

**Literature at Footscray—a discussion paper.**

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‘The fact that both regimes [in Hungary] chose ... the House of Terror ‘as the scene for torture and interrogation speaks for itself ... No, it does not ... There is ‘no real situation behind the text—this is just text; words compromised by the site’, which in turn claims to authorise them. There is no ‘concrete, tangible horror’; this is not, as the building presents it, then only conceivable story that could have been told ...’ Thomas Laqueur, ‘Unquiet Bodies’, review of István Rév, *Retroactive Justice: prehistory of post-Communism*, *LRB* 6.4.2006, p. 8.

‘This insidious slide towards a language without truth or stable meanings is a frightening thing, and as professional custodians of language as a translucent medium of communication, I think we have to do something about it ... The writer’s moral mandate is gloriously wide, embracing any writing which takes us deeper into any human sensibility ... We should be both alert and afraid as we guard the integrity of our language.’ Inga Clendinnen, from her acceptance speech for the ASA Medal for 2005, *Australian Author*, April 2006, p. 13.

Roger Penrose writes that to mathematicians, mathematics is “not just as a cultural activity that we have ourselves created, but ... has a life of its own, and much of it finds an amazing harmony with the physical universe.” This is also true of literature, as I understand it. Literature is a game, but it is also an activity that reveals much about the relation between humans and their world. It can help us to understand what it means to live as individuals in society, specifically in Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In other words, it places us in our history, a history that is not merely a collection of facts, but must be assembled into narratives and understood imaginatively to apprehend its meanings. In this it differs from mathematics, which proceeds logically from fixed premises or observations. The writing and reading of literature proceeds dialectally, from an experience of words towards a common understanding.

As an example, take Macbeth’s soliloquy when he contemplates the murder of his king, Duncan. He ways the pragmatics of the action, but then his imagination takes him to a deeper level of reality:

Besides, this Duncan  
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been  
So clear in his great office, that his virtues,  
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against  
The deep damnation of his taking off;  
And pity, like a naked newborn babe,  
Striding the blast, or heaven’s cherubim horsed  
Upon the sightless couriers of the air  
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,  
That tears shall drown the wind.

The metaphors embody a moral reality that is pertinent in any age of power politics, and can be unpicked to show their source in a tradition that leads from Christianity to western humanism. But the power of the passage comes from a richness of language that expands our understanding of human possibilities for good and evil.

Simon During once said that the traditional purpose of teaching literature was to enlarge our capacity for the empathy that enables us to understand others by entering into their experience. We could add to this that its function in school education has been to enable readers to enter imaginatively into experiences that they have not yet encountered in their lives. But During went on to claim, without evidence, that these purposes were no longer valid. It may be that they are no longer fashionable, that theory has taught us to ask other questions, but I am not convinced that these new questions should displace the old.

The most serious attack on the older purposes has come from followers of Foucault and Derrida. Ian Hunter, for example, argues that traditional English teaching does no more than train students to govern themselves in the interests of power. Derrida argues that the nature of language is such that there can be no determinate meaning for any text. It follows from such arguments that the teaching of literature can only be an imposition of meanings that reinforce the power of the ruling elite. Yet, as Nathan Hollier points out in the latest *Overland*, power is always a relationship and is therefore never absolute. If no text has a single meaning—and even traditionalists would concede this—then all interpretation is an exercise in imagining alternative constructions and possibilities of reality. Because literature teaches us to identify with others, it offers us alternative ways of living in society and the of constructing the institutions that shape the society where we live.

I have however passed over a critical issue in my use of the word interpretation. Interpretation requires not only the authority but also the language to interpret. The danger of looking to traditional ways of teaching literature is not merely that we may fall into the circularity of Arnold's definition of culture as the best that has ever been thought and written, but of tying our interpretation to expressions of value that fail to address the issues of the present. Again, the current issue of *Overland* addresses this problem through Phillip Mead's essay on the commemoration of Judith Wright. He argues that, despite her canonical status in Australian literature, the literary discussion of her work fails to deal with the central issues that concerned her for the later part of her working life.

Ian has asked me to talk about the history of Literary Studies at Footscray. To do this, I need to go back a little into the history of English teaching generally. When I came to Footscray, in 1976, Literature was already well-established as a major in the degree of Bachelor of Arts—Urban Studies. The logic of this degree was that students should complete three majors—one in a core area of urban studies, one in a directly vocational area, and one in an area of liberal studies, which was taken to include humanities and social sciences. David English and Dirk den Hartog had developed their major in Literature, which was in this last category.

David and Dirk were both about ten years younger than I was, which meant that they belonged to the first generation of Australian university students who had grown up without memories of the Great Depression or, except in vague terms, the Second World War, which were both central to the experiences of their own parents and of the people who taught them literature. These teachers had experienced the Second World War and the treacherous events that led to it, but few had experienced its horrors as directly as Leavis had the first. Leavis, a pacifist, had spent four years as a stretcher-bearer amid the trenches of the Western Front. He carried Milton in his pocket throughout this time, and so spoke with authority when he condemned his poetry as deadening. Buckley saw no direct conflict, but spent two terrible years encountering bureaucratic tyranny in a military hospital. Both spent their working lives seeking a poetry that would reconstitute a community that had been lost. But while Leavis saw poetry as giving direct access to this world, Buckley looked to literature to point to a truth beyond itself. In practice, this made him an ally with those teachers and critics who saw literature as something good in itself, something

outside the politics of its time. One consequence is that English-language writers after the second world war never engaged, except as partisans, in the Cold War and the sterility of ideology in the way modernists between the wars had engaged with the death of modernity.

The Literary Studies curriculum I found when I came to Footscray was the product of this period in English studies. Dirk had been taught at Melbourne by Sam Goldberg and Vincent Buckley, both, in different ways, followers of FR Leavis. David had been taught by Harold Oliver, more nationalist and new critical. What these teachers had in common, alongside Marxists like Arnold Kettle or Ian Watt, was a belief that the study of literature provide an access to social truths. Literature was the key to a good society, whether hierarchical, for the New Critics, organic, for Leavis, or collective, for the Marxists.

The course David and Dirk had developed was scholarly; it offered students a good understanding of English writing over two or three centuries, alongside a study of such political and social themes as utopianism. I felt that it was too much oriented to the North Atlantic, and we added units in Australian literature and, later, Asian Pacific literature. These were taught as discrete units, but for a time we experimented with a streamed organization that incorporated British, American and Australian-Pacific segments in each unit. The overall commitment of the course was to the kind of liberal humanism that Simon During once summed up as the belief that the study of English enables us to understand ourselves and others better, and therefore to act more humanly in the world. During gave no reasons for his rejection of this claim as no longer sustainable. I believe that it remains a good starting point for any consideration of what English may offer to its students. Its lack of theoretical rigour meant it was unable to resist the attacks of postmodernism in its various guises, but I would also argue that the success of the theorists has completed the work of the New Critics in denying English studies a function in understanding the contemporary world or fitting our students with the skills they need to counter the corruption of values in contemporary society. This corruption is nowhere so evident as in the loss of meaning in language, yet it has been left to the historians, rather than the literary critics, to point to this destruction of the medium that is above all else the object of our study. Traditional literary studies failed to respond adequately to this issue because an approach that had originally been enquiring and constructive had become formalist, moralistic, and exclusive. Instead of opening students' minds to literature, it used literature to grade the quality of their minds. It continued to serve the best students well, only because they found their own way beyond it. It no longer addressed the matters that most interested them, and the writers they read. As teachers, we had collectively lost confidence in our subject. In a note written to members of the Melbourne University English Department at about this time, the new professor, Howard Felperin, pointed out that what they were teaching at the university no longer had any relationship to what was being taught in the schools. He was far from concerned by this, but in retrospect this can be seen as a major severance of English studies from the community, a severance that was only partly healed by the development of cultural studies.

Yet we cannot blame the theorists for this loss of confidence in our own discipline. Literary theory, including feminism and post-colonial studies, has undeniably exposed areas of experience that were completely neglected in traditional literary studies. The structuralists have furthered our understanding of how language actually works to construct reality, and the post-structuralists have taught us to distrust literalism and the belief that the world cannot be simply captured in language. The relativism this implies is not unbounded, but rather a recognition that all values are historically conditioned. The hermeneutical approach enables us both to enter into the historical moment of a text, and to distance ourselves to discover alternative readings and judgments. This dual movement of entrance and distancing is characteristic of those varied

theorists whose work arises from their own intense participation in the history of their times. Raymond Williams went from the battlefields of France to work in adult education, where he tried to build the kind of organic community Leavis had imagined. As an academic, he devoted his energies to producing an unillusioned Marxist account of literature that showed both how it revealed the human costs of economic organization and offered alternative futures. In France, Hélène Cixous draws on her experience of struggle in Algeria to provide a feminist and post-colonial critique of modern society. Derrida formulates his theories after prolonged meditation on Marx and on the failures of the 1968 uprisings to overthrow power. He participates in campaigns for justice in South Africa, and where he uses the same kind of deconstruction of the linguistics of totalitarianism that he employs in his more general work to undermine the claims to a single truth that underlie the ideology of capitalism. Edward Said similarly uses his participation in the political struggles of the Palestinians to construct a historical critique of imperialism. All of these writers demonstrate the importance of literature in helping us understand the social reality that shapes it and to imagine alternative ways of being in society. While we may have needed the salutary reminders of Foucault or Derrida that language can never escape its power structures or embody an absolute truth, we have too easily accepted their suggestion that there is no truth beyond language. To cite another historian, this time one writing about remembering Fascist and Communist terrors in Hungary, where there is ‘no real situation behind the text—[it] is just text; words compromised by site.’ (István Rév, quoted by Thomas Laqueur, *LRB*, 6.4.06, p. 8). It is important to recognise the dangers of those who believe they know a single truth and seek to impose it on others. Meaning may be constructed by language, but there is no private language, for language is determined by life, and our consciousness of life is determined not individually but collectively. There is always a collective situation outside the language. Power speaks lies to this situation. Literature seeks its truth, knowing that it will never find it. As Lacan claimed, although to be questioned by Derrida, “Fiction manifests the truth: the truth that illustrates itself through evasion.” Or as Beckett says, “Where I am I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”

## Literature teaching: Purpose

To enable students to become citizens of the republic of letters and the commonwealth of humanity by developing their

### Skills

1. To read and interpret a literary text, including poetry, fiction, life writing, drama and essays;
2. To write clearly and coherently, developing logical argument supported by literary analysis and empirical evidence as appropriate;

### Knowledge

3. To know and be able to use the key terms of literary discourse;
4. To be able to identify the major periods of development of literature in English, including writing from Britain, America, and Australia, and writing in English from at least one other country;

### Understanding

5. To understand the complexities of the relationship between text and context;
6. To understand the major schools of contemporary literary theory;
7. To be able to relate literary to cultural theory;
8. To recognise the playfulness, fallibility and contextual determination of all texts.
9. To understand the function of literature in personal and social development.

The development of courses that meet this purpose depends on maintaining a sufficient basis of scholarship and research. Research is integral to academic teaching. It enables staff to know what is happening in their fields of study and to excite their students about it. But the teaching itself feeds the research, directly and indirectly raising the questions that should animate it. Teachers and students constitute a single academic community.

It is vital to the health of this community that each part of it be in communication with all others. The university needs to promote both graduate and undergraduate study, and undergraduates should be aware of the postgraduate work. The employment of postgraduate students as tutors, provided it is not exploitative, is one way of ensuring this knowledge. The central vehicle however should be a vigorous honours program, supplemented by interaction with other university honours students. This in turn should ensure a continuing demand for postgraduate studies in literature.

The development of such an academic community becomes more urgent in the light of the likely change in the pattern of university education to the American model of general degrees followed by specialist graduate courses. Handled properly, this could enhance equity through the system. This will happen only if the courses in the general degrees, including literature, are of the highest scholarly standards. The alternative is that they become mere service courses, and universities like Victoria are reduced to service institutions gradgrinding students for professional entrance examinations.