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The following essay constructs a version of my English history. The essay consists of several types of text, including a fictionalised account of my adolescence, reminiscences about my high school and university education, as well as an argument about the role of literary theory in English teaching and professional learning. How can anyone explain his or her history? By combining these texts I hope to capture a sense of the multifaceted nature of my education without pretending to fully comprehend it. I am also aware that other people mentioned in this essay will have a different view of the experiences and debates that I recount.

1. Sun on the Stubble

*Early morning.*

Bruno brushes through the stubble to look at his traps. No luck. He pulls out the pin buried in the earth, and awkwardly snaps the trap shut, to jingle the contraption at his side as he trudges to his next spot. A white scut as the rabbit frantically pulls at the trap, but there is no escape, and easing it out, then grabbing its back legs firmly, Bruno wrings the bugger's neck. Taking his knife, he rips open its taut belly, and casts its steaming guts on the ground. The sun swings above the ridge and touches the stubble paddocks with long-handled brushes of golden light. In the distance Bruno sees the farm house, its windows ablaze.

‘D’ya get any?’

This from his brother as he enters the kitchen.

‘A couple.’

‘Y’can give ‘em to me, if y’ like. I’m goin to the rabbit’o later this mornin…’

But any favour Herb might do for him, he’d remind him about it for weeks to come. Besides, last time he left him a couple of bob short, said it was a handling charge. Herb had ferrets, and always got plenty of bunnies, but Bruno had to make do with traps. Once Herb let him borrow one of his ferrets – for a fee – and Bruno lost it, when after the thump thump of the chase it got the taste of blood and stopped down the hole. He’d spent the whole day trudging over those paddocks, with the wheedling ferret in a box, and a few bunnies tied up in a hessian bag. Then he had to drop everything, and run back to the house to get a shovel, and start digging. The stupid thing finally stuck its head out of a tunnel late afternoon, after Bruno had dug a trench about four feet deep.

‘Y’don’t pay me enough. I’d be better off gettin outa the place altogether than stayin here and workin me guts out for nothin. How’s a bloke to support a wife and kid on twenty quid a week?’

‘Nett!’

Father and Herb are at it again.

‘Yeah. But what’s in it for me? I’m supposed to sweat me guts out, only to see the whole place handed over to Lottie and this one …’ – he looks at Bruno – ‘after you’ve gone? … Well? Why should I bother to do anything when all I’m doin is workin for them?’

Bruno washes down his toast with his tea. He keeps his eyes down. How many times has he heard this conversation? It seems that every morning his brother harangues their father about his income. They take their loud talk with them as they drive into town for the sale, with Bruno in the back seat, thinking about school assemblies and meaningless algebraic equations. He reads about his adventures. Cigarettes and Matches. The Secret in the Woodpile. Tin-Kettling and Floodwater.

Donnervetter, Bruno! Don’t talk stupid. To high school you must go.

His mother wants him to be a teacher. He will earn good money. His brains are a Gift of God. His body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Herb’s nine years older, his father’s right hand man. No place for two boys on the property.

2. The Sleepy Ones

I wrote this narrative fragment at the time of my father’s death when I had just turned thirty. By calling myself Bruno, the central character in Colin Thiele’s *Sun on the Stubble*, I hoped to gain a perspective on my experiences that would not otherwise be available to me.
Sun on the Stubble was the set text in my first year at Murray Bridge High School, along with Australian Poets Speak, an anthology edited by Colin Thiele and Ian Mudie. Much of the verse in the anthology evoked images of an Australia that were drowsy and faded, like Kenneth Slessor’s ‘country towns’ with their ‘willows and squares, and farmers bouncing on barrel mares’. We ploughed through each poem, the heat outside shimmering above the asphalt. But I remember enjoying Sun on the Stubble because the scenes and characters were familiar to me, and I wrote pages in response to the comprehension questions my English teacher set on the novel each week.

The way I am using Sun on the Stubble to construct an account of my experiences as an adolescent does not match my memories of studying the novel when I was at high school. On the day of my father’s funeral I found myself in the midst of his brothers and sisters and their children. My aunties and uncles and cousins. At home after the service, the younger children ran off to gather mulberries from the trees my father had planted a few years before his death, while inside the adults ate Kuchen and drank tea. Now an English teacher myself, and working in a state high school in Melbourne, I found it difficult to engage in their conversations about church and farm life. I was also conscious that they were wary of me, and that some of them thought I was too clever by half. One of my uncles put me in my place.

‘Sieben Schläfer!’ Uncle Otto declared.
‘No, I don’t know what that means.’
‘Sieben Schläfer? I thought you were supposed to be clever.’
‘Sieben? … Seven? …’
‘Seven Sleepers! If it rained on the 27th June, the old men they would talk about Sieben Schläfer. Some rain every day it would fall for the next seven weeks. And at the end of that time the paddocks they would be green …’

High school had driven a wedge between me and my Lutheran upbringing, something which would probably not have happened had I been sent to Concordia College as planned. Sun on the Stubble is framed by a Prologue describing Bruno’s anguish at being sent to school in Adelaide, when the scenes of his boyhood ‘swept through his mind’s eye, leapt and swayed and flickered like the changing patterns of sunlight on the stubble’. At around the time when I was meant to go to Adelaide, my father almost went bankrupt, and he was unable to pay the boarding fees. So I found myself at the local high school, the beneficiary of all that a state high school had to offer students in the 1960s, mixing with teenagers from Murray Bridge and the surrounding farming districts, and open to all that my English teachers had to offer me. Despite the pressures imposed by statewide examinations (which began with Intermediate, followed by Leaving and then Matriculation), these teachers challenged me, made me re-examine my beliefs, goaded me into experimenting with my writing and reading novels like Catcher in the Rye and Down and Out in Paris and London. By the time I got to Leaving, I was debating the existence of God with other students in class, loudly declaring myself to be an atheist, while dutifully attending church with my parents and singing dour Lutheran hymns each Sunday.

3. ‘An instrument of the Devil’

Dear Brenton,

I am writing you this letter in the spirit of help and not rejection and I ask you in all sincerity to accept this on such basis.

I want you to thoroughly examine yourself and realise that everything I have told you in the past was in the spirit of help, but unfortunately you have not registered, therefore the outcome of this degrading happening. I appreciate your success in the academic world but never mind how clever you are, and this is a gift of God, common sense will always prevail.

It is high time you woke up and realised by following the agitator you are an instrument of the Devil and the only person you are hurting is your own self. To use Vietnam as an issue is ridiculous as you and the radical mob know no more about it than I do, and that is nothing. Why? Is it not equally morally important to demonstrate against China and Russia for supplying arms, or against alcohol which is the greatest killer on the roads in our country today?

I think you were a fool to be at the demonstration and I feel sorry for the Police to even try to control an unruly mob of people attempting to apply their sensational rot on the public. I wonder whether you would be interested in a demonstration deploring the suffering inflicted on helpless women and children fleeing from an invading army.

Your trouble is self-inflicted, I find no fault with the Police, and you have to bear the consequences. I recommend you to go to Court personally, and in all humility plead Guilty, and in your say, which you get, apologise to the Magistrate and promise never to become involved again …
4. A university education

By the time I became caught up in protests against the Vietnam War, my father’s accusation that I was an instrument of the Devil only showed how alien his beliefs had become to me. My participation in protest action was limited when compared with the stance taken by other students. A couple of former students from Murray Bridge High School who were older than me refused to register for national service and their university education was severely disrupted as they continually sought to evade arrest.

A greater source of conflict for me than my Lutheran upbringing was that I was completing an Honours degree in English, even as I was defending myself against a charge of hindering a police officer during a demonstration against the mining of Haiphong Harbour. When I initially made a weak protest by saying that I was not prepared to enter a plea, the magistrate snarlingly sent me back to the lockup for refusing to recognise the court. A young policeman who was about my age took my belt away from me and ushered me into a stinking cell with a urinal in the corner. I was only released when I pleaded innocent to the charge, and several weeks later, after having had my case remanded two more times, I eventually changed my plea to guilty. Other students maintained a more defiant stance, defending themselves without the aid of a lawyer, and challenging the authority of the police and the magistrates.

Every week several of us attended a seminar at Flinders University, entitled Marxism-Leninism. I had been given permission to complete this subject as part of my Honours degree, even though it was a Philosophy subject. So I found myself continually in dialogue with students from contrasting disciplinary areas, as we debated the war, discussed our court cases, and explored topics like dialectical materialism, historical materialism, the state and revolution, left wing communism, the role of the vanguard party in any revolutionary struggle. In conversation with Walter Benjamin, Brecht compares one of his didactic pieces with a poem by Becher. He says of his own poem: ‘Anyone who learned from it was supposed to put himself in place of the “I” of the poem.’ But of Becher’s poem, he remarks: ‘When Becher says “I”, he considers himself – as president of the Union of German Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers – to be exemplary. The only trouble is that nobody feels like following his example. He gets nothing across except that he is rather pleased with himself.’ (See Benjamin, 1973.)

Whether a knowledge of Brecht’s remarks on Becher would have caused us to revise our views of the relationship between literature and class struggle is unlikely. In any case, Brecht’s own stance is characteristically contradictory, swinging from those lines which demand empathy with the plight of people who have been degraded by the ‘dark times’ (‘schliesslich bin ich auch nur ein Mensch’1 – so sings a woman who has been forced to prostitute herself since she was seventeen) to the disavowal of empathy and insistence on critical detachment in his writings on the theatre. Yet for all the claims he made on behalf of the Verfremdungseffekt, his poems and plays still convey a sense of the complex ways in which people form their values and beliefs, including the contradictory relationship between their values and the habitual practices of their daily lives. People do not arrive at their beliefs simply by thinking about them, as though their convictions are the product of rational reflection and choice. My Lutheran upbringing was not something I chose. And although being born into that world did not mean that I was obliged to remain one of the ‘sleepy ones’ ('Selig
sind diese Schläfrigen,’ declares Zarathustra, ‘denn sie sollen bald einnicken’), my distance from the beliefs and values that were instilled into me as a child and adolescent cannot be explained solely as a result of my capacity to engage in a critique of Lutheran ideology.

5. Language, totality and mediation
What was at stake in those earnest discussions about the role that literature might play in social reform? How might I best explain the intellectual struggle that I was experiencing at that time?

The way we were hotly debating class struggle and the possibility of revolutionary change no doubt seems laughable now, especially when you put those debates against the backdrop of Australian society of the 1970s. By and large, the writers from whom we were drawing produced their work in reaction to the social turmoil of the First World War and the rise of fascism – the ‘dark times’ evoked by Brecht’s poem, ‘To Posterity’. A book which had a decisive impact on me, and which I subsequently read and reread many times, was Georg Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness, which first became available in English translation in 1971. How could anyone conceivably apply Lukács’s schema of revolutionary transformation (including the emergence of the proletariat as the identical subject/object of the historical process) to Billy McMahon’s Australia? At the end of our degrees, several of us spent time working in factories (I was employed as a fettler in Chrysler’s foundry at Lonsdale, south of Adelaide) in a bid to join working people in their struggle to overthrow the capitalist system, only to discover that they were preoccupied by much more mundane concerns, such as obtaining a living wage from week to week. Few of us, I think, could really appreciate the dull ordinariness of that struggle.

At the time, there seemed to be two alternatives available to me. One involved turning my back on ‘the scandal of literary scholarship’, as the US academic Louis Kampf described it, exposing the class biases of ‘Tintern Abbey’ and ‘Easter 1916’ and thereby protesting against ‘the slaughter in Vietnam’. ‘Such anti-humanist activity,’ wrote Kampf, ‘may be the going price for a study of literature which affects life’ (Kampf 1968, pp. 57–58). The other alternative was the tepid Leavisism with which my lecturers and other Honours students in the English Department greeted the outrageous state-ments which I imported from the Philosophy seminars in which I had been participating. For Louis Kampf it was a revelation that ‘the quiet honesty of “Tintern Abbey” hides a lie about the morality of nature; that our passive acceptance of the poem’s seductive authority may keep us from seeing ourselves, the world and, indeed, “Tintern Abbey” as they really are’. In response to such iconoclastic readings of canonical texts, my English Department lecturers could only speak in a hushed tone, invoking the life of the imagination, and continuing to exercise their typically refined discriminations in order ‘to enter into possession of the given poem in its concrete fullness’ (Leavis 1972, p. 213).

The ‘radicalism’ of critics like Louis Kampf never seriously challenged the type of literary analysis they were supposedly critiquing. But the Leavisism of my university lecturers was likewise a caricature of Leavis’s work, and I can now pose my dilemma more intelligently, in a way that I would not have been able to do when I initially experienced this conflict between my politics and my interest in literary studies. The issue was captured for me by Perry Anderson’s essay, ‘Components of the National Culture’, where he showed how Leavis, through ‘that completeness of possession and that fullness of response’ of literary criticism, was reaffirming the value of the ‘organic community’ (Anderson 1970, p. 271) and promoting a vision of connectedness that challenged the alienating tendencies of ‘mass civilisation’ (Leavis and Thompson 1977, pp. 80–81). This ideal of community was to be achieved by literary critics whose role was to focus on language as a vehicle of tradition and thus sustain a sense of society as a whole. As Terry Eagleton has subsequently argued, the idea that the values of a true community (or ‘literary tradition’) could be ‘kept alive by the educated (who are not to be identified with any social class)’ hardly stands up to critical interrogation (Leavis and Thompson 1977, p. 82, Eagleton 1983). However, despite the faintly ridiculous character of these pretensions, they still represent an attempt to formulate an alternative vision of human community (or ‘totality’) to liberal individualism and the market economy.

As I came to understand the political or interventionist character of Leavis’s criticism, I began to appreciate the remarkable integrity of his formal analysis of literary texts. At one level his famous affirmation of ‘the ideal critic’ as ‘the ideal reader’ who attains ‘a peculiar completeness of response’ to the literary work (Leavis 1972, pp. 212–213) cannot be dissociated from his nostalgia for the ‘organic community’ of ‘Old England’, for ‘the time-honoured ways of living and inherited wisdom of the folk’ (Leavis and Thompson 1977, p. 87, p. 80). He nonetheless succeeds in conducting a formal
analysis of literary works that involves a sustained focus on the language of the text. Even as I say this, I am mindful of the comical way that, as university English students, we assumed the mantle of ‘the complete reader’, entering into possession of ‘the given poem’ (Leavis 1972, p. 212–213) without regard to social and cultural contexts that might have enhanced our reading of the text, or what Gale MacLachlan and Ian Reid have since described as the complexities of ‘framing and interpretation’ (MacLachlan and Reid 1994). We were unable to make how we were situated as readers a topic for discussion, even though we were all dimly aware that we were being taught to read in a certain way, in contrast to the common-sensical (or ‘expressive realist’) attitudes we had adopted as high school students (cf. Belsey 1980, Culler 1983, Mares 1988). My subsequent history as a reader might be described as a growing awareness of how my reading has been variously framed or situated. Yet out of my education I continue to distil a sense of the value of a formal analysis of literary texts, no longer a ‘complete reading’ of the type Leavis conducted, but one which remains indebted to his sensitivity towards language – what I would nowadays call the textually mediated character of experience.

When, in 1971, Fredric Jameson published Marxism and Form, he opened up the possibility of a Marxist analysis of literary texts of precisely this kind: a formal analysis that was deeply engaged and intelligent, with a powerful critical edge, which recognised the complex ideological work that texts perform. This work was achieved, not by reflecting a pre-existing reality (whether conceived as ‘history’, or ‘experience’, or ‘ideology’) but through the formal tensions that the text embodied (see Jameson 1971).

Such a formal analysis can only occur within the framework of a larger commitment. T.S. Eliot captures this paradox when he observes: ‘The “greatness” of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards; though … whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards’ (Eliot 1965, p. 31). By revisiting Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness, I was finally able to draw links between the critical habits that I had cultivated as a student of English and my interest in Marxism. Lukács’s intellectual trajectory was from a romantic, anti-capitalist stance in texts like The Theory of the Novel (which begins by invoking those ‘Happy ages’ when ‘the starry sky is the map of all possible paths – ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars’) to the model of social and historical analysis presented in History and Class Consciousness, where he argues that ‘it is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation’ (i.e. the notion of an economic base and a superstructure) ‘that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality’. The category of totality, writes Lukács, ‘the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts, is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a wholly new science’ (Lukács 1971, p. 27). If Leavis’s literary criticism was grounded in romantic nostalgia for ‘the community of Old England’ (a community that was supposedly re-discovered through participating in a community of like-minded readers who affirmed the justness of each other’s discriminations), Lukács’s Marxism opened up the possibility of an analysis which established connections between discrete social phenomena, and thus made the realisation of a true human community a project for the future.

How Bruno eventually grappled with Althusserian critiques of Hegelian Marxism that simultaneously appeared at the time of the publication of History and Class Consciousness is another story (see Althusser 1977). Althusser challenged Lukács’s notion of history as an ‘expressive’ totality, arguing a far more complex model of the social structure and historical transformation than that conveyed by History and Class Consciousness (cf. Jameson 1981). As far as literary theory was concerned, it took Bruno a long time before he could bring himself to read Terry Eagleton’s Criticism and Ideology or Pierre Macherey’s Theory of Literary Production, although when he did read them he was open to their arguments about the ideological work performed by texts, and the way they bracketed out any traditional Marxist reference to history as some kind of explanation of the text’s significance (see Doecke 1989). From those debates Bruno took some key intellectual or methodological principles that continue to shape his work as a teacher and researcher. When he was in the thick of those debates in the early 1970s, he was hardly able to appreciate their significance in the way that he does now, as his understanding has been shaped by his reading since then, most notably post-structuralist critiques of Marxism, and efforts by theorists like Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, Tony Bennett, John Frow and Stuart Hall to argue the possibility of social critique without traditional guarantees (to echo the title of one of Stuart Hall’s essays). Rather than invoking Lukács’s grand vision of the ‘totality’ of the socio-historical process, he sees himself as engaging in
a more modest and feasible project of identifying forms of ‘relationality’ that remain purely provisional (cf. Frow 1971, 1981).

6. ‘New more radical teaching methods’
There was general concern expressed by all parents attending the P&FA meeting regarding the teaching of English at Year 10 level, in particular with respect to the use of a specified teaching method. Results from the Year 10 mid-year examination for students taught by this method showed in some cases alarming differences in their performance at the examination compared with classroom assessments. Parents expressed alarm that the new more radical teaching methods did not appear to prepare students for conventional assessment and questioned their suitability. P&FA agreed to request the Principal to provide in writing details regarding the curricula, methods of assessment and effects on the development of written and spoken communication skills of the specific teaching method discussed by P&FA.

The importance of this item to Council lies in its potential for debate between teachers and parents concerning what should be taught in the classroom in English. It is particularly disturbing to parents to find wide discrepancies in the material presented and the methods of assessment employed by teachers when teaching such basic subjects as English. The lack of detailed information regarding the syllabus of Year 10 English in the Year 10 Handbook does not help this situation. Parents believe they are entitled to expect information regarding the aims, the books to be read and the methods of assessment associated with teaching English.

(Parents & Friends Association Report to School Council, Wednesday 6 July 1983)

7. Professional learning
The ‘new more radical teaching methods’ that were of concern to parents who were active on the P&FA consisted of enabling students to draft their writing and then revise their work with the benefit of feedback from both their peers and me as their teacher. I had been to several inservices involving primary and secondary teachers which had extolled the value of ‘process writing’ in primary school – there had also been a special issue of English in Australia devoted to ‘the writing revolution’ heralded by Donald Graves and Donald Murray (Walshe 1982) – and I had experienced some success in implementing a process approach in my Year 7 and 8 classes (cf. Doecke and McClenaghan 2004). It seemed reasonable to import those methods into my Year 10 class. The students in this class were generally disengaged from schooling, and I thought they might benefit from the opportunity to write on topics of their own choice, draft their work in consultation with each other, and then ‘publish’ their work. This might give meaning to their school writing that it otherwise lacked. At this moment in Victoria David McRae was arguing the need for an alternative Year 12 English course that enabled students to draft their work and write for a wider audience than simply their teachers, and I saw myself as embarking on curriculum development that might lead these students into a program of the kind he envisaged (see McRae 1980, Tickel 1981, cf. Howells, 2003)

I handled the challenge posed by the P&FA report quite ineptly, partly because of oversensitivity to the emotive language of the report, and partly because I failed to persuade the English coordinator and other leading English teachers within my faculty of the value of what I was doing. I was not completely isolated – I had allies – but I was hardly likely to win anyone else over by declaring in a detailed written response to the P&FA Report that

English faculty members should be encouraged to read. It is particularly frustrating for those members of the faculty who have kept in touch with recent curriculum developments to find themselves arguing with people who are totally ignorant of contemporary trends. The accusation of ignorance is a legitimate criticism at a university level, and I don’t see why the same criterion should not apply to our discussions.

My reason, however, for including these fragments of text in my English history is not to reflect on the politics of curriculum development and whole school change, interesting though such a focus might be, but to capture the ethos of the high school in which I was teaching. Every Monday’s staff meeting would feature a long diatribe by the Deputy Principal about the need to stamp out the wearing of black socks rather than white. At year level assemblies co-ordinators would regularly call out the names of students who were trouble makers (one of my students described himself to me as ‘a piece of furniture in the Principal’s office’). The school had recently introduced a curriculum innovation called Vertical Modular Grouping, which required Year 8 and 9 students to choose subjects, including topics like Heroes and Heroines, Mastermind, Adventures in History. Nearly all these subjects lacked any detailed curriculum. They simply filled spaces in the timetable and created the illusion of choice. Members of the English Faculty
were locked into a set of practices epitomised by dry comprehension exercises, spelling lists and traditional grammar. By and large, the students experienced the curriculum as dull and irrelevant, although this is not to say that they did not enjoy coming to school and socialising with one another. They were lively individuals, who were sometimes feisty in their defiance of the school ethos. When the Principal published an anonymous letter from ‘a concerned parent’ in the school newsletter, expressing concern about ‘one of the latest crazes’, namely for girls ‘to wear their dress as short as possible’, ‘bordering on the line of indecency’, one of my Year 8 students responded by writing:

I was walking to school with my little sister; well she wasn’t so little anymore. Today was the day. She was looking forward to this day since before Christmas. It was her first day of high school. And mate did I feel stupid walking with her. She had white socks on, school shoes, and her uniform was past her knees. I wore black socks, runners, and me dress was up around me bum. We arrived at school. I couldn’t believe there were so many of the little terrors there. I told Sarah all about the school. She thought she could handle it. I knew she wouldn’t.

Other students produced writing that gave me insights into their daily lives and interests.

| RICHMOND | 9 | 6 | 60 |
| COLLINGWOOD | 5 | 4 | 34 |

Half time and Richmond were nearly 5 goals up on Collingwood at this 1980 Grand Final.

I was that excited by all that was happening and I was busting to go to the dunny; I told dad and slowly battled through the crowd. I made my way down the steps, turned left and passed a hot dog stand. It was then that it hit me. It was the strongest smell of piss I had ever smelt. I followed the smell to a queue at least 100 men deep, and reluctantly queued up (for you can never ignore the call of nature). After about five minutes I finally got through the door only to find myself ankle deep in piss. It was so packed you could hardly move and the troughs did not have one free space. Crowded people were bleeding their lizards wherever they could find a free space. Me, being only an eleven year old midget, couldn’t find anywhere to pee. I was getting desperate when a well built man came up, picked me up, and told me to piss in the trough.

I thanked him and slowly waded out to the exit. Fresh air at last!

The image of rows of men ‘bleeding their lizards’ is perhaps not what Donald Murray had in mind when he exhorted teachers to draw on the ‘nine million experiences’ students will have on their way to school rather than setting topics for writing (Kamler 1982, p. 26). Written at the beginning of Year 10, this piece was the first of a series of stories this student composed that were full of colloquialisms of this kind. Despite the unsophisticated nature of his writing, I still value the impulse behind his effort to grapple with words and experience, and I prefer such writing to the empty fluency of the literary essay currently extolled by Year 12 examiners (cf. Teese 2000).

But it is not that I value such writing because it conveys a sense of ‘authentic’ experience. I have always been annoyed by the critique of process writing that emerged in subsequent years which accused advocates of ‘process’ of being trapped within romantic notions of writing as individual expression. You could embrace process pedagogy without swallowing Murray’s culturally loaded vision of children being exposed to ‘nine million experiences’ on their way to school (cf. Doecke and McClernaghan 2004). An equally important rationale for my pedagogy to that provided by exponents of process writing was given to me by Making the Difference: Schools, Families and Social Division, in which R.W. Connell, D.J. Ashenden, S. Kessler and G.W. Dowsett reported on an extensive survey they had conducted on how students variously engaged in schooling, exploring the differences between the ways private school students experienced their education in comparison with the experiences of students attending state schools. The lack of social mobility through schooling which they reported matched my own experiences of watching intelligent adolescents with a very acute sense of the social structure drop out of school. The book did not provide any solutions to this dilemma, but it formulated the dilemma clearly, in a way which challenged the habitual practices in which we engaged as secondary English school teachers.

Within the social space provided by schools and classrooms, I felt that as an English teacher I could provide my students an opportunity to debate their values and beliefs. This was not a matter of ‘authorising disadvantage’ (cf. Gilbert 1987, 1990), but of enabling them to reflect on how language shapes their experiences. Nor was it a matter of encouraging them to find their authentic ‘voice’ (cf. Gilbert 1987, 1990) or to realise a creative potential that burst the boundaries of the social structure. The Year 8 girl who wrote about her little sister wearing white socks to school was actually an only child. She constructed a voice and persona that
enabled her to articulate her resistance to schooling (cf. Connell et al. 1982, pp. 84–85). Rather than extolling her piece as an example of gritty ‘realism’, one might dwell on how her text speaks to other texts (it is a direct response to the letter from ‘a concerned parent’ that the Principal chose to publish in the school newsletter). It is also worth reflecting on the way the story about the footy match combines a number of texts, juxtaposing the results on the scoreboard with the masculinist language of ‘bleeding lizards’. The text does not simply convey a vivid impression of an event (real or imagined), but a sense of the languages that constitute this student’s world. By encouraging the students in my Year 10 class to write about topics of their own choice, writing from a variety of points of view and in a range of genres (not simply gritty realism but fantasy adventures, murder stories, etc.), I gained insight into their struggle with ‘the dominant position in the whole system held by the competitive academic curriculum’ and the ‘deepening problem of authority in schools’ (Connell et al. 1982, pp. 20–21). Through such writing these students were able to carve out a space for themselves (however tentatively) vis-à-vis the competitive academic curriculum and the dominant language of schooling.

Not that I want to present a heroic tale that constructs me as valiantly fighting for social justice and equality. My inept handling of the P&FA complaint ultimately led to further conflict, when I decided to pass every student in my Year 10 class. I was then called into the Principal’s office and asked to explain why my results did not match the bell curve. For my efforts, I was banned from teaching any senior classes. In response to the debate that the P&FA report generated about the culturally loaded nature of the competitive academic curriculum, the school’s curriculum committee had invited me to develop an alternative Year 11 course along the lines of David McRae’s Course B. But another teacher was now given the opportunity to teach this course, and I was exiled to Years 7, 8 and 9. This was presumably on the assumption that any damage I might do to these young brains could be repaired in subsequent years.

8. Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben
I imagined that by bringing these fragments of text together I would convey a sense of discontinuity and disjunction, but instead I appear to have constructed an account of my life as a continuing interrogation of the values instilled in me when I was young. Even though we might eventually distance ourselves from the beliefs and practices of our upbringing, there is a sense in which everything we experience continues to be shaped by the world we knew when we were younger. The languages we spoke and the stories we were told as children echo in our memories, traces of our early struggles to make connections between words and meaning, language and thought (cf. Doecke and Kostogriz 2003).

I would not want my rewriting of Sun on the Stubble to be read simply as a condemnation of the community in which I grew up, as though I am somehow entitled to make a judgement of this kind. I certainly recall moments when I sensed a certain narrowness or hypocrisy about the way people declared their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal saviour. The pastor and the elders would speak of hell-fire and damnation for those who sinned. But at the sale yards the talk was crude, a perverse counterpoint to the stifling piety that the congregation would display on Sundays. When Herb Noack’s wife fell ill, he shrugged roughly. What could you do when there ‘was something wrong mit der breeding bag’? Young girls who had to get married were eyed by everyone as they entered the church, their bellies conspicuous, their heads bowed, meekly accepting their shame. With respect to all these things, Thiele’s novel gives a sanitised account of those Lutheran communities, for all the pleasure that I have derived from reading and re-reading this story over the years.

Yet hypocrisy is not something that you can simply ascribe to others. It is also something with which you struggle inwardly as (to borrow the words of Bach’s famous cantata) you bear witness to Jesus Christ with ‘Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben’. The traces of my past are evident in the way I continue to believe in the possibility of creating a true human community, while remaining conscious of tensions between this common project (or ‘common pursuit’) and the values and aspirations of people who are on the outside, who reflect ‘difference’ or ‘otherness’.

My decision to become an English teacher can partly be explained in these terms. My immersion in Lukács’s Marxism had brought me to a dead end. The radical Messianism of History and Class Consciousness, where the division between what ‘is’ and what ‘ought to be’ is transcended by a vision of revolutionary praxis, is displaced in Lukács’s later work by a tedious account of the role of ‘art as self-consciousness in Man’s development’, a fully blown aesthetic that seems utterly irrelevant to contemporary issues. However, a throw-away
line in a fragment of Über die Besonderheit als Kategorie der Ästhetik opened up new directions for me. After reviewing the ways in which audiences react to ‘the relation between man and humanness’ embodied in great works of art, Lukács observes that sometimes the ‘aesthetic receptivity’ of the audience can be undermined by their ‘ideological and artistic immaturity’ (Lukács 1972, p. 229, p. 235). To illustrate this, he gives the example of Soviet youth who, when watching Romeo and Juliet, ‘would gladly take their figures and fates for their own’, whereas any mature viewer ‘must well know that such concrete fates lie completely outside his world of possibilities, that they belong irretrievably to the past’ (p. 233). Lukács’s own analyses of literary and artistic works clearly presuppose ‘a genuine, aesthetically-shaped susceptibility’ (pp. 235–236). But how does one acquire this ‘susceptibility’? How can one learn to appreciate the relationship between ‘man and humanness’ presented in ‘great’ works of art? The answer for me lay in finding out how teenagers learn to read and acquire the habits of discrimination and analysis that adults value – an experience which led me to question those very habits that Lukács extolled, bringing me to a realisation of the multiple readings that any text can generate. It is a salutary experience for anyone to justify his or her tastes or ‘common pursuits’ to a class of Year 9 students (see Doecke 1997).

This may sound a somewhat implausible explanation of why I became an English teacher (though I have told the story many times to anyone who has cared to listen and it is no longer possible to say whether it is true or not). There have been several moments in my life when I have benefited from a conflict between engaging in theory and meeting the demands of teaching secondary school and university students. Too often the question of making connections between theory and practice is trivialised as occurring only within the context of one’s day-to-day teaching. On the one hand, some educational ‘theorists’ (inverted commas intended) advocate a form of reflective practice that is really little more than evaluating the success or otherwise of a particular teaching strategy or transformation of academic knowledge into ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ (cf. Shulman 1986). On the other hand, poststructuralist theorists and advocates of ‘critical literacy’ make large claims about the possibilities of radical transformation through changing one’s pedagogy. But the contexts in which teachers are obliged to operate are finally too complex to allow us to contemplate radical transformation as simply a function of a particular pedagogy. Our practice needs to be informed by theory – we need to think long and hard about the way language mediates our experiences, and about the ideological work that we perform as English teachers – but if we are serious about the possibility of bringing about social change we need to recognise the complex mediations that are involved in any project for social reform (cf. Doecke 1996).

This is not to say that we should all reconcile ourselves to waiting for that moment of radical transformation (the socialist revolution!) and in the meantime plough on with what we have always done. I hope that when I was teaching English in secondary schools my classrooms provided sites where students could explore the complex relationships between language and identity and language and community, despite the fact that I was caught up in a set of practices that were reproducing social inequality (cf. Doecke and Hayes 1999, Doecke and McClenaghan 2004). Now, as a teacher educator, I am once again experiencing a tension between my habitual practices and my sense of other possibilities, other ‘forms of belonging’ (Eagleton 2003, cf. Doecke 2004). The paradox in writing this essay is that the only way I have been able to express my desire to create a better future is in the form of a continuing conversation with voices from my past.

Notes
2 ‘Blessed are the sleepy ones, for they will soon drop off.’

References


