

## ‘Real’ English and ‘English Lite’: What texts should we teach in the English classroom? (I) or ‘English Lite’ and ‘Thick Lit’: What is the debate about?

by Frances Devlin-Glass

**W**hy is it that John Howard wants to micro-manage English curricula? Why does how we teach English and Literature regularly make it to the front and editorial pages of the national dailies? I will attempt to critique that phenomenon, to explain my state of mind, that of being both alert and alarmed. I should make it clear that I speak not from the vantage point of having a close familiarity with VCE classrooms, because I don’t, but I do have experience in dealing with the products of those classrooms having spent the last 35 years teaching first years, and regularly devising new curricula for them.

Julie Brennan framed up the panel on ‘Real’ English or ‘English Lite’ for the VATE conference thus (in part):

The suggested changes to VCE English last year provoked volumes of hyperbole from the media: It was dubbed a ‘tragic act of cultural barbarism’ and alleged that children would be ‘robbed of joy and part of their heritage and identity’. It was ‘poison’, ‘a profound tragedy’, ‘sinister’ and perhaps most frightening of all ‘postmodern’! It was a little surprising for English teachers to suddenly imagine that they could potentially wield this much power. But do they?

Allowing for the sexy-issue factor, I wondered whether the question was ingenuous, rhetorical or abject. Even in pre-theory days, in the era when we were more innocent about the role of our discipline in the reproduction of class and power, I’d have thought English teachers had power, and

my argument would be that we have it still, probably in double measure because our discipline empowers us to teach students how to recognise the workings of power in language and multimodal texts, and to critique it. We have a particularly effective currency (this commercial metaphor is bothersome, especially as I abandoned a military one in favour of it – a sign of our embattled times?) in the cornucopia of texts at our disposal, and ones that can be deployed in empowering ways for our students. In what follows I hope, at the risk of seeming Pollyanna-ish, to defend this position.

The latest round of the debate began with Tony Thompson’s article, ‘English Lite is a tragedy for Students’ in *The Age* 12 September 2005. He was concerned that VCE English might be reduced to a single print text and he was alarmed about the watering down of curriculum driven by the ‘postmodern notion that books are somehow connected to a hegemonic view of the world that can only be addressed by making sure that comics, television shows, milk cartoons and road signs are never marginalized.’ While I acknowledge his irony and admire his passion and commitment, I found myself arguing with some of his propositions. Against his view that no multimodal text yields as much significance as a piece of genuine literature (a good debating text for a curriculum committee warm-up), one has to ask are there not good multimodal texts which warrant analysis and which will yield opportunities for critique? I think so, and I’m sure many teachers are already

engaged in the heady process of estranging what is familiar to students and using the process to teach both semiotic analysis (a not-too-distant cousin to traditional aesthetic 'prac crit' methodologies) and critical literacy in a rich and engaging bundle. I'd have to disagree with Thompson about multimodal texts being not as rich. It depends, of course, on the text. While there's a lot, for instance, you can do to estrange *Toy Story* using critical literacy methodologies, I'd much rather work on *Princess Mononoke* because there's a lot more to engage my mind and those of my students, and because it offers more scope for the application of a variety of approaches. Films as dense and aesthetically intriguing as *Memento* or *Pulp Fiction* are superb for all sorts of analyses, and utterly engaging to students at first year university. My hope is that analyses of simpler multimodal texts of all kinds (the legendary tissue boxes, advertising and DVD covers) are occurring in lower secondary, and indeed primary.

I'm with Thompson, however, on the risks of boredom and of not stretching students far enough. I'd be arguing that because of the absurdly ambitious regimes in first year university courses around the country where students get a week to study a major (or minor) work, that the luxury of many weeks to study particular works is one that should be gloried in and not squandered on mediocre texts. These are, after all, often the texts that students take with them into the rest of their lives. They have the potential to shape identity and meaning for many students, and probably especially those who won't study English at university, so it's a highly privileged opportunity, and in my view the texts should be rich and multi-layered. But, of course, everything depends on not only what is taught but how it's taught.

Should we stick to the canon? And if so, how reverently? This is to raise a raft of questions: firstly what is the canon? Whose

canon? Canons even in the days before they were problematised were, and are, amazingly fickle things. Joyce, now canonical, did not get his guernsey on university curricula much before the late 60s in most Australian universities, though Melbourne and UQ were a bit more proactive and Adelaide very late into the game. Leavis, canon-maker extraordinaire, certainly didn't have much time for Joyce, though he'd tried to circumvent the censors to teach it in Britain as early as 1926. He, I think, found Joyce's religion and his class and comedy problematic. Even at this point, when Joyce's position inside the academy is secure, is he more read outside than inside? Further, there are Shakespearean plays that you probably wouldn't choose to teach to senior secondary or university students even in a specialist course. And of course, not all texts deemed canonical necessarily are the ones that teach well. The case of Furphy (whom I love to bits and think is every bit as good as Melville) is instructive: he is deemed to be a foundation of the Australian canon, but is rarely taught because of the immense scholarship needed to read him well. What's with canonicity?

Problematising the canon and its exclusiveness has been one of the most exciting phenomena in literary studies in the last thirty years. Feminist and postcolonial critics have since the 1970s given this process much impetus. In the process, critics and theorists, not always women, also demonstrated that women readers and writers were emasculated, and taught both women and men how to read as a woman. There's no turning back from such practices. We cannot pretend that the postmodern revolution which empowered potentially half the human race to think of themselves as more dignified and more equal, didn't happen. What we have to foster, though, are those versions of feminism that aren't narrow and programmatic, and those versions of gender studies that see how men have been handicapped

for three millennia by gender asymmetries. What more powerful way to do this than through literary texts? Not that that is the only thing one does with any particular text. And mostly this work of gender-awareness will be done on the side, as a matter of course, rather than directly.

Then, of course, there were legitimate postcolonial demands from the margins, a process that refurbished several canons by including the colonial upstarts – the claims to greatness of Australian writers, and more surprisingly, Aboriginal and Maori writers. The richness is added by such voices as Toni Morrison and V.S. Naipaul, and, more controversially in Australia, Mudrooroo, means that the canon is now unthinkable without them. Who would want to resile from that revolution?

I'd also question whether the call for the return to the canon is innocent. It's certainly naïve. What critical literacy/literary theory has taught us is the implication of canon-formation in class- and gender-formations, nation-building and imperial projects (Anderson, Eagleton). As John Docker claimed some decades ago now, exclusively aesthetic and formalist methodologies certainly had the effect of dumbing down what one could talk about in a text, as well as its implied politics. It was a mechanism for engendering an apolitical reader.

Literary knee-bending and forelock-tugging, and to change the metaphor, rattling of white picket fences in Howard's case, is alive and well, and this is no doubt what has inspired some of the heat and light of the debate as it has currently surfaced this Easter (or was it a cunning way to displace the AWB from the front pages, or something else?). I'm delighted that the debate in this round has in fact centred on Shakespeare as it has helped to crystallize what the issues are for our political masters. But I would argue that it is the kiss of death to treat even

Shakespeare reverentially. Every author deserves an attempt to read him in the light of what one can intelligently reconstruct of his ideological and literary context as well as in the light of the debates of our own time, theoretical and otherwise. Methodologically, that's increasingly easy to do: teachers are very familiar with hooking the students into *Romeo and Juliet* using Baz Luhrmann, with a view to locating the issues more in terms of our own culture, and then they may well go back to the more traditional productions (BBC versions perhaps), and perhaps from there to talking about the physical opportunities in the Globe and the court theatres for the production of poetry. As a literary critic and a theatre critic trained (in the '60s) to appreciate purist Elizabethan productions of Shakespeare, I was delighted to have my horizons radically challenged by the new generations of Shakespeare directors, especially Roger Hodgman and John Bell. Give me a Melbourne Greek scenario for the low-life characters in *Measure for Measure* and I'm understanding a lot more about Shakespeare than I would with ordinary clowns. And I can well understand too that kids from Northcote High would get much more out of it too. But I also anticipate that audible recoil in the theatre audience from the expectation that Isabella could be expected to marry the sadistic duke, and experience the frisson when it happens. That almost gasped 'no' I heard from the theatre audience in Melbourne in 2005 indicates they were following the debate carefully, and that the indigenization/modernisation of the Bard's content was utterly justifiable. That expectation that Isabella could be expected to marry the duke belongs to Shakespeare's time, and I'm thrilled, as was that audience, when Bell withheld his consent to it by how he ended the play (he froze the question and took the lights and curtain down on it), and that moment of theatre semiotics tells me Bell's production is of my time and that to debate with the Bard in this way is justified, indeed necessary. Bardola-

tory does not rule in the theatre, nor should it rule in our classrooms. I envy secondary teachers the time to build the bridges you need to between students' experience and the text and to take roundabout routes to the traditional analyses of language and aesthetics, introducing critical literacies on the way. Application of a range of methodologies, from traditional aesthetic and theoretically-grounded critical literacy methodologies and several historicisms on the way, is surely what such an experience of teaching a Shakespeare text needs to be able to take for granted.

If canonical knee-bending is out, why should theoretically based methodologies be reverentially treated? This brings me to the SCEGGS assessment question, asked in the context of the current New South Wales senior English curriculum, which made the PM and others see red. To have asked these students to give feminist/marxist/racial accounts of *Othello* is for me to operate in a generative space, but it is to ask the question entirely the wrong way and to invite both programmatic responses from the students, and the kinds of knee jerk reaction of the PM and others of his cast of mind. Let me explain. To ask the question in the way SCEGGS did is to invite potted Marx, unintelligent feminism, lazy poststructuralism. It is to invite over-simplified, programmatic potted application of complex theoretical approaches, the kind of thing that actually does dumb down. It's not defensible to collapse nuanced and complex issues in this way. To be well-read as a feminist is to know that there are many feminisms and that the debate has moved very productively into gender studies and into areas that deeply problematise sexual and gender binarisms of all kinds. And yet the SCEGGS impulse is good, and more time teasing out some really searching questions based on (gendered) character or language analysis of the issues would eliminate the problem and be less inclined to expose the essay-setters to

the obloquy they have properly received. Good assessment questions, as practising teachers know, are hard to formulate to get the kind of close attention to text and marry it with meaningful issues. Not only does the SCEGGS question give feminism etc. a bad name, it is also deeply out of touch with real young women. I imagine the SCEGGS women are not different from my own students who are very wary of the 'f' word, because they can take their consciousness-raising mothers' hard-won gains for granted, and they won't know gender discrimination in their bones until much later in life as a result of tough experience. Further, I think it's worth questioning if students at secondary level will benefit from straight theory; I would argue that the best armoury we have for opening students up to poststructuralist thinking are literary texts themselves rather than serving theory on the rocks, so my approach would be that theory be used laterally rather than full-on to open up questions of power and critique.

Another aspect of the debate that bothers me is the false dichotomy it sets up between aesthetic/formalist manoeuvres on the one hand and postmodern ones on the other. Just because many postmodern theories and technologies define themselves in opposition to what they seek to supplant, we as practitioners do not have to buy this rhetoric. We can engage in the critique of power and privilege (which some understandings of the artefact undoubtedly embody) and simultaneously engage in the analytical manoeuvres of practical and aesthetic criticism. It is not either/or: we can comfortably do both by examining the text in its own terms and by offering resistant readings of it. We will probably want to go a lot further, and ask questions about the conditions of production, about the debates into which the work inserts itself, and about how they compare with debates and understandings of our own time. We have a rich vibrant pot of methodologies to select from, and our ap-

proach can afford to be eclectic and shaped by the text we are reading.

Let me give you an example of what I mean by doing theory laterally. I was astonished to find that Philip Hodgins *Dispossession* has been on the VCE syllabus, and commend the text-spotters on that brave choice. I imagine it speaks directly to country students, but I also know that city kids have been profoundly moved by it too (a young woman from Strathcona put it into my hands and said it was the best thing she'd ever read). Dealing with that text would inevitably involve asking a set of formalist questions about why he uses blank verse, how the tradition typically uses it, what about his deployment of it is original. It's superb understated poetry, and I'd want my students to experience its aesthetic pleasures, and how moving it is. Further, I'd be wanting to do some heavy-duty work on Australian literary history, exposing students to heroic settler narratives, perhaps a bit of Lawson, select bits of Furphy and Baynton, and of course, Russell Ward. I'd also want to use the poem to critique bush nationalism, and further bring gender into the debate. I think I'd also want to raise the hints in the text about Aboriginal dispossession and tie them in to Battler narratives and the sense of entitlement that animates the followers of Pauline Hanson. I'd also want them to talk about how unprogrammatically it does gender. It would be a rich, multi-faceted discussion, which hopefully will stay with them for life. I think the texts we give them, especially if I am to spend six precious weeks of classes on them, have to sustain such analyses, be worth that investment. Although Howard mightn't get it, and certainly wouldn't agree with my politics, it is also simultaneously an enquiry into cultural citizenship and critical nation formation.

At the risk of sounding like a conspiracy theorist, I'd like to speculate about the real

agenda of the critics. I think the underlying debate is not really about whether we teach Shakespeare or popular culture, but rather about introducing students to postmodern methodologies and critique. What I think Howard and those of his ilk (and I include Leonie Kramer and David Williamson who have entered the debate – strange bedfellows) fear in the new critical literacies is the formation of a more subversive, questioning citizen. It's finally, I'd suggest, about power, and the potential for English classrooms to raise consciousness about how power is deployed in language and visual texts. How can you read postcolonial literature and not have your intellectual and feeling sensibilities broadened, and demand a better deal for Aboriginal languages? For compensatory programs? For symbolic gestures full of meaning in place of legalese? To raise such matters is to jump over the white picket fence that Howard wants to rattle and rebuild into a fortress. And the same goes for teaching our students to be more aware of gender and class and multicultural issues. If anything, what we have learnt in the post-9/11 era is how fragile the intellectual gains made since the late 60s actually are. To reduce the critical literacies to a top-down imposition of lefty values is to seriously misrepresent the process that the study of English Literature, even in the hands of formalists, always did – to educate the sensibilities and the intellect. We're now doing another job but one very much congruent with our traditional aesthetic (and not entirely outmoded!) foci: we also encourage provisionality in the study of our assumptions and those of one's nation, and nothing is spared critique, especially not the canonical.

Another aspect of the literacy debate is the job we do in raising consciousness about how texts make meaning. If we're studying a pop culture text, it's not only because it connects with what the students actually think about, but also because we're want-

ing to foreground and analyse the process of text-construction, to defuse its capacity to take us over, to cannibalise our thinking. If we don't give students the capacity to understand how texts work on them, how they paper over their own silences and omissions, erase other potential subject-positions and so on, then we are missing opportunities for transferable skills which will make them life-long critics of texts of all kinds – whether of the PM's micro-facial-gestures of reassurance and triumphalism, as much as of Othello's race. And we deprive them of the pleasure of full control over their alignment and resistance activities as textual consumers.

In conclusion, I hope I've made a case that we still occupy as powerful a place in identity formation, nation-building as ever we did. At this point in history, I hope we do it with a much stronger sense of egalitarianism and that we question the sources of our own authority more rigorously, and with more troubling questions and doubts than the previous generation. We have the privilege of working alongside students who are often, but not always, anxious to expand their horizons. Those that aren't are our deepest challenge. The Prime Minister remains a deeper challenge. If we weren't powerful, why would our political tyros be getting into the minutiae of curriculum?

### **Works Cited**

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