I started writing when I was five, this constant consciousness of “I am a woman, I am a woman speaking as me” has never been part of my consciousness: it just isn’t part of it. I am a human being. And I am *me*. Of course if you stop to think about it I am a woman. I am also a woman in that I’ve had a child. I’ve borne a child. But it isn’t something that – as a poet I’m a poet. I’m not a woman poet; I’m not a man poet. I’m a *poet*, and that has always been my consciousness.⁴²

In the same way as she argues for her individuality, she also argues for the individual syntax and form of her poem to be counted as important. For her individuality to be disregarded is indeed to be subsumed under an ideological umbrella. “I’m not a woman poet ... I’m a poet.” Interestingly, Lucasta Miller argues that this is precisely the consciousness that the Brontë sisters had. She quotes Charlotte Brontë, upon discovering her sister Emily’s poetry:

One day, in the autumn of 1845, I accidentally lighted on a MS. volume of verse in my sister Emily’s handwriting. Of course, I was not surprised, knowing that she could and did write verse: I looked it over, and something more than surprise seized me, - *a deep conviction that these were not common effusions, nor at all like the poetry women generally write.*⁴³

She goes on to say that “such poems merited publication.” What Charlotte Brontë seems to be saying here is that “such poems,” poems that spoke beyond “common effusions” or “the poetry women generally write,” are the ones that deserve publication. She also suggests that her critical judgement comes from an assessment of the topography of the particular text, else how could she distinguish “such poems” from “common effusions?” Miller also notes that when Charlotte Brontë wrote to Robert Southey (and was rejected on account of her gender) she clearly wished to be

⁴² *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p. 178.

⁴³ Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), p. 11, my italics.

taken seriously as a writer, not as a woman writer.⁴⁴ Otherwise, she would not have bothered to write to a man within the circles of literary fame. What she sought was *general* literary fame in a time when women were discouraged from writing.

To avoid this patriarchal subsumption of text to cause, we must allow for the aesthetic – the kind of aesthetic that reads for the whole text and yet is willing to admit theoretical questions. Otherwise, great women writers will always be subtly denied their greatness. This, in fact, is the position that Germaine Greer takes in her book *Slip-Shod Sibyls*. Greer argues that the literary establishment, fuelled by particular strains of feminism, has created a double standard for women writers, which calls second-rate writing first-rate in order to admit women writers to the canon. In so doing, Greer argues the establishment merely succeeds in patronising women and preventing them from becoming truly good writers. She argues that “the dilemma of the student of poetry who is also passionately interested in women is that she has to find value in a mass of work that she knows to be inferior.”⁴⁵ Greer argues that there has been a double standard for women poets, in an effort for them to be admitted to the canon of literature. More to the point, she talks specifically about this feminist movement in English syllabuses:

Second-rate, dishonest, fake poetry is worse than no poetry at all. To insist on equal representation or positive discrimination so that She-poetry appears on syllabuses in our schools and universities is to continue the system of false accounting that produced the double standard in the first place. This is not to say that we should not work at reclaiming women’s work but simply that we should be aware that we are more likely to find heroines than poets. To award them the bays without pausing to consider whether they really were victors is to misunderstand both the desperateness of their struggles and the continuing dilemma of the woman who loves both women and poetry.⁴⁶

What Greer requires is for the aesthetic to be admitted in reading both poetry by men and poetry by women. Paul Dean, specifically reviewing Gilbert and Gubar’s feminist agenda, raises this precise point: “When confronted with a literary work, by a writer of either sex, the first question we ask is: is it any good? In answering that question we can apply a number of criteria, but the gender of the writer will not be

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 8

⁴⁵ Germaine Greer, *Slip-Shod Sibyls: recognition, rejection and the woman poet* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. xi.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. xxiv.

among them.”⁴⁷ Writers like Emily Brontë are secured a place of interest on the grounds of their work, as opposed to their gender. In other words, is it not, perhaps, more feminist to read for the whole text, and to listen carefully for the differences and strengths of each particular text?

Greer reads poets that feminists have revived, such as Aphra Behn, Letitia Elizabeth Landon (L.E.L.) and Christina Rossetti and shows them to be second-rate artists. In the case of L.E.L., for example, Greer shows how L.E.L. produced second-rate poetry in part because of her stunted development as a person. She argues that L.E.L. was in fact guaranteed an audience because she was a young woman, and points out that she did have fame in her lifetime. Greer also argues quite convincingly that L.E.L.’s poetry is erratic, badly formed, and embarrassingly confessional. For example, when Greer reads “The Venetian Bracelet,” she comments that, “for one who insists that her personal experiences are utterly irrelevant to her poetry, this gargantuan adverbial clause, with its flying buttresses of parentheses ought to find no place at all in the poem. The morose and crabbed style is not in itself attractive and the most scrupulous critic must be pardoned for harbouring a suspicion that the ‘Child of Song’ is getting something off her chest.”⁴⁸ The arresting thing about Greer’s reading is that she is completely unrepentant in calling L.E.L.’s poetry second rate, at the same time as remaining sensitive to the hardships that L.E.L. must have faced as a woman. She goes on to say, “both [‘The Lost Pleiad’ and ‘The History of the Lyre’] provide L.E.L.’s partial diagnosis of her spiritual disease, and both bear the unmistakable stylistic signs of arrested development and artistic frustration. That the poems are not better is the proof of their argument. That they are not worse is a painful indication of what might have been.”⁴⁹

At first, Greer’s brash judgements seem politically incorrect. It seems provocatively “un-feminist” to argue that a text written by a woman is not a good text. However, what Greer maintains is that to read any other way is insulting to women as artists and thus women in general. If we maintain a double standard, we patronize women and keep them locked up in their place as muse. Dropping the double standard means dropping the feminist rubric with which we read. In fact, by inference, it is

⁴⁷ Paul Dean, “Fighting for HerLand,” *The New Criterion*, 13 (8) (1995 April), 19.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 308-9.

⁴⁹ Germaine Greer, *Slip-Shod Sibyls: recognition, rejection and the woman poet* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 309.

patriarchal to read thus, because we not only keep women like L.E.L. locked up in their private torture, we lock women like Emily Brontë out of their deserved placed as writers worthy of note.

Gilbert and Gubar, in their reading of *Wuthering Heights*, are clearly insensitive to the otherness of the text and its author. Having decided a priori that texts yield comment on feminism and the patriarchy, Gilbert and Gubar paste their critical priorities all over the otherness of the text. Laura Donaldson uses Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* as a parable to highlight Gilbert and Gubar's problematic reading. She says: "Seeing (or not seeing) is the paradigmatic political and hermeneutic act ... This blindness of The Brotherhood is ironically dramatized when, during his fit of rage, Brother Tobitt's glass eye pops out. For the Invisible Man, Tobitt's dead buttermilk eye becomes a powerful emblem of how those who *should* see cannot perceive difference and how this incarcerates him in a social and political transparency."⁵⁰ While Donaldson is principally concerned with Gilbert and Gubar's blindness to issues of race, and I am concerned with their blindness to the text, I share her concern that their reading is tendentious. The feminist movement is rightly interested in the protection and expression of 'the other.' It is true that women have been cast in the shades of men and that has meant that their voices have been silenced, as Nancy Gish points out.⁵¹ But to free women writers from the shades of *men* and to cast them again into the shades of the *critic* is to ensure that they remain well within the bounds of a patronizing (patriarchal) reading.

The 1999 Stage 6 Syllabus: feminist or patriarchal?

This leads to some important questions regarding the syllabus. Firstly, to what extent can we call the syllabus "feminist?" How will girls undertaking the HSC read the texts on the syllabus? How will they read the syllabus? And, finally, how will they read *themselves* as a result of the choices that the syllabus makes?

One of the ways to approach these questions is to find out how many women are actually on the syllabus as authors. As Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar argue, if the

⁵⁰ Laura Donaldson, "The Miranda Complex: Colonialism and the Question of Feminist Reading," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism*, 18:3 (1998 Fall), 65-66.

⁵¹ Nancy Gish talks about women as poets, and says that "we cannot talk about Irish poetry but only about Irish men's poetry because the rest has been silence. And until those silences are filled there is not Irish poetry." *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p. 173.

canon is a product of patriarchal choices, we need only choose women as much as men to even things up. It seems that in this respect, however, the syllabus is not concerned with women as authors. In fact, there appear to be *fewer* women as authors on the present syllabus than there were on the last. For example, for the texts set for study 2004-2007, there are 85 texts written by men and 25 texts written by women.⁵² Research by Wendy Michaels comes up with some fairly devastating news for the feminist movement that would seek to see the canon changed in high schools. The reporting article, from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, asks: “Helen Garner, Kate Grenville, Elizabeth Jolley, where are you? Despite critical acclaim, their works have failed to make the Higher School Certificate reading list, a symptom, critics say, of a gender imbalance that promotes Shakespeare alongside David Williamson’s *Dead White Males*.”⁵³ They note that, in comparison with Ireland, where 39% of works on school syllabuses are written by women, Australia’s syllabuses have a paltry 13% representation by women. The stage 6 1999 syllabus does not have a large representation of texts written by women, whether canonical or not. *Pride and Prejudice* makes an appearance, but as Simon Langton’s BBC production, so a potential female text is subsumed by a male composer. Austen herself gets one look-in in the Comparative Study of Texts and Contexts, where Emma is compared with *Clueless*. Emily Brontë is also on the syllabus, where *Wuthering Heights* makes an appearance in the Critical Study of Texts. However, Charlotte and Anne Brontë, George Eliot, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Edith Wharton are some of the canonised female writers that are notably absent. This could be the direct result of the efforts by the syllabus to include popular along with canonised texts, but it is still evident that many canonised men keep their names on the list for study. And this is not to mention women who might have been included on the alternative canon: Alice Walker, Janet Frame, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou are all absent. And this is also not to mention women writers closer to home who might have deserved attention: Katherine Susannah Pritchard, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Katherine Mansfield, and Miles Franklin. By the feminist standards set by Wendy Michaels, Gilbert and Gubar, and Showalter, the syllabus fails miserably to include women of note (or women of no

⁵² *English Stage 6: Prescriptions, Area of Study, Electives and Texts Higher School Certificate 2004-2007* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 2003), pp. 33-39.

⁵³ Linda Doherty, “HSC leaves women on shelf,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 8 2003.

note at all) on the syllabus as compared with male writers. In this respect, it is no feminist syllabus at all.

There is, however, a more general sense in which the feminism of the syllabus must be considered, and this is the way the text, author and reader are hermeneutically positioned in the syllabus. For the sake of continuity, it is worth examining the ways in which *Wuthering Heights* is treated as text, how Emily Brontë is treated as author, and how the student as reader is positioned. *Wuthering Heights* is found in the Critical Study of Text. The syllabus says that, “this module requires students to explore and evaluate a specific text and its reception in a range of contexts. It develops students’ understanding of questions of textual integrity.”⁵⁴ More specifically, in relation to *Wuthering Heights* as Prose Fiction, students are required to “explore its literary qualities and different readings of the text, and reflect on the values implied by these readings.”⁵⁵

The requirement to read a text in a “range of contexts,” as we saw, is designed to loosen the text from a determinate meaning. The syllabus presumes that a reader’s context can alter a reading enough for it to undermine “textual integrity.” Students studying *Wuthering Heights* read the text from a variety of perspectives, the emphasis being on making the student understand that a reader’s context and values influence their reading.

If the meaning of the text is secondary to a student’s investigation and the “integrity of the text” is under question as a matter of course, the text necessarily becomes a secondary, if not obsolete, player in the reading process. Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, in this unit of work, is necessarily sidelined to make way for students to understand the “range of contexts” in which readers read.

Interestingly, Module B does not address the notion that, as a text, *Wuthering Heights* actually may have enabled that very context to take shape. It does not allow for the suggestion that a particular text may indeed change the way a culture reads,

⁵⁴ *English Stage 6: Prescriptions, Area of Study, Electives and Texts Higher School Certificate 2004-2007* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 2003), p. 18.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

and so interpret all future texts, since it does not reflect on the particularity of texts at all.⁵⁶

If students are required to assert a hermeneutical assumption over and above *Wuthering Heights*, which is the position that Gilbert and Gubar take up, then the power is all the reader's. As I have argued with Gilbert and Gubar, the reader necessarily takes up a *patronising* position. Rightly enough, Gilbert and Gubar hope that feminism does away with hierarchy altogether, which is what they are suggesting when they argue that the characters at the Heights do not operate on any hierarchal system but that feminine chaos reigns.⁵⁷ Ironically, however, the critical act that the kind of feminism that Gilbert and Gubar espouse and practice re-installs a hierarchy that occludes the particularity of text, replacing one patriarchy with another. In the same way, the syllabus prompts students to adopt a patriarchal position that does not let the text exist as 'other.'

Another perhaps more important point to be considered is the position of the syllabus in such a transaction. For it must be admitted that it is not the students themselves who are adopting a patriarchal position when reading Emily Brontë. More often than not, they just want to pass their exams. It is the syllabus that positions the students as patriarchal readers. The students are readers under orders. In this case, the arche-power is actually the syllabus. When the syllabus requires that students question the "textual integrity" of *Wuthering Heights*, the syllabus expects that students toe the ideological line on the issue. Even if a student responds personally to a text, as the current emphasis on "personal response" in the marking of New South Wales HSC English suggests, they must do so within the bounds of the rubric set by the syllabus, which is to see this personal response as a part of different contexts in which to read. This done, the questions that the student forms are diluted in the face of the meta-hermeneutical task that the syllabus requires of the student.

⁵⁶ René Wellek explains that the hermeneutical habit of taking the text to be material allows one to take liberties with the text, and forgets that we are enabled by the texts that have been read throughout history. His comments are specifically on deconstruction, but the comparison here is apt: "The view that there is 'nothing outside of the text,' that every text refers or defers only to another text, ignores that texts – political, juridical, religious, philosophical, and even imaginative and poetic – have actually shaped the lives of men and thus the course of history." "Destroying Literary Studies," *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, ed. Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 43.

⁵⁷ Gilbert and Gubar note that "*Wuthering Heights* in its stripped functional rawness is essentially anti-hierarchical and egalitarian as the aspiration of Eve and Satan." Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 274.

There is one elective in the whole syllabus that deals explicitly with feminist concerns. In the Extension Course, in Module Three, students can study an Elective called “Gendered Language.” Here, they are required to “explore the relationship between gender and the conventions, proprieties and practices of expression.” They are to “consider the nature of the influence of social roles and expectations and examine the relationships between power, gender and language.”⁵⁸ The texts set for study from 2004-2007 are John Tranter’s poetry entitled *The Floor of Heaven*, Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, Deborah Tannen’s *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, and Shekhar Kapur’s film *Elizabeth*. These texts are the foundation for an exploration of the way in which women and men have been “gendered” by social conventions created by language. The question of the patriarchal use of language to oppress women would surely be at issue here. However, it is apparent that while this module may appear to deal with the oppression of women as ‘the other,’ it is also working constitutively to oppress ‘the other’ at the same time. To squeeze Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* into such a topic is surely to read the play carelessly, with the conclusion of reading already provided by the syllabus. To watch *Elizabeth* with a view to analysing it in terms of gender and language alone pays no attention to the form and structure of the film, which are surely pivotal in a mature reflection on the film. In other words, this module encourages students to reflect on the ways in which language has formed gender, while discouraging students to attend to the text as ‘other.’ In addition, it is ironic that the syllabus is itself language, in the imperative, ordering students to form their opinions around the language of the syllabus. Students may be asked to reflect on the otherness of the opposite gender in this module, but they are being asked to assume the role of the dominant in their reading.

The net effect of this for students is that no new perspective, particularly the perspective of ‘the other,’ will be able to break its way into their consciousness. This is because the consciousness of the student has been determined a priori by the syllabus. They may learn about the issues of feminism, patriarchy, and gendered language. But a sensitive understanding of the other’s experience is studiously avoided by such a syllabus. How are students to discover a woman like Emily Brontë,

⁵⁸ *English Stage 6: Prescriptions, Area of Study, Electives and Texts Higher School Certificate 2004-2007* (Sydney: Board of Studies, 2003), p. 31.

or even Catherine Earnshaw, if the point has already been decided and the conclusions have already been written into the syllabus? In other words, the syllabus prevents students from developing a relationship with 'the other' and so being changed by that encounter. If the intimacy of experience is stripped away in the name of ideology, then relationship can never form and conversation can never start. Surely the beginning of encountering 'the other' and realising that the world is perhaps made of people like and not like me is intimacy and conversation.

Chapter Six:

Postcolonialism and the ‘form of a human being’

Somewhere, everywhere, now hidden, now apparent in whatever is written down is the form of a human being.¹

Virginia Woolf

¹ “Reading,” *Collected Essays*, ed. L. Woolf, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967), p. 29.

Virginia Woolf suggests that reading, however construed, is a human interaction with human interactions.² It requires contracts – reading relationships – to be negotiated and maintained throughout the reading moment.³ These contracts commit the reader to the author, the author to the reader. It also commits the reader to the society within which the reader reads, and vice versa. It commits the reader, in short, to the conversation that both author and reading contemporaries prompt. Jean Paul Sartre says that “all literary work is an appeal”⁴ and that “you are perfectly free to leave that book on the table. But if you open it, you assume responsibility for it.”⁵ What Sartre rightly intimates here is that reading is an interaction between two human beings. Rather than a text being a flat terrain to be worked upon, reading requires a reader to respond to a topography already formed, already begun. This is not to say that a reader cannot change that topography or that terrain by walking upon it; rather it is to suggest that if reading is a human relationship, then it must be assumed that the gesture of writing – the “appeal” that Sartre talks about here – has shape and personality before the reader picks that book up from the table. Of course, the conversation changes when another voice is added in the same way as a piece of music changes if a contrapuntal theme is incorporated into the whole. However, since a human being initiates the “appeal,” it is concomitantly true that no text will ever be the same and will not generate the same conversation as the next book on the coffee table. If a “literary work” is “the form of a human being,” as Virginia Woolf suggests, then what we are dealing with is not a flat or indifferent surface to work upon, but the product of another *human being* – an intentional utterance from ‘an other.’ To read as if the text were a flat surface, therefore, is arguably a transgression of ‘the other.’

As I have argued in the case of feminism, reading that assumes the shape or meaning of a novel before the reading process begins will force the text to become what it is not. And this, ironically, contradicts the very worthy impulse that drives feminist reading. In this chapter, I investigate the ways in which some postcolonial

² *ibid.*

³ The range of reader-response criticism also suggests this. Whether one considers Wolfgang Iser, who suggests that the reader is the co-creator of an artistic work with the author or David Bleich’s suggestion that we belong to a community of interpreters, we have good reason to suggest that reading is about human communication. Wolfgang Iser, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” and David Bleich, “Epistemological Assumptions in the Study of Response,” in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* trans. Robert Baldick (England: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 33.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 35.

readings follow similar tendencies, in that they read with imperialism as their object. Postcolonial reading, with its emphasis on digging out evidence of imperialism in the literary works it reads, reinforces its own assumptions (which does not mean these assumptions are not true.) Rather than the text "appealing" to the reader, thereby ensuring that the shape of 'the other' might suggest itself, the reader "appeals" to the text on her own terms. The net effect of this is that 'the other' in all its particularity becomes smothered. As Erin O'Connor argues, "the postcolonial narrative of literary history has largely overwritten the Victorian novel."⁶ To encounter an 'other' on one's own, unshakeable, impermeable grounds, and to assimilate that 'other' to one's own assumptions is indeed an imperialistic act.

In arguing that, when we read, we need to allow the 'other' to suggest itself rather than project our own assumptions onto the text, I am not arguing the reverse. That is, I am not arguing that we come to the text with no assumptions, or even that the text exists discretely outside of the reading encounter. Quite the reverse. Later on in Chapter 7, I argue that Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of horizons suggests that, in allowing the text to "speak" we actually bring our own assumptions to light in a dialectical reading process. The 'form of a human being,' as it were, emerges only when the self is there to act as relief and conversation partner.

Inadvertently, then, postcolonial reading that does not take into account the individuality, the particularity of a text commits the very crime that it works against. Further on in her essay, Erin O'Connor argues that "cultural imperialism may even be said to find its interpretive analogue in the critical imperialism of postcolonial literary studies ... call it Victoriantism – the mining of distant, exotic, threatening, but fascinating literature to produce and establish a singularly self-serving body of knowledge elsewhere, a body of knowledge that ultimately has more to tell us about the needs of its producers than about its ostensible subject matter."⁷ I investigate two texts and two postcolonial readings of these texts to watch this process unfolding.

⁶ Erin O'Connor, "Preface for a Post-Postcolonial Criticism," *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 300.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 305.

Chinua Achebe and *Heart of Darkness*: bloody-minded imperialism, bloody minded reading

One example of the way in which postcolonialism tends to read according to its own precepts is Chinua Achebe's famous reading of *Heart of Darkness*. This reading is important to consider as it is the seminal work in postcolonial criticism. Originally given as a lecture in 1975, Achebe's essay, "An Image of Africa: Racism in *Heart of Darkness*," makes a personal, angry demand that we read literature in terms of the moral effect that it can have on readers. He asks for an ethical reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and finds it wanting. Achebe's essay sent shock waves through the academy, and postcolonial thought developed in the wake of his insistence that issues of race should count when we appraise works of art. While his reading of *Heart of Darkness* lacks some of the critical sophistication that his successors enjoy, Achebe initiated habits of reading – characterised as a hermeneutics of suspicion – that carry through into a postcolonial habit of reading. For this reason, it is worthwhile isolating these habits in an examination of his treatment of *Heart of Darkness*, so as to reveal the kind of ethical reading the syllabus encourages its students to undertake.

Achebe's reading of *Heart of Darkness* demonstrates the ways in which postcolonial habits of reading tend to privilege an inflexible ethic before, throughout, and after the reading moment:

The real question is the dehumanisation of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanisation, which depersonalises a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot.⁸

A novel that celebrates dehumanisation deserves critical scrutiny, and many of us share Achebe's belief that reading such sentiments is bound to have sinister repercussions – especially for students eighteen years and younger. What I am interested in here, however, is not the validity of Achebe's protest against imperialism but the ways in which – as in Gilbert and Gubar's feminist approach to *Wuthering Heights* – Achebe transgresses his own professed ethic in his mode of reading. I am interested in the ways his reading "dehumanises" *Heart of Darkness* when he fails to read the novel as a whole and fails to read it closely. Europe's transgression against

⁸ Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 257.

Africa is that it drew Africa into its own economic, cultural and political sphere without reference to Africa's particular beauty, particular people, and particular customs. What I am interested in is the ways in which, analogously, Achebe draws *Heart of Darkness* into his own general ethic— an ethic that most enlightened readers would share – to such a degree that he neglects the particularities of *Heart of Darkness* as 'other.'

Conrad as a “bloody racist”

Achebe's reading of *Heart of Darkness* depends upon his thesis that Conrad positions Africa as a foil to Europe. When he describes Africa's relation to Europe in Conrad's novel, he describes the imperialist conquest. In the opening paragraphs of his critique, he notes that “*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world,’ the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality.”⁹ Africa merely exists, in other words, for Conrad to highlight the virtues and corruptions of Europe. Achebe most certainly describes accurately the political relationship of Europe to Africa and what he describes is utterly deplorable. Achebe notes that Conrad's “darkness” – however metaphorical that “darkness” is – is always connected with the African rather than the European. Its literal referent remains ‘African’ and this, Achebe claims, is indicative of a deeper racism. In fact, Achebe's critique raises the larger issue of how European literature as a whole uses and deploys ‘black’ and ‘white,’ ‘darkness’ and ‘light.’ However, my question to Achebe is whether his view is not so uncompromising as to shape reading and to distort it. Does *Heart of Darkness* – in particular – demonstrate and constitute the imperial relationship of Europe to Africa? It is arguable that Achebe has not read *Heart of Darkness* charitably enough for him to have read it closely, and thus that he is unable to let “the text”¹⁰ address him in all its otherness.

Since Achebe's accusations rest on Conrad's apparent construction of an *antithesis* in Europe and Africa, it is perhaps instructive to examine the ways in which Conrad may be, in fact, drawing *parallels* between Britain and Africa. If this is the

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 252.

¹⁰ When I speak of “the text,” I am not assuming that the text exists as a discrete entity, before the act of reading brings the text “to life,” as it were. I speak of “the text,” I speak metaphorically.

case, then Conrad could very well be mounting an attack on the imperial oppression of *both* places. In fact, Marlow's story opens by drawing this very parallel:

I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago ... darkness was here yesterday. Imagine the feelings of a commander of a fine – what d'ye call 'em – trireme in the Mediterranean ... Imagine him here – the very end of the world, a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke ... sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages, precious little to eat fit for a civilised man, nothing but Thames water to drink ... Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness like a needle in a bundle of hay – cold, fog, tempest, disease, exile, and death – death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here ... Or think of a decent young citizen in a toga ... The utter savagery had closed round him – all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men ... Imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender – the hate.¹¹

Marlow's narration, then, is buttressed by a reflection on the link between Britain and Africa, rather than holding one up as more civilised than the other. When Marlow says "darkness was here yesterday," thereby prefiguring the "darkness" to follow, he is consciously framing his story of imperial oppression in Africa with imperial oppression elsewhere. And as Dorothy Trench-Bonett points out,¹² race may have been the excuse for the rape and pillage of Africa, but in beginning his story in the Roman British context, Marlow carefully suggests that oppression is more arbitrary than Achebe would have us think. The "darkness," then, hovers not only in Africa but anywhere else that human beings dehumanise other human beings.

As if to fortify Marlow's parallelism, the novel opens on one river, and reflects on another. Achebe, because he is determined to see Africa and Europe in juxtaposition, rather than in relation, believes that Conrad creates even the rivers in opposition, "one good, the other bad." What he fails to see is that Conrad uses the rivers to draw parallels, since rivers obviously connect somewhere, and are the means by which oppressors come to the oppressed. This in turn suggests that the travesty we read about in Africa is prefigured "here" in Roman Britain. The novel opens thus:

The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails and was at rest. The flood had been made, the wind was nearly calm,

¹¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 10

¹² Dorothy Trench-Bonnet, "Naming and Silence: A study of language and the other in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," *Conradiana*, 32:2 (Summer 2000), p. 88.

and being bound down the river the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

The Sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint ... A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.¹³

What is interesting about this passage are the ways in which Conrad appears to foreground the connection between the River Thames and the River Congo. He notes, for instance, that “the Sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an *interminable* waterway.”¹⁴ Since the river is indeed interminable, in the sense that the waterway of the Thames flows, in the end, into or out of the River Congo, Conrad sets the two rivers up for comparison. Achebe argues that Conrad champions one over the other. This passage seems to suggest the contrary, since it both suggests a continuum between the two rivers and meditates on the *gloominess* settling over the Thames.

Conrad describes the settled towns along the Thames thus: “The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom brooding motionless.” Europe, here, does not seem to be the bastion of civility and enlightenment, but of death and foreboding. This description of the River Thames does not seem so different from the narration that is to follow in the River Congo, where the darkness increases the “farther back” Marlow goes. Therefore, it is arguable that Conrad has perhaps drawn parallels between the two rivers to show their similarities, over and above their differences. The two rivers are connected, in Conrad’s description here, rather than being two discrete bodies of water to be compared, one as a “foil” for the other. If this is the case, then the “gloominess” and sense of doom that we read does not have to do with Africa per se as the seat of barbarism, but with some common darkness. C.P. Sarvan notes that:

The gloom is very much over the Thames as well. The Thames as ‘a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth’ is connected with and therefore a part of those uttermost ends. The river signifies what is abiding in nature, in man, and in the nature of man, even as ‘the sea is

¹³ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 7.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, my italics.

always the same' and foreign shores and foreign faces are veiled not by mystery but by ignorance.¹⁵

It is arguable that Achebe misses Conrad's emphasis on the commonality between the two rivers because he is set on interpreting Conrad's vision as bipolar. If he is mistaken in this, then it is feasible to argue that Conrad locates the "darkness" in both instances of oppression and that his *Heart of Darkness* is a wholesale critique of the white impulse to subjugate and exploit "those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves."¹⁶ That Achebe cannot read *Heart of Darkness* like this rests on his own determination – rather than Conrad's – on seeing Africa as a foil for Europe. In these instances, this insistence means that Achebe ironically misses the very ethic that Achebe demands as a criterion for great art.

Achebe's accusation against Conrad, as he himself admits, rests on the notion that the narrator of the novella, Marlow, and Conrad are one and the same. Throughout his attack on Conrad, Achebe selects Marlow's narration and attributes it to Conrad:

Having shown us Africa in the mass, Conrad then zeros in, half a page later, on a specific example, giving us one of his rare descriptions of an African who is not just limbs or rolling eyes ... As everybody knows, Conrad is a romantic on the side. He might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet but they have at least the merit of being in their place, unlike this dog in a parody of breeches. For Conrad things being in their place is of the utmost importance. "Fine fellows – cannibals – in their place," he tells us pointedly.¹⁷

What is clear in this passage is that for Achebe, there is no distance between Conrad and his narrator. It is Conrad, and not Marlow, who "zeros in," who likes "cannibals ... in their place." Achebe even goes so far as to say that it is Conrad himself who "tells us pointedly."

Achebe is aware of the critical danger of attributing Marlow's views to Conrad. "It might be contended, of course," he says "that the attitude to the African in *Heart of Darkness* is not Conrad's but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and

¹⁵ C.P. Sarvan, "Racism and the Heart of Darkness," in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), pp. 283-4.

¹⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 10.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 254.

criticism.”¹⁸ Aware that this would indeed be critically clumsy, he defends his attack on Conrad by claiming that, “if Conrad’s intention is to draw a *cordon sanitaire* between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters.”¹⁹

Achebe’s contention that Conrad does not seem to set up an alternative frame of reference fails to take into account that the *reader* might be this other frame of reference. Furthermore, it fails to take into account the complex narrative method employed in *Heart of Darkness*, which has a tale told through *two* carefully constructed narrators and registers an ironic distance not only between Conrad and his narrator(s) but also registers distance *between* these two narrators.²⁰ Jakob Lothe says that the frame narrator and Marlow not only “supplement but also contradict one another, so that the combined effect becomes more paradoxical, ironic, and complex.”²¹ That there may be no uniformly moral character or narrator within the covers of *Heart of Darkness* allows us to regard Marlow in a variety of ways. Since Achebe not only collapses Conrad into Marlow but also fails to register Conrad’s frame narrator and the ironic distance that this “character” creates between Marlow and the reader, it is entirely possible that Achebe has misunderstood what Conrad achieves in this novella. An ironic narration *depends* upon distance – dissonance, even - between the reader and the narrator. Therefore, when Achebe refuses to read Marlow as a character, rather than a mouthpiece, he becomes clumsy with the text and does not allow it to speak.

Still further, Achebe maintains that, “it would not have been beyond Conrad’s power to make that provision” – the alternative frame of reference – “if he had thought it necessary. Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad’s complete confidence.”²²

¹⁸ Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”, in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 256.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Peter Brooks’s essay “An Unreadable Report: Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” explores the complex narrative structure of *Heart of Darkness*, and argues that the thematics of the novella are constituted by the triple framed narration. He explains that the frame narrator retells Marlow’s story, who in turn retells Kurtz’s story, but that Kurtz’s story is not told, thereby leaving a space as the “heart” of the telling. In *Joseph Conrad: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Elaine Jordan (Hong Kong: Macmillan Press, 1996), pp. 67-86.

²¹ Jakob Lothe, *Conrad’s Narrative Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 24.

²² *ibid.*

Achebe makes his claim that Conrad and Marlow are the same by using logic of elision or omission; because Conrad does not create this other character or point of reference, Conrad is not suggesting anything different to the want of a moral stance in the novel, and therefore Conrad is a racist. His argument, then, is based on a view that suggests the authorship is not arbitrary, but considered. However, if we follow Achebe's logic through, it is not clear why Conrad would have chosen to have a narrator at all. Achebe is clear that his omission of this "frame of reference" could not have been arbitrary. Equally, then, why would Conrad have chosen to have a narrator as opposed to a third person narration? Surely it would have been easier to skip the process of creating a narrator if Marlow and Conrad are truly one and the same. If the narration is purposeful and meaningful, then it follows that Marlow must be a character rather than a puppet, and Conrad must be an artist rather than a ventriloquist.

If this is the case – that Marlow as a narrator is at a distance from Conrad as author – then it follows that there is a strong case for viewing *Heart of Darkness* as a critique of imperialism, rather than an endorsement of it. Just as Sir Thomas Bertram, whom I will discuss in the next section, is the object of Austen's critique, so it is entirely possible that, at times, Marlow is the object of Conrad's critique for precisely the same reason: their implication in the dehumanising business of exploiting other people. Marlow as narrator is a character who invites both our admiration and our disgust; he is a narrator with all the requisite blind spots of a character. From the beginning of the novella, Marlow is simultaneously critical of the imperial endeavour, and yet a participant in the oppression of the African people. In this fashion, Conrad creates a varying dissonance between his reader and Marlow, now inviting our agreement with him, now invoking our disgust. As Greaney explains, "the exceptional thematic complexity of 'Heart of Darkness' is in part dependent on the *varying degrees* of insight shown by the novella's narrators."²³ Our feeling toward Marlow is complex: depending upon his blindness or insight – willful or otherwise – we develop a relationship toward Marlow that is shaped by the frame narrator.

For example, before Marlow leaves for Africa, his aunt tells him that he was "something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle ... she

²³ Michael Greaney, *Conrad, Language, and Narrative* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2002), p. 23, my italics.

talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,' till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit."²⁴ As the presence of a frame narrator allows us to register, it is quite clear in this situation that Marlow is critical of the white presence in Africa, even as he is an employee of "the Company," and is perfectly aware that colonialism is raping Africa. He is also critical, it seems, of the altruistic missionary presence in Africa, since his Aunt's remonstrations "made [him] quite uncomfortable." It is precisely Marlow's variability as a narrator – magnified by the presence of a frame narrator – that makes him a character and not a mouthpiece. This in turn puts him at a distance from Conrad, and it is precisely Marlow's varying ethical commitment that creates the ironic distance we feel as we read.

One very powerful indication of this fluctuating moral commitment is where Marlow describes his entrance into the Company's station. In one of the most wrenching parts of the novella, Marlow relates a horrific scene in which Africans literally rot and die at the hands of white progress. His lingering description is accompanied by an astute recognition of the devastating results of imperialism, making Marlow at this point a conscious moral reference point. This scene is useful as Achebe also refers to Marlow's narration here:

My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment, but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno ... black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die. They were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought in from the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest.²⁵

The scene that Marlow paints here is truly chilling, and his narration suggests that he is self-consciously portraying the horror. The scene is hellish, it is "some Inferno." It

²⁴ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), pp. 15-16.

²⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 20.

is very clear that these “black shapes” are human to Marlow, since the horror derives from their “attitudes of pain, abandonment and despair.” It is even quite clear that Marlow sees where this despair is coming from: “Another mine on the cliff went off.” Marlow remembers why these souls, these bodies, are here: “the work was going on. The work!” The repetition of “work” prefigures, in fact, the famous lines “the horror! The horror!”

It is feasible to suggest that Marlow begins to register the true source of darkness here, and to register it as an impulse to oppress other people in order to make money. Importantly, this process is legitimated by reams of paper. Legal language legitimates these deaths, as the Africans were “brought in from the recesses of the coast *in all the legality of time contracts.*” As Greaney suggests, “Marlow fully appreciates that of all the weapons at the colonists’ disposal, language is the most insidiously powerful. The ‘ominous voice’ of the law is every bit as brutal and dehumanizing as the arsenal of conventional weapons used to subjugate the colonized African people.”²⁶ Western systems of law and language have perverted what is just and right, and capitalism has turned people into commodities, they become seen as “inefficient.” The scene draws the highest level of disgust from Marlow’s listeners and it is difficult to maintain that Conrad endorses white activity in Africa.

Interestingly, this scene is followed by another scene that similarly induces our disgust as readers, but it does so by differentiating and distancing the reader from Marlow. Following hard on the heels of this description of the white rape of Africa in all its visceral, gory detail, Marlow encounters the accountant:

I didn’t want any more loitering in the shade and I made haste towards the station. When near the buildings I met a white man in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high, starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots ... I shook hands with this miracle ... He had come out for a moment, he said, “to get a breath of fresh air.” The expression sounded wonderfully odd with its suggestion of sedentary desk-life ... I respected the fellow. Yes. I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair. His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser’s dummy, but in the great demoralisation of the land he kept up his appearance. That’s backbone.²⁷

²⁶ Michael Greaney, *Conrad, Language, and Narrative* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2002), p. 67.

²⁷ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 21.

Propelled by his horror at the scene he has just witnessed, Marlow walks into the Station, and meets the very white presence he has deplored a paragraph beforehand. He is greeted by “unexpected elegance,” and at this point we are perhaps just as surprised as Marlow. The juxtaposition of the two scenes is truly shocking, as the accountant is apparently indifferent to the men dying in the shade just metres away. So indifferent, in fact, that far from feeling that this scene outside is disturbing and thus seeking solace within the four walls of his office, the accountant steps *outside* “to get a breath of fresh air.” He goes *from* the sanitized books in his room *to* the scene of death and devastation and takes solace from it! The accountant’s grip on his humanity is so loose that, as he presumably calculates the monetary losses and gains of the mine, he has forgotten just how these losses and gains come about.

Our surprise is only further compounded when Marlow adds that “the expression sounded wonderfully odd with its suggestion of sedentary desk-life.” Marlow has brought us with him and crafted our disgust at the scene just witnessed, but here we part ways. While we find the juxtaposition of the two scenes “odd,” the ironic distance with Marlow at this point invokes our criticism of him that he should find it “wonderful” – although it is perhaps equally possible that Marlow himself is taking refuge in a defensive irony here. He has just made a very clear connection between the dying Africans in front of him and “the mines,” and now fails to explicitly admit how the administration of these mines and the appalling indifference of the accountant is part and parcel of the “horror” he has just seen. Thus, Marlow is here the subject of Conrad’s critique, since Conrad secures our disgust by securing our agreement beforehand. That we share Marlow’s shock in the previous scene ensures our ironic distance from him, secured by the distance between his insouciance and our moral engagement.

The “total act of discourse:” Reading the Particular Whole

Aside from the issue of whether Marlow is a narrator rather than a mouthpiece for his creator, there is the question of whether Marlow is the centre of the novel. What or who, indeed, can be named as the centre of the novel, as the “heart of an immense darkness,”²⁸ “the horror”? If we are to decide on whether reading this novel is

²⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 76.

ethically supportable – and I am not opposed to an investigation of the ethics of reading *Heart of Darkness*, quite the reverse – it seems *ethical* that we ask these questions. Grappling with the challenge that feminism presents to his reading of Rabelais, Wayne Booth sets himself the following agenda: “surely what we shall want to grapple with is not words or propositions in isolation but the total ‘act of discourse’ that the author commits.”²⁹ If we read any part and divorce it either from the whole or from the artistic rendering of that part (or of the whole, for that matter), we invariably skew the text before us to our own ends. Ironically, even if the text were sexist, classist, or racist, we would not be able to see it clearly if we took only part of the text in isolation. This kind of critical act – where we take a part in isolation and read it as representative – is inadequate, since we ensure that the text cannot open up new avenues for us to think about ourselves or our world, let alone address such issues as the devastation that imperialism leaves in its wake. Indeed – and here I repeat my question of the last chapter – why read at all if we already know what we think?

Wayne Booth’s call to read for the “total ‘act of discourse’” suggests that we read to recognise the whole. Of course, as I have just suggested, this goal is always already offset by the fact that we experience novels – and each other – as incarnate. That is, we cannot know a novel or a poem apart from our *experience* of a novel or a poem. Therefore, before I even begin to suggest an alternative, and hopefully a fuller reading than Achebe’s, it is important that I stress that mine is but one voice in a conversation about and with *Heart of Darkness*. In suggesting another reading, I am critiquing Achebe’s reading for its partiality, and for its obstinacy in refusing to account for major parts of the novel. He does not, for example, account for Kurtz, or the “hollow men” at the station. Here, I will attempt to account for the novel as a “total act of discourse,” to the best that my experience will allow me. In reading so, I read and critique in conversation, since other perspectives fill out and challenge my own. In offering an alternative reading, I am attempting to show how, once Achebe announces that his reading is determinative, his reading has effectively refused the text and, therefore, effectively refused alternative readings.

²⁹ Wayne C. Booth, “Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism,” *Critical Inquiry* 9 (September 1982), 57.

The heart of *Heart of Darkness*

T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men" begins with a nod to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; "Mistah Kurtz, he dead." It is these "hollow men, the stuffed men" that I would like to pursue in searching for the alternative centre of "the darkness."

Throughout the novel, Marlow tells us time and again about his encounters with hollow men. These hollow men are, as it happens, always white, and the Manager at the Station is one of these men:

He originated nothing, he could keep the routine going – that's all ... Perhaps there was nothing within him. Such a suspicion made one pause – for out there there were no external checks. Once when various tropical diseases had laid low almost every 'agent' in the station he was heard to say, 'Men who come out here should have no entrails.' He sealed the utterance with that smile of his as though it had been a door opening into a darkness he had in his keeping.³⁰

This man "originates nothing," suggesting that he is perhaps one of these men that has "no entrails." His smile suggests that, on the other side of that door, the "darkness" signifies that there is nothing behind it but vacancy. Further on, the "papier-mâché Mephistopheles" exhibits the same qualities, or to be more precise, the lack thereof: "I let him run on ... and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe." The accountant is made of papier-mâché – that is, he has no body. And being Mephistopheles, Lucifer's sidekick, suggests that his insubstantiality is part and parcel of the darkness that both draws and terrifies Marlow. In both instances, we can see Marlow identifying the nothingness, the hollowness in both men, both *white* men, a creeping toward the heart of the darkness.

Thus, Marlow's search for Kurtz begins. Marlow's journey toward Kurtz is one propelled by hope for fulfilment, for relief from the hollowness. Unlike the journey of the men whom Marlow has left behind at the Station, and of the Aunt he has left behind in Europe, Marlow's journey is propelled by a search for substance, for some ultimate enlightenment. He leaves the papier-mâché Mephistopheles in order to find Kurtz, who has come to represent the zenith in Marlow's imagination – and consequently for us as his readers, our zenith. His narration constantly shifts from one focus to another, from Europe, to the Station, to the Inner Station, constantly

³⁰ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 25.

looking for the centre. Even when our impulse is to look more closely and finally attend – for example, to look more closely at the harrowing scene at the Station – Marlow's narration skips to the next scene, spurred on as if on a search. James Guetti notices the same irrepressible movement in the narration at the moment where Marlow sees the skulls outside Kurtz' place and immediately moves on:

Marlow is looking beyond or over the image even before a reader is sure what it is ... To better understand the effect of this narrative discounting and musing on visual detail, we may imagine, hypothetically, the opposite case. Suppose that "Heart of Darkness" proceeded as it does right up to the moment where the heads on the posts leap into Marlow's field of vision, but that when that happened, the response to them was like a response in Poe or in a Victorian horror story: "Good God!" (or Great Scott!) They were *human heads*! That sort of action is ultimate. To give the image such immediate recognition establishes a climax and is a way of ending the movement; and it could even be a way of ending the entire narrative ... and then it would be a simple story of moral degeneracy.³¹

But, as with the image of the African men dying outside the Station, Marlow does not give the image finality. He moves on and necessarily drags us with him. Even if we wanted to make these images final, to make it a story of "moral degeneracy," the constant movement reminds us that this is not the "total act of discourse." As the centre is deferred, so our sense of urgency and the concomitant importance of Kurtz is heightened. Despite not having appeared in the flesh, so to speak, Kurtz has become for us a *presence* in the novel, the impulse of the narration. There is the sense that Marlow looks forward to Kurtz because he is different to the "hollow men," because he is "a special being."³²

It is his search for Kurtz that, ironically, both disappoints Marlow and leads him on a new kind of search for the centre – that is, logos as speech and wisdom. When Marlow begins to suspect that he might not meet Kurtz, he expresses disappointment, only to understand the real impetus of his search:

There was a sense of extreme disappointment as though I had found out I had been striving after something altogether without a substance. I couldn't have been more disgusted if I had travelled all this way for the sole purpose of talking with Mr. Kurtz. Talking with ... I flung one shoe overboard and became aware that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to – a talk with Kurtz. I made the strange discovery that I

³¹ James Guetti, "Mixed Motives," *Word-Music: The Aesthetic Aspect of Narrative Fiction* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1980), pp. 114-115.

³² Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 28.

had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing. I didn't say to myself, 'now I will never see him,' or 'Now I will never shake him by the hand,' but, 'Now I will never hear him.' The man presented himself as a voice.³³

Marlow first suspects that what has been driving him – that is, logos – is “something altogether without a substance.” Marlow has always known that he is on a journey towards Kurtz, and that Kurtz is for him the constantly deferred hope of ultimate enlightenment, but his realisation here is that that ultimate enlightenment is characterised not by action, but by words: “I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but discoursing.”

Furthermore, as Marlow only now discovers that language is the centre of his search, he also begins to suspect something about the *nature* of language. When he understands that the word is perhaps what he has been searching for and that language is “something altogether without a substance,” he undergoes what Guetti so aptly calls an “agonising conversion.”³⁴ As if to prefigure Derrida's *différance*, Marlow begins to see that language refers to itself, and that there is nothing “behind the door,” so to speak. Expecting to find Kurtz as substantial – as *presence*, to use Derrida's term – he finds that Kurtz is a “voice” and thus begins to see the centre itself as hollow rather than substantial. Ironically, his “ultimate enlightenment” is that there will be no ultimate enlightenment.

In fact, when Kurtz dies, Marlow's conversion appears to be complete. When he speaks of Kurtz, it is as a disembodied voice. He says that, “Kurtz discoursed. A voice! A voice! It rang deep to the very last,”³⁵ and then further on he describes Kurtz's death as the silencing of a voice: “The voice was gone. What else had been there? But I am of course aware that next day the pilgrims buried something in a muddy hole.”³⁶ His death signifies the silencing of a voice, rather than the decay of a body. Marlow sees Kurtz's body as merely “something;” it is not Kurtz, but the husk of the voice where the soul of the man dwelt. At this point in the novel we are in the peculiar situation of being able to articulate what it is we cannot see – that is, the heart

³³ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), pp. 47-48.

³⁴ Guetti, “Mixed Motives,” *Word-Music: The Aesthetic Aspect of Narrative Fiction* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1980), p. 122.

³⁵ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 67.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 69.

of the darkness. Kurtz's body signifies nothing to Marlow, as we can see when Kurtz dies. It is his voice that counts. However, Marlow has already begun to understand that language – Kurtz's voice – refers only to itself. It is not a centre, but a vacancy. Marlow begins to realise that his own world is nothing but words, that words do not refer to some ultimate reality, and that we cannot chase them to a centre and discover the ultimate reality that will save us. He had thought that the "hollow men" – the papier-mâché Mephistopheles, the pilgrims, his Aunt, the accountant – were different from Kurtz. When he discovers that Kurtz was also just a voice – "What else had been there?" – he is finally ready to hear Kurtz's famous pronouncement: "the horror! The horror!" This, of course, is finally compounded when Marlow rejoins the "hollow men," lying to Kurtz's Intended and telling her that Kurtz's last words were her name. He enacts a storytelling that is completely "kicked loose from the earth."³⁷

It is interesting at this point to refer back to Achebe's critique of Conrad. One of Achebe's complaints is that "it is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the 'rudimentary souls' of Africa,"³⁸ pointing out that Africans are either silent or unintelligible to Marlow. However, if we take in "the total discourse" of *Heart of Darkness* and accept that the most duplicitous characters in the novel are so wedded to language that they actually come to *be* language, then perhaps it is not so much an attempt to make Africans appear barbaric as to portray them as whole and cohesive human beings. Achebe says that many of Conrad's portrayals of Africans are all "limbs," "rolling eyes," "savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet." It is true that Marlow's portrayal of African people usually takes note of their bodies, not their language. They are viscerally physical. However, if we remember that the white men "have no entrails," and that this hollowness is "the horror," then the fact that Africans are portrayed as being bodies is not so much a stab at their barbarity but an indication of their humanity. Unlike Achebe, Conrad does not appear to be promoting the logos as an indication of white Europe's progress or virtue, but as evidence of the decentred centre.

In this light, it is interesting to note the ways in which documentation – on which the European presence in Africa so clearly relies – is portrayed once Marlow

³⁷ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 65.

³⁸ Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 255.

comes to understand that his language refers only to itself. As language becomes self-referencing, the possibility of justice and virtue becomes concomitantly attenuated. When Marlow returns, he keeps Kurtz's documents to himself until pressed to return them to the Company. Knowing what he has seen, he is reluctant to part with these words that collaborate with what he has seen take place in Africa:

I kept the bundle of papers given me by Kurtz not knowing exactly what to do with it ... A clean-shaved man with an official manner and wearing gold-rimmed spectacles called on me one day and made inquiries, at first circuitous, afterwards suavely pressing, about what he was pleased to denominate certain 'documents'. I had refused to give up the smallest scrap out of that package and I took the same attitude with the spectacles man. He became darkly menacing at last and with much heat argued that the Company had the right to every bit of information about its 'territories' ... I assured him Mr. Kurtz's knowledge however extensive did not bear upon the problems of commerce or administration. He invoked then the name of science, 'It would be an incalculable loss if,' etc etc. I offered him the report on the 'Suppression of Savage Customs' with the postscriptum torn off. He took it up eagerly but ended by sniffing at it with an air of contempt.³⁹

The 'documents' have come to represent for Marlow the ways in which language is duplicitous as it becomes severed from any meaning. Thus, he refuses to give up the information, both to protect Kurtz from those whose experience is too limited to understand and to refuse to provide more fodder for the machine. The bespectacled official "invoked then the name of science," becoming less and less reliant on personal encounter and more reliant on the letter of the empirical law to press his case. Of course, this has the reverse effect on Marlow, who has come to distrust language. Thus, the irony becomes poignant when Marlow offers the official the report on "Suppression of Savage Customs," since we remember only too clearly the moral dissolution of Kurtz, proving to be the savage among "savages." It is Kurtz, "loosed from the earth," reliant solely on language, who is the savage, and thus the official's demand for the documents proves to be suffocatingly ironic. As if to thwart the Company's reliance on "the letter," Marlow offers the official the document with "the postscriptum torn off," symbolising the linguistic – and consequently existential – crisis that Marlow has undergone. And so, it is little surprise that Marlow's sense of what is just collapses toward the end of the novel. Conrad's profound critique of the

³⁹Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 70.

Western perversion of language reflects not only on Marlow's personal demise, but on the social implications of language "kicked loose of the earth."

Just before he goes to speak to Kurtz's Intended, and just before he lies to her, he remembers Kurtz reflecting on justice: "and later on I seemed to see his collected languid manner when he said one day 'this lot of ivory is mine. The Company did not pay for it ... I am afraid they will try to claim it as theirs though. H'm. It is a difficult case. What do you think I ought to do ... I want no more than justice.' ... He wanted no more than justice – no more than justice! I rang the bell."⁴⁰ And so, with justice collapsed, with words "kicked loose of the earth," Marlow goes to the Intended and lies to her, "with something like despair in [his] heart."⁴¹

Edward Said at Mansfield Park: Listening to Irony

As I have said, one of the key casualties of a hermeneutics of suspicion is the particularity of the text. What is interesting about this casualty is its relevance to the postcolonial emphasis on listening to 'the other' in all its particularity. Edward Said's essay on Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, in his book *Culture and Imperialism*, is another interesting case study in this regard. Said's emphasis on 'the other' is the crux of his work, and the basic premise of his literary analysis. In an interview with Joseph A. Buttigieg and Paul A. Bové, Said explains that his work was crafted around the injustice of imperialism: "I was much more interested in locating the axis of this book, *Culture and Imperialism*, in the contest over territory, which is at bottom what I am really writing about."⁴² Said foregrounds imperialism in his readings, in an effort to work against it. He positions himself as arbitrator - an interventionist - on behalf of the oppressed. Later in the interview, he says that "this book was intended to deal with those things that might have an effect on hastening the demise of imperial structure, although I realize that it's a kind of impossible goal."⁴³ Said is quite explicit about the way he views his position as an intellectual, and that is to work for the oppressed, which in turn means identifying power structures and exposing them in the hope that the exposition will elicit equality: "The intellectual's role is dialectically,

⁴⁰ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 72.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴² Edward W. Said, *Power, Politics and Culture: interviews with Edward Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan, (Great Britain: Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 185.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 185.

oppositionally to uncover and elucidate the context I referred to earlier, to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power wherever and whenever possible.”⁴⁴ Said writes the way he does, and takes the positions he does, because he believes every human life is important and because injustice flies in the face of this belief.

With this in mind, Said approaches Austen’s *Mansfield Park*. First, Said is careful to maintain that it is not a sustainable position to claim that nineteenth-century novels breed imperialism by virtue of their being English or by virtue of when they were written: “The first thing to be done now is more or less to jettison simple causality in thinking through the relationship between Europe and the non-European world ... we must not admit any notion, for instance, that proposes to show that Wordsworth, Austen, or Coleridge, because they wrote before 1857, actually caused the establishment of formal British governmental rule over India after 1857.”⁴⁵ Said is careful to avoid dogmatic claims that explicitly – and Said implies, sloppily - link canonical literature with all things unjust. Having said this, however, Said goes on to explain that Austen’s *Mansfield Park* may not be imperialist as such, but could be said to be upholding good manners at the expense of inciting resistance to the imperial project:

How do writers in the period before the great age of explicit, programmatic colonial expansion – the “scramble for Africa,” say – situate and see themselves and their work in the larger world? We shall find them using striking but careful strategies ... positive ideas of home, of a nation and its language, of proper order, good behaviour, moral values. But positive ideas of this sort do more than validate “our” world. They also tend to devalue other worlds and, perhaps more significantly from a retrospective point of view, they do not prevent or inhibit or give resistance to horrendously unattractive imperialist practices.⁴⁶

Said’s reading of *Mansfield Park* as implicated in the English imperial regime depends upon his claims about the ways in which Fanny Price profits from the slave trade in Antigua. Said rightly maintains that the wealth and comfort that we read about at Mansfield Park is a direct result of the brutal oppression of black people in Antigua. Sir Thomas Bertram’s domestic prosperity *is* directly linked to his imperial forays in the colonies. It is this that leads Said to believe that there is a covert nod to

⁴⁴ Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 135.

⁴⁵ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Great Britain: Vintage, 1993), p. 97.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

imperialism in *Mansfield Park*. He says that “the morality [of Mansfield Park] is in fact not separable from its social basis: right up to the last sentence, Austen affirms and repeats the geographical process of expansion involving trade, production, and consumption that predates, underlies, and guarantees the morality.”⁴⁷ And it is true that there are parts of *Mansfield Park* that should make us shudder at the ways in which some characters are completely unrepentant and brazen in their open exploitation of the slaves in Antigua to secure their own access to luxury.

One particular instance, which I relate because it was one part of *Mansfield Park* that made me shudder when I read it, is where Lady Bertram asininely tells Fanny, “Fanny, William must not forget my shawl, if he goes to the East Indies; and I shall give him a commission for any thing else that is worth having, I wish he may go to the East Indies, that I may have my shawl. I think I will have two shawls, Fanny.”⁴⁸ The obscene ease with which Lady Bertram associates the systematic oppression of the colonies with her own petty luxuries is startling here, and it is little surprise that Said picks up on this passage as an example of imperialism functioning in the world of *Mansfield Park*. He says of this passage that it “stand[s] for a significance ‘out there’ that frames the genuinely important action here, but not for a great significance.” And Said is perfectly right. Lady Bertram is only interested in imperial expansion because it might bring her “two shawls” (although I would not be as generous as Said in giving a shawl any kind of “significance.”)

There is something missing in this reading, however. When we read Lady Bertram’s request, we laugh as well as shudder because Lady Bertram, here, is arguably the butt of Austen’s jibe. Her repetition of Fanny’s name, and the ludicrous nature of her request conjures up an image of a woman with so little grasp on reality that to register the social injustice of her husband’s plantation, and her lifestyle, is quite beyond her. She is, in modern parlance, an airhead. What Said might be missing when he uses this passage as evidence of the way *Mansfield Park* as a whole is complicit with the slave trade is Austen’s acid satire.

If this is the case – that Austen is indeed ridiculing the characters who have actively invested in the slave trade in Antigua – then it is arguable that Austen is, at

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴⁸ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, Norton Critical Edition. ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), p. 208.

least implicitly, resisting the dominant ideology of her time – indeed arguable that *Mansfield Park* addresses and resists the dominant corporate ideology of our time. It is entirely possible that Austen is one step ahead of Said here and that in the way she characterises Lady Bertram she is implicitly doing what he requires in the very passages that he takes to be evidence of her imperialist undertones.

One of the other instances where it is possible that Said misses Austen's satire is the pinnacle of the imperialist endeavour in the novel, Sir Thomas Bertram himself. Said relates the situation as it stands when Sir Thomas Bertram is away "tending his colonial garden," and recounts how the moral state of his household disintegrates in his absence. He says, however, that this is "explicitly associated with feminine 'lawlessness.'"⁴⁹ This summation comes from nowhere, as Said does not develop the juxtaposition between male rule and female dissent at all throughout the essay. What seems more likely is that the disintegration we see in the household is a direct result of Sir Thomas's irresponsibility toward his family. Interestingly, Said touches on this as a possible reason for the moral and familial disintegration at Mansfield Park, but fails to see it as one of the central reasons why Sir Thomas Bertram invites Austen's satire. Sir Thomas neglects his wife and indulges his daughters to such an extent that they become almost entirely without regard for anyone but themselves. Most of the trouble in the novel, incidentally, could be explained by Sir Thomas's absence: Mrs. Norris usurps authority in the house, and thus spoils the Bertram girls and terrorises Fanny; the Crawfords insinuate themselves into the family and create havoc; Maria Bertram cavorts with the cashed up Rushworth and thus chooses a vacuous husband for herself, and so on. It is possible that this could be read in terms of the novel's support for patriarchy (as Said suggests) but at the very least it seems just to allege that in the first instance Sir Thomas Bertram is guilty of plain parental and spousal neglect. He is, then, the subject of Austen's *critique*. In addition, assuming that Austen is as scrupulous a writer as her portrayal of character suggests, it is instructive to remember that Sir Thomas is absent *because he was in Antigua*. As Allen Dunn points out, "Austen seems to view Sir Thomas's ventures overseas with suspicion, since they involve forsaking his agrarian home for foreign speculation and since Sir Thomas's absence from his estate during his trip to Antigua has such very destructive

⁴⁹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (Great Britain: Vintage, 1993), pp. 102-103.

consequences.”⁵⁰ If Austen is critiquing Sir Thomas for his absence, she is indirectly critiquing his abundant interest in his imperial ventures overseas.

Said does not read Sir Thomas Bertram as the subject of Austen’s critique. When Sir Thomas comes home from Antigua, for example, Said recounts the ways in which he administers rule in his household as if he were still in Antigua. It is perhaps worth looking in the same detail at the passage from *Mansfield Park* on which Said comments:

It was a busy morning with him. Conversation with any of them occupied but a small part of it. He had to reinstate himself in all the wonted concerns of his Mansfield life, to see his steward and his bailiff – to examine and compute – and, in the intervals of business, to walk into his stable and his gardens, and nearest plantations; but active and methodical, he had not only done all this before he resumed his seat as master of the house at dinner, he had also set the carpenter to work in pulling down what had been so lately put up in the billiard room, and given the scene painter his dismissal, long enough to justify the pleasing belief of his being then at least as far off as Northampton. The scene painter was gone, having spoilt only the floor of one room, ruined all the coachman’s sponges, and made five of the under-servants idle and dissatisfied; and Sir Thomas was in hopes that another day or two would suffice to wipe away every outward memento of what had been, even to the destruction of every unbound copy of ‘*Lover’s Vows*’ in the house, for he was burning all that met his eye.⁵¹

Said says of this passage that “the force ... is unmistakable. Not only is this a Crusoe setting things in order: it is also an early Protestant eliminating all traces of frivolous behavior. There is nothing in *Mansfield Park* that would contradict us, however, were we to assume that Sir Thomas does exactly the same things – on a larger scale – in his Antigua ‘plantations.’”⁵² Said is exactly right here; Sir Thomas is organising his life here precisely as he would his “plantations.” When Austen uses the word “plantations,” she is *inviting* us to make that assumption. In fact, as both Francis Sparshott and Susan Fraiman suggest, Austen uses the word judiciously to invoke a connection between slavery and Sir Thomas’s relationship to his family. Sparshott notes that, at the time of writing, Wilberforce had well and truly made an

⁵⁰ Allen Dunn, “The Ethics of *Mansfield Park*: MacIntyre, Said, and Social Context,” *Soundings*, 78: 3-4, (Fall Winter 1995), 498.

⁵¹ Said cites this same passage: Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (Great Britain: Vintage, 1993), p. 103. From the version I am working from: Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), pp. 131-132.

⁵² Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Great Britain: Vintage, 1993), pp. 103-104.

impact on the English consciousness and slavery was considered a moral evil.⁵³ Fraiman further notes that Austen uses slavery as a metaphor a second time, this time more overtly, when *Emma's* Jane Fairfax compares governesses with slaves. As Fraiman suggests, far from unwittingly assuming that the slave trade should exist, Austen could be seen as employing slavery as a "metaphor and a trope" for the male domination of women at the time.⁵⁴

What is salient in this passage is that Sir Thomas spends very little time with his family. Once again, this is the direct result of his commitment to the "hold and rule" of Mansfield Park, as Said would have it, over and above any meaningful connection with his family. Austen points out that "it was a busy morning with him," in fact, so busy that "conversation with any of them occupied but a small part of it." Far from condoning Sir Thomas's administration of Mansfield Park, Austen is here showing his obsession with the "hold and rule" of his estate as essentially draconian on the one hand and irresponsible on the other. When Austen writes that Sir Thomas "was burning all that met his eye," she no doubt intends to invoke images of Sir Thomas's plantation in Antigua and the cruelty that he no doubt employs to get what he wants. On this count, Said is surely right. Where Said is arguably missing the mark, however, is that Austen is not upholding Sir Thomas as a good and virtuous man, but in fact is holding him up to her critique. Francis Sparshott rightly suggests that Said misses the "sardonic ... raised eyebrow of an author" when he misses Austen's ironic treatment of Sir Thomas: "Austen represents Sir Thomas as by no means an unequivocally admirable figure, and his character as quite consistent with proprietorship and management of a slave plantation."⁵⁵ Said says of the relation between Mansfield Park and Antigua that "what assures the domestic tranquillity and attractive harmony of one is the productivity and regulated discipline of the other."⁵⁶ While Said is right, that the fiscal productivity of Antigua will no doubt affect how many shawls Lady Bertram can have, he is mistaken to assume that Austen believes that the productivity of the plantation in Antigua can ensure the moral fortitude of Mansfield Park. Said here argues that Mansfield Park, shored up by the plantation in

⁵³ Francis Sparshott, "The View from Gadshill," *Philosophy and Literature*, 20:2 (1996 October), 403.

⁵⁴ Susan Fraiman, "Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry*, 21:4 (1995 Summer), 813.

⁵⁵ Francis Sparshott, "The View from Gadshill," *Philosophy and Literature*, 20:2 (1996 October), 402-403 and 400.

⁵⁶ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (Great Britain: Vintage, 1993), p. 104.

Antigua, is a picture of “domestic tranquillity and attractive harmony.” I would argue that *Mansfield Park* is a picture of quite the reverse. The fact that *Mansfield Park* is as attractive to read as it is, is a measure of the internal and domestic strife at the house. For a novel to be interesting, there needs to be tension, strife, disagreement, and dissolution, and in Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, that strife is manifest in the supposedly genteel Bertram household. It is not, as Said maintains, a “tranquil” place to be at all.⁵⁷

In fact, the motif of the absentee father is one that could be carried through the entire novel. An examination of the other father in the story, Mr. Price, would fortify the claim that Austen critiques the ways in which fathers can neglect their familial connections. As Susan Fraiman suggests, Said does not consider just how prominent the critique of the absent father is throughout Austen’s entire oeuvre.⁵⁸ The pattern of absent fathers leads us to a very different conclusion from Said’s. As with the previous passage, I quote the very same passage that Said cites from *Mansfield Park*:

Fanny was almost stunned. The smallness of the house, and thinness of the walls, brought every thing so close to her, that, added to the fatigue of her journey, and all her recent agitation, she hardly knew how to bear it. Within the room all was tranquil enough, for Susan having disappeared with the others, there were soon only her father and herself remaining; and he taking out a newspaper – the accustomed loan of a neighbour, applied himself to studying it, without seeming to recollect her existence. The solitary candle was held between himself and the paper, without any reference to her possible convenience; but she had nothing to do, and was glad to have the light screened from her aching head, as she sat in bewildered, broken, sorrowful contemplation. She was at home, But alas! It was not such a home, she had not such a welcome as – she checked herself; she was unreasonable A day or two might shew the difference. *She* only was to blame. Yet she thought it would not have been so at Mansfield. No, in her uncle’s house there would have been a consideration of times and seasons, a regulation of subject, a propriety, an attention towards every body which there was not here.⁵⁹

First and foremost, this passage is an exploration of Fanny’s individual consciousness. She tries to overcome her hurt and her own tendency to fall into self-pity – so, in this passage we see Fanny warring against herself. On the one hand she feels neglected,

⁵⁷ Although, it is fair to say, that Fanny sometimes experiences *Mansfield Park* as a tranquil place to be.

⁵⁸ Fraiman says that “had Said placed Sir Thomas Bertram, for example, in line with the deficient fathers who run unrelentingly from *Northanger Abbey* through *Persuasion*, he might perhaps have paused before assuming Austen legitimizes the mastery of *Mansfield Park*.” Susan Fraiman, “Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism,” *Critical Inquiry*, 21:4 (1995 Summer), 808.

⁵⁹ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York: Norton, 1998), pp. 259-60.

and on the other she attempts to justify that father's neglect as understandable: "she checked herself; she was unreasonable." Against this fluctuating consciousness, Fanny idealises her uncle's house in reaction to feeling excluded from her father's. The primary effect, then, is Austen's creation of Fanny's fluctuating and textured consciousness in the narrative.

Said's interpretation of this passage is extremely interesting and convincing. He sees this passage as illuminating the ways in which space is administered to ensure sociability: "In too small a space, you cannot see clearly, you cannot think clearly, you cannot have regulation or attention of the proper sort. The fineness of Austen's detail ("the solitary candle was held between himself and the paper, without any reference to her possible convenience") renders very precisely the dangers of unsociability."⁶⁰ There is no doubt that Fanny's being "stunned" has much to do with the rupture involved in moving from one enormous, well appointed house to a small house that is run much like a circus. And there is no doubt that Fanny's shock can be registered as the shock of moving between classes and "spaces." However, not only does Said fail to register the creation of Fanny's consciousness in the passage, he also misses the critique of Fanny's father, a critique similar to the one she exercises on to Sir Thomas. Said sees "the solitary candle ... held between himself and the paper" as Austen's critique of Mr. Price's manners, but he misses the emphasis of the passage on the sheer lack of consideration and love that Mr. Price shows Fanny. His movements around the house are, as Fanny registers it, "without any reference to her possible convenience." Mr. Price may come from a lower class than Sir Thomas, but the lack of interest and love with which he approaches his daughters is exactly what earns Austen's critique in *both* cases. As Fraiman convincingly argues, "Said's premise ... is undercut by Austen's own critique of the moral blight underlying Mansfield's beauty, which she achieves not least by blurring the normative class opposition between Mansfield and Portsmouth."⁶¹

In fact, when the rest of the chapter is considered, it is very clear that Austen takes time to emphasise Mr. Price's abominable behaviour and her critique of it. For example, when Fanny comes home, Mr. Price walks into the house as if he were walking into a bar: "lastly in walked Mr. Price himself, his own loud voice preceding

⁶⁰ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (Great Britain: Vintage, 1993), p. 105-6.

⁶¹ Susan Fraiman, "Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry*, 21:4 (1995 Summer), 809.

him, as with something of the oath kind he kicked away his son's portmanteau, and his daughter's band-box in the passage, and called out for a candle; no candle was brought, however, and he walked into the room." Rather than, say, seeing his children's things and seeing to their being placed in their rooms for their convenience, he swears at his own inconvenience at having to step over their bags. It is astounding that his children's bags do not elicit some excitement at their being home! Secondly, what is striking about Mr. Price is his complete disregard for Fanny, and Austen takes pains to spell this out for us. After greeting his son William, and gushing over the sailing of the Thrush, William reminds Mr. Price that he has entirely forgotten about his daughter (who has, incidentally, been away longer than William.) Mr. Price's response is telling:

With an acknowledgement that he had quite forgot her, Mr. Price now received his daughter; and, having given her a cordial hug, and observed that she was grown into a woman, and he supposed would be wanting a husband soon, seemed very much inclined to forget her again. Fanny shrunk back to her seat, with feelings sadly pained by his language and his smell of spirits; and he talked on only to his son, and only of the Thrush, though William, warmly interested, as he was, in that subject, more than once tried to make his father think of Fanny, and her long absence and long journey.⁶²

Mr. Price's hug is "cordial," and one wonders whether she would have even garnered that much affection if William had not said something. It is not necessarily Mr. Price's class that dictates his disastrous relationship with his daughter, but his disregard for her and her feelings. In a poignant moment, Fanny registers that her father does not want to talk to her by virtue of her being a daughter: "he talked on only to his son, and only of the Thrush." Not only that, Austen quietly registers the way in which Mr. Price views his daughter in much the same fashion as Sir Thomas views his plantation in Antigua; she would be "wanting a husband soon." Noting her age and what that might financially entail for him, his blithe observation suggests that Mr. Price views Fanny as a commodity. In this sense, his manner of relating to the world around him is exactly the same as Sir Thomas's manner of relating to his – albeit bigger – world. Both see others around them as commodities to be managed or exploited, rather than families to be loved and learned from. In Fraiman's words, Austen depicts a domination that extends further than the imperialist ventures that Sir

⁶² Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), p. 258.

Thomas undertakes: "The barbarity she has in mind is not literal slavery in the West Indies but a paternal practice ... to put female flesh on the auction block in exchange for male status."⁶³ Austen makes a quiet but striking connection between the imperialist tendency in Sir Thomas, and Mr. Price's proprietorial attitudes in this passage. Domination and its disastrous effects, then, extend far beyond what Said imagines in *Mansfield Park*.

To return to the passage that Said cites as evidence of the way in which the aristocratic use of space is played off against the working class use of space, it is interesting that he does not note that one of the significant features of the passage is Fanny's despair over her being unloved. Earlier in this chapter, Austen makes it clear that "would they but love her, she should be satisfied." So, when Mr. Price sits with the candle between himself and his paper, in complete disregard of the daughter he has not seen for much of her youth, it reinforces Austen's interest in the absent father. It is interesting, at this point, to remember the critique, albeit a relatively gentle critique, that Mr. Bennett invites in *Pride and Prejudice*. It is largely through his lackadaisical approach to his family that much of the trouble ensues in the novel. In all three examples - Sir Thomas, Mr. Price and Mr. Bennett - we find examples of the ways in which absent fathers make life hollow and difficult for their daughters and wives.

The practical point of all this is that Said has, in both passages, overlooked the satire and the critique of domination in the very passages that he uses to establish a case for the novel's imperialist complicity. There is more than one kind of 'imperialism.' Wayne Booth suggests that when we read to privilege our own agenda, we "overstand" the text rather than *understand* it: "the really pressing questions arise when we deliberately free ourselves from obligation merely to *understand* 'the work itself,' and happily violate its invitations in order to achieve *overstanding*."⁶⁴ When Said privileges the postcolonial reading here, he over-stands the text and thus cannot let it speak. In the interview with Buttigieg and Bové, he explains that "all the literary analyses, explications and commentary that I have in this book I see as *under* – "*under*" in the sense of *commanded* by, or *patronized* by, or *under* the influence of,

⁶³ Susan Fraiman, "Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry*, 21:4, (1995 Summer), p. 812.

⁶⁴ Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 115.

some fairly gross historical realities, which for me are basically two: on the one hand, the reality of the colonized and, on the other, the reality of a colonizer.”⁶⁵ In assuming the priority of theory to text, Said make it clear that the hermeneutics of suspicion stands *over* the text, ironically for the sake of a resistance to domination. Since it could be argued that hearing Austen’s satire is crucial to understanding her social vision, when Said cannot hear Austen, it is possible that he has read with his own thesis so insistently in mind as to read against the grain, so to speak. In other words, when he considers postcolonial sentiment before attending to the text, he glosses over Austen’s satirical critique and betrays her vision of social justice, not only for her world, but for our world. Ironically, the postcolonial reading does not leave room for Austen to speak about this vision. It would be disingenuous not to qualify my comments here, by also saying that Said’s reading does give the sense that he knows the geography of the text he reads well, as one who loves what he reads. Said says that “literary analysis is interesting to me because, unlike some people in my field, I actually like books, poems and writers that I read.”⁶⁶ I am not suggesting that Said has an uncritical objection to canonical works per se. I believe him entirely when he defends Austen against those who would seek to exclude her from the curriculum and the canon for her imperialist sentiments:

It would be silly to expect Jane Austen to treat slavery with anything like the passion of an abolitionist or a newly liberated slave ... Yes, Austen belonged to a slave-owning society, but do we therefore jettison her novels as so many trivial exercises in aesthetic frumpery? Not at all, I would argue, if we take seriously our intellectual and interpretative vocation to make connections, to deal with as much of the evidence as possible, fully and actually, to read what is there or not there, above all, to see complementarity and interdependence instead of isolated, venerated, or formalized experience that excludes and forbids the hybridizing intrusions of human history.⁶⁷

Said’s argument here depends upon the assumption that our prime duty – “above all” – is “to make connections” rather than first respond to the particular text. Of course, any response necessarily makes connections so that we can make sense of any text, but Said assumes that the opposition between “complementarity and interdependence”

⁶⁵ “Culture and Imperialism: Interview with Buttigieg and Bové, 1993,” *Power, Politics and Culture: interviews with Edward W. Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (Great Britain, Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 193, my italics.

⁶⁶ “Culture and Imperialism; Interview with Buttigieg and Bove, 1993,” *Power, Politics and Culture: interviews with Edward W. Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (Great Britain, Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 197.

⁶⁷ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Great Britain: Vintage, 1993), p. 115.

and “isolated, venerated, or formalized experience” is absolute. In other words, he assumes that an aesthetic reading can be at once separated from a historical and ethical reading. As I will argue in the next chapter more fully, this dichotomy will prove itself to be a false dichotomy, since an investment in an aesthetic reading necessarily binds a reader to the action and its ethical consequences – consequences that cannot be guessed at before what Martha Nussbaum calls “excursions of sympathy” have taken place.⁶⁸ Not only that, when he suggests that this aesthetic reading “forbids the hybridizing intrusions of human history,” Said fails to outline how we are to decide which particular “history” we see as “intruding.” His hermeneutical assumptions have not allowed him to subject his own assumptions to that ethical interrogation that he suggests as necessary to make space for ‘the other,’ thus making his argument as a-historical as the kind of aesthetic reading he warns against.

Said does argue that a text can be valuable despite the fact that it does not overtly resist imperialism, suggesting that a text can have worth outside an explicit postcolonial framework. Elsewhere, Said suggests that he reads with a postcolonial vision and an aesthetic appreciation simultaneously: “it’s possible to read Jane Austen with a sensitivity toward it as a work of art and yet also to locate it in this other world that I’ve been talking about at the same time.”⁶⁹ Said’s position here is more nuanced than, say, Achebe’s, who does not consider another way of reading the text as politically viable, let alone consider reading it simultaneously as a work of art. What is striking about Said’s reading of *Mansfield Park* is that, not only does he see aesthetic reading and ethical reading as necessarily distinct, his oblique, postcolonial sentiment is indeed borne out in - *and from* - Austen’s novel. Austen’s acute, liberal satire of the colonising people is itself part of the heritage from which postcolonial ideology derives. One of the ironies is that he almost comes upon this realisation himself:

There is a paradox here in reading Jane Austen which I have been impressed by but can in no way resolve. All the evidence says that even the most routine aspects of holding slaves on a West Indian sugar

⁶⁸ Martha C. Nussbaum, “James’ The Golden Bowl: Literature as Moral Philosophy,” *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 142.

⁶⁹ “Culture and Imperialism: Interview with Buttigieg and Bove, 1993”, *Power, Politics and Culture: interviews with Edward W. Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (Great Britain, Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 198.

plantation were cruel stuff. And everything we know about Austen and her values is at odds with the cruelty of slavery. Fanny Price reminds her cousin that after asking Sir Thomas about the slave trade, 'There was such a dead silence' as to suggest that one world could not be connected with the other since there simply is no common language for both. That is true. But what stimulates the extraordinary discrepancy into life is the rise, decline, and fall of the British empire itself and, in its aftermath, the emergence of a post-colonial consciousness. In order more accurately to read words like *Mansfield Park*, we have to see them in the main as resisting or avoiding that other setting, which their formal inclusiveness, historical honesty, and prophetic suggestiveness cannot completely hide. In time there would no longer be a dead silence when slavery was spoken of, and the subject became central to a new understanding of what Europe was.⁷⁰

Firstly, I wonder if Said's "paradox" is not a paradox at all. That is, perhaps his first hunch about Austen was right – that she is working from a humanist position that resists slavery on the grounds of the sanctity of human life. Perhaps *Mansfield Park* is working to "resist...that other setting," in a sense other than that which Said intends even as Said critiques the novel for failing to do so in this sense.

The only way we can come to this conclusion is by taking into account Austen's habit of employing satire to castigate, in varying degrees of severity, the characters that transgress her humanistic vision. Still further, registering this habit of Austen's means reading aesthetically - "carefully," as Denise Levertov has it. To read aesthetically is to read *ethically*. The two cannot be happily separated, as Said hopes they can. For example, it is possible that this "dead silence" is in fact Sir Thomas's tacit acknowledgement that his ownership of slaves is wrong, rather than being evidence of there being no language with which to describe it. Fanny's re-telling of the event registers her own naivety and innocence at the 'embarrassing' ground she has just inadvertently exposed. Austen requires us to register this innocence, so that – as attentive readers – we see Austen questioning the morality of the practice. In short, that Fanny asks the question, and that Sir Thomas refuses to answer, is evidence that Austen's stance on slavery is perhaps not so far from "the passion of an abolitionist" as might be thought. As I have been arguing, it is more plausible that Austen assumes this passion as self evident, and uses it as a metaphor for "imperialism" in the home. Fraiman suggests this very thing when she considers the second time that Fanny is recorded as confronting Sir Thomas: "the key moral and political confrontation of the

⁷⁰ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Great Britain: Vintage, 1993), p. 115.

book remains ... that played out between this nobleman and the timid young woman who, astonishingly, stands up to him by refusing to marry Henry Crawford."⁷¹

I am running the risk here – and perhaps committing the crime – of solipsistically claiming that I am right and Said is wrong in his interpretation of *Mansfield Park*. Perhaps. What I am attempting to show is that Said's commitment to a postcolonial vision means that he privileges this vision in such a way as to prevent him from seeing the unique shape of the text itself. Ironically, what this has meant, I argue, is that he has missed the more particularised postcolonial vision of *Mansfield Park*. Francis Sparshott complains that Said privileges a "generalized and unhistorical 'slavery' that belongs more to ideology than to the real world in which the novel's action is placed. Instead of adding a missing dimension, it obliterates an important part of the novel's reality."⁷² While Sparshott is surely not correct to say that the slavery Said refers to is "unhistorical" – England's participation in the slave trade is distinctly 'historical' – he does raise the issue of general reading at the expense of the particular text. To return to my original argument, Said's commitment to this "other way of reading" – which is a commitment to the hermeneutics of suspicion – has blurred his reading of the text in such a way as to obscure its otherness.

Interestingly, my critique takes its cue from Edward Said himself, who is clearly committed to the sanctity of 'the other' and of human life. In a discussion with Bonnie Marranca, Marc Robinson and Una Chaudhuri, Said says that, "the universal is always achieved at the expense of the native."⁷³ I believe that he is absolutely right here. To extrapolate Said's point, it is also true that, when the native (or 'the other') is suffocated by the universal, the universal will never change and must remain immune to anything new. In the case of *Mansfield Park*, the universal – which in this case is Said's commitment to a postcolonial reading – is achieved at the expense of the native: *Mansfield Park* itself.

⁷¹ Susan Fraiman, "Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry*, 21:4 (1995 Summer) 811.

⁷² Francis Sparshott, "The View from Gadshill," *Philosophy and Literature*, 20:2 (1996 October), 403.

⁷³ *Power, Politics and Culture: interviews with Edward W. Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (Great Britain, Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 111.

An Imperative Syllabus

The great problem with this approach is twofold. Firstly, if the way that we approach text informs our pedagogy and the way we treat each other (which are arguably one and the same thing,) then we model a relationship of domination to our students. Secondly, when Said places himself in a morally superior position to *Mansfield Park*, he uncritically sweeps away the foundations of his own liberal humanist heritage, which allowed the sentiments of postcolonialism to flourish. In such a fashion, we create a system that shuts out any possibility of surprise or change. In order to have good dialogue, to debate and thus establish some kind of egalitarian classroom, we must *listen*. And if we do not listen to texts, then we have no reason to listen to each other. Thus, the hermeneutics of suspicion threatens genuine democratic dialogue, because the truth has been decided a priori.

PART THREE – English in the Classroom

Chapter Seven:

Conversation in the Classroom: Hope, Rhetoric, and a Civic Education

Rhetoric is not just what Richards calls ‘the art of removing misunderstanding;’ it is the communal art of pursuing new truth. – Anon.

Thus far, my critiques of deconstruction, cultural materialism, feminism and postcolonialism in the classroom have centred on the practical outcomes of implementing these theories. I have not quarreled with the basic ethic that drives any of these branches of theory. In fact, my critiques of these theories have stemmed from my commitment to that ethic: an openness to ‘the other,’ that is, and to the unexpected. What has emerged is that the practical implications of the literary theories implemented by the Stage 6 2000 Syllabus are, ironically, the reverse of what the theories intend. They intend to open a space for ‘the other,’ but in so doing, set that theory up as an untouchable ontology, and thus shut out questions and conversations that might threaten the sovereignty of that central ontology. ‘The other’ becomes almost completely inaccessible.

How, then, can we develop pedagogy and a theory of reading that invites ‘the other’ into the conversation? What tools do teachers need to encourage students to enter into conversation? After all, as we have seen, it is impossible to decree an ethic – even one based on equality and fairness – and trust that it will find its own pedagogy. In my search for a system of thought that would encourage conversation in the classroom, I have found rhetoric more serviceable than any other system. The American tradition of rhetoric, in particular, has given me some tools with which to think and speak about why English might have a central civic function inseparable from the aesthetic experience of reading literature. Because rhetoric is epistemic, it is a system of thought that deals effectively with reading *and* pedagogy, which is the intersection I am most interested in. It is a “way of knowing” that makes significant room for the kind of activity that students engage in in an English classroom. Moreover, and more importantly, this tradition of rhetoric has allowed me to form a framework that constitutes the very ethic that I strive for. As this is my main criticism of the theories I have dealt with throughout this thesis – that they decree openness to ‘the other’ and yet constitutively shut out conversations – this is key in my decision to investigate rhetoric as my architectonic rubric.

If we want our students to be engaged with the civic constitution of Australia, I contend, then we need to be able to see that *ethics* are created in community.¹ That is, ethics arise out of conversation, experiencing case studies, and consensus. They do not arise out of an immutable ontology that insists that students see the world in such and such a way, and respond in such and such a way. Essentially, the allure that rhetoric holds for me as a reflective practitioner is that, in a rhetorical framework, ethical truth is arrived at through community, rather than handed down from any academy – be that academy avant-garde or traditional. If rhetoric were practiced in the classroom, then, this would mean active and real participation from students and teachers in the creation of ethics. My reasons for believing that this real participation is important are not merely sentimental – I do care deeply about my students and consider them to be thinkers in their own right – but are deeply theoretical and practical at the same time. The ethics that the syllabus seeks is essentially a social ethics. The problem is that the syllabus does not arrive at these ethics via social process.

Conversely, rhetoric sees the health of a civic state as inextricably wedded to the social agency that rhetoric provides. The great civic rhetorician, Cicero, describes the creation of a civic state thus:

Nay more (not to have you for ever contemplating public affairs, the bench, the platform, and the Senate-house), what in hours of ease can be a pleasanter thing or one more characteristic of culture, than *discourse* that is graceful and nowhere uninstructed? For the one point in which we have our very greatest advantage over the brute creation *is that we hold converse one with another*, and can reproduce our thought in word. Who therefore would not rightly admire this faculty, and deem it his duty to exert himself to the utmost in this field, and that by so doing he may surpass men themselves in that particular respect wherein chiefly men are superior to animals? To come, however, at length to the highest achievements of eloquence, what other power could have been strong enough either to gather scattered humanity into one place, or *to lead it out* of its brutish existence in the wilderness up to our present condition of civilization as men and citizens, or after the establishment of social communities, *to give shape* to laws, tribunals, and civic rights?²

¹ Ethics is a term I prefer to politics, since it gives the participants in my classroom more latitude. I will discuss these “excursions of sympathy” in more detail in my discussion of Martha Nussbaum’s thought on the import of literature in our ethical development.

² Cicero, *De Oratore*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. E.W. Sutton and H. Rackham (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1996), Bk I, viii, p. 25

The picture that Cicero paints here is of a civic leader, who is able, through “eloquence” (his word for rhetoric), first to create a social community and then to open discussions in order to give this community shape. Interestingly, he does not stipulate which ethics will give this community a social shape – for a social shape is surely one that includes all “scattered humanity.” His emphasis is on “discourse,” on the ability to “hold converse with one another.” He therefore implies that the ethics and the particular judgements that will shape this community will come out of the conversation we hold with one another, rather than the other way around. The syllabus is contrary to what Cicero proposes in this one fundamental way: it proposes that conversation will ensue *after* the ethic is provided a priori.

Cicero then implies that the ability to lead and to author a civic life comes from this ability to discourse, to enter into conversation. What he proposes (to bring his comments to the situation at hand) is that students in New South Wales be authors, instead of critics, that they need to be involved in giving shape to a state, rather than applying an ontological ethic to a particular situation. If we make his comments even more specific to our situation, what Cicero is proposing is that we need to be able to see reading as a *conversation* with someone else, and the process of that conversation as *generative* – and thus the student becomes an author. What we have at the moment is a situation wherein a student is encouraged to see the reading process as one of application; here is an ethic, now apply it to the text. In this scenario, the reading process is not a conversation, but is a transaction shaped by a power play. Ironically, by putting students in this position of power, the reading moment cannot be generative and the student loses authorship. What we need, for the civic health of New South Wales and the wider country, is a conception of reading that moves students from disengaged critics to the sense of agency that conversation offers.

For guidance, I have borrowed most of my definitions of rhetoric and the way it works from three thinkers: Wayne C. Booth, Martha C. Nussbaum, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. The two former are firmly within the American tradition of rhetoric, while the latter comes from the German philosophical tradition. However, all three – because of their similar dedication to rhetoric as a way of knowing and therefore a way of reading – have proved invaluable to me in establishing an alternative framework for my English classroom. That said, I offer Wayne Booth’s definition of rhetoric by way of introduction:

In short, rhetoric will be seen as *the entire range of resources that human beings share for producing effects on one another*: effects ethical (including everything about character), practical (including political), emotional (including aesthetic), and intellectual (including every academic field). It is the entire range of our use of “signs” for communicating, effectively or sloppily, ethically or immorally. At its worst, it is our most harmful miseducator – except for violence. But at its best – when we learn to listen to the “other,” then listen to ourselves and thus manage to respond in a way that produces genuine dialogue – it is our primary resource for avoiding violence and building community.³

The first thing that attracted me to rhetoric as a way of thinking and speaking about what I do was the fact that its central emphasis, when “at its best,” is on *listening*. Because it is centred on dialogue as a way of knowing, it values questioning, and will invariably encourage students to challenge stock notions of all kinds. It encourages a civic commitment to the subject matter and to each other, and it allows for ‘the other’ to surprise us in any way it chooses.

What this definition does not do is outline how this takes place in the specific context of reading. I undertake, by unpacking the thoughts of the three thinkers I outlined above, to show here how and why rhetoric encourages us to read. I will then chronicle a specific case from my classroom and compare what my class and I achieved with what rhetoric teaches, to test if rhetoric truly provides the freedoms I hope for.

Questioning in the Hermeneutical Process

1) Why is reading a rhetorical act?

The syllabus has made a strong decision in seeing reading as an inescapably political act. Influenced by the theorists that I have examined in its emphasis on oblique reading, the syllabus indicates its suspicion of what it sees as the pretense of aesthetic reading to be essentially a-political. Its “usefulness,” then, is wedded to the development of oblique reading in its students as “political reading.” As I suggested in Chapter Two, the central justification for teaching the subject “English” has indeed focussed on the civic consequences of reading. The syllabus talks about the need to “foster the intellectual, social and moral development of students, in particular developing their ... knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes in the field of study

³ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication* (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. xi-xii.

they choose, [their] capacity to manage their own learning, [their] desire to continue learning ... [their] capacity to work together with others, [and their] respect for the cultural diversity of Australian society.”⁴ What the syllabus suggests is that, whether we are aware of it or not, reading has civic consequences. Where I disagree, however, is with the assumption that reading a text aesthetically will always be an a-political (or covertly politically oppressive) act. Martha Nussbaum’s work explains why aesthetic reading is never a-political, but is highly wedded to the ethical development of the interpreter. In her work on Henry James and his fiction, Martha Nussbaum explains that literature – “literature” is her term – throws light on the moral condition of human beings as no other discipline can. Coming from a ‘philosophical’ rather than ‘literary’ background, she explains that philosophical language, which seeks to explain and explore the condition of human beings simply, plainly and universally, without the encumbrances of character, style, plot or verse, fails to achieve what literature achieves in its depiction of the moral quandaries and choices that human beings of all backgrounds find themselves in.⁵ She takes her cue from Aristotle, who believes that ethics and morality are not something that can be arrived at by deduction, since it cannot exist prior to a case, and cannot exist without consensus centred on those case studies.⁶ Our ethics are arrived at through dialogue and, importantly, practice.

This said, it becomes clearer why Nussbaum insists that philosophy is unable to approach the complexity of human ethical and moral predicaments, manifold in their particular instances. Speaking in general terms, philosophy finds it difficult to explore the sheer range of particulars that we see all around us every day, in every moral predicament that we see on the news, in classrooms and in our homes. These moral predicaments include particular instances of the kind of sexism, classism and racism explored by ideological criticism. Literature, on the other hand, because it is embedded in “style,” just as we are embedded in our skins and in our culture, explores these universal predicaments particularly:

[The task of assessing moral choice] cannot be easily accomplished by texts which speak in universal terms – for one of the difficulties of deliberation stressed by this view is that of grasping the uniqueness of the

⁴ Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Syllabus* (Sydney, Board of Studies: 1999), p. 5.

⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, “James’ *The Golden Bowl*: Literature as Moral Philosophy,” *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 138.

⁶ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* Book 1 1357, pp. 5-7.

new particular. Nor can it easily be done by texts which speak with the hardness or plainness which moral philosophy has traditionally chosen for its style – for how can this style at all convey the way in which the “matter of the practical” appears before the agent in all of its bewildering complexity, without its morally salient features stamped on its face? And how, without conveying this, can it convey the active adventure of the deliberative intelligence, the “yearnings of thought of and excursions of sympathy” that make up much of our actual moral life? ... Finally, without a presentation of the mystery, conflict, and riskiness of the lived deliberative situation, it will be hard for philosophy to convey the peculiar value and beauty of choosing humanly well.⁷

The case for the study of literature, as Nussbaum sees it, is that literature *constitutes* the moral choices that philosophy attempts to describe and finally diagnose.⁸ One of the reasons for literature’s superior claim to ethical deliberation and conversation is that just as our moral predicaments find feet, as it were, in our cultures, histories, institutions, so literature is incarnate in its own form and style. In this way, a work of literature is able to portray the difficulty of moral choice, since moral choice is always incarnated in a particular history and culture. In addition, then, literature also throws light on the triumph of good choice and the tragedy of bad choice, in the characters and speakers it lives through. Therefore, ethical appraisal of literature is utterly inseparable from a study of style; ethics are inextricably bound up with aesthetics, in other words. As Nussbaum says, “if our moral lives are ‘stories’ in which mystery and risk play a central and a valuable role, then it may well seem that the ‘intelligent report’ of those lives requires the abilities and techniques of the teller of stories ... only in that form could (the author) fully and fittingly express it.”⁹

Nussbaum provides some answers for me here as to why some units of work have been positively moving and riveting both for myself as well as my students, and why some units of work set by the syllabus have failed. In 2001, my year 12 Standard students studied John Misto’s *Shoe-Horn Sonata*, which is a play about two women who have survived World War Two as prisoners of war under the Japanese army.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 142.

⁸ It is interesting to consider Derrida’s philosophy in the light of Nussbaum’s distinction between the literary and the philosophical. He tends to use a “literary style” that varies according to his subject. In this sense, his philosophy can hardly be said to wanting to be “hard” or “plain.” There is much that could be said of Derrida’s stylistic choices and his blurring of the lines between literature and philosophy, and I cannot go into that here. However, suffice it to be said that my impression of Derrida is that he adopts a literary style *for a philosophical point*, rather than a literary exploration of philosophical questions.

⁹ Martha C. Nussbaum, “James’ *The Golden Bowl*: Literature as Moral Philosophy,” *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 142.

Misto's play is an indictment of the ways in which power is wedded to imperialism and, invariably, to men, thence passing into the recording of history. As my class moved through the play, our imaginations and thus our ethical powers of judgement began to awaken. At this point, the play began *to matter*. The play's action consists, for the main part, of two elderly women on stage, discussing in retrospect what happened to them when prisoners in Malaysia. All the "action," then, is inferred. The power of the play, as I remember our discussions, emerged when we began to investigate the dramatic effects that Misto employs. While the women discuss their ordeal – the central incident being where one character sacrificially prostitutes herself in return for a tablet to prevent cerebral malaria killing the other – Misto has "Rule Britannia" playing in the background. He has enormous pictures of Stalin, Hitler, Churchill and Roosevelt erected behind the women, dwarfing them on stage. And thus as the women talked in our classroom, their predicament came alive for my students. Bearing in mind that my class was a Standard class and almost uniformly found English "difficult," "boring," "hard," and "pointless," I was astounded one day when one of my students announced seriously that he would like to set up a petition to the Prime Minister, asking that these women be remembered with a memorial in Canberra.

In the light of Nussbaum's description of the ethical power of fiction, Misto's play became an ethical voice, because my students could emotionally and imaginatively identify with and yet differentiate themselves from the two characters on stage. Nussbaum explains that "excursions of sympathy" allow an investment in the particular that philosophy cannot. As I understand Nussbaum's point, this is only possible because the play constitutes human action in its style, its dramatic choices and its characters. A flat description of the ways in which historiography has been unfair to women in the past would undoubtedly not have moved my mostly male, mostly eighteen-year-old students. A feminist treatise would not have enticed them to action, to petition the Prime Minister on behalf of these women. However, they were able to become ethically and politically engaged because they were first emotionally engaged by the characters on the stage. And as Nussbaum says, "only in that form could he fully and fittingly express it."

The rejoinder I hear the syllabus giving is that the syllabus *does* engage students morally, that it *does* engage students to appraise a text in terms of its

aesthetic appeal, what it terms “language forms and features.” After all, the syllabus is arranged around the basic ethic that students learn to appreciate people other than themselves in their reading.

What it does not do, importantly, is see moral engagement and aesthetic appraisal *as the same act*. Nussbaum shows that it is impossible to separate the two, since the moral and ethical particular is embedded in the aesthetic rendering of the text. What I am proposing here as an alternative to the syllabus’s directives is different in this fundamental way. I maintain that a student’s capacity to engage with a text ethically is fundamentally paralysed if they are not encouraged to engage with it emotionally first – *without the imperative* to read obliquely the instant they finish, since this does not allow the emotional and imaginative engagement that Nussbaum describes.

This emotional engagement needs to be viewed as a critical moment in itself, as Nussbaum indicates. Often supporters of the syllabus have proposed that the first reading, termed the “aesthetic reading” and considered the naïve reading in the same moment, exists to support the mature, “critical” reading, which is the oblique reading. Kelli McGraw sets up a proposal whereby students would read aesthetically, which she terms the “compliant” reading, and then read critically, which she call the “resistant” reading. She argues that her “framework sees both critical and aesthetical appraisal as necessary in order to engage in a kind of reflective analysis. The framework also emphasises that both compliant and resistant readings are not isolated acts, but happen in the context of a reader reflecting on their own thoughts and feelings.”¹⁰ To some extent, I agree with her. What I take issue with, though, is that in this kind of framework, like the syllabus, McGraw implicitly separates the aesthetic from the critical. It is true that later readings can read a text more resistantly, and I do not for one moment want a world wherein students cannot read obliquely. (Incidentally, it is also true that later readings can involve a conversion from a resistant reading to an “invited” reading, as was the case with my resistant Standard class reading *The Shoe-Horn Sonata*.) It is not at all obvious why a resistant reading should be a more critical reading, a more mature reading. Moreover, it is not at all obvious why a resistant reading is the more political. The aesthetic is not separable

¹⁰ Kelli McGraw, “Reconciling the Critical and the Pleasurable,” *mETaphor*, 3 (2005), 27.

from the ethical reading, and this suggests that the aesthetic is therefore not separable from a critical reading.

Secondly, on a more practical note, if students are encouraged to read obliquely in an effort to achieve a “critical” reading, they will surely work out where the emphasis lies, where their marks are coming from, and defer. What I suggest is that when this happens, a student *cannot* engage emotionally and cannot engage critically or ethically.

What happens when a student is encouraged to skip to the “oblique” reading, then? What happens to their moral engagement, to their capacity to engage politically and compassionately with the world? I would like to borrow an example from Elaine Marks, here, that captures most of my experience teaching the reading habits that the 2000 Stage 6 syllabus encourages. Marks describes a situation where she sets the novel *Dust Tracks on a Road*, by Zora Neale Hurston, for study on a course called “Writing Women’s Li(v)es.” Here is Marks’s account of how the class responded:

What seemed to disturb the hostile students was that Hurston’s narrative did not focus sufficiently on what the students expected to read: the unrelieved story of Hurston’s oppression as a black woman growing up in the South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The class was composed entirely of women, and all of those who were angry with Hurston (and me) were white. These angry students did not react with “surprise” at the discrepancy between their expectations and the words of the text but rather with hostility, in part because, through no fault of their own, they have had little or no training in the reading of a literary text ... If the students do not find evidence of racism, sexism, or anti-Semitism, they tend to assume that either the writer or the teacher is guilty of a cover-up ... In a sense, the students were denying Hurston the right to write in a certain style, the right to write against the doxa and the discourse of her time and place. They could read *Dust Tracks on a Road* only in terms of racism and sexism. And because they could not find in it what they were looking for, they denied themselves the pleasure of discovering a new and different text, another mode of writing and reading.¹¹

In this scenario, which is all too familiar to me, Marks’s students have privileged their ethic (that sexism, racism, anti-Semitism is deplorable) before, over and above the text. In so doing, they have not connected with the text itself. What this then means is that they are unable to make emotional and imaginative connections with the

¹¹ Elaine Marks, “Feminism’s Perverse Effects,” *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, Ed. Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 423.

particular story that Hurston has to tell, because – and I think Marks is right – they have not been taught to engage aesthetically with a text: “they have had little or no training in the reading of a literary text.” And, to repeat my point, this must mean that they cannot engage *ethically* with Hurston’s story.

Not only do these students cut themselves off from the “new and different,” particular ethical moments in this text, they also engage in what I would call unethical reading habits. If we accept what I have been hinting at in the previous chapters – that the text is ‘an other’ just as a black woman is ‘an other’ to me – then the reading habit these students employ means that they have effectively shut Hurston out of the conversation. Marks deplores their reading habits because they deny themselves pleasure. I go further and suggest that when these students read like this – or are taught to read like this – they ironically deny themselves the chance to engage in real ethical (which is to say *political*) conversation. This is inimical to civic health, threatening the development of compassion and nuanced moral judgement as mainstays of our society.

And so, in summary, why read? I share the syllabus’s push for an ethical approach to reading texts and consider it paramount. In that I have ethical criticism in view, though, I contend that the aesthetic must be a part of the ethical reading moment. In order for students to be able to experience vicariously, say, the oppression of the two women in *The Shoe-Horn Sonata*, they had to be able to experience the play aesthetically, which is in fact how we experience the world. Hypothetically, if I had given my students that feminist treatise, a flat description of the way historiography has shut out women in the telling of history, then they would not have been able to attend to that particular moment when Sheila explains to Bridie that she has traded herself for a malaria tablet, so that Bridie could live. Even now as I relate that instance, the moment loses its power without the form of the story, the immediacy of the stage. The poignancy of that moment, in all its unutterable tragedy, dissolves into an “issue,” and arrives dead on its feet.

What is an author?

In his book *The Company We Keep*, Wayne Booth develops a metaphor for texts – and by implication, authors – that proves useful when reflecting on what a text is. He proposes that we think of texts as friends. I need to stress at this point – in order to

respond pre-emptively to those who might see tradition as *inevitably* dangerous – that in proposing this, he does not mean that we read texts uncritically, obsequiously giving way to each text’s demand, offer and ethical framework. To do so would be to view a text as a dictator who is in no way a friend. In viewing a text as a friend, Booth gives us a way of talking about texts and what a text constitutes that prevents us from falling into the paradigm wherein we *only* see reading in terms of power.

Booth takes his understanding of friendship from Aristotle, who views a true friend as a match, a relation of “strength with strength and aspiration with aspiration.”¹² What this concomitantly means is that the kind of friendship that Booth proposes is a reciprocal one – a friendship wherein a deep respect for difference and sameness is cultivated from the hours spent together. I would like to first extrapolate Booth’s point to an end that he does not explore. I would like to point out, with respect to the still¹³ tenacious adherence to Barthes’ essay, “Death of the Author,” that Booth’s metaphor presupposes that we treat texts as a human endeavour and their implied authors as humans. Booth discriminates here between the “career author” and the “implied author.” He suggests that the career author is the flesh and blood author, while the implied author is the outlook that characterises the “total act of discourse” in the work.¹⁴ When I refer to the “author,” then, I am not referring to Misto, say, I am referring to the artistic and ethical shape of *The Shoe-Horn Sonata*, which, of course, is uniquely human.¹⁵

One of the reasons that Booth’s metaphor of a friend has been so useful to me is that it solves the quandary we slip into when we begin to think of text and reader in a hierarchical relationship. Stephen Bonnycastle’s book *In Search of Authority*, which many teachers read in order to understand the new syllabus better, suggests that reading that takes specific account of text or author “tends to be authoritarian, and to maintain that the meaning of a work of literature is objective and external to the

¹² Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 174.

¹³ The essay was published in 1977.

¹⁴ Booth goes into great detail in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* on the distinction between the flesh and blood author and the implied author. He draws on this work in *Company*, assuming the groundwork in the first book. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 71-76.

¹⁵ Booth describes the implied author thus: “the ‘implied author’ chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read; we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the sum of his choices”. *Rhetoric of Fiction*, pp. 74-75.

reader ... this attitude squashes readers.”¹⁶ In framing reading in this manner, Bonnycastle immediately casts the act of reading in terms of power relations. Consciously or unconsciously taking stock of Foucault’s and Nietzsche’s understanding of the world, Bonnycastle proposes that power struggle is the dominating condition of our social world. The syllabus tends to subscribe to this view of reading and attempts to correct the imbalance of power to make meaning and significance by encouraging the “oblique reading” that I discussed earlier. In this fashion, the hope is that power is wrested from the text or the author and given to the student (although, as I have pointed out, what effectively happens is that the syllabus interprets the text, and the student defers to the syllabus. If the syllabus attempts to diffuse power, it does so in a way that inadvertently arrogates all power to itself.)

My difficulty with this view of reading is that it does not deal with the problem that the practical implication of the syllabus so aptly demonstrates: what happens once we have wrested the power from the text or the author? Because the act of *wresting* is itself invested in power, we are still left with the ethical problem of one party dominating the other, and we simply propagate the inequalities that we noted before the coup d’état. As I said earlier, it is just that the labels have been rearranged.

Booth’s call to consider the text as a friend – and by implication the implied author – circumvents some of these problems. In appealing to Aristotle’s concept of friendship, Booth also invokes Aristotle’s rhetoric, which would see friendship as *dialectic*. That is, it would see the reading process as give and take, as questioning and answering, and importantly, as both a fluid and a structured process. In this way, the text/author and the reader are never statically in one position, but are in *conversation*. Booth suggests that the text we have in front of us, as we read, invariably implies some sort of invitation: “As soon as someone takes the trouble to get my attention, by publishing or by talking to me, the offer of some benefit or pleasure or companionship is undeniable ... all narratives offer with their titles and opening sentences a cry of invitation: ‘Join me, join me, because if you do, you will receive something that no other story can give you in quite the same way.’”¹⁷ An invitation immediately suggests an offer of *relationship*, rather than the transfer of information. It suggests that the act of reading is a social phenomenon, which reflects

¹⁶ Stephen Bonnycastle, *In Search of Authority: An introductory guide to literary theory*, 2nd ed. (Canada: Broadview Press, 1996), p. 38.

¹⁷ Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p.174.

on Booth's fundamental view that human beings are essentially social, rather than individual beings¹⁸ – which, incidentally, is a view that I share. And with the suggestion that reading is a social phenomenon comes the accompanying view that reading involves give and take, rather than applying an inflexible method to a text to produce the same, invariable result.

This then prompts the observation that just as we receive many types of invitations in our daily lives, so the types of literary friendships we are offered are varied in intent and integrity. For example, Booth compares the drastically different kinds of invitations in texts like “The Gospel According to St. John,” D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and an article called “Nerd Without Nerve” from Penthouse magazine. As Booth points out, the first of these offers salvation, the second wisdom about our lives and our situation in the industrialized world, and the third offers sexual thrills.¹⁹ Furthermore, this leaves room for the observation that the invitation will not necessarily be benign, and nor will it *necessarily* deliver what it promises²⁰ – just as an invitation in our flesh and blood lives will likewise carry with it these possibilities. Good reading, then, will be a case of developing the necessary skills in determining what type of invitations we will accept, what type we will provisionally accept, and what types we will decline. In other words, good reading requires judgement. And these judgements will be made in the knowledge that, when we read and deal with text, we are dealing with human relationships rather than “issues,” devoid of the unique and particular shape of an author's invitation.

What shall we read?

If reading is always already an ethical investment, then this begs the question, what shall we read? Does it make a difference what type of text we read? Does it have to be “literature?” The syllabus gives very clear directives to mix literature with popular culture, so as to break down the distinction between high and mass culture. It defines texts like this:

[Texts are] communications of meaning *produced in any medium that incorporates language*, including sound, print, film, electronic and multimedia representations. Texts include written, spoken, nonverbal or

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 176-177.

²⁰ It could, also, deliver more than it promises!

visual communication of meaning. They may be extended unified works or series of related pieces.²¹

The syllabus here takes up the position occupied by cultural studies, as defined by Fred Inglis: “In a similarly guerilla attack, Cultural Studies denounce the category of art as an instrument of class assertiveness, refuse the sacred status of art, and treat all symbolic expression as equally worthy of serious interpretation.”²² Implicit in Inglis’s statement is the drawing of battle lines: those that support the academy, the drawing room and “literature” over there and the “guerrillas” that want to dismantle it all over here. As a matter of fact, I am not so interested in finding a side in this debate and exploring the rationale for the canon or against it. While I love literature, the canon is not something I feel called upon to defend.

Here I once again take my cue from Wayne Booth and suggest that, in terms of the question of the canon and what we should choose to elide and what we should choose to venerate, rhetoric takes account of *all* types of communication. As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, the study of rhetoric, which is a means of ethical criticism, means that all types of human communication involve ethics of invitation, listening, communication and a final call to action. So far, rhetorical conceptions of English have no quarrel with the syllabus’s decision to mix popular texts and canonical texts. Having said this, I take a second cue from Wayne Booth, and suggest that some texts prompt more conversations than others. Some texts, like the Vodafone advertisement I just picked up (at random, I assure you), do not really open a space for much conversation. The advertisement sports David Beckham in a supermarket, engrossed in his new mobile phone. The caption reads: “There’s a place where even queuing is fun.” Now, hypothetically, after my class and I have finished working out where the composer wants us, which will take approximately five minutes,²³ what kind of conversation will this advertisement prompt? Can it talk to me about the politics of technology and the way technology forms our lives and culture? Can it tell me about the loneliness that technology can prompt, when we become severed from each other? Can it tell me why most school age children in New South Wales have mobile phones and most school age children in Cambodia

²¹ Board of Studies, *English Stage 6 Syllabus* (Board of Studies: Sydney, 1999), p. 145, my italics.

²² Fred Inglis, *Cultural Studies* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1993), p. 18.

²³ Teaching advertisements and “visual texts” is compulsory now in high schools. Finding the “hidden message” in an advertisement does actually take five minutes per advertisement. What does the composer want from us? To buy a Vodafone mobile phone and plan. End of conversation.

have limited access to clean water? This advertisement, really, has a very small sphere of potential conversation. While I do consider all texts as human communication, therefore, I also want to assert that there are some texts that prompt wider conversation than others and it is these that I am interested in. These texts are not always canonical – I have found some of the best conversations with and about the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* – but I do often find that the more canonical texts provide conversations that are almost never drawn to a complete close.

How can we question a text?

It is all very well to assert that reading a text is a process of question and answer, but this does not explain how we ask questions of an apparently inert text. How, for example, do we question *The Tempest*, set for study in the Area of Study 2004-2007, in such a way that it will answer us? And a secondary but equally important question is, supposing that we can actually ask the question, what question do we ask? How do we decide such a thing?

Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic develops ways in which we question a text, and a rationale for this dialectic approach to understanding. Gadamer's understanding of understanding is based on the interplay between sameness and otherness. A text makes sense to us because it is similar to us, and addresses us because it is different from us. He sees the text both at a distance and on a continuum, (what he calls "temporal distance"): "Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness; ...here too is a tension. It is in the play between the traditional text's strangeness and familiarity to us – between being a historically intended, distanced object and belonging to a tradition. The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between."²⁴ Thus, a text is intelligible because tradition keeps a continuum open between the text and the interpreter. More importantly, the moment of understanding comes from the distance between it and myself, or between the implied author and myself. What I do not understand provides the impetus for my movement toward the text in an effort to understand it. If it were not different from me, if there were no distance between the text and myself, then there would be no moment of understanding, only assimilation to myself.

²⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 295.

What Gadamer argues for, then, is the text's otherness and the importance of that otherness in order to understand anything new. This is particularly important, it should be noted, for texts from another time and another culture, as Gadamer makes clear:

Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted. Hence temporal distance is not something that must be overcome. This was, rather, the naïve assumption of historicism, namely that we must transpose ourselves into the spirit of the age, think with its ideas and its thoughts, not with our own, and thus advance toward historical objectivity. In fact, the important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding. It is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us.²⁵

Gadamer challenges the objectivist stance of historicism, claiming that understanding can never be a-historical; we can never truly transport ourselves to another time, another culture, another gender, or another class. To do so would be to ensure that the text could never address us, since we would simply assimilate it to our present understanding, what Gadamer calls our "horizon." What he suggests, on the contrary, is that we read from our horizon, that we read with the knowledge that we are embedded within our tradition, which is a conglomeration of our gender, class, time and so on. While we can never understand just how framed we are by our horizon, Gadamer suggests that what the text does is bump against our horizons so as to bring them into relief against its own horizons.

Ironically, then, 2006 does not *prevent* me from understanding Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but is rather a *condition* of my ability to understand it. It is true that complete otherness would prevent any understanding occurring. If there were not a continuum between the Elizabethan period and 2006, for example, then *The Tempest* would be gibberish to me.²⁶

²⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 297.

²⁶ It could be argued that Shakespeare is often gibberish to teenagers. However, I would argue that it is one of the teacher's roles to show the student the sameness of any text, to show a point of entry. I remember coming home from school one day, when I was in year 9, and declaring to my father who taught English when I was younger, that I thought Shakespeare was "stupid". A sure sign that Shakespeare's texts were "gibberish" to me! My father got out Shakespeare's sonnet, "When My Love Swears She is Made of Truth", and, question by question, let me pick out the shape of a very modern story. Pretty girl marries old rich man, both lie to each other and thence become intolerable to each

What Gadamer argues is that custom and tradition fill in those years, tempered by other horizons along the way, creating both the distance and the continuum connecting me with the text. The tension between sameness and otherness drives the moment of understanding and already, the stage is set for a way in which we can understand the text as a conversation partner. What we see in Gadamer's hermeneutic is the centrality of dialectic, the precursor for democratic understanding.

Central to Gadamer's hermeneutic – and I would add, to Martha Nussbaum's and Wayne Booth's ethical criticism – is a reliance on Aristotle's theory of knowledge, which is the precondition for conversation as a way to create truth. It is all very well to decide that conversing with a text is a more democratic way of reading than either paying obeisance to a text, or pasting it over with our own ideas. However, what I have said in no way explains *why* conversation is a truer way of thinking about reading texts than an epistemological power struggle. In this regard, all three of these thinkers are indebted to Aristotle's understanding of the ways in which moral knowledge – which is the kind we are dealing with when we read literature – is different from theoretical knowledge.²⁷

The reason it is different becomes clearer when we inspect the different kinds of truth Aristotle proposes. Aristotle believes that truth can be thought of by distinguishing between scientific knowledge, philosophical wisdom, intuitive reason, practical wisdom and art. These five categories can be then understood in three categories, the first three being grouped under “theoretical or scientific knowledge.” These three types of truth or knowledge deal in “things that are ungenerated and imperishable,”²⁸ and thus the main task in these realms is to deduce, using a method, what will be invariably and universally true for that thing in this world. Importantly,

other. I was stunned by the modernity – which is to say the sameness – of the story; stunned to such a degree that I could feel the otherness of the sonnet impressing itself upon me. I have been friends with Shakespeare ever since.

²⁷ All three thinkers are explicit about this debt. Gadamer explains that his hermeneutic has to do with the human sciences, which “stand(s) closer to moral knowledge than to that kind of ‘theoretical knowledge’” which is “unchangeable, a knowledge that depends on proof and can therefore be learned by anybody”. *Truth and Method*, p. 314. Martha Nussbaum begins her ethical criticism by insisting upon Aristotle's understanding of truth: “This is a study whose aim, as Aristotle insists, is not just theoretical understanding but also practice ... It cannot, then, in any way be cut off from the study of the empirical and social conditions of human life; indeed, this, in Aristotle's conception is part of the social study of human beings ...” *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 139.

²⁸ Aristotle, “Ethics,” Bk VI in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. R. McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 113.

this kind of truth can only be concerned with what already exists. It cannot concern itself with what needs to be made.

In the case of reading, however, it is clear that the moment of understanding does not exist prior to the conversation with the text. Reading, then, generates meaning, rather than deduces it. No method can be applied to the “thing,” since the text does not exist – that is, it is not understood – prior to the reading. The kinds of criticism that I have investigated in this thesis are wedded to a scientific model of knowledge, in that they apply a method of suspicion that is resistant to the text at hand. These critics have mistaken a text for an “imperishable” thing, have misunderstood the generative and crafted nature of a text, and thus misapplied a scientific model of knowledge to a practical realm. We need a way of thinking about *the truth that is made* rather than the truth that is deduced; we need a way of thinking about ethics, understanding, and politics, since these things are surely not “ungenerated and imperishable” but are created by humans for humans, for specific purposes and occasions. Aristotle calls this kind of truth practical wisdom and productive wisdom. He says of this kind of truth that it is a “state concerned with making, involving a true course of reasoning.”²⁹ In the realm of reading, which involves “making” in both the crafting of a text, and “making” understanding between text and reader, practical wisdom is surely what we should pursue if we are to make any sense of why and how we read.

If this type of truth is “concerned with making” it is certainly clear that there needs to be a “true course of reasoning” to complement what we understand about the nature of the truths we encounter in this realm. If deducing truth is appropriate in the scientific world, then it seems appropriate that inducing truth is appropriate in a realm where truth is *made*, specific to a circumstance and specific to bodied human beings. Richard McKeon makes it clear that this realm is the realm of Aristotle’s rhetoric: “Art is architectonic with respect to making, and the architectonic art of making is rhetoric, insofar as rhetoric is an art of thought.”³⁰ Rhetoric, then, provides us with a way to make this truth, to investigate this truth, and finally to converse with each other about this realm of truth. It is a way of thinking and investigating that is

²⁹ *ibid*, Bk VI, p. 1139.

³⁰ Richard McKeon, *Rhetoric: Essays in Invention and Discovery*, ed. Mark Blackman (Woodbridge, Connecticut: Ox Bow Press, 1987), p. 4.

appropriate to the kind of knowledge we are dealing with when we read – that is, practical wisdom, practical truth.

The question, then, becomes a major rhetorical tool for reading that is sensitive to the type of truth we find in literature. We have established that rhetoric, re-termed as “conversation” in both Gadamer’s hermeneutic and Wayne Booth’s ethical criticism, is a way of pursuing the potential for truth in literature. And questions, clearly, mark the ebb and flow of a conversation, which will always be unchartered if it is a true conversation. Indeed, as Gadamer says, “a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation ... than we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No-one knows in advance what will ‘come out’ of a conversation.”³¹ A true question, then, must be one that is a genuine question, in the sense of provoking a conversation whose end is not determined.

How, then, can we proceed if we have absolutely no ground that is determined? If a genuine question cannot guess at its answer, how does one formulate that question at all? It appears we must have something to grasp, something with which to formulate that question. Gadamer suggests that the place we begin is the “subject matter” that binds the text and interpreter. When we watch *The Tempest*, then, it is the story of Prospero and the machinations of the several “courts” on the Island that binds us to the action and gives us some framework with which to work. As Aristotle maintains in his reflection on the “the tragic effect” in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*,³² our attention is sustained because we sympathise with Oedipus, we have taken an “excursion in sympathy.” Once we have this boundary, we can ask our questions.

The question still persists, though, as to how we formulate that question? Firstly, Gadamer talks about the question as something that breaks open the space for

³¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 383.

³² Aristotle proposes that, to achieve “tragic effect”, we must see that Oedipus is both like us and is a little bit better than us. For our purpose here, I am primarily interested in Aristotle’s point that our connection with Oedipus is what propels our interest in the plot, and thus drives the tragic effect. Aristotle, *Poetics* (England: Penguin Classics, 1996), p. 21.

conversation: “Discourse that is intended to reveal something requires that that thing be broken open by the question.”³³ I am reminded at this point of my student, Alex, who asked the question: “Miss, is it just me or are all the relationships in *The Tempest* about power?”³⁴ In the context of our classroom, this question certainly had the potential to “break open” the space for a conversation. Alex had begun to ask questions of the text, to approach the text as “discourse.” And as I reflect on Alex’s question and the conditions in which he asked it, the mystery of how one knows what to ask both remains mysterious and becomes clearer. Alex asked that question for two reasons: because he did not know and because he was beginning to see a pattern in the play. The text had impressed – in the sense of indenting – him with something other than himself. He was coming upon something new to him, and questioned the text based on that discovery. Gadamer suggests that, indeed, there is almost no way of teaching one how to question, since each question will be different and dependent upon the discourse between the unique interpreter and the unique text: “There is no such thing as a method of learning to ask questions, of learning to see what is questionable ... the important thing is the knowledge that one does not know ... a particular lack of knowledge leads to a particular question.”³⁵ That negation, then, that apparent lack or the state of not knowing actually creates the question that begins the conversation with the text.

That said, it is still possible to ask a question of a text that is not really a question. In other words, it is possible to ask a question of a text that is either not related to the questions that the text itself is posing when it addresses us in its otherness, or that is a statement posing as a question. Toni Morrison, in her Nobel lecture on December 7, 1993, describes just such a situation in a story about a blind, wise old woman and some young people “who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is.”³⁶ To blow her cover, they ask her a question she cannot answer: “Is the bird I am holding living or dead?” Morrison chooses to read the woman as a metaphor for a practised author, and the bird for language. I take it one step further and suggest that these young people are

³³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 363.

³⁴ I tell Alex’s story in Chapter Two when I talk specifically about the Stage 6 1999 syllabus.

³⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 365-366.

³⁶ Toni Morrison, “Nobel Lecture”, <http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html>, accessed 15.1.07.

much the same as Hurston's students, who are under the tutelage of the kind of thinking that the 2000 Stage 6 syllabus promotes. The question that these young people ask is not a question, it is a trick.³⁷ It is not designed to open up a dialogue with the old woman, to find out what she thinks, to engage her wisdom. Effectively, this kind of question stays within the realm of what we already know.

To return to *The Tempest*, therefore, when the syllabus provides the questions for students – how is this play an Imaginative Journey? – the potential for true discourse between text and interpreter is denied. In order to release this uncharted conversation a question must be true. It must be open to otherness, just as Alex's question was when he engaged with *The Tempest*. And, importantly, the question must be posed by the interpreter himself; in other words, Alex must pose his own question without the determination of a syllabus.

Overstanding and Understanding: Meeting and Making Mutual Friends

What happens when we truly understand something? Gadamer describes the moment of understanding as “the fusion of horizons,” wherein a text and its interpreter find common ground after investigating common subject matter. The issue that keeps rising behind this theory, however, is how to ensure that the text does not come to dominate the interpreter. After all, if Booth is right (and I believe he is) the text is the party that *initiates* the conversation. As we have already seen, Jean-Paul Sartre says that, “to write is to make an appeal to the reader”³⁸ and this supports Booth's view that the text – or the implied author – is the instigator of the conversation. And then two pages later, Sartre makes this incisive point: “You are perfectly free to leave that book on the table. But if you open it, you assume responsibility for it.”³⁹ And so, we find that the conversation is instigated by the text, but it is abundantly clear that the

³⁷ Morrison's lecture finishes by exploring the possibility that this question was a rhetorical device designed to prompt a discussion with the woman, to get her to speak and answer for her generation and its neglect of those younger than herself. In this case, the question is actually a true one in the sense that it wants dialogue. Fittingly, Morrison has the woman respond, after the youngsters have finished explaining their motive for such a question, that “I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done – together”. In a brilliant rhetorical move, Morrison demonstrates the power of genuine questions and genuine dialogue. Therefore meaning is, as she says, “this thing we have done together”. *ibid.*

³⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* trans. Bernard Frechtman (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 1993), p. 33.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 35.

interpreter is not under any obligation to open that book, and in this sense must assume some responsibility for the ensuing conversation.⁴⁰

This in turn begs the question: what does it mean to take responsibility for a conversation with a text? Again, Gadamer is helpful on this point. He suggests that the key to genuine conversation is listening carefully, allowing the otherness of our partner in conversation to be other, while maintaining our point of connection so that dialectic can proceed. He says: “To conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented. It requires that *one does not try to argue the other person down* but that one really considers the weight of the other’s opinion. *Hence it is an art of testing.*”⁴¹

Firstly, Gadamer’s point hinges on the issue of where our attention is to be directed: not at the career author, then, but at the subject matter that the text initiates and that we invite when we sit down to engage with the text. When I experience *The Tempest*, my attention needs to be given to the plot, then, to the twists and turns that Shakespeare as the implied author is proposing. I need to surrender to those twists, turns and sympathetic excursions in order to be able to orient myself in the conversation.

Secondly, and of vital importance, Gadamer makes the crucial point that our position as interpreter is not to “argue the other person down” but to “consider the weight of the other’s opinion.” That is, our listening must be attentive if we are to formulate a good question, and thus propel the conversation with the text. To formulate a question before we listen, or before we read, is to shut down the possibility of conversation. In terms of rhetoric, to shut down conversation is to shut down learning, since literature can only be a partner in producing truth. To listen attentively to ‘the other’s’ opinion, therefore, is absolutely vital in developing the skill for responding to ‘the other,’ both the textual other and the bodied other next to us as we read. To take responsibility for that text, then, is to listen well for the voice of the other throughout the text.

⁴⁰ The peculiar situation of the HSC is such that the students studying English cannot choose the texts they study, and their teachers also have a very limited selection from which to choose. Nor can they, and as we have seen, formulate their own questions to pose to the text. In this sense, I am describing a hypothetical situation here, and one that I propose educational systems should aspire to promote.

⁴¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, p367), my italics.

Gadamer maintains that when we listen to a text, respond with a genuine question and let the ensuing conversation take us where we did not expect, both the text and the interpreter leave that conversation changed people. In other words, reading is a transformative process. He describes this process thus: “In a successful conversation ... [the partners in conversation] come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain as we were.”⁴²

When my students and I read through and perform *The Tempest* for each other, we cannot really be said to be listening to and understanding the play if we assert ourselves against the play before we read. When we decide beforehand that we will experience the play through the rubric “Imaginative Journeys,” we are effectively “putting [ourselves] forward and successfully asserting [our] point of view.” And, as Gadamer makes abundantly clear, it is therefore impossible to leave that encounter any different from when we began our reading. Conversely, if we had been able to follow Alex’s question through – “is this play concerned with power?” – we might have been able to “test” the play against Alex’s hypothesis. Well, is it? How shall we find out? What do we, as a group, think about that? How will the text answer us? And so on. And as Gadamer suggests, if we were able to follow this process of conversation through, we would leave the encounter changed people, because we would leave in “communion” with a new friend.

Wayne Booth, Rabelais and the “total act of discourse”

Again, I am hearing the voice of caution here: how does the *text* change in the course of this conversation? It is all very well to assume that *we* change, but what if that change is simply just bending our shape to an immutable, traditional relic like Shakespearean drama? What if the text dominates the reader to such an extent that the reader cannot formulate a genuine question? What if the weight of tradition is too much? I need to assert here that I believe that this is entirely possible, rendering the possibility of reverting to rote learning very high. That the weight of the canon, and the looming threat of exams and the heaviness of tradition might overwhelm a reader

⁴² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 379.

is entirely possible. I would hasten to add, however, that *any* kind of learning that is not conversational will inevitably result in rote learning, even the kind that demands that we engage critically, as in the case of the Stage 6 2000 syllabus. Gadamer's view of how a text becomes intelligible means that I must bring my otherness to a text in order for that new communion to be created. In this regard, when a text returns to the tradition, as it were, it is a different text from when I picked it up, purely because I have become a part of that tradition in the reading.

The syllabus has attempted, in various ways, to encourage students to read critically, to read across a text, in order to usher in an ostensibly democratic civic state. And if by democracy we mean a condition which promotes vigorous debate, then this is a purpose I share with the syllabus. While I have endorsed Gadamer's hermeneutic here, I have left one avenue untrodden. Gadamer's main rival – and I would hasten to add that this rival was also his conversation partner, and that Gadamer's hermeneutic is marked by this particular conversation – was Jürgen Habermas, who maintained that Gadamer's insistence on tradition as an enabling force in understanding made him susceptible to encouraging the status quo.⁴³ In other words, Habermas suggests that Gadamer's hermeneutic does not allow room to resist tradition, if tradition is corrupt and bankrupt. Indeed, how *do* we address tradition and reject parts of it, if it is our tradition that constitutes who we are? And a question that translates this more general philosophic question into a specific one, related to our specific situation in NSW high schools: how is “critical” or “oblique reading” ever to take place – if we must listen carefully to a text – since we are clearly changed by listening? How, to be even more specific, are we to resist what some may term the imperialist sentiment in *The Tempest* if we are listening carefully to it? What if we are changed by the nefarious ethic in a text?

Wayne Booth's ethical criticism deals with this problem convincingly, and I will attempt to outline the process of his thought here, and then follow it with an example of my own from my classroom. Toward the end of Booth's book *The Company We Keep*, he includes the essay quoted in the previous chapter in which he demonstrates how a reading that listens to the “total act of discourse” might

⁴³ This debate can be found in Albrecht Wellmer, *Critical Theory of Society*, trans. Joel Cumming, (New York: Continuum, 1971) pp31-51 and commentary on the debate can be found in Paul Riceour, “Ethics and Culture: Gadamer and Habermas in Dialogue,” *Philosophy Today*, 17 (Summer 1973), 153-65.

simultaneously begin to resist the invitation offered by an author. This, for Booth, is the ultimate act of ethical criticism. He calls this process “coduction,” which is a neologism formed from “*co* (‘together’) and *ducere* (‘to lead, draw out, bring, bring out’).”⁴⁴ Like Gadamer, Booth insists on the conversation with a text as a generative event, where the meeting with an implied author will change both parties. Where he is importantly different from Gadamer is that “coduction,” for Booth, must always include conversations with others: “How does my coduction compare with yours?”⁴⁵ Consequently, when we read for the “total act of discourse,” ironically we read knowing that our perception of this total act of discourse will change depending on who we hold our following conversations with. This is, of course, of essential importance to me because of the necessarily social reading that takes place in a classroom, where I might have up to thirty different “coductions” taking place at any one time. Already, we can see how tradition might loosen its grip on a conversation if there are this many ‘others’ that we are listening to, in addition to ‘the other’ that is the text.

Booth demonstrates how coduction might lead to a resistant reading – one that would transgress traditional readings of a traditional text – in his reading of François Rabelais. He attempts to take stock of the feminist criticisms of Rabelais, that his portrayal of women is sexist. Before he undertakes this task, Booth incisively points out one of the pitfalls that attends many attempts at resistant reading – like Achebe’s and many of those who respond to him⁴⁶ – that they tend to draw up a tally of politically incorrect offences against politically correct virtues. As we have seen, Achebe lists some of the things that irritate him about the text: the absence of particularising language when Conrad depicts African people, the pitting of Africa against civilised Europe, and so on. And those who take issue with Achebe, like C.P. Sarvan,⁴⁷ list Conrad’s virtues as a way of offsetting Achebe’s accusations. Booth argues that this way of approaching ethical criticism is not helpful because it fails to take account of the *ideology of the form*. As I made clear in the last chapter, this piecemeal approach can only ever lead to a war of attrition because the two

⁴⁴ Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 72.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 73

⁴⁶ I engage with Achebe’s resistant reading habits – typified famously in his reading of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* – in Chapter Seven, in the context of the tradition of postcolonial criticism.

⁴⁷ C.P. Sarvan, “Racism and the Heart of Darkness”, in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Norton Critical Edition (Great Britain: W.W. Norton, 1998), pp. 283-4.

disagreeing parties have not agreed upon what they are judging. Consequently, the disagreement can never lead to conversation with the text or anyone else. Effectively, the two disagreeing critics talk past each other, because they have talked past the text in their reading.

Booth suggests that we must respond and grapple with the “‘total act of discourse’ that the author commits.”⁴⁸ He says of Rabelais in particular that:

What we seek, once again, will not be words or propositions in isolation, or even overall “themes,” but the *total pattern of desires and rewards that the author commits us to*. Rabelais cannot be blamed for an act of injustice unless we have some reason to believe that his work *as a whole* – the *complete* imaginative offering, the *total* pattern of desire and fulfillment that we enjoy – is vulnerable to the charge. In short, ideological criticism depends on discovering not the ideology *in* the form but the ideology *of* the form.⁴⁹

The task that Booth sets himself as an ethical critic is to appraise Rabelais for the whole of his work, rather than picking on one word or one joke that may suggest that Rabelais is sexist. This requires that we must, as Gadamer suggested, surrender emotionally, imaginatively and – provisionally – politically to the work. We need to be able to track the emotional terrain that Rabelais lays out for us. We need to be able to ascertain – as difficult as this is – where Rabelais intends us to view his story from. Does he place us in a position of irony? Which character is he steering our emotional connections toward and away from? Booth talks about it like this: “Propositions about women can tell us nothing, then, until we ask, Who utters them? In what circumstances? In what tone? With what qualification by other utterances? And, most important of all, What is the quality of our emotional response, point by point and overall?”⁵⁰ If we are to appraise literature ethically, as the syllabus wants students to do, then we need to be able to give students the tools to be able to appraise a work aesthetically, as Nussbaum insisted. After all, these two tasks are not separate tasks, but are one and the same task.

A Conversation: Year 8 ethically appraises Scott Hicks’s film, *Shine*

⁴⁸ Wayne Booth, “Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism,” *Critical Inquiry* 9 (September 1982), p. 57.

⁴⁹ Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 396, “*in*” and “*of*” my italics.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 399.

At this point, I want to revert to my own experience in the classroom to give an example of how Booth's resistant, ethical and holistic reading habits can work in this immediate, social setting of a classroom. I have chosen a favourite unit that I normally teach with Year 8, "Autobiography and Biography: *Shine*,"⁵¹ primarily because I have taught this unit of work to students with differing abilities, across genders, classes and races and have had similar success across the full range of groups from Year 8. As a result, the examples I offer range across those different classes, who were all responding to the same tasks under the same pedagogical assumptions. As I wrote this unit of work, I unwittingly adopted many of the assumptions that Booth has described above. I assumed that I wanted my students to be able to respond emotionally, to engage with the characters, and to respond to the film as a whole. I wanted them to be able to reflect on where the director had positioned them as viewers and to reflect on the craft of film-making to achieve that task.

I began the unit by asking the students to relate an embarrassing moment to the person next to them. They had ten minutes; anything that had mortified them. I then asked for silence for the next 10 minutes, while they listened to my instructions and followed through with them. They were to relate their neighbour's story, in writing, as if they were the protagonist, under the condition that they could bend the story in any way they saw fit. (The ripples of discomfort were palpable at this point!) Then, after this exercise, I asked the students to journal their responses to two questions: How did it feel to have your story told by another person, without the ability to interrupt them and edit? How did it feel to tell another person's story, with omnipotent power to do as you liked? This exercise was designed to craft an emotional experience, that would elicit a latent ethics of biography and autobiography that I suspected all my students already harboured. Therefore, I hoped to prepare my students to "read" *Shine* both responsively and critically. At this point, many of my thirteen-year-old philosophers had already begun to question just how "objective" one could be in telling a story, and almost *all* had recognised the power of writing.

We then, as a group, watched *Shine*. Throughout the viewing, we constantly checked where the director wanted us to be. When the camera focuses on the water dripping down the wall, after David's father has hit him with the wet towel, what are we expected to think? Invariably, my students intelligently chorus: Blood. Whose

⁵¹ *Shine*, prod. Jane Scott, dir. Scott Hicks, 1996.

blood? David's. So, what is this telling us about David and David's father? Invariably: David's father is crushing him inside. At this point, I provided those questions that "broke open" the text, that moved us further and further toward the "total act of discourse." However, as the unit progressed, I asked my students to journal their responses and connect them immediately to a decision the director had made. They made extraordinary discoveries that I could not anticipate. One of the students noted that the camera pans through a barbed wire fence, and then made the observation that we feel as if we are inside Auschwitz at the Helfgott family home. This, compounded with Mr. Helfgott's heavy German accent, keeps positioning our sympathies with David. Nearly all of them found that David's antics are always cute, always securing our affection, and consequently our "patterns of desire," as Booth describes it, follow David. He became our point of reference, and our sympathy for other characters forms around that central sympathy. Because my students became actively engaged with David, they could see the whole work, they could see where Scott Hicks was positioning them as viewers.

Thus far, the ethics of autobiography had been laid to rest, although one recalcitrant (or attentive?) student would sometimes ask: what did that exercise we did earlier have to do with any of this? What, indeed. After I had taught this unit of work once, mostly focussed on how the film had been crafted, another colleague heard about my unit and showed me a book written by David's sister Margaret Helfgott, contradicting much of what the film proposes is the truth. I photocopied key passages from the book and at the close of the unit, handed them out to the students. I watched as ethical commitments that they had made at the beginning of the unit began to challenge their sympathetic alignments with David in *Shine*. They had decided that deliberately to bend the truth was wrong, and therefore had to entertain the idea that the film could not be called true biography or autobiography. And after I had let them form emotional attachments to David, that ethic was pulling at their "friendship" with David and at their "friendship" with the implied author, director Scott Hicks. At this point, it is impossible to chronicle the conversations that followed, as each class responded differently. For a sample, some turned their ethical criticism to Margaret Helfgott's writing, asking the same questions of it as they had of *Shine*. Some held unswervingly to their attachment to David, while some rejected it as autobiography altogether. Some commented that David's mental illness might have shaped his

memory to such a degree that he could not have told the story differently, some had no sympathy for such concessions.

Here I must stop lest I go on too long. What is clear, though, is that my students *first* conducted a conversation with the text to draw out the “complete imaginative offering,” and *then* were able to assert their own ethical convictions in a conversation with the then complete text. At this point, I am sure that Wayne Booth would have agreed that my students had become highly accomplished ethical critics.

As a reflective practitioner, my questions do not cease at the close of a unit, just as I would hope that my students’ questions do not cease at the close of their reading. True rhetoric, for a teacher, requires me to question myself as well as the text. Like that of my students, my ethical criticism needs to investigate the provisional truth that conversation creates. Did my students really *listen* to *Shine*? If they rejected *Shine*, as many did, as an example of ethical autobiography, did they merely assimilate *Shine* to their own horizon and go home unchanged? First of all, it is important to remind ourselves of Booth’s understanding of “coduction:” “it can never be performed with confidence by one person alone. The validity of our coductions must always be corrected in conversations about the coductions of others whom we trust.”⁵² In this sense, that final question that we asked *Shine* – the text castigates David’s father for being unethical; is the text constitutively ethical in its story telling? – is never a final question. Because we had up to thirty coductors in the room at any one time, our final question never resolved itself into a final answer, and as far as I know, that questioning is still continuing.⁵³

That the questioning never ended is, to me, evidence of the strong aesthetic and emotional attachment that my students made to the text in the first place, and evidence that my students walked away from that encounter with this “other” text different to when they initially encountered it. Some, indeed, amended their initial ethic to make room for their attachment to David, as we saw when students took David’s mental illness into account in their judgement. Because they loved David, in other words, my students were able to see the weight that their judgements would

⁵² Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 73.

⁵³ Interestingly, a student that I had taught in another class, under the same set of pedagogical assumptions, found me online on Messenger. He was three years out of high school, and it had been four since I had taught him. However, he said that he had something to tell me: “Got some new ideas about Matrix. Must talk.”

have. They were able to see, contrary to the film's "total act of discourse," the importance of a nuanced, flexible, *emotional* ethical judge, capable of multi-perspectival judgement. Contrary to the practical result of the syllabus, wherein a teacher must present the students with their ethical guideline before they begin their reading, thus circumventing a students' emotional response to a text, this rhetorical approach to reading critically engages the students in a real – rather than simulated – ethical decision.

What drives my commitment to rhetoric as a discipline that we could embrace in English classrooms across New South Wales is that my students totally encounter the text as other, but also encounter *each other* as other. What we encountered in that unit when Margaret Helfgott disagreed so violently with David Helfgott was a rift that appeared complete. They spoke not with each other, but about each other, and we were their audience and their adjudicators. However, what was remarkable about this unit of work was that, while this unit spawned some very vigorous debate, my students all seemed intuitively to know that this was an exercise we were *experiencing together*. Constitutively, then, we had developed an ethic of biography: that is, we listened to one another because we all knew that none of us alone had an answer to this complicated ethical problem.⁵⁴ What drives my interest in rhetoric is the constitutive commitment to otherness, bound by sameness, that rhetoric requires. In this way, I hope to offer each of my radically unique, radically other students the opportunity to enter into a unified civic commitment to each other. In this final sense, I do not believe that any one of my students went home the same person after they finished "reading" *Shine*.

As I implicitly draw parallels and contrasts between the syllabus and rhetorical pedagogy, it is worth asking the explicit question: what, after all, is the difference between the two? As I explain how I taught my unit on *Shine* in terms of rhetoric, it occurs to me that there are many similarities between my unit and the syllabus. I did have an ethical conversation in mind when I set up that unit, just as the rationale for the syllabus is set up on an ethic of openness to the other. I also crafted an experience

⁵⁴ It is important to stress that, at this point, my questioning was as earnest as my students'. I may have guided their questioning up to a point, but I have to confess that I do not know what I think of the film as autobiography, and every time I teach this unit, I find myself swinging closer to and drawing away from the text. At this point, I joined the conversation as a genuine participant.

for my students *before* we actually viewed the text, changing the direction that the unit took after the viewing. What, after all, was the difference?

Before I discuss this, it is useful to explain the common ground that I share with the syllabus that is so evident in this unit of work. First of all, as the teacher I in no way expected my students to come up with the same answer; I take it as a given that each student will interact with the text differently and intended to respect that, particularly in the last stages of the ethical appraisal. Secondly, I did arrive, with my students, at a point where we were reading obliquely. I do see this as a valuable exercise. After all, we challenged the integrity of the text *Shine*, asking it to answer for an ethic that it itself sets up when it pronounces that it is “based on a true story.” How is that different from what the syllabus proposes, and how does my unit of work escape the criticisms I have mounted against the theorists in the previous chapters? Well, it probably does not escape them all, and I would hope to engage with any criticism levelled at my pedagogy, if only to improve this unit of work.

However, the unit of work that I put together is different in these fundamental ways. Firstly, when I set up the heading, I set it up in aesthetic terms. “Biography and Autobiography” are terms that describe genre. Had this unit of work been incorporated into the syllabus, it might have been called something like, “Tolerance and Friendship: *Shine*.” Set up like this, students already know what they are going to “find,” since the reading has been determined for them. If I had set up the unit in this way, we would not have to look for the “total act of discourse,” but would select parts of the film that supported this investigation, thus lessening the potential of the text to speak to us. Consequently, there would be no cause for the questions that came thick and fast later on in the unit of work that I taught. The unit of work that I taught ended openly; that is, it did not “close” in the sense that all my students had decided what ethic I definitively wanted from them. Because I had not told them what they would find and where their sympathies should lie, their engagement with the text was *theirs and not mine*. When they began to take notes independently and reflect on the way their sympathies were being guided by the director’s decision, they had to engage fully with the empathetic movement of their imaginations, as there was no way I was going to tell them which was the “righteous” character, and what “issues” we should be looking for! To do that would have been to kill the debate.

As it happened, my students did arrive at an ethical discussion, but they did it on the strength of their own questioning of the text. Implicit in my writing and my teaching was the view that a discussion on ethics would emerge *without* my overt machinations, since an imaginative and emotional connection with a character will inevitably invoke the ethical horizon of each viewer. By setting up the unit on rhetorical principles – that is, on the strength of conversation – I believe that my students became oriented toward each other in their discussion of ethics and justice. Thus, they become civically conscious and then become civic authors and agents.

Conclusion:

**The Best of Rhetoric: the ‘infinitely gentle,
infinitely suffering thing’**

The story of my year 8 class and their ethical appraisal of Shine is indeed a successful example of what Wayne Booth would call “the best” of rhetoric: “when we learn to listen to the ‘other,’ then listen to ourselves and thus manage to respond in a way that produces genuine dialogue – it is our primary resource for avoiding violence and building community.”¹ However, what happens when rhetoric is at its worst? “At its worst, it is our most harmful miseducator – except for violence.”² How does rhetoric at its worst affect our classrooms? There are many avenues where “the best” of rhetoric can become circumvented, where conversation can become a “harmful miseducator.” Conversation can be cauterised by a refusal to listen, by a dominating speaker, by the weight of history, and by the subject matter itself. As feminists, postcolonial critics, deconstructionists, and Marxists have been reminding us for decades now, there are so many ways that “the other” is locked out of the conversation, such that the dominating “conversation partner” is permitted to mount the soapbox time and again. I concede, there are many, many such examples.

In addition, there is the ancient criticism levelled at rhetoric; that it categorically refuses to adopt any other ethic than a commitment to conversation. This, of course, leaves our students wide open to influence of all kinds: political left, political right, sophistry, and what Wayne Booth calls “rhetrickery” – “the arts of making the worse seem the better cause.”³ Indeed, what if the conversation partner or the subject matter is dangerous? In *Gorgias*, Plato suggests that the eloquence of a morally decrepit conversation partner could have disastrous effects: “The orator need have no knowledge of the truth about things; it is enough for him to have discovered a knack of convincing the ignorant that he knows more than the experts.”⁴ Or, worse still, what if the provisional truth that the participants arrive at is a dubious ethic? Quintilian agonises over this very question in his *Institutio*:

If the powers of eloquence serve only to lend arms to crime, there can be nothing more pernicious than eloquence to public and private welfare alike, while I myself, who have laboured to the best of my ability to

¹ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication* (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing), 2004, p. xi-xii.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴ Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Walter Hamilton (London: Penguin, 1960), p. 38

contribute something of value to oratory, shall have rendered the worst of services to mankind.⁵

I remember discussing Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World* with my year 12 class, where one student was adamant that remaining high to the eyeballs on the tranquiliser "soma" sounded just fine to him – "why is happiness not a goal in itself?" he asked. Or yet another similar incident where my year 10 class was discussing the film *The Matrix*, and one of my students announced that she would quite happily have betrayed Neo along with the Judas Iscariot-like character, Ciper. Similarly to my year 12 student, she clearly articulated that she would prefer to live a blissfully ignorant, immoral life than an ascetic, consciously moral life. What am I to do when I believe that a conversation leads to a dubious ethic? After all, both of these conclusions are, in essence, governed by a highly individualistic – even selfish – ethic that I personally find wanting. These questions are, to a large extent, beyond the scope of this thesis in that they deal with just how far pluralism can go before it becomes irresponsible relativism. In asking for rhetoric to replace the hermeneutics of suspicion as the dominant paradigm for reading pedagogy, I am indeed opening myself and my students to any kind of conversation partner, rather than just those who categorically and explicitly illuminate "the other."

Rhetoric can by no means *guarantee* that open conversations can lead to a robust ethic of the other. It can, however, give us cause to *hope* for this ethic to flourish. It is the difference between hope and guarantee that really highlights the divergence of rhetoric and the present English syllabus. Hope, which is essentially what rhetoric is based on, beckons critical thinking, wooing students to think laterally and imaginatively but can never demand that such things occur. It simply leaves room for growth and waits for the student to move into that space. Guarantee, on the other hand, by its very nature makes demands that can accidentally and inadvertently snuff out the delicate process that is a teenager learning to think and argue sensitively and critically. Hans-Georg Gadamer, incidentally, explicitly acknowledges the role of hope in his hermeneutic:

Dutt: Of course one does not find in your thought the pessimism that predominates in the late texts of Adorno and Horkheimer. The gesture of your texts is different from this. You are more confident.

Gadamer: Yes, I am very sceptical of every kind of pessimism. I find in

⁵ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria: Books x-xii*, trans. H.E. Butler (Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 1.

all pessimism a certain lack of sincerity.

Dutt: Why?

Gadamer: Because no one can live without hope.

Dutt: But to express hope, of course, does not mean that you join the philosophers of cheer.

Gadamer: Most certainly not! Naturally one cannot keep quiet about the negative.⁶

And so, in arguing for rhetoric, I am in no way attempting to prove, empirically and categorically, that rhetoric is able to deliver what the hermeneutics of suspicion cannot. What I am suggesting, though, is that the very nature of guarantee ironically works against the kind of open conversation that fosters the kind of compassion and curiosity that generates a true ethic of the other. Like Gadamer, I cannot justify “joining the philosophers of cheer.” I most certainly see the place for healthy scepticism. In response to the questions I level at my own commitment to conversation and the range of evils that necessarily come with that commitment, I must admit that at the core of my teaching and my reading is the hope that true communal ethic will, like T.S. Eliot’s “infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing,” arise from conversation.

With this proviso, then – that rhetoric can never guarantee the emergence of ‘truth’ – I propose rhetoric as the answer to the problem that I see as inherent in the syllabus: that is, rhetoric *constitutes*, rather than describes and declares, the ethic of listening to the other. If we have conversation as our aim, and the English classroom as a place that hones those skills of conversation, then surely we will begin to see students develop into the civic leaders that the syllabus hopes that they will become. This is impossible, as I have shown, without students engaging with a text aesthetically and rhetorically (which are, of course, not necessarily two different things). If we can allow students to engage with a text aesthetically, as a conversation partner, then their sense of agency in the construction of ethics, character, classroom and state will mature as they begin to see the “others” sitting next to them in classrooms across the state more clearly. They will be able to become politically active without toeing a party line, and will be able to listen to even the most vitriolic polemic with the ears of a conversationalist. I propose that this is the kind of student that the current syllabus hopes for, and that rhetoric will help to create.

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer in Conversation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 83.

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