‘It don’t mean a thing ...’
‘Literary’ Language in Secondary Classrooms

by

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I am the author of the thesis entitled

'It don't mean a thing...': literary language in secondary classrooms

submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Ethical Considerations
Approval to undertake the project was given by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (DUHREC) (see appendix).
It don't mean a thing
If it ain't got that swing
(doo wah, doo wah, doo wah, doo wah
Doo wah, doo wah, doo wah, doo, wah)
It don't mean a thing
All you got to do is sing
(doo wah, doo wah, doo wah, doo wah
Doo wah, doo wah, doo, wah, doo wah)
It makes no diff’rence
If it’s sweet or hot
Just give that rhythm
Ev’rything you got
_Duke Ellington_

One of the factors that contributed to my pursuing this inquiry into ‘close reading’ was observation of my two teenage sons learning their craft as jazz musicians. Marty, who plays the trumpet, would spend hour after hour utterly absorbed in transcribing the music of, among others, Miles Davis. He would listen to a few bars and transcribe them; check that his auditory memory was accurate, and then play them for himself before moving on to the next few bars.

He was in this way unlocking the secrets not just of what Miles had achieved but how he had achieved it. He was coming to understand the music as “joined and moving” (Reid, 1984, p.12) through what Reid calls a ‘workshop’ activity as distinct from the “vacuous appreciation” (p.11) of the ‘Gallery’. Similarly, his brother, Tom, would investigate the music of masters of jazz clarinet or saxophone such as Eddie Daniels and John Coltrane.

This was ‘close reading’ of a kind. Jazz musicians speak of an expert player as having plenty of ‘language’ available. I wondered whether this method of explicitly learning the ‘language’ of music had any relevance to ways in which a student reader might develop his or her grasp of the language of a work of literature.
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Abstract

I inquire, in this thesis, into the concept of ‘close reading’, especially with regard to the disposition and skills required to engage with literary texts. The term has been out of fashion for a variety of reasons for some years now, but I shall be arguing that it is time to restore it to the centre of a literary education, and an English education more generally. At stake is a consciousness of the work that literary texts can do in strengthening our grasp of language, of the relationship between words and meaning.

Attention to literariness or ‘close reading’ has been closely identified with the work of F. R. Leavis. Cultural studies, which aimed to promote a democratic and inclusive range of texts as suitable for study, came to displace his dubious ideal of a literary culture shaped by a cultural elite who could engage in the reading practices he advocated. What was of value in those practices disappeared, however, in reaction to what was perceived as the ill founded conception of ‘life’ and an ‘organic community’ that governed his criticism.

My argument is essentially that the baby was thrown out with the bathwater, a position that I seek to justify by drawing on the work of Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton, who have both argued – the latter in recent years – the importance of ‘close reading’, despite the more problematic aspects of Leavis’ legacy.

I find that responses to literary texts in senior secondary classrooms deal in abstracted content at the expense of attention to form. I show this by critically scrutinizing examiners’ reports produced for the Victorian Certificate of Education, the high stakes examination that students must complete in Victoria in order to progress to university study, as well as by examining the work of a teacher of English who foregrounds the play between language and meaning in her professional practice.

I argue that consideration of how students might be taught to discern the character and meaning of literary form is vital if they are to discover the grounds of meaning making. As a way of explaining my standpoint, I include two chapters that construct my history as a reader. This is partly to give an account of the ‘autobiography of the question’, to use Jane Miller’s resonant phrase, and is in recognition of the fact that no research can be objective, that it is always shaped by the perspective and values of the researcher. These chapters are also, however, driven by a desire to understand my own education, and the way I attended to the relationship
between words and their meaning at different phases in my life. My autobiographical inquiry thus has an open-ended character, as this relationship remains an abiding preoccupation with me.

An awareness of the role that language plays in mediating experience and social relationships is fundamental to an informed and critically engaged citizenry. My thesis is concerned to explore ways in which English teachers might restore a heightened linguistic awareness to the heart of their professional practice, to their sense of who they are and what they do.
Chapter 1

Literariness: an unacknowledged problem

The infectious passion of his reading – wasn’t that the thing that stirred us when we first encountered him...? (Howard Jacobson, 2011, on F. R. Leavis)

When students have an inadequate grasp of the form that texts take, they are limited to dealing in abstracted ‘content’. They fail, in an important sense, to grasp the text, since meaning is necessarily derived from considerations of language or form. Not to put too fine a point on it, the text “don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing”; taking pleasure in the text as a verbal construct is essential to finding a depth of meaning in it.

The lyrics and the rhythm, the content and the form, of Duke Ellington’s jazz standard are as one in leaving no room for doubt that a sense of ‘swing’ is essential to the improvised performance and reception of a jazz composition. While a jazz aficionado may find this notion simplistic, it at least provides an unmistakable signpost for the novice listener. The way into a literary text may not be at all clear; the reader is left wondering what to make of it, and behind this is the critical question: how to make something of it. Questions of ideological positioning in relation to the text have tended to divert attention from, and even discredit by association, the kind of close reading which can realize the form of the text.

The “scrutiny” of texts advocated by F. R. Leavis (1895-1978), with its suggestions of a searching examination and a critical stance, has been largely discarded in an over-reaction; it is necessary to recover, in the light of theoretical perspectives, what was of value in it. We need to rethink how we might find meaning, and hence take pleasure, in the form of literary texts – and, by extension, other kinds of texts. Jonathan Culler, whose Literary Theory: a Very Short Introduction (1997) is notable for the clarity and succinctness with which it deals with issues and problems of literary theory, has articulated the value of a recognition of ‘literariness’ and an appropriate disposition towards it:

... theory has highlighted the literariness of texts of all sorts. To
reflect on literariness is to keep before us, as resources for
analyzing these discourses, reading practices elicited by
literature: the suspension of the demand for immediate
intelligibility, reflection on the means of expression, and
attention to how meaning is made and pleasure produced.
(Culler, 1997, p.41)

In listening to a performance of *It don’t mean a thing* ... we do as we
are expressly told, and attend to its ‘swing’. As Eagleton (2007) puts
it: “The question is not how tenaciously you cling to the text, but
what you are in search of when you do so” (p.2).

It is significant that Eagleton, a highly influential theorist and critic,
has called (2007, 2013) for the renewal of “close attention to literary
form and technique” (2013, p. ix). After writing three decades ago:
“[close reading] implies a limiting as well as a focusing of concern”
(1983, p.38) he now finds that “... one cannot raise political or
theoretical questions about literary texts without a degree of
sensitivity to their language” (2013, p.ix). Such questions or concerns
become limited and incoherent when abstracted from the language
that can inform them.

Eagleton articulates, in reflecting on his teaching experience, a key
difference between the way that students appear to him to engage
with texts and the kind of attention which his own literary education
had disposed him to give to the form of words on the page:

What gets left out is the literariness of the work... [Most
students] treat the poem as though the author chose for some
eccentric reason to write out his or her views on warfare or
sexuality in lines which do not reach to the end of the page.
(2007, p.3)

That is, students do not give due consideration to “the means of
expression” as distinct from its content or ‘message’. They don’t
realize, in fact, ways in which such “means” can enable them to gain a
purchase on content and hence produce meaning. Attention to
structural elements reveals the limitations of an individual
interactionist approach to reading.

This lack of sensitivity to the challenges and rewards of language and
form is not, though, a problem of recent origin. Eagleton claims:
Since many of these students are bright and capable enough, the fault would seem to lie largely with their teachers. The truth is that quite a few teachers of literature nowadays do not practise literary criticism either, since they, in turn, were never taught to do so. (2007, p.1)

I attempt in this study to ascertain the “degree of sensitivity” which students demonstrate to the language of literary texts, and to trace how this may have altered over four decades. I examine in Chapter 2 the proposition that there has been a shift from a perception of literature as ‘Culture’ to its use in informing what is seen as a broader sphere of ‘cultural studies’ (Patterson, 2008). I am interested in understanding what may have been lost as well as gained by this radical alteration of focus, if indeed it can be substantiated.

I take these terms to indicate a shift from a privileging of the literary imagination as somehow embodying a sensibility that is sensitive to the relation between words and meaning to a far more diffuse focus on ‘cultural studies’. This shift has arguably been productive, and indeed might be said to reflect a democratic impulse that takes us well beyond what Raymond Williams (1958, 2001) calls ‘the culture of the tea shop’ (p.12) to an appreciation of culture and creativity in a far wider range of contexts than is typically named by ‘literature’ or university ‘English’ courses. Yet the development of a sensibility that is alert to the relations between words and meaning is surely critical to a grasp of culture and creativity, and as such should be seen as the means, if not the focus, of a literary education which is open to these wider perspectives. Culler identifies the vital role of literary study in this respect:

The suspension of the demand for immediate intelligibility, the willingness to work at the boundaries of meaning, opening oneself to unexpected, productive effects of language and imagination, and the interest in how meaning and pleasure are produced – these dispositions are particularly valuable, not just for reading literature but also for considering other cultural phenomena, though it is literary study that makes these reading practices available. (Culler, 1997, p.51)

I aim to gain perspective on concepts of ‘literariness’ – or deficits thereof – and corresponding pedagogy over time. More
fundamentally, I intend to develop understanding of the nature and value of an apprehension of “literary form and technique”. To this end I explore personal experience, teachers’ focused discussion of the nature and uses of literary texts in English, examiners’ reports and sample student ‘responses’, as well as evidence of students’ work in participating teachers’ classrooms.

I understand that in doing so I am bringing to bear on pedagogy in senior secondary English or Literature classrooms what might be regarded as a peculiarly literary perspective – especially because it entails reference to what might now be assumed to be a dim (in more senses than one) and distant past. The attempt to develop a refined understanding of what happens to texts within classrooms settings in terms of the sorts of negotiation of meaning that occur within those settings might seem to be at odds with a focus on the theory and practice of literary criticism understood as a rarified if not esoteric pursuit. I find, however, that these fields reciprocally inform and ground each other.

Raymond Williams (1921-1988), whose work is regarded as laying the foundations for the field of cultural studies, was a student of F. R. Leavis at Cambridge. Williams came to reject elements of Leavis’ work with a view to both broadening and deepening perspectives on the operations of language in society, but as he remarked relatively early in his career:

I could not have begun this work if I had not learned from the Marxists and from Leavis; I cannot complete it unless I radically amend some of the ideas which they and others have left us. (Williams 1958, 2001, p.20)

An appreciation of culture and creativity depended on that sensitivity to language which his Leavisite education had cultivated in him even though he came to see its perspective as ideologically blinkered. The term ‘cultural materialism’ indicates how Williams used ideas from the one field to “amend” the other:

[Williams’] theory of cultural materialism looks two ways. As cultural materialism, it is the name Williams gave to his distinctive version of Marxist theory, but, as cultural materialism, it refers to his response to the theory and practice
of literary analysis at work in the existing institutions of English studies. (Higgins 1999, p.125)

He had learned from Leavis to appreciate the power of language and from the Marxists to have regard for this power in social and political contexts. Bringing the perspectives of the one field to bear on the other produced insights into the material, historical and social character of language. They had much to offer each other, as Williams perceived:

Leavis has never liked Marxists, which is in one way a pity, for they know more than he does about modern English society, and about its immediate history. He, on the other hand, knows more than any Marxist I have met about the real relations between art and experience. (Williams, 1958, p.16)

Taking Williams’ lead, this study in effect crosses the boundaries between literary studies and the field of English curriculum and pedagogy. Although, for example, English teachers are typically English majors, the way they learn to talk about English curriculum and pedagogy may be something quite distinct from the discourse of literary studies as it is practiced at university. I explore why this might be the case and reflect on the consequences.

I make a particular study of a very experienced teacher’s own literary education and her approach to her interactions with students. I focus on her pedagogy because she has over the course of her career practised the kind of literary criticism which Eagleton (2007, 2013) has come to recognize as of enduring value. Significantly, she is so far from being a dinosaur in the current context that students see her classes as novel and stimulating. I ask why this might be so.

I should underline the point here that although the thrust of my study has much to do with the foundation of a central, not to say key, component of the curriculum subject English, and hence I am concerned to explore the conceptual history of close reading, my thesis is in the end about teaching. It is not meant primarily as an original contribution to a long-standing debate in aesthetics and literary theory about the relationship between form, content and meaning.

In order to arrive at its destination of teaching, however, my thesis must negotiate ways in which categories and concepts such as ‘literariness’ and
‘reader response’ have set terms for educational debates about what to
教 and how to teach it, content and pedagogy. I ask whether revision
of these categories and concepts, though intended to liberate language
study, may have paradoxically limited it. And a focus on teaching
necessarily involves giving consideration to the controls exerted by
contexts – institutional settings (especially testing arrangements), their
history and their politics.

In essence, the thesis addresses the central question, “Why and how
might students be taught to attend to the literariness of texts by exploring
the relationship between form and content?” It is organized in seven
chapters that follow, broadly speaking, three strands. The first strand is
principally a theoretical inquiry that takes the form of critical engagement
with thinkers whose work was profoundly influential in raising this
question and continues to speak to it, though for a variety of reasons it
may have fallen into neglect. The second finds in my own formation as a
reader fertile ground for inquiry into the character and potential of close
reading. The third strand deals with the empirical materials – examiners’
reports, the use of fiction and poetry in schools, as well as a focused
account of exemplary practice – referred to above. I aim, by interweaving
these three strands, to gain perspective on the status and treatment of
literariness in senior secondary classrooms and to inform prospective
teaching of it.

Rather than provide a conventional literature review in this first
chapter, I go straight to the heart of the problem with a personal
account of an attempt to teach a set text under the dispensation of
the Victorian State education system. My intention, in telling the
story from a teacher’s perspective, is to enable the reader to grasp
the implications of my inquiry for students’ learning in the
classroom. I explore what notions of ‘literariness’ and ‘response’
might mean for students who are required to engage with ‘literary’
texts. I reflect on the devices or stratagems that they employ in
attempting to make meaning.

1) Making Literariness Visible

“Literature does not have a transferable message; it is a meaning.” (Peter Abbs,
1989, p.58)

I had, after a thirty-year career in the classroom, taken relatively
early retirement because the pension arrangements on offer from the
state education authority made this a sensible decision. My wife’s career as a secondary school principal was taking up a great deal of her time and energy, and we still had school age children. I could provide balance by having more time for home duties.

I was open to opportunities to do part time work, however, and was glad to accept when asked to take the final year of secondary English (Year 12) for a few weeks, at the start of the school year, at the senior campus of a large, regional college. I had for the previous few years worked at a Year 7 and 8 campus; it would be good to revisit the challenges of senior English.

I was impressed by the culture of the school: warm, co-operative relationships prevailed between my colleagues and their students. And yet I came to wonder, as an ‘outsider’, whether customary ways of dealing with literary texts served students well.

I was required to teach a Penguin paperback collection of short stories, Minimum of Two, by Tim Winton. My attempts to introduce students to what – as became evident – were to them novel questions of the relationship between the form and content of the stories prompted awareness of the uncertainty of their relationships with, and experiences of, literary texts. They lacked confidence in dealing with ‘literary’ language as such.

Tim Winton, born in 1960 in Western Australia, has twice been short listed for the Man Booker prize for fiction, and has won the Miles Franklin Literary Award, an annual literary prize awarded to "a novel which is of the highest literary merit and presents Australian life in any of its phases", a record four times. His writing is notable in particular for its evocation of coastal Western Australia.

It is one thing to win literary awards and another to have texts set on courses for secondary students. I had enjoyed teaching Winton’s Lockie Leonard: Human Torpedo (1990) at junior secondary level not simply because of the novel’s content – its treatment of adolescent ‘issues’ succeeds in being sympathetic, insightful and funny – but because of the use of language that enables this success. Lockie is a ‘surf rat’ who has moved with his family from the city to Angelus, “the most remote town on earth”. It wasn’t hard to get my Year 8s interested: a reading of the first few pages, which introduce Lockie and his family, did the trick:
The Leonards called Lockie the Human Torpedo because he took so long to get out of bed in the mornings. Actually Lockie was slow at almost everything, but the mornings were his worst time. When he eventually got up, he helped Phillip out of his piddly PJs and went for breakfast.

‘You’re gonna hafta grow out of this peeing in the night boy,’ said Lockie. ‘It’s flamin’ disgusting.’

Phillip bit his lip. He was a small kid, soft-looking and sensitive. ‘I didn’t drink since five o’clock yesterday.’

‘Yer need a tap on yer dick.’

Phillip laughed and Lockie was glad because he knew it stopped him from going further and getting cruel. It was easy to cut a kid like Phillip. But sometimes he wanted to tie those stinking PJs around Phillip’s neck and sling him out into the rain (pp. 6-7).

Lockie’s solution to the problem, put so directly in the vernacular, always got a laugh, but he clearly has a depth to his character as well. The resolution of his conflicting feelings towards his brother is nicely achieved. As the story gets under way Lockie falls in love – or lust – and has to figure a lot of conflicted feelings. His family is vital to him in deciding where he stands in relation to the girl in question and the wider peer group. The glory of the book, though, is the drama of his relationship with his first love, the sea:

And then came this great green thing hissing out of nowhere and Lockie knew he’d either ride it or drink it, so he turned and went for it and felt it power him out forward as though he’d been shot from a cannon. He went screaming down the face. Aaaaaaarrgh! With his bouncing, vibrating, bottom turn, he thought his board would snap, or maybe his legs, but he held to it until he was fading to the shoulder again ... up ... up ... until he was aiming down the long, long curving wall of the wave. He crouched to save his knees breaking and the whole world went green as the inside of a cave. He was swallowed up. Not a cave, a sea monster. All ribbed and snaky, cold and deadly with its trapped breath on the back of his neck ... (pp. 124-125).

There are so many aspects of language to investigate here, from the way the image of the “great green thing” which comes “hissing” is sustained – “Not a cave, a sea monster” – to the use of the vernacular
– “he’d either ride it or drink it” – to the impetus of a verb – “he felt it power him out forward” – to the way the variation of sentence structure propels the narrative – “He went screaming down the face”. There is a sense in which the terror and the exhilaration of Lockie’s passion can only be realized on the basis of what might seem a narrowly technical approach to language. Students may otherwise fail to notice, for example, that he succeeds in slaying a dragon.

*Minimum of Two* had been chosen as a class text prior to my taking the class, but I was happy on the basis of my experience to engage with it. At senior secondary level in the state of Victoria schools are provided by the higher authority which runs state wide examinations with a list of options from which they can choose. The first section of the English course involves detailed study of a text; a group of teachers in a school chooses two texts, but then the individual class teacher will normally focus on one.

I should make it clear, however, that the account that follows is not contingent on a particular curriculum or ‘study design’, as it is known in Victoria. Although the analysis is at one level the product of work in a classroom in a large regional school, it is also founded on thirty years experience in the classroom. It is posed as a kind of thought experiment which attempts to map out how a large group of senior secondary students (in this case twenty-five sixteen to seventeen year olds) might be expected to ‘respond’ to a ‘literary’ text via ‘comprehension’ exercises.

The collection and analysis of students’ comments on the alternative pedagogy which I pursued was for me a way of exploring questions such as ‘Where do these students stand in relation to the language of a given literary text?’ and ‘To what extent is this alternative pedagogy successful in prompting a sense of its literariness?’ As I will go on to explore in the following chapters, such questions seem to me to have important implications for realizing the value of a literary education not simply in terms of achieving success in the curriculum subject English but for giving access to a peculiarly heightened awareness of the power of language.

This initial inquiry was, however, simply part of my work as a teacher as I attempted, by gathering data and reflecting on it, to ascertain how students were responding to classroom activities. It was only later that I saw its potential for instigating the present study.
Minimum of Two, a collection of fourteen stories written by a precocious talent in his early twenties, had been published in 1987, well before any of the students in my class were born and at the advent of the digital revolution in communications. The cover photograph, much of it selectively out of focus, was of two little boys wading in a lagoon, surrounded by Western Australian wild flowers, and engrossed in examining what might have been tadpoles in a jar. It didn’t occur to me to stop to consider the photograph and its relationship to the printed stories, even though it might have been more accessible to the students than literary fiction. It was, at least, a kind of signpost to the printed words.

I had glanced at the ‘blurb’ on the back cover, which drew on a familiar (to me) critical language in its sketch of content:

Tim Winton’s characters are ordinary people who battle to maintain loyalty against all odds; women, children, men whose relationships strain under pressure and leave them bewildered, hoping, sometimes fleeing, but often finding strength in forgotten parts of themselves.

The book had presumably been chosen for study because the collective of English teachers at the school considered that it could communicate valuable insights into ‘life’ in an engaging way. Did my students think, though, that the business of ‘studying’ texts was about abstracting such ideas? One of the quotes from reviews indicated the ‘literary’ character of the prose: “Like Hemingway, Winton writes prose in which you can hear the thumping of the heart of the long-distance swimmer, or the rasping heave of the asthmatic.” This hardly seemed a likely comparison, and in any case it gave no clue as to how literary prose could ‘mean’ in this physical way.

Did my students find themselves stirred and enlivened by Winton’s prose as the blurb assumed the reader would be? Could they hear the “thumping of the heart” or the “rasping heave of the asthmatic” – that is, could they process the printed page so as to produce these effects? As it turned out, they would have had difficulty articulating differences between a sample of Hemingway’s prose and one of Winton’s. Has there ever, though, been a golden age when students could have done so readily enough? These students had been required to perform tasks in relation to literature in school, of course,
but had not so much been engaged by it as prompted to develop a range of strategies which they saw as, in a limited way at least, satisfying demands. They were obliging enough.

But these reflections came later. I focused at the time on the print without pausing to consider the extent to which such literature might be extraneous to the lives of many of my middle class students, brought up in a digital age. My teaching experience had led me to be sceptical about the value of some time worn practices which seemed to be routine at the school, such as having students work through sets of ‘comprehension’ questions in order to develop ‘knowledge’ of a book, and on this basis embarking on the discussion of themes, large ideas about ‘life’, drawn from it (how Winton’s characters “battle to maintain loyalty against all odds”, for example). I believed that students would likely have the opportunity to learn best – at least in the first instance – if their attention was drawn to the actual words of a print text. I wanted to use the words on the page to stimulate and at the same time ground ideas. As I probed the complexities of students’ responses to this approach, however, I realized that for a teacher to stand in front of the class and attempt to alert them to what the syllabus loosely referred to as ‘features and qualities’ of a ‘text’ was, for reasons which I became interested in pursuing, a fraught endeavor.

At issue were the capacities of my students for dealing with the language of the text. I saw that ‘comprehension’ questions, verbal as well as written, tended to encourage them to read superficially. In effect, they learned that printed words could be treated as so many counters, to be selectively, if not arbitrarily, produced at a prompt. Consider, for example, how students might be ‘trained’ to respond to questions about a passage such as this from the opening page of the story *Laps*:

> Every stroke of her dogged freestyle was a blow, and with each swim she knew she was shifting more than her own weight. Somehow, out there that summer, Queenie changed. Early on, the morning swim was like doing penance, but in time it became a pleasure. She began to feel she belonged in the dawn-brown sea, as she had when she was a girl, when her grandfather was alive, when the world could only be good... (pp.75-76).
The untutored reader is left wondering why the writer doesn’t come to the point. Why allude to complex events and feelings? Why can’t things be more explicit? Language, it appears, is being used to obscure. There seems little point, to a reader with this frame of mind, in going beyond the obvious. So she plucks a word from the throng. 

E.g. **Question:** Why is Queenie so determined to keep swimming?  
**Answer:** Because it is changing her.

Should a ‘comprehension’ question, then, direct students to reflect, at a more general level, on a character’s state of mind? Can a larger frame of reference stimulate students’ thinking? This misses the point. Such a question does not teach the student that in writing of this *literary* kind language *is* the point. If students simply repeat words such as “changed”, while remaining unsure of others such as “dogged”, meaning is literally out of the question. And, more to the point, they cannot find their bearings because they lack a sense of the physicality, the sounds and the rhythms of the words. Because they lack a grasp not simply of *what* the odd word on the page might mean, but more fundamentally of *how* printed language might mean as ‘literature’, analysis of a character’s thoughts and feelings is beyond them. They contrive, instead, disconnected notions. E.g.  
**Question:** What are Queenie’s thoughts and feelings as she swims?  
**Answer:** Queenie is thinking that all her hard swimming is helping her to change herself and she likes to remember back to when she was a girl.

Even if a ‘comprehension’ question were to stimulate more careful thought, the focus and character of this thought would, given the stimulus and required product, be problematic. What, after all, might it prompt the student to perceive and how strongly? A conscientious student might attempt to look around the text and show a measure of insight. Yet, because she has been asked to paraphrase, she reduces the text to a series of bland assertions. E.g. **Question:** What is Queenie’s motivation for swimming each morning? **Answer:** Queenie realizes that her swimming is good for her because it helps her get rid of her frustrations and rediscover a more positive attitude towards life.

It is tempting, too, to think that questions posed to students must be personalized in terms of characters (Mares, 1988) – that some aspect of the human condition must thereby be abstracted from the passage – in order to generate a ‘response’. A question that is personalized in
a different way, by attributing motivation to the author behind the scenes, doesn’t necessarily constrain the student to give strenuous attention to verbal means; instead it elicits an answer in kind in that it is at a remove from language. E.g. **Question:** How does the author show changes in Queenie? **Answer:** The author shows that after a while Queenie starts to enjoy her swimming.

Our conscientious student expends a great deal of time and effort in responding in this way to multiple questions. She is, in effect, learning strategies that are counter-productive to those of skilled, absorbed reading. The lack of definition ascribed to the term ‘text’ is a problem. It might be observed that in the putative questions and answers given so far there is nothing to explicitly suggest, except in so far as the last refers to an author, that they are intended to further understanding of a literary work. They could apply to a real person. As Eagleton (2013) explains:

> The most common mistake students of literature make is to go straight for what the poem or novel says, setting aside the way that it says it. To read like this is to set aside the ‘literariness’ of the work – the fact that it is a poem or play or novel ... Literary works are pieces of rhetoric as well as reports. They demand a peculiarly vigilant kind of reading, one which is alert to tone, mood, pace, genre, syntax, grammar, texture, rhythm, narrative structure, ambiguity – in fact to everything that comes under the heading of ‘form’ (p.2).

It may be that, as has been demonstrated, students are in effect **taught** to “set aside the ‘literariness’ of the work”. It is very difficult for them then to appreciate that what counts – at least in the first instance – in grasping the sentences about Queenie as a character in a short story is not a theory about ‘her’ as a ‘person’, whether expounded in writing or in discussion, but alertness to the language which is available **on the page** not simply for the reader’s instruction but for her pleasure. If the student does not feel the force of “blow”, for example, with its suggestion of aggression, as well as determination, or she cannot appreciate the conceptual dexterity of “she was shifting more than her own weight”, or the shades of meaning, the promise, evoked in the assonance of “the dawn-brown sea”, or the way “good” chimes with “could”, she is not properly apprehending the words. Above all, she needs to feel the rhythms of the phrases and sentences as they build, like the rhythms of
Queenie’s stroke, taking her and the reader back to a better time: “She began to feel she belonged in the dawn-brown sea, as she had when she was a girl, when her grandfather was alive, when the world could only be good.”

Here I aim to demonstrate, by focusing on language ‘features’, processes of analysis or awareness that enable deep and rich understanding. This is not to say that meanings can ultimately be fixed, like butterflies pinned to a display board, but rather that students need to appreciate the potential richness not simply of meaning but of the aesthetic pleasure that not only makes meaning possible but motivates it. The reader needs to develop a relationship with the words which allows for this kind of experience of them because

Language in poetry is a reality in itself, not simply a vehicle for something distinct from it. The experience which matters is the experience of the poem itself. The relevant feelings and ideas are those which are bound up with the words themselves, not something separable from them. (Eagleton, 2013, p.137)

Winton’s language is ‘poetic’ in this literary sense; it needs to be read with due alertness because “the relevant feelings and ideas” of radical change in Queenie, wrought over time by physical activity, are “bound up with the words themselves”. Such reading has wider applications because, as Culler (1997, p.41) points out, “texts of all sorts” can productively be read with an eye (and ear) to their literariness. This touches on the insights into language which can potentially be imparted by the study of literature. Raymond Williams clarifies the perspective on, or relationship to, language entailed in experience of ‘literary’ language:

Language is ... a distinctively human opening of and opening to the world: not a distinguishable or instrumental but a constitutive faculty. (Williams 1977, p.24)

Students might more profitably be asked, then, to respond to a question such as ‘How does Winton, through his choice of language, show changes in Queenie?’ Yet even this tends to imply that the author simply transmits or expresses an idea through the medium of language, which is in this sense “instrumental”. Williams insists that “meaning is always produced; it is never simply expressed.” He
develops a conception of language as inherently social, resourceful and open to change:

Language is not a pure medium through which the reality of a life or the reality of an event or an experience or the reality of a society can ‘flow’. It is a socially shared and reciprocal activity, already embedded in active relationships, within which every move is an activation of what is already shared and reciprocal or may become so. (Williams 1977, p.166)

In this sense language reciprocally ‘speaks’ us – it enables, discovers even, powers of expression – just as we, in speaking or writing or reading, activate its potential. We glimpse this apprehension of the “activity” of language in E.M. Forster’s aphorism: “How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?”

A revised question such as ‘How does Winton work with language in this passage to convey Queenie’s thoughts and feelings?’ calls for the kind of reading which Eagleton finds indispensable (“Literary works ... demand a peculiarly vigilant kind of reading”) but which he finds has been lost, if not discarded. This ‘close reading’ might enable students to approach what Williams means by language as a “constitutive faculty” in that it suggests that language itself, as a social phenomenon which we tend to take for granted, plays its part in the author’s attempts not simply to express but to discover meaning. Language might be regarded here as essentially active, offering possibilities but at the same time constraints. Williams’ biographer explains:

... what Williams draws constant attention to is the sense of representation in its social-political sense, that writing is always writing from a position, a matter of the subject and of consciousness, and not only of the object, of the external world. In this sense of representation, the role of language in writing is constitutive, and not merely instrumental; the writer is always a participant and not only an observer, marked by the language he or she adopts at the same time as they try to get beyond that language ... (Higgins 1999, p.83)

But my students were having difficulty in seeing the language of Winton’s story as “distinguishable or instrumental”, much less as “constitutive”. The problem became clearer when I attempted to
stimulate responses to the language of the passage by asking, “Can you pick out a word from the first sentence which seems unusual and striking in this context?” It turned out that many of my students had surprising difficulty even with the concept that words could be distinguished one from another. I was more specific: "What is achieved by using the word “blow” here?” It might, for example, be taken as suggesting aggression, as if Queenie is pitting herself against more than immediate physical conditions of weight and water. When responses faltered I attempted to use a strategy of contrast, so asked, “How does “blow” differ from, say, ‘achievement’ or ‘victory’ – as in “Every stroke of her dogged freestyle was a victory”? I realized, though, that they struggled with the notion that the substitution of different words had differential effects that were telling in the larger context of the story.

To them this may have been hair splitting, but in fact it was a ‘Catch 22’. Close reading may have seemed to the Eagleton of 1983 a myopic pursuit but, as he came to recognize, without it meaning is literally immaterial. My students couldn’t frame the story’s meanings because they were not responsive to its detail; they didn’t know where they were in it. They were accustomed to tasks that, in requiring them to render ‘content’, implicitly discounted the aesthetic and artistic character of the work. Such tasks undermined the critical mental effort – attention to how words mean rather than simply what – which is essential not simply to taking aesthetic pleasure in a work of print literature but to grasping its meanings. I will canvas, in the course of my thesis, explanations as to why the curriculum does not privilege the kind of attention to the grounds of meaning that I aim to demonstrate.

The passage quoted above is reprised at the end of the story:

She launched into a crawl, smacking across the tops of swells as she had done behind the old man in the boat all those years back. She kept the hill in sight. She struck out, not invincible but strong. And she knew she could swim it all out of her; it was only a matter of time (p.87).

“The hill” is where “the old man”, her grandfather, is buried. Queenie is intent on exorcising her past as revealed by the story, or at least on coming to terms with it, and her swimming is a means of – and a metaphor for – achieving this. She is no longer simply “dogged”,

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doing things by degrees, but purposeful, and the alliterative language conveys a determination to remain buoyant in the face of pain: “She launched into a crawl, smacking across the tops of swells ...” “Crawl”, an old fashioned but expressive word in place of ‘freestyle’, gives an image of her action, enabling “smacking” to resound as it amplifies the hard ‘c’ and plays against the liquid ‘l’s picked up in ‘swells’. It is worth dwelling on how the inventive use of a familiar word in a novel context can give the reader a renewed sense of its power. The language conveys Winton’s easy, vivid way with the vernacular, but no doubt he tried out other forms of words before its productivity led him to settle on this.

Raymond Williams observes, in pointing to the limitations of “harsher theorizations of sixties structuralism” for which “linguistic activity was simply performance of a pre-existing system”:

> Among other things, the history of what we call literature is an extraordinary demonstration of the discovery of new possibilities of linguistic use. Human beings made language, and they will remake it, not just setting out to do so – though they do sometimes – but as a normal ongoing process in the course of their full social experience. (Williams 1979, p.331)

Queenie has gained a realistic confidence in her capacities: “She struck out, not invincible but strong.” Again, the meaning of “struck” is inseparable from its sound as it reinforces the emotional as well as physical aspects of her effort. Students might thus, by identifying differences in language use, and by appreciating its aesthetic character, begin to see how it might be regarded as ‘constitutive’. They might develop a more secure relationship with language and develop confidence in dealing with it. They might notice, for example, how the second, short sentence – “She kept the hill in sight” – gives a breather from the impetus of the first and allows for renewed effort in the third. Or how the semi-colon in the last provides room for resolution.

But do these details really matter? Can drawing attention to them inform students’ reading of the story at a level which counts? It is clear, at least, that if the reader has not developed the capacity to “experience” them in a physical sense, then key meanings remain unrealized. The story deals indirectly with the anti-whaling protests in Albany in 1977. Indications of the conflicts of the time provide
context for ways in which the story conveys the courage required to confront the past and to undertake the shifting of perspectives involved in renewing the present which – as it turns out – offers surprising blessings. Queenie has a partner, Cleve, and a six-year-old daughter, Dot. They have, seven years on, returned to the town and visited several sites, including the disused whaling works, so that Queenie, “full of memories”, can come to terms with them:

As they walked back up the gravel drive, Dot grabbed her hand and Cleve’s and the wind blew and she was like a sail between them (pp. 84-85).

The import of this image of the child filled like a sail with a gust of life and, in effect, carrying her parents along with her, might seem obvious enough, but is not necessarily so to readers who are not accustomed to reflect on language. “The relevant feelings and ideas are ... bound up with the words themselves”, as Eagleton puts it. In this case we notice how the sentence picks up momentum with a simple succession of ‘ands’. Culler (1997) focuses these issues:

A literary work is an aesthetic object because, with other communicative functions initially bracketed or suspended, it engages readers to consider the interrelation between form and content (Culler, 1997, p.33).

Although literal minded ‘comprehension’ exercises may be intended to encourage students to pay attention to details of the text, students ‘learn’ in effect that because meanings are to be abstracted from words the language on the page is beside the point. Or they ‘learn’ that meanings are somehow ‘hidden’ by, or entangled in, words. They can become very insecure about literary works, especially when assessment of what are loosely described as ‘responses’ counts heavily towards examination marks.

I persisted in attempting to use the words on the page to stimulate and at the same time ground ‘responses’. After about three weeks devoted to reading and discussing the stories, I asked my students to provide written comments as to whether the class was meeting their expectations. Their views presented as wildly divergent – it was as if significant groups of students had attended very different classes. Ellen, for example, was concerned that “we do not study or even outline the key themes in the stories, which are generally, in my
opinion, what most essay questions are pinpointed at.” John, by
contrast, found “a large focus on understanding the stories ... we are
not skimming over them.”

Where Ellen felt constrained: “We don’t study the book in depth ...
[there is] too much direction in thought,” John found: “We are being
told that our own thinking on examples given is good and not being
shown what to do yet not being left in the dark.” Clearly, there were
different schools of thought here as to what it might mean to “study
the book in depth”.

Charles was impressed by the teacher’s “very intricate
understanding”, but felt that he yet lacked a method by which he
could achieve it for himself. Terry wanted a more direct route: “We
need to have these stories drilled into our heads.”

In order to probe these different theories of learning about literature
I asked students to respond in writing to the question, “Where am I
placed as an English student?” I wanted them to reflect on their
formation as English students. John wrote:

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I suppose what I’ve been doing is soaking up what I’ve heard in
class and then I have regurgitated the stuff that I thought the
teacher wanted to hear... I’m now starting to understand that
I’ve got to start thinking for myself and making conclusions
based on the text ... I’m beginning to realise that by getting
more in depth and omitting needless words I actually have
more to write and the ideas flow better.
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Although I was encouraged by this evidence of John’s developing
autonomy in dealing with the text, not all students had experienced
the instruction similarly. For Ellen words and meanings cohabited in
mysterious ways: “I love reading and understanding hidden concepts
threaded throughout the storyline.” She wanted what she believed to
be the direction provided by comprehension questions: they were for
her an essential tool which enabled her to locate “concepts”, which
would otherwise remain “hidden”, in the text. She explained:

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English is one of those frustrating subjects for me because
there is no definite answer like in maths or science. That is why
I need comprehension questions because I can actually work
things out, there is a right answer.
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Quite reasonably, Ellen wanted to be able to “work things out.” What kind of school subject, she asked herself, didn’t allow for the possibility of “a right answer”? She was unhappy because it seemed to her that a new and unwanted teaching strategy had for her cut off access to tools and routines that served to obtain such answers. To have attention directed persistently at details of the text amounted for her to “too much direction in thought”. She wanted to work at a more general level, and believed that, indeed, the examination apparatus required her to do so.

These two students had, despite what looked like a similar formation as English students, adopted very different attitudes towards what was evidently for them a novel pedagogy. John had discovered that writing could be an instrument of thought about the text. Rather than replicate or “regurgitate ... stuff that I thought the teacher wanted to hear”, he used the kind of attention to words demonstrated in class as a model for “thinking for myself and making conclusions based on the text”. For him, ‘close reading’ was proving emancipatory.

For Ellen, on the other hand, comprehension questions could resolve the frustrating indeterminacy of the text. She believed that they offered a direct route ‘into’ a text and therefore found the foregrounding of detail relatively pointless. She was accustomed to having questions devised for her around ideas abstracted from a text rather than being required to generate them on the basis of attention to language. It was likely, too, that as a capable reader and talker, she enjoyed generalized discussion of themes.

Charles spoke for those who, while attentive enough, were frankly puzzled. He was not confident that there was any method by which he could secure meaning:

I see it as kind of an ‘airy fairy’ subject ... I try to use too many impressive words ... I like subjects like maths or science where I can work through a process to an answer ... I feel as though [in an English essay] you just have to blurt it out, and you don’t know whether it’s right or not. Until you get it back.

This sense of English as “an ‘airy fairy’ subject” reflects students’ disorientation when asked to deal in abstracted meanings which for them have no material basis. Such work plainly does not benefit
students who struggle to make tangible connections for themselves. Another way of putting this might be to say that for students like Charles the discursive practices of school bear no relation to the out of school texts which they inhabit (cf. Gee, 1990, 1992).

Terry represented those who relied on the English teacher as disciplinarian and enforcer:

You can’t just read a story and think its been put into the person’s head ... taking notes off the board, writing summaries of the stories, doing set questions on the novel is how I learn...

And while there were those who, like Jim, used a subjective escape clause – “It is hard to enjoy English when the set work isn’t interesting” – I was encouraged by the responses of students such as Toni, who was evidently also benefiting from a new approach:

Previously I just did the questions in each chapter, and it was a hassle, so I did them as fast and distantly as I could, and that’s about as far as my understanding went. I got through but now I know that there is a difference, a BIG difference, between ‘getting through’ and doing well. This year there haven’t been questions, there’s been more focus on the words of the text, not just the basic character outlines and their stories. As a result, I feel I’m trying harder to understand. It’s paying off as essays are easier to write because the knowledge of the text is already understood in my mind.

Toni was coming to understand that, as Eagleton (2013) puts it:

Part of what we mean by a ‘literary’ work is one in which what is said is to be taken in terms of how it is said. It is the kind of writing in which the content is inseparable from the language in which it is presented. Language is constitutive of the reality or experience, rather than simply a vehicle for it. (p.3)

Still, I was faced with an unenviable task. I was dealing not simply with a range of skills, but with deep-seated and perhaps intractable dispositions. Should I resort to ‘spoon feeding’, as some students demanded, or could I, in maintaining a focus on the language of texts, develop more explicit activities that they would find inherently engaging? Was it possible to help them develop a heightened
awareness of the character and qualities of the medium of a work of literature – printed language on the page? Why should a student who could perform complex conceptual operations in mathematics or physics believe that English was beyond him?

I was intrigued to note that many of the students who had proved most responsive to my attempts to develop sensitivity to printed language learned music. The school ran an excellent music program. These students were not only accustomed to listening carefully to a conductor and to being attentive to others in playing as an ensemble, but they were skilled at registering notation in order to produce sound. Just as an attentive reader produces and shapes meaning from print, so these musicians had developed an awareness, which was constantly refined and reinforced, that black marks on a page denoted – potentially – meaning which could be realized by a skilled performer.

2) An Unacknowledged Problem

“...analytical attention with an extractable content has made irrelevant the demanding act of first engaging with the art as art... We need to re-establish a fitting relationship with the actual medium we are studying.” (Peter Abbs, 1989, pp.68-69)

The relationship of student readers with the printed page of a novel, poem or play must necessarily prove “demanding” if it is to be rewarding. At the same time, it should not be placed beyond their grasp under the guise of providing direction. Short cuts such as ‘comprehension’ questions do not, despite the best of intentions, constrain students to “establish a fitting relationship” with a given literary text; rather, they tend, in the absence of a strong sense of the material basis of responses, to sabotage their experience of it. Chris Wheat, a former teacher in a lower socio-economic area of Melbourne – a voice from the ‘chalk face’, as it were – has called attention to a fundamental, pervasive and largely unacknowledged problem:

Around half the Year 12 English students in Victoria receive a C+ or less in the end of year exam. The scripts of the C+ students usually show an engagement with the text but it can be a somewhat bland or formulaic one. The scripts assessed as inferior to those C+ scripts have a surface understanding and
indicate that the student is having trouble expressing someone else’s ideas or their own simple ones. Beneath the C responses scripts become facile and illiterate... 15,000 students [on the left side of the bell curve] who have reached the end of their schooling and respond so miserably to literature should be more of a concern than it ever is. (Wheat, 2006, p.49)

Although Wheat is unhappy with outcomes of the exam, he does not question the efficacy of the course of study for high ranking students:

... the disturbance they cause to the profession does not seem significant after reading the extraordinary scripts we award A+s or the excellent A responses. These reassure us that on the right side of the bell curve half the year 12 students in the state are writing well and responding enthusiastically to the texts we choose for them. (p.49)

What, though, is the nature and quality of these students’ “engagement with the text”? Have they developed “a fitting relationship” with it? To what extent do these students too rely heavily on the elaboration of ‘information’ about a text rather than responsiveness to its language? Do they turn the ‘problem’ to advantage in superficially sophisticated ways? Examiners’ reports reveal that the sensitivity towards language that I have described is not a key discriminator when it comes to differentiating quality scripts from less satisfactory work (cf. Teese, 2011).

In the state of Victoria examiners’ reports play an important role in the institution of the VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) Year 12 (final school year) examinations. They shape teachers’ understanding of how students’ writing in response to the mandates of the curriculum is in practice to be interpreted and evaluated by examiners. The classroom experience discussed above calls into question the repertoire of practices that is valued by the curriculum at senior secondary level for studying print literature. It prompts inquiry into ways in which ‘engagement’ with literature and ‘responses’ to it are conceptualized in the classroom.

Teese (2000) finds, in investigating students’ access to the curriculum more broadly, that because “School subjects are codified, authoritative systems of cognitive and cultural demands” (p.3), they advantage those students with certain cultural ‘accomplishments’,
typically the children of upper middle class families who attend wealthy private schools. At the same time, he argues:

It is not the intellectual demands of the curriculum as such that are problematic, but their imposition without parallel improvements in how the weakest students learn and without controls over how power is exercised by the strongest students and their institutional patrons. (Teese, 2000, p.7)

It seems unlikely that “intellectual demands” on the “strongest students” can be effective in giving access to literature if they do not produce “parallel improvements in how the weakest students learn.” It may be inferred, if they do not do so, that they provide little more than occasion for the reinforcement of cultural advantage. “Codified, authoritative systems” become problematic when, as will be argued, they ostensibly draw on the field of literature but do not give access to it. While the “strongest students” are no doubt better equipped to produce a plausible account of content, their grasp of form is open to question.

Teese (2011, pp.14-15) shows that they typically engage in a verbal display that is at a remove from the text in question. The text simply provides an occasion for them to engage in that display. The key issue is the sense of language – the relationship to it – that is implicit in their work. All students can benefit from an approach that explores explicitly the grounds of their meaning making.

The point can be illustrated by a comparison of passages from two students’ essays (2014) on the novel Ransom by David Malouf. They are both written as an ‘assessment task’, which counts towards students’ final, high stakes assessments, at a regional state high school. I will be returning to this site in seeking to further my inquiry.

I should make it clear that this is the school at which Carol, the experienced teacher referred to earlier, worked. I had discussed my project with her, and because she was very interested in it she agreed to give me access to her students’ written responses She appreciated opportunities to discuss the rationale that underpinned her pedagogy and in this instance alerted me to a pertinent debate which had taken place at the school.
I should also clarify the methodology of the study with respect to the part Carol plays in it. I draw on her work not in an attempt to ascribe ethnographic significance to it (though some of the methods used, such as recorded discussions, give an ethnographic flavor) but to establish a teacher’s distinctive point of view. I came to realize that I had the opportunity not only to develop a ‘naturalistic’ account of how Carol went about her day-to-day work in the classroom, but also to understand her formation as a teacher who had devoted herself to her students’ literary education across decades. Her interactions with students and teachers, set in the broad context of her career, could occasion empirical materials which gave practical demonstration to what might otherwise remain relatively abstract ideas.

*Ransom* had been chosen, like *Minimum of Two*, for detailed study. It retells the final section of Homer’s *The Iliad* from Books 22 to 24, beginning with Achilles mourning the death of his friend, Patroclus at the hands of King Priam’s son Hector, the Trojan hero. It recounts the development of their friendship and Achilles’ revenge by slaying Hector. Achilles proceeds to drag Hector’s body behind his chariot around the walls of Troy, and each morning for the succeeding ten days drags it around Patroclus’ funeral pyre. The gods preserve it, however, from this desecration. In Malouf’s version of the story Priam determines to divest himself of the trappings of kingship and approach Achilles in order to ransom Hector’s body not simply with treasure but by appealing to him as a fellow human, a father and a son.

Australian novelist, David Malouf (born 1934), is the author of ten novels and six volumes of poetry. His early reputation was earned by his poetry; his fiction, including short stories, has won many local and international awards over more than four decades. His work is remarkable for the poetic economy of its prose. Literary critic, Peter Craven, has commented: “No one else in this country has the maintenance of tone, the expertness of prose, the easeful transition between lyrical and realist effects” (cited in Gilling, 2008, p.28).

The students, Sam and Sarah, are in the final year of secondary school and their essays are in response to the question “Are there any true heroes in *Ransom*?” Sam writes:

Embarking upon both a journey to alter his legacy and a journey of the grieving process, Priam specifically goes
“stripped of all royal insignia” in a “plain white robe … no amulet”. Symbolically returning to a common father, this action reverberates with heroism, valour and courage throughout the novel and readers. Transcended into a man, unprotected by kingship, armies or his “Idaeus”, Priam puts his life to “chance”. In doing so, he becomes the hero, a fierce act of “violent compassion” and a universal affirmation of humanity.

Sam attempts to answer the question by pointing to Priam’s heroism, but the key issue to be considered is the quality of his engagement with the actual language of the text. Or is it? The ‘assessment rubric’ calls for “A highly-developed and well-sustained interpretation of a selected text supported by the considered selection and use of highly appropriate textual evidence.” What is the relationship between developing an “interpretation” and “textual evidence”? What kind of relationship to the language of *Ransom* is involved in the “selection and use” of this “evidence”?

Sam’s first sentence introduces two purposes of Priam’s journey – to change the way he will be regarded over the course of time and to express his grief. The expression is somewhat stilted – “to alter his legacy” and “a journey of the grieving process” – as if these remain learned, second hand items. Of course all such information is to a large degree acquired from a teacher or secondary sources, but the phrasing here does not indicate that the student has made sense of these ideas for himself by thinking carefully about what they might mean in terms of the process of Priam’s ‘heroic’ decision making – laid out, as it happens, in some detail in the novel. Priam realizes that he has an opportunity to change the story that will be told about him, but this is not his primary motive. He simply wants to recover the body of his son, which is being desecrated by Achilles.

He comes to the realization, prompted it seems by a god (the novel is circumspect about the role of the supernatural in human affairs) that he can in his desperate circumstances take a chance – do “what any man might do” (p.59) – but this is a revolutionary, even subversive, notion in a world that is to all intents and purposes under the sway of the gods. He is not as king just “any man” (p.59), as his wife, Hecuba, who is frightened and angry at this idea, reminds him. Yet he finds it within himself to explain:
That’s true. In one way I’m not. But in another, deeper way, I am. I feel a kind of freedom in that. It’s a feeling I like, it appeals to me. And perhaps, because it is unexpected, it may appeal to him too: the chance to break free of the obligation of being always the hero, as I am expected to be always the king. To take on the lighter bond of being simply a man. Perhaps that is the real gift I have to bring him. Perhaps that is the ransom. (Malouf, 2009, pp.59-60)

The progress of thought here is lucid; it is developed simply yet artfully. Priam agrees with Hecuba at one level, but he consults a deeper human self to discover a more fundamental “feeling” which “appeals”; it is not as if he is divesting himself of responsibility, but he can and should “break free of the obligation of being always the hero” – an onerous but, he realizes, paradoxically superficial “obligation” which society has imposed on him – in order to “take on the lighter bond of being simply a man”. It is at this level that he trusts, or at least is prepared to take the chance, that he can find common ground with Achilles.

The novel has prepared this ground by telling us earlier that Achilles knows full well that he must meet “a hero’s death out there in full sunlight under the gaze of gods and men”. This is necessarily not something he can, as a human being, shut out of consciousness:

That is fixed, inevitable. With the pious resignation of the old man he will never become, he has accepted this.

But in some other part of himself, the young man that he is resists, and it is the buried rage of that resistance that drives him out each morning to tramp the shore... (Malouf, 2009, p.9)

Malouf finds a way, by having Achilles adopt “the pious resignation of the old man he will never become”, of gaining a perspective which conveys the poignancy of his life cut short.

It might be expected that students’ responses to the novel would demonstrate some alertness to the deftness of its language – that is, if they are expected to develop an apprehension of it for themselves as distinct from dealing in abstracted content. The text tells us that when Priam allows himself to contemplate how his plan might work “the picture that forms before him is of himself seated ... in full sunlight on the crossbench of a cart. A plain wooden cart...”
He himself is dressed in a plain white robe without ornament. No jeweled amulet at his breast. No golden armbands or any other form of royal insignia. (Malouf, 2009, p. 47)

Sam’s addition of “stripped” – “stripped of all royal insignia” – is something of a dramatic flourish; it indicates a straining after significance which is not made explicit – what is the point of dressing in this way? In fact, Priam has divested himself of the trappings of his kingly role, if not of its spirit.

The introduction to Sam’s following sentence: “Symbolically returning to a common father” gestures at a ‘big’ but, as it stands, incoherent idea. Perhaps he means that Priam means to travel to meet Achilles “simply [as] a man”, but the idea does not take shape in response to the language of the novel.

Rhetorical phrases such as “this action reverberates”, “transcended into a man” or “a universal affirmation of humanity” are similarly empty of meaning. The oxymoron “violent compassion” is not to be found in the novel. Such hyperbole is, in effect, camouflage which attempts to compensate for a lack of attention to its language. It seems likely that Sam struggles because he is uncertain as to how to establish a “fitting relationship” with that language.

Which is not to say that he sees himself as ‘struggling’: it is possible that he is justified in believing that the paragraph could be read as a kind of code in which elliptical language – “to alter his legacy”, for example, rather than ‘to change the way he will be regarded in the future’ – and overblown phrasing are taken to be cryptic indications of an impressive grasp of meaning.

Sarah writes, by comparison (original spelling and punctuation have been preserved):

When Priam is given the idea that his life may have an element of “chance”, that he may be able to “force events into a different course” he feels as if it is an opportunity to “break free of the obligation of always being king”. Malouf depicts Priam to be “bewildered, but strangely excited” by his new found freedom, demonstrating he is both liberated and scared by such an “unaccustomed” idea. The magnitude and audacity of his idea,
to journey to the Greek camp – into the unknown – is emphasized by constant references to his physical frailty “his mottled veined hands” and “sunken cheeks”. However Malouf shows how his ability to step outside the confines of the “royal sphere” enables him to transcend the obligation of “always standing still at the center”; an image that evokes a sense of rigidity and passivity; a statuesque quality that is wonderfully durable but also disturbingly unhuman.

In her first sentence Sarah uses accurate references to the language of the novel to sequence, and thereby think through the development of, key ideas. Whereas Sam merely mentions “chance” – “Priam puts his life to chance” – Sarah shows how it works for Priam, or rather how he boldly makes ‘chance’ work for him. It may be that Sarah does not possess Sam’s rhetorical flair, but her attentiveness to the novel allows her to structure and elaborate her writing in a way which is foreign to him. Her second sentence uses the notion of ‘Malouf’, the author behind the scenes, not to bypass the actual language but to identify it as something intended and at the same time as taking on a verbal life of its own. A ‘depiction’ is to be considered in its own right. Sam doesn’t refer to language in this sense.

Sarah understands that this ‘verbal life’ is “demonstrating” meanings which, if she is attentive enough, she may realize; hence her nice perception that “[Priam] is both liberated and scared”. She grasps too, on this basis, the wider import of “references to his physical frailty”. It is likely that she has learned in the classroom a vocabulary which includes words such as “magnitude and audacity”, but they do not remain second hand: she has discovered how to use them convincingly for herself in her discussion of the novel.

Whereas Sam does not substantiate his use of “transcend”, Sarah uses the word to indicate the release that Priam finds in being able to “step outside the confines” of his kingly role. A form of words such as “an image that evokes ...” in itself promotes attentiveness to the language of the novel. Sarah’s understanding of the novel is evidently well furnished with meanings generated in this way. Sam, by comparison, flails away at a remove from the language.

It is evident that a lot of work – in terms of classroom discussion, note taking and practice at developing ideas in writing – lies behind
Sarah’s paragraph on the part of both teacher and responsive student. It is clear that she has been exposed to the language of the novel, and has been challenged to generate ideas from it, in a way that Sam has not experienced. He contrives to register with an ‘impressive’ turn of phrase ideas that he has collected, but his writing is pretty much devoid of the benefits of this kind of close reading.

I should make it clear that the example from Sam’s work is, like Sarah’s, from a ‘body’ paragraph; it is not an overview of argument which serves as an introduction to his essay but is characteristic of his writing throughout. The comparison is in this sense just.

The team of six English teachers at the school was required to cross mark their students’ essays or ‘assessment tasks’, and found at the end of the process that the essays of these two students were ranked highest of the cohort. The teachers were required, for the purposes of exam moderation, to rank one ahead of the other. The website of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) explains:

Moderation is a process of ensuring that the same assessment standards are applied to students from every school doing a particular study. Statistical moderation is a process for adjusting schools’ assessments to the same standard, while maintaining the students’ rank order given by the school. The VCAA uses statistical moderation to ensure that the coursework assessments given by different schools are comparable throughout the State...

Each VCE study includes at least one external examination and the VCAA will use the examination scores in each study as the basis for statistical moderation of schools’ assessments... Because the external score is based on examinations done by all students across the State, it is a common standard against which schools’ assessments can be compared. (VCAA, 2014)

After re-reading the essays, four teachers voted for Sam’s essay as superior to Sarah’s. The reasoning behind this decision is summed up in an email that the English coordinator, Sam’s teacher, later sent to Carol, Sarah’s teacher: “One of them is too General English – all show and no substance, and the other is too Literature – all substance and no show.”
How can ‘English’ be opposed to Literature in this way? Students in the state of Victoria have the option of studying either or both of these subjects. As the title indicates, Literature is a more specialized study of what are regarded as relatively demanding ‘literary’ texts, but there is a deal of overlap between the two fields; indeed, the division between them is arguably artificial; Ransom could conceivably be set on either course. As will be discussed, these teachers chose the novel for study because Carol persuaded them that as a ‘literary’ text it seemed to lend itself to fruitful inquiry. Sarah’s attention to its language arguably pays off in terms of the quality of her response; unfortunately the ‘system’, as interpreted by a majority of these teachers, does not see it in this way.

The proposition that style trumps substance is odd, to say the least. It is not as if the coordinator, a very experienced teacher can’t see the clear differences between the two – that Sarah’s use of “textual evidence” is very different from Sam’s – but she believes that the examiners are likely to be impressed by Sam’s writing – his “interpretation” – in a way that they will miss in Sarah’s. Carol found this perception disturbing not simply because it seemed to involve inequity but because she feared, on the basis of anecdotal evidence and examiners’ reports, that it might well be justified. The incident demonstrates the need for inquiry into the nature of students’ engagement with the language of literary texts.

I am setting out, in undertaking this inquiry, to explore how the concept of ‘close reading’ figures within the work of influential literary critics, and then how ‘close reading’ might feature in the work of practising teachers and the exchanges they facilitate in classroom settings.

It is clear, at least, that students and teachers experience an uncomfortable degree of uncertainty as to what the ‘system’ requires of them. The coordinator recognized objectively the value of Carol’s work with Sarah: she later asked Carol to tutor Sam in order, as she saw it, to arm his “show” with more “substance” for the final exam. What, though, constitutes the ‘system’? What are the theoretical underpinnings of the assessment apparatus that in turn, as a reflection of the curriculum, shapes classroom practice? What does it look for in students’ work, and – more significantly – why?
A fundamental issue would seem to be the nature of students’ engagement with language on the page. How, in the first instance, is the printed word made visible or accessible to students, so that they can interact with it? What then might be their perceptions of the constructed nature and aesthetic qualities of the language of a given text, and how might a grasp of elements of its construction give access to it as a meaning-generating phenomenon? There seems to be some doubt as to whether these questions are regarded as critical to students’ learning.

3) Close Reading: the Productivity of Language

“We also need to find a way of standing back which keeps us in touch with the work’s tangible presence.” (Terry Eagleton, 2013, p.149)

In Tim Winton’s story, Laps, the focus on Queenie’s resilience in coming to terms with the past plays out against references to environmental degradation. Whaling may be dead at ‘Angelus’ but at Scarborough in Perth “the little men with big money were tearing up the beachfront to build hotels for the Americans” (p.76). Near Angelus what was the family farm is suffering:

Beyond the gate, the rising land was overgrazed and guttered. In the distance, the hill showed signs of tree-felling.

‘A hundred and fifty years,’ Queenie murmured. ‘And now this.’ (p.85)

At the end of the story Queenie takes a moment to wryly reflect before she launches into her sustaining “crawl”:

Up behind the vehicle on the deserted beach she saw the dunes. Further back was the hulking shadow of the hill where the old man was buried. In his own six feet. Well, that’s all anyone needs, she thought. More than I need. (p.87)

The story is concerned with what, after all, should be our relationship with the environment, historical and ‘natural’. To use it as stimulus for an investigation of these issues, however, might well be to neglect meanings generated by Winton’s literary ‘take’ on them. What should be the relationship between attentiveness to the text and regard for
wider “political or theoretical questions” (Eagleton 2013, p.ix)? Higgins summarises Williams’ key ideas in this respect:

At the centre of cultural materialism is the call for a critical attitude towards all forms and practices of representation, and not only those associated with literature. A key characteristic of cultural materialism is its bringing together of three dimensions of intellectual analysis and enquiry which are far too often kept apart, to the detriment of each: the textual, the theoretical or conceptual, and the historical. Cambridge English, at least in the evaluative mode bequeathed by Leavis and his followers, had tended to privilege the textual at the expense of the theoretical and historical ... Contemporary structuralism, as Williams understood it, tended to focus on the theoretical over the historical and, in a curious sense, over the textual, often allotting texts only the role of example in the demonstration of the ‘truths’ of theory ...

In all of these partial approaches ... what might be called the productivity of the text was ignored – that productivity which meant that texts could contest as well as articulate or embody given ideologies. (Higgins 1999, pp.134-135)

What counts then in reading Laps is not so much environmental concerns as the “productivity” of the “forms and practices of representation” which touch on them. It has to be allowed that they may not “contest ... given ideologies” directly: ‘touch’ is an appropriate word here because the story takes a tangential approach to questions of conservation. Its textual means – “everything that comes under the heading of ‘form’” – should not on this account be discounted.

A radically new ideology is articulated and thereby let loose in Ransom, but it is initially dropped lightly, as if inadvertently, into the conversation between Priam and Hecuba, “two old people consulting together... Two children holding hands in the dark” (p.60):

‘If I do not succeed in this, and am lost, then all is lost. We must leave that to the gods. Or to chance.’

There! – and a little shiver goes through him – he has said it. Chance?

She looks up quickly. Surely she has misheard.
‘It seems to me,’ he says, almost dreamily, ‘that there might be another way of naming what we call fortune and attribute to the will, or the whim, of the gods. Which offers a kind of opening. The opportunity to act for ourselves. To try something that might force events into a different course.’

She wishes she had misheard. Words are powerful. They too can be the agents of what is new, of what is conceivable and can be thought and let loose upon the world. (p.61)

Again the language simply and deftly registers not simply the progress of Priam’s thought, along with his apprehension, but its impact in terms of Hecuba’s startled reactions, her comprehension of the import of what he is saying. Conrad (2009) in a review of Ransom describes the novel as “a philosophical meditation on Homer’s fatalistic universe” which sets out to contest the ideology of The Iliad:

Priam's decision to humble himself by appealing to Achilles interests Malouf as a moral novelty, a thought that no man has ever previously allowed himself to think... He sees Priam's initiative - which alarms his wife, Hecuba, and scandalises his courtiers - as a gratuitous action, a thrillingly reckless attempt to locate "a kind of opening" in the closed and foredoomed society of the epic. That opening is an aperture that leads from the ancient world to the modern, from an earth on which human beings live and die at the whim of ill-tempered Olympian deities to our freer but chancier moral territory, where everything is contingent and fates are unpredictably accidental. (Conrad, The Monthly, May 2009)

This radical “attempt to locate ‘a kind of opening’” relies, though, on the “productivity” of Ransom’s language for the reader. It may occasion “philosophical meditation”, but appreciation of Ransom as a novel requires attentiveness to its language. The historical makes sense in terms of the textual and vice versa. And this endeavor clarifies, from a theoretical perspective, the status of language on the page.

The practice of ‘close reading’ has been associated with Cambridge English, and in particular with F. R. Leavis, whose work has not been treated kindly by history, perhaps because its means of ‘practical criticism’ has been so closely identified with its ideological ends.
Higgins characterizes his work as missionary in its zeal to locate and instill certain values:

[Cambridge English’s] principal aim, through that lingeringly close textual analysis known as ‘practical criticism’, was to judge and discriminate the quality and sincerity of an author’s thought with the ultimate aim of promoting discrimination, maturity and sincerity among the reading public as a whole, as well as encouraging these virtues in writers themselves, as the necessary constituents of the good society. (Higgins 1999, pp.172-3)

Higgins uses a pejorative expression – “lingeringly close” – in describing the method, so that it becomes identified with the perceived limitations of the purposes to which it was put. But if Leavisite ‘close reading’ came to be seen as narrow on account of its determination to cultivate such forbidding values as “discrimination, maturity and sincerity”, this should not be confounded with its demonstration of an appreciation of language. At the same time, its “[tendency] to privilege the textual” was problematic because of its failure, if not refusal, to theorise and contextualize it (cf. Leavis, 1937, 1952; Wellek, 1937).

I had arguably pursued what might be regarded as a narrowly textual view of Laps – as my own Leavisite/New Critical literary education had taught me to do – leaving my students at something of a loss regarding its social and historical context. Or rather, I had not given due consideration to the character of the textual in relation to the social and historical. Which is not to say that I should have delivered a kind of social studies lesson. What was needed was exploration of how environmental issues are represented in terms of the language of the story, so that students might not only grasp how it is constructed in terms of an historical and environmental perspective, but on this basis better understand the “productivity” of its language or form. I would aim to expose the cultural aspects of the story and thus develop a sense of the materiality of its language – and vice versa.

The story suggests that for Queenie, whatever the success of the anti-whaling campaign, things had not gone well: “She had come from her home town a loser, an outcast; she left behind a grave and a crusade and a well of bitterness ...” (p.75). She seeks to recover her strength,
physically and emotionally, not simply for her own sake but for her family and for any kind of intervention on behalf of the environment. And this recovery of strength is registered not simply in what the story says but in the way it says it.

“A peculiarly vigilant kind of reading” (Eagleton, 2013, p.2) could be recognized then, given this contextual clarification, as not pernickety or myopic but vital in pursuing, as Ellen (one of my students referred to earlier) puts it, “the key themes in the stories”. It matters, for example, that “Every stroke of her dogged freestyle was a blow” rather than a ‘victory’. There is nothing easy or glorious about Queenie’s struggle; the end is not even in sight. She is through her swimming physically engaged with the elemental, but issues involved in sustaining the environment are, at least for the moment, in the background; what counts is her struggle as conveyed in language. It takes reading of this kind to recognize and enjoy the “productivity” of language, just as a jazz piece only has meaning if its audience can physically engage with its ‘swing’. The clarification and articulation of this meaning would of course be a work in progress.

This more comprehensive account of form sheds light on “the theoretical or conceptual” in that the character of the text as “representation” becomes clearer. I had anticipated that a focus on textual detail with my students would constrain them “to consider the interrelation between form and content” and hence to find larger ideas emerging from it. For some this turned out to be the case – witness Toni (another of my students referred to earlier): “This year ... there’s been more focus on the words of the text ... It’s paying off as essays are easier to write because the knowledge of the text is already understood in my mind” – but others, who had been led to believe that they could find success by other means, needed an explicit account of how “vigilant” attention to “everything that comes under the heading of form” could prove rewarding in terms of meaning.

The notion of meaning ‘emerging’ as ‘larger ideas’ may indeed be misleading. Toni came to identify “knowledge of the text” with “more focus on the words”. She found herself “involved in the demanding act of engaging with the art as art” (Abbs 1989, pp.68-69). It was not as if, for her, content or ideas now belonged in a realm independent of the materiality of language on the page, although this had
evidently been so in the past. Williams traces this assumption back to Plato:

Plato’s major inquiry into language ... was centred on the problem of the correctness of naming, in which the interrelation of ‘word’ and ‘thing’ can be seen to originate either in ‘nature’ or in ‘convention’. Plato’s solution was in effect the foundation of idealist thought: there is an intermediate but constitutive realm, which is neither ‘word’ nor ‘thing’ but ‘form’, ‘essence’, or ‘idea’. The investigation of either ‘language’ or ‘reality’ was then always, at root, an investigation of these constitutive (metaphysical) forms. (Williams 1977, p.22)

In what sense does language partake of ‘things’? How can we speak of characters as if they are ‘real’? The derivation of ideas from the language of literature, and, at a more fundamental level, the status of this language in relation to ‘reality’, were issues for Ellen, among others. She believed that the reading demanded by English required her to discover “neither ‘word’ nor ‘thing’” but “‘form’, ‘essence’, or ‘idea’” at an “idealist” or disembodied level in the shape of “hidden concepts threaded throughout the storyline”. “The storyline” is itself an abstract concept, and “hidden concepts” a further mystification, but her approach was not altogether misguided. As Eagleton poses the problem:

All knowledge depends to some extent on a process of abstraction. In the case of literary criticism, this means being able to stand back from the work and trying to see it in the round. This is not easy, partly because literary works are processes in time which are hard to see laid out as a whole. We also need to find a way of standing back which keeps us in touch with the work’s tangible presence. (Eagleton 2013, p.149)

It became evident that at least some of my students were surprised to discover “the work’s tangible presence” – a term which suggests physical apprehension – in a way that they never had before. Toni explained: “Previously I just did the questions in each chapter, and it was a hassle, so I did them as fast and distantly as I could.” “Distantly” is a significant choice of word; evidently she now felt, by comparison, “in touch”. Toni recognized that she had not previously developed “a
fitting relationship” with a given text. Ellen, though, was reluctant to relinquish strategies which she saw as serving her well.

The assumption that ‘comprehension’ questions can deliver certain goods – “analytical attention with an extractable content” – tends to blindside attention to the textual. My student, Terry, who believed: “You can’t just read a story and think it’s been put into the person’s head” was stuck in something of a cul-de-sac, at a remove from the text not only because he assumed that he could not, when left to his own devices, engage effectively with it, but because what he took to be the remedy for this situation disabled his capacity to learn to do so: “Taking notes off the board, writing summaries of the stories, doing set questions on the novel is how I learn.”

This was “a way of standing back” which, in putting him (“the person”) at a remove from the object of attention, rendered him passive. What was needed was not a way to “put [the story] into the person’s head” but a way of thinking about it which might enable Terry to engage with it as a verbal construction rather than simply at the level of narrative. Raymond Williams reframes a focus on the textual as key to a larger conceptual scheme:

[Williams] presents us with a powerful refocusing of literacy as above all a critical literacy. While primary literacy develops the basic skills of reading and writing, critical literacy is a secondary literacy, which brings into play particular forms of analysis and interpretation which treat all texts as representations, and not presentations, of the world. (Higgins 1999, p.174)

This move is open to misinterpretation, however, in that it may be taken as opening up a gap or false dichotomy between “reading and writing” and “analysis and interpretation”. Terry was in trouble because he assumed – or had in effect been taught – that his ‘basic’ reading was not capable of an analytic, appreciative dimension: that is, he had no confidence that he could find a depth of meaning in what he read. And the analysis and interpretations that he looked to were counter-productive in this regard because, disregarding the materiality of the text, they focused on content at the expense of form.
The “process of abstraction” to which Eagleton refers tends to take the materiality of a ‘representation’ for granted, and hence can’t answer to students’ confusion when they are called on to provide a critical appraisal of content in the absence of a heightened regard for form. It is all the more important, then, to make explicit to students the crucial distinction between language as material “representation” and as abstracted “presentation” – that is, for example, between regarding Queenie as a character constructed by words such as “crawl” and “smacking” and treating ‘her’ as a ‘real’ person.

Of course, if she had been asked, Ellen would readily have acknowledged that Queenie was not a ‘real’ person, but still she believed that writing about the text in English involved treating this character in a story as ‘real’. Ellen did not grasp the distance between this “way of standing back” and “the work’s tangible presence”, which meant in effect that she did not explicitly grasp the nature and significance of the latter. And she had good reason to believe that in the ‘real’ world in which “essay questions are pinpointed at ... the key themes in the stories” a focus on it was beside the point. As Eagleton observes:

One of the most common ways of overlooking the ‘literariness’ of a play or novel is to treat its characters as though they were actual people. In one sense, to be sure, this is almost impossible to avoid. (Eagleton, 2013, p.45)

It is one thing though to write of Queenie: “She seeks to gather her strength, physically and emotionally”; it is another to understand that “this gathering of strength is registered not simply in what the story says but in the way it says it.” It is worth considering the significance of the notion of ‘character’ in this respect:

The word ‘character’ nowadays can mean a sign, letter or symbol as well as a literary figure. It derives from an ancient Greek term meaning a stamping tool which makes a distinctive mark. From there it came to mean the peculiar mark of an individual, rather like his signature. A character, like a character reference today, was a sign, portrait or description of what a man or woman was like. Then, after a while, it came to mean the man or woman as such. The sign that had stood for the individual became the individual herself. The
distinctiveness of the mark became the uniqueness of the person. (Eagleton, 2013, p. 48)

A pattern of black marks on a page is identified as a character and hence as a person. Eagleton suggests that “one way to avoid speaking of characters as though they lived in your apartment building” is to set them “in the context of the [work] as a whole”, so that they may be understood to be products of elements such as “theme, plot, mood, imagery and so on”. Thus

Hamlet is not simply a despondent young prince; he is also an occasion for certain reflections by the play as a whole, the embodiment of certain ways of seeing and modes of feeling ... (Eagleton, 2013, p.63)

In the same, if very minor, way Queenie is not simply an emotionally bruised young woman who seeks to recover herself but “an occasion for certain reflections ... the embodiment of certain ways of seeing and modes of feeling.” The key words here are “occasion”, indicating the dimension of time, and “embodiment”, a problematic term because it suggests the realization of these “reflections” physically in a ‘character’, which is in this sense an abstraction even though it is dependent on signs.

The work is a “process in time” and it involves language as physical signs or ‘characters’, print on the page; the concept of “embodiment” comes unstuck, however, in that it assumes a great deal of insight into how such a ‘character’ – in its derived sense – may be construed as a ‘person’ in the reader’s mind. The metaphorical language of “occasion” and “embodiment” subsumes “the distinctiveness of the mark” into “the uniqueness of the person”. Such a rapid slide needs clarification.

Even though Eagleton is well aware of the danger, he finds it hard to avoid. Williams points, from a historical perspective, to the difficulty of sustaining a sense of the materiality of language:

[this emphasis on language as constitutive] was in constant danger of becoming simply a new kind of idealism – ‘humanity’ and ‘creativity’ being projected as essences – while the tendencies it opposed moved towards a new kind of objective materialism. This specific fission, so fateful in all subsequent
thought, was in effect masked and ratified by a newly conventional distinction between ‘art’ (literature) – the sphere of ‘humanity’ and ‘creativity’ – and ‘science’ (positive knowledge) – the knowable dimensions of the physical world and of physical human beings within it. (Williams, 1977, pp. 24-25)

Students need, in essence, to understand how a ‘character’ may be signified by physical words on the page so as to enable the construction of a ‘representation’ – as distinct from a ‘presentation’ – of the world. It is necessary to continually take stock of the “constitutive” or “productive” character of language. The notion that a critical stance towards a representation will of itself constrain students to develop a reading which is grounded in “everything that comes under the heading of form” – which will keep them “in touch with the work’s tangible presence” – is optimistic if not misguided. It can tend, on the contrary, to filter out the materiality of language.

At the same time it might be argued that an issue arises here concerning the reader’s engagement with the text at a personal level. Jack Thomson, in his influential book Understanding Teenagers Reading: Reading Processes and the Teaching of Literature (1987) quotes D. W. Harding:

Fiction can contribute to the search for identity or role definition that is a crucial task at the stage of adolescence. It allows you to try on various personalities, each of which selectively emphasises some fear or potentiality of your developing self. (p.53)

Reading necessarily involves, and is motivated by, ‘identity work’. “Try[ing] on various personalities” as if they were different sets of clothes involves, however, the development of a degree of awareness of their material production and value. Thomson reaches the conclusion, based on interviews with students, that:

... it was their conviction that a gulf existed between their personal thoughts and feelings about texts, and what they believed their teachers valued as response and expected from them. They believed that their teachers disvalued the personal and emotional in favour of a detached aesthetic response. However true this general characterization of teacherly
preferences is, the important point is that many students believed it to be true. (p.228)

The opposition that Thomson’s interpretation of his data leads him to establish here is unhelpful. By 2014, when Sarah and Sam produce their responses to _Ransom_ (discussed above) its terms have simply reversed. Sarah’s more “detached aesthetic response” is “disvalued” in relation to what might be read as Sam’s “personal and emotional” effusion. In fact, Sarah’s reading is not, in that it is attentive, “detached”; her close reading enables her to engage with characters in a way that Sam cannot.

I discuss these matters further, in relation to my own autobiography, in Chapters 3 and 5. I pursue in Chapter 2 questions relating to form and content, and to the material basis of the aesthetic.
Chapter 2

Form and Content

"Languages and structures, rather than authorial self or consciousness, become the major source of explanation." (Jonathan Culler, 1982, p 21)

1) 'A Fitting Relationship' With the Text

"English students in England today are 'Leavisites' whether they know it or not, irremediably altered by that historic intervention. There is no more need to be a card-carrying Leavisite today than there is to be a card-carrying Copernican.” (Terry Eagleton, 1983, p.27)

I should make it clear at the outset of this study that I am not a “card-carrying Leavisite”; it is impossible to simply invoke the value of ‘close reading’, as Leavis understood it, given all that has happened between the moment of Scrutiny and the present. Eagleton asserts in Literary Theory, in sardonic fashion, that people of his (and my) generation were inducted into a particular way of reading literature:

Indeed by our own time literature has become effectively identical with the opposite of analytic thought and conceptual inquiry: whereas scientists, philosophers and political theorists are saddled with these drably discursive pursuits, students of literature occupy the more prized territory of feeling and experience. Whose feeling and what kind of experience is a different kind of question. (1983, p.22)

The success of the enterprise was that we all felt that this was perfectly natural. Very few of us had the capacity to focus on the assumptions behind what we were doing, especially given Leavis’ own refusal to offer a philosophical rationale for his approach as a literary critic. ‘Close reading’ was its own justification in that it would grant the reader entry into “feeling and experience” (cf. Leavis, 1937,

What I am arguing should not be construed, then, as simply motivated by nostalgia for a time that has passed. I am interested, rather, in understanding how a reader might develop – given recognition of the materiality of its means – productive interaction with a given text. This interaction has the potential to prove valuable beyond achieving exam success in that it can explicitly foster a heightened sense of the relationship between words and meaning.

I shall illustrate the nature of ‘close reading’, as I think it might be practised now, by comparing an example of Eagleton’s criticism with ‘close reading’ as it was practised by Vincent Buckley, one of Leavis’ students who played a very influential role in educating students at Melbourne University into the kind of attentiveness to the literary work that Leavis represented. This means revisiting my own education, something that I shall do throughout this thesis.

I shall inquire into my own literary education in order to try to understand the role that ‘close reading’ played in my growing understanding of literature, both as a student and then later as a teacher. From where I stand now, ‘close reading’ appears as a sort of residue, something that I would distil from my education as one of the most significant things I learned. My inquiry concerns the relevance that this lesson might still have today (if indeed it has any relevance).

I take as something of a touchstone Raymond Williams’ articulation of the significance of a close, attentive relationship with a given, literary text:

... these ‘higher’ forms of production, embodying many of the most intense and most significant forms of human experience, are more clearly understood when they are recognized as specific objectifications, in relatively durable material organizations, of what are otherwise the least durable though often the most powerful and affective human moments.
(Williams, 1977, p.162)

The example of Buckley’s criticism, on the opening stanza of W. B. Yeats’ poem ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, appears in his Poetry and the Sacred (1968), a collection of critical essays. I remember Buckley, a
famous critic and poet, as a charismatic personality even if, as will become clear, the grounds of his criticism were not altogether evident to me. He writes:

Here is Yeats facing with his poetic powers at their highest pitch the agonizing realization that the physical energies he has come increasingly to rely on must inevitably be abandoned, and that the labour of replacing them with higher energies must be immediate and intense. Consequently, the opening gesture of rejection is quite violent, and the dialectic between physical and spiritual energies is expressed in an almost hypnotic pace and rhythm:

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another’s arms, birds in the trees
—Those dying generations—at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

Anyone who yields himself, however self-critically, to the power of the opening gesture, ‘That is no country for old men...’, will see that it is sudden, almost desperate, in its force. The unexplained ‘That’ is a sign of the completeness of the renunciation ... And the interesting thing is that, after the renunciatory gesture of these few words, the verse becomes not bitter or explanatory but celebrant. It is the flux of physical passion which the first stanza celebrates, even while it is announcing the need for a renunciation of it. (pp. 198-199)

The second example of criticism, from Terry Eagleton’s How to Read a Poem (2007) introduces the poem thus: “Form and content also work productively against each other in the first stanza of ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, one of the great Irish emigration poems” (p.84). Eagleton continues:

The poet is telling us that he must abandon the perishable domain of human love, sexuality, death and reproduction for some more enduring kingdom, one less carnal and fugitive. Yet even though the opening demonstrative already places this
perishable domain at arm’s length (“That’ rather than ‘This’),
the imagery which portrays it is tender and mutedly sensuous.
And this grants the natural, human world of the dying
generations a grace and preciousness which makes it hard to
abandon. Yeats is refusing to make things easy for himself by
setting up a convenient straw target of the fleshly world he is
leaving behind ... (p.84)

I am interested here not so much in the relative success of these
passages of criticism in throwing light on the poem as in ways in
which their approaches to its language or “material organizations”, as
distinct from its burden of “human experience,” might enable them to
do so. Published four decades apart, they illustrate very different
theoretical assumptions regarding the relation of language and
‘experience’. Whereas, for example, Eagleton’s focus, after an opening
summary of content, is on ways in which form contributes to
meaning by working to implicitly undercut, if not countermand, the
initial, explicit assertion, Buckley reads the poem as ‘embodying’
what is assumed to be the ‘reality’ of the poet’s personal crisis: “Here
is Yeats...” Form and content, poem and ‘reality’, are conflated to a
degree.

Buckley is too responsive to the poem’s language not to be aware of
what he calls “the dialectic between physical and spiritual energies”
but he does not register this “dialectic” in terms of the relationship of
form and content which Eagleton finds “productively” antithetical.
Instead, he tends to read it at a psychological and even metaphysical
level. The focus is on the poet’s crisis, as represented in the poem, at
the expense of attention to the materiality of the poem itself. In other
words, Buckley’s reading, rather than being necessarily founded on
appreciative attention to the poem’s language in a formal sense,
tends to obscure or at least burden it with interpretations that are
motivated by assumptions about the experience, the ‘life’, which he
sees it as, in a sense, processing in order to achieve a kind of
transcendence. He concludes:

Above all, we take away the sense of a completed movement
of the spirit and the senses affirming a sacred possibility which
the facts of living would seem to deny (p.204).

Buckley invests his reading of the poem with the intense states of
emotion, such as the poet’s “agonizing realization”, which he takes to
be its motivation. They may well be, but to read the poem in these terms must be, to a degree, to impose on and suppress the import of its “material organizations” (Williams, 1977, p.162) of words.

Buckley points, for example, to “the opening gesture of rejection” in, initially at least, what might seem unremarkable terms, but they are personal compared to Eagleton’s focus on language per se, divested of emotional states: “... the opening demonstrative already places this perishable domain at arm’s length (‘That’ rather than ‘This’).” “Demonstrative,” compared with “gesture”, is emotionally neutral; it would not be out of place in a technical, linguistic field.

Whereas Buckley’s reading seems to want to become so caught up in the poem as to impose emotion on it: “…the dialectic between physical and spiritual energies is expressed in an almost hypnotic pace and rhythm,” Eagleton’s reading prefers to cannily step back, as if to try to see more clearly, by underlaying it, what the language is achieving: “…the imagery which portrays [this perishable domain] is tender and mutedly sensuous.” Where Buckley finds a pitch of feeling, so that for him the poem proceeds at a “hypnotic pace”. Eagleton finds that “[Yeats] is in elegiac mood” (p.84).

“Reflection on the means of expression, and attention to how meaning is made and pleasure produced” (Culler, 1997, p.41) might well lead the reader to think of “the opening demonstrative” as a “gesture of rejection”, but this “gesture” could surely only be considered “quite violent” on the basis of assumptions as to the ‘speaker’s’ highly wrought psychological state; it would not seem to be substantiated by the words themselves. It might well be regarded as “sudden”, but the reader can only “yield” to Buckley’s sense of it as “almost desperate in its force” if she subscribes to his assumptions as to the poet’s tortured soul. An “agonizing realization” is one thing and the exercise of “poetic powers” another.

Eagleton may be guilty at times of glibly underlaying the power of the language – “‘fish, flesh, or fowl’ sounds more like a grocer’s terminology than a poet’s” (p.85) – but his attention to its formal character provides the grounds for appreciation of what has been achieved:

Yeats remains rigorously in control, as the orderly syntax suggests. By about line 4, we are growing a little anxious: what
are all these bits and pieces adding up to? Then, suddenly, a
main verb (‘commend’) locks authoritatively into place in the
next line, to bind these various elements together and lend
them some overall thrust and coherence. (p.85)

“Command”, hardly an impassioned word, itself involves a kind of
stepping back, a gaining of perspective on the “flux of physical
passion” of which Buckley speaks, but – perhaps because of this – it
does not attract his attention. Eagleton’s recognition of form enables
him to identify it as a key element in the poem’s verbal organization:

It is as though the chain of brief phrases, with its rapid,
cumulative build-up, generates a sense of mounting
excitement... Its grammatical open-endedness suggests that
this copious piling of life-form upon life-form could in principle
go on forever, creating just the sense of exuberance and
prodigality that the verse is after. But that clinching main verb,
not to speak of the beautifully intricate rhyme scheme, is on
hand to assure us that everything is under control... So the
intellect is not just in Byzantium, to be encountered on
disembarking, but is already unobtrusively at work in the
present. (p.85)

Buckley’s account of the progress of the poem, by comparison, fails to
detect the significance, the production of meaning, of this mastery of
form:

The poetry here is about flux, but it presents that flux as a sort
of ceremony. For the tone rises again after ‘song’, and the next
three lines flow to a climax, and ebb to the lingering regret of

‘Whatever is begotten, born, and dies’. (pp. 199-200)

The metaphor of “a sort of ceremony” is an attempt to account for the
productivity and the control that Eagleton finds in Yeats’ use of form.
Buckley concludes:

Throughout the poem’s first six lines, it is ‘sensual music’ that
predominates. It is the early supremacy of that music which
establishes the dialectical movement and brings a note of
celebration and of generalization out of the very personal
drama which has been so immediately presented; for Yeats has
now to espouse and enact a much fuller sense of ‘intellect’ than he has so far shown. The rest of the poem is devoted to this.
(p.200)

For Eagleton the “dialectical movement” is “unobtrusively at work” in the relationship between form and content whereas Buckley can only see it in terms of “the early supremacy” which Yeats affords ‘that sensual music’ in order set it against the “much fuller sense of ‘intellect’” which is to come.

At the heart of the poem for Buckley is “the very personal drama which has been so immediately presented” and this tends to displace or at least obscure the extent to which its meanings are a product of “material organizations” (Williams, 1977, p.162) of language. Where Eagleton looks for system in the language – “... ‘the young in one another’s arms’ and ‘birds in the trees’ are deliberately bare and notational. It is as though Yeats is just touching them in on his poetic canvas” (p.85) – Buckley focuses on the notional ‘speaker’ – “The young/in one another’s arms, birds in the trees’ is higher in pitch than the opening words, and more expansive in its movement” (p.199).

Buckley is searching for meaning in the language, but is not on sure ground in his attempt to locate it because he finds its origin in a speaker who is, in a sense, outside it. Eagleton, by comparison, finds that this sense of “pitch” is founded in language: “... the chain of brief phrases [which] generates a sense of mounting excitement,” and the “grammatical open-endedness” which produces a “sense of exuberance and prodigality” out of what at one level is “bare and notational”.

Yet it might be argued that Eagleton misses Buckley’s sense of language as motivated by the author’s strong feeling: “It is the flux of physical passion which the first stanza celebrates ...” writes Buckley (p.199). Eagleton’s characterization of Yeats’s imagery as “tender and mutedly sensuous” (p. 84) is comparatively pallid.

In 1968 Buckley does not have access to the perspective on the production of meaning which becomes available as

... critical attention comes to focus not on a thematic content that the work aesthetically presents but on the conditions of
signification, the different sorts of structures and processes involved in the production of meaning. (Culler, 1982, p.20)

As a comparison of Eagleton’s interpretation and Buckley’s indicates, “Languages and structures, rather than authorial self or consciousness, become the major source of explanation” (p.21). And these ideas have more general application:

For Derrida ... instead of thinking of life as something to which signs and texts are added to represent it, we should conceive of life itself as suffused with signs, made what it is by processes of signification. Writings may claim that reality is prior to signification, but in fact they show that in a famous phrase of Derrida’s, ‘Il n’y a pas de hors-texte’ – ‘There is no ‘outside-of-text’: when you think you are getting outside signs and text, to ‘reality’ itself, what you find is more text, more signs, chains of supplements. (Culler, 1997, p.12)

Yeats’ ‘presence’ in the poem then, in which Buckley is so invested, “turns out to be a particular kind of absence, still requiring mediations and supplements” (p.12). It is not, however, as if he is not in a sense everywhere in the poem, as Eagleton suggests, exploring and exploiting the potential for making meaning of “processes of signification”.

2) The Material Basis of Meaning

“A literary work ... engages readers to consider the interrelation between form and content.” (Jonathan Culler, 1997, p.33)

The strongest writing in Laps deals with Queenie swimming in the ocean, re-establishing a relationship with it. The story’s environmental significance is to be discovered in this relationship, which begins:

After seven years, Queenie Cookson began to swim seriously again. Each morning she drove to City Beach and swam up and down between the groynes. Out behind garlands of surfers and waist-deep swimmers, she scored the swells with her strokes. It hurt: she felt as though she was etching herself on the sea.
The rather fanciful floral image of “garlands of surfers and waist-deep swimmers” contrasts with the painful intensity of effort registered in “she scored the swells with her strokes”. She is out to make her mark; her sense of “etching herself on the sea” indicates a kind of infliction, as well as release, in this striving in the face of the impersonal ocean.

Winton here ambitiously stretches the resources of language. “It hurts” focuses an aspect of meaning of “scored” and in turn makes available the idea of the sharp difficulty involved in Queenie’s “etching herself” through the strenuous use of her own body. The difficulty for students, though, is that in order to grasp this imagery they need access to a somewhat unfamiliar edge to “scored”. They can readily understand a football ‘score’, but they need to be led to think through how this means to make a mark – and not without some pain perhaps. Mark, as in to ‘take a mark’ – is another (Australian rules) football term which might illustrate the point. By comparison with this profitable kind of complication Winton’s control of the vernacular – words that are colorfully familiar – is, so it seems, easy:

Sometimes Dot paddled out on her board and Cleve watched her hassling for waves with men twice her size. It made him laugh to see her cut a long bottom turn; she was dwarfed by the most puny wave. She put the men to shame zigging and zagging under the churning weight of water.

Dot is “hassling” and then – in her element though ”dwarfed” – “zigging and zagging”. Winton conveys with characteristic deftness the dynamism and scale of the sea – “the churning weight of water” which is in effect a major proponent in the story. “Weight” is apposite, of course, in sound to “water”, locking the words into place, but the touchstone of meaning here is “churning” with its suggestions of force and unpredictability. Such attentive reading aims, at least in the first instance, at an appreciative kind of analysis. It attempts to “establish a fitting relationship with the actual medium” of language by “consider[ing] the interrelation between form and content” (Culler, 1997, p. 33).

Is this endeavor seen as critical, however, in the classroom? Patterson (2008) finds that a “a significant shift” of secondary English can be understood in terms of an opposition of “traditions”:
There seem strong grounds for arguing that secondary English has undergone a significant shift over the past four decades, from a ‘study of Culture’ in the Arnoldian–Leavisite tradition to ‘cultural studies’ in the Williams–Eagleton tradition. These two traditions appear to be on opposing sides in the battle for the minds and hearts of the English student. Each brings into sharp relief the type of person that English teachers would like their students to become: on the one hand, a cultured individual, with a heightened appreciation of great literature, capable of articulating the contribution of that literary heritage to the development of civil society; and on the other hand, the sensitive, reflective citizen capable of creatively expressing his or her own experiences in the context of textual understandings, who also is able to deconstruct the role of culture in the creation of meaning within modern societies. (Patterson, 2008, p.311)

The terms of this opposition imply a pejorative view of that tendency to dwell on the aesthetic character of texts which could produce a “heightened appreciation” of them. Rather, students are to gain perspective on their “own experiences” – and hence be capable of “creatively expressing” them – by means of “understandings” arrived at via the medium of texts; they are thereby to gain insights into the operations of culture.

Williams and Eagleton are nominated as founding figures in a “tradition” which has the potential to produce “the sensitive, reflective citizen”, but in fact they reflexively engage with the ‘Cultural’ heritage, showing both its strengths and its limitations with respect to their own development as literary critics and critically engaged citizens. Their work shows that an opposition of Culture and cultural studies is inadequate to the extent that it fails to take into account the material basis of key concepts such as ‘aesthetics’, ‘medium’, ‘culture’, ‘creativity’ – and, indeed, ‘language’ and ‘literature’.

I will argue in the course of my thesis that although the curriculum mandates attention to “material organizations” (Williams, 1977, p.162) of language, referring, for example, to “the structures, features and conventions used by authors to construct meaning in a range of literary texts” (VCAA, 2006, p.29), its enactment in practice is
problematic (cf. ACARA, 2012). I inquire into why this might be so.

I had attempted to develop in my students a “heightened appreciation” of Winton’s story as literature in so far as I had persistently directed their attention to “reading practices elicited by literature: the suspension of the demand for immediate intelligibility, reflection on the means of expression, and attention to how meaning is made and pleasure produced” (Culler, 1997, p.41). I had cast doubt on the value of “textual understandings” which were not grounded in the text in this way, only to find my approach hard going for students who were reluctant to abandon methods which allowed them to deal in meanings at a relatively abstract level. They were used to taking a more direct route to the content, as they saw it, of a given text – the abstracted ‘what’ as opposed to the material ‘how’ of meaning.

My approach came as a surprise, welcome or not, to students. It is doubtful, except in so far as he or she has been exposed to a plainly different way of doing things – that “the English student” has any awareness at all of these rival claims on “minds and hearts”, much less a capacity to discern their relative merits. What seems to be at issue is a perceived contest at a theoretical level, which yet has serious practical consequences, between what is painted as a debilitating conservative view – leaving students, at best, as ‘full bottles’ of literary Culture – and a progressive approach which promises to produce, by contrast, enlightened ‘citizens’ who can proactively use meanings drawn from texts to make sense of their world.

Patterson’s formulation, which strives to fairly represent accepted notions of these opposing pressures, suggests that the ‘Williams-Eagleton tradition’ has deserved to displace the ‘Arnoldian–Leavisite’ tradition’ because it promotes a constructively critical stance on the part of the reader in a way that its predecessor did not. It implies that “a cultured individual” is captive to Culture – even though immersion in it might be regarded as no bad thing – in a way that “the sensitive, reflective citizen” is not.

The “individual” who has gained “a heightened appreciation of great literature” is yet a stunted conformist, or so it seems, compared to she who has developed the capacity to “creatively express ... her own experiences in the context of textual understandings”. “The cultured individual”, the mouthpiece of “the contribution of that literary
heritage to the development of civil society”, is something of a fall
guy for those “who also [are] able to deconstruct the role of culture in
the creation of meaning...” Here the ambitions of a discourse of
education seem to be in danger of discounting what literary studies
might have to offer towards realizing them.

It does not follow, according to this account of the “shift” of
“traditions”, that possession of a work of “great literature”, to the
extent that one has gained a “heightened appreciation” of it, confers
personal or cultural competence in the active, democratic sense
characterized by Patterson. But what might enable this competence if
not a grasp of language? What are “textual understandings” as
opposed to “a heightened appreciation” of literature? What could
constitute the one in the absence of the other? And how might such
“understandings” be critical to insights into broader aspects of
culture? What indeed do we mean by ‘culture’? It is necessary to
inform usage of the word with a sense of its historical development:

Culture in all its early uses was a noun of process: the tending
of something, basically crops and animals... From early
sixteenth century the tending of natural growth was extended
to a process of human development... (Williams, 1976, p.87)

Culture as “human development” can then be understood as
involving material processes. Williams notes:

It is especially interesting that in archeology and in cultural
anthropology the reference to culture or a culture is primarily
to material production, while in history and cultural studies the
reference is primarily to signifying or symbolic systems. This
often confuses, but more often conceals the central question of
the relations between ‘material’ and ‘symbolic’ production,
which ... have always to be related rather than contrasted.
(Williams, 1976, p.91)

I have referred to Eagleton’s revision of his earlier views on the
nature and value of close attention to the language – including
“everything that comes under the heading of ‘form’” – of literary
texts. The career of his mentor, Raymond Williams, has been
described thus by his biographer:
Starting from a training in literary studies which was heavily geared to aesthetic assessment, he worked to deepen the practice of textual analysis by historicizing it, and to broaden its scope by including diverse forms of cultural expression beyond the literary (film, television, media). In so doing, he opened the way for the new modes and objects of analysis associated with contemporary cultural studies. (Higgins, 2001, p.3)

“Aesthetic assessment” is taken to be limiting, but that is not to say that aesthetic considerations, as a key element of coming to terms with a text, should be discarded. While Higgins’ summary of Williams’ career would seem to support the notion of an opposition between, on the one hand, literature as hidebound high culture and, on the other, “textual understandings” as offering powerful perspectives on a wider world, it would be misleading to conclude that “aesthetic assessment” was, for Williams, spurious. As Culler notes, aesthetic considerations are inescapably in play in the apprehension of literature:

   A literary work is an aesthetic object because, with other communicative functions initially bracketed or suspended, it engages readers to consider the interrelation between form and content. (Culler, 1997, p.33)

Eagleton, in his earlier phase of reaction against what he saw as the social isolation of literature, took a focus on aesthetics to be the catalyst for this. He puts the case in his highly influential, polemical Literary Theory (1983):

   ... the effect of aesthetics was to suppress these historical differences [in the reception of art]. Art was extricated from the material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it is always caught up, and raised to the status of a solitary fetish. (p.19)

A blinkered preoccupation with aesthetics is seen as pernicious in that it closes down attention to “material practices, social relations and ideological meanings”. Williams’ approach, by contrast, is measured. He does not lose sight of the fact that the real cause of this displacement was not aesthetics but a reaction against a restrictive society. The exclusivity of a focus on aesthetics was symptomatic
rather than causative. In his *Keywords* (1976) he explores the development of the use of the word ‘aesthetic’ which “first appeared in English in the nineteenth century, and was not common before the middle third of the century” (p.31). He concludes:

> It is clear from this history that ‘aesthetic’ ... is a key formation in a group of meanings which at once emphasized and isolated subjective sense activity as the basis of art and beauty as distinct, for example, from social or cultural interpretations. It is an element in the divided modern consciousness of art and society: a reference beyond social use and social valuation which, like one special meaning of culture, is intended to express a human dimension which the dominant version of society appears to exclude. The emphasis is understandable but the isolation can be damaging ... (p.32)

It is not that he rejects “subjective sense activity” per se; it is of course integral to response. Rather, he does not want to see it divorced from “social or cultural interpretations”. That a focus on aesthetics should emerge as a reaction against the limitations of “the dominant version of society” is “understandable”; the issue is how art and society might be reconciled. The problem is not aesthetics but their “isolation”.

Williams goes on to argue in *Marxism and Literature* (1977), a summation of his thinking which is as rewarding as it is densely written: “... we have to reject ‘the aesthetic’ both as a separate abstract dimension and as a separate abstract function” (p.156). Yet he concludes that the materiality, the physicality, of language and form is vital to the reader’s motivating experiences of how literature can yield meaning and pleasure:

> ... to enter any part of [the specific and highly varied history of art], in an active way, we have to learn to understand the specific elements – conventions and notations – which are the material keys to intentions and response, and more generally, the specific elements which socially and historically determine and signify aesthetic and other situations. (Williams 1977, p.157)

Crucial to Williams’ argument is the social production of these “specific elements”. His analysis would seem apposite to the
dichotomy of passive immersion in Culture (though it confers “a heightened appreciation of great literature”) and active use of “textual understandings” in so far as he finds that “The central error of expressivist theory [as distinct from formalist] ... is the failure to acknowledge the fact that meaning is always produced; it is never simply expressed” (p.166). Reading cannot be, given this distinction, simply passive reception of a “literary heritage”. Yet the production of “textual understandings” necessarily involves – if the phrase is to acquire meaning – a heightened, aesthetic sense of language. This in turn involves a grasp of form.

The creation of meaning in writing may use words in novel, inventive, individual ways but it is always contingent on them as a social resource. In a sense we can’t comprehensively understand what is expressed if we can't grasp how it is produced, and it is on this basis – a sense of how the social resource of language is being inventively turned to advantage – that “social or cultural interpretations” come into play. Williams’ metaphor of “material keys” (p.157) suggests the need to find a way into the text by focusing narrowly on the character of language that is available on the page – to dwell on it as an entity in itself with a particular provenance, disparate as elements of it might prove to be – rather than to treat it as a transparent window on meaning. Thus, in Winton’s “… she scored the swells with her strokes” the word “scored” might come in for particular attention. It might be remarked, as an aspect of the word’s formal character, that sound alone sharpens its sense by giving it an affinity with “strokes”.

Such prompts are not aimed merely at developing a “heightened appreciation of great literature” in that its language is merely given a special shine, but at giving students a grasp of “material keys.” They are intended, from a broader perspective, to introduce students to a way of reading that they may not have met previously. Students are in this sense discovering “specific elements which socially and historically determine and signify aesthetic and other situations” (Williams 1977, p.157).

In short, the text needs to be treated, in the first instance, with due regard for its language and form rather than merely as grist to the mill of what is seen as some larger ideological issue. The attempt to press it into service as instrumental in the attempt “to deconstruct the role of culture in the creation of meaning within modern
societies” (Patterson, 2008, p.311) shuts down meaning in so far as it blinds the student reader to its sources. If a literary work specifically “engages readers to consider the interrelation between form and content”, and “theory has [in this sense] highlighted the literariness of texts of all sorts” (Culler, 1997, p.33), then questions of language and form do not belong in an aestheticized, esoteric sphere, but are vital to the production of meaning more generally (cf. Eagleton, 2007). They may be seen, when made explicit in dealing with a literary work, to be applicable to the textual forms and content that students engage with outside school.

Reading is necessarily attentive too to “intentions and response” in that “language is not a pure medium... It is a socially shared and reciprocal activity” (Williams, 1977, p.166). Given this conception of language as social, it follows that “always active and inherent” (p.167) in reading is the development of a relationship:

Thus to address an account to another is, explicitly or potentially, as in any act of expression, to evoke or propose a relationship. It is also, through this, to evoke or propose an active relationship to the experience being expressed ... (p.166)

And the “experience” is “expressed” through words on the page. Peter Abbs contends that, as discussed in Chapter 1:

... analytical attention with an extractable content has made irrelevant the demanding act of first engaging with the art as art... We need to re-establish a fitting relationship with the actual medium we are studying... (Abbs, 1989, pp. 68-69)

Williams queries the use of the term “medium” (“language is not a pure medium ...”) finding that “In [an] influential kind of technological determinism (for example, in McLuhan) the ‘medium’ is (metaphysically) the master” (William, 1977, p.159). Although ‘medium’, especially from its use in the visual arts, came to mean “the specific material with which a particular kind of artist worked”, and hence “to understand this ‘medium’ was obviously a condition of professional skill and practice,” the convenient shorthand of the concept tended to blindside the reader:

... a familiar process of reification occurred, reinforced by the influence of formalism. The properties of ‘the medium’ were
abstracted as if they defined the practice, rather than being its means. This interpretation then suppressed the full sense of practice, which has always to be defined as work on a material for a specific purpose within certain necessary social conditions. (pp. 159-160)

The opposition of “textual understandings” and “a heightened appreciation” of literature “suppress[es] the full sense of practice”. Although ‘cultural studies’, as a reaction against the idealization and reservation of literature, endeavors to reconcile literary texts and society, its focus on content at the expense of form tends, paradoxically, to perpetuate an abstracted view of literature.

The limitations of its perspective might plausibly be understood in terms of Williams’ explanation of the “isolation” of the aesthetic. Just as “[aesthetic], like one special meaning of culture, is intended to express a human dimension which the dominant version of society appears to exclude”, so ‘culture’, in a limited though superficially powerful sense, may be “…more readily and more confidently asserted ... by association with the ‘life of the spirit’ or ‘our general humanity’” (p.161).

To discard a “heightened appreciation” of language along with the idealization and corresponding restriction of the category of “great” literature is to tip the baby out with the bathwater. It is to entertain an alternative kind of idealization and restriction, albeit posed in more inclusive terms, because of a failure to recognize the crucial significance of “work on a material...” (Williams, 1977, p.160). Precisely because the materiality of art “goes beyond ... our ordinary experience of objects” (Williams, 1977, p.162) is all the more reason for being attentive to it.

It should be clear enough, after all, that form is integral to art. As Williams points out: “...no artist could dispense with his working skills”, and, just as “Musicians remained involved with the material performance and material notation of instruments which were the products of conscious and prolonged manual skills”, so “Writers, in ways which we must examine and distinguish, handled material notations on paper” (p.162).

Williams applies the formal analysis associated with literary criticism to broader forms of cultural expression. His observations regarding
visual media, for example, remain pertinent more than forty years later:

It can be reasonably argued that the televisual impression of ‘seeing the events for oneself’ is at times and perhaps always deceptive. It matters very much, for example, in the visual reporting of a civil disturbance, whether ‘the camera’ is looking over the heads of the police being stoned or over the heads of the demonstrators being tear-gassed. (Williams, 1974 / 2001, p.182)

‘Cultural studies’, in opposition to ‘Culture’, seeks a comprehensive grasp of “the role of culture in the creation of meaning within modern societies”; it is interested in the formation of “the sensitive, reflective citizen” (Patterson, 2008, p.311). This is not so much – as Williams finds applies to Culture – a context in which art is seen as a Romantic protest against “degraded forms of commodity production” (p.162); rather, ‘cultural studies’ is concerned with what are seen as larger meanings as opposed to the preciousness of a focus on the textual attributes of ‘great’ literature.

‘Cultural studies’ seems to assume, as the younger and iconoclastic Eagleton put it, that: “[Close reading] implies a limiting as well as a focusing of concern” (Eagleton, 1983, p.38). Yet without such reading, as Eagleton comes to recognize, “the full sense of practice” slips out of sight. In rejecting ‘close reading’, along with ‘Culture’, ‘cultural studies’ puts itself at a further remove from the materiality of the text.

This recognition necessarily involves “heightened appreciation” of language, understood as “relatively durable material organizations”. It is necessary too, in focusing on the materiality of the text, to be wary of loose, abstracted references to ‘creativity’:

Given the large elements of simple ideological and hegemonic reproduction in most of the written and visual arts, a description of everything of this kind as ‘creative’ can be confusing and at times seriously misleading. Moreover, to the extent that ‘creative’ becomes a cant word, it becomes difficult to think clearly about the emphasis which the word was intended to establish: on human making and innovation. (Williams, 1976, p.84)
If ‘creative’ is intended to refer to “human making”, then it necessarily involves work with materials. As the jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie explains in relation to his ‘medium’ of music:

For a guy’s musical development, the same rule applies in jazz as in any other field; you collect facts, and study ... you take a riff that Roy Eldridge played, and you play that riff ... and you figure the alternatives. You say, “Ah, you could also go here instead of going there.” And when you get that far, finally you’ll come up with something different. But it’s the same music. It’s just progressing all the time. (Ward and Burns, 2000, p. 410)

The jazz musician’s focus on the nature and potential of the musical materials at his or her disposal is an apt example of “human making and innovation”. There is a tendency, because words are assumed to be native to students in a way that the esoteric forms of jazz are not, and because of the impulse to romanticize ‘creativity’, to overlook or neglect the need for this kind of attention to the language of literature.

3) ‘Literary’ Language and ‘Life’

“Signification, the social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs, ... is indeed, literally, a means of production ... “(Raymond Williams, 1977, p.38)

Williams, regarded as the founder of ‘cultural studies’, rejects an aestheticized isolation of literature from society, yet for him, given that his focus is on the materiality of meaning making as distinct from a relatively abstract play of ideas, sensitivity to form remains vital. It is necessary to constantly keep in mind that the grounds of the reader’s relationship with the text are material words.

The study of literature as ‘Culture’ tended to lose sight of this fact, or more accurately did not grasp its full significance in that, in failing to grasp the character of the ‘medium’, it would unaccountably confound words with ‘reality’:

Any unit of expression can be shown, by analysis, to depend on the formal signs which are words and not persons or things,
and on their formal arrangement. ‘Natural’ expression of ‘reality’ or ‘experience’ can be convincingly shown to be a myth, occluding this real and demonstrable activity. (Williams, 1977, p.167)

Although the study of ‘great’ literature, or what was regarded as worthy of the name, would subject to strenuous scrutiny a given writer’s means of expression in order to ascertain its expressive qualities, its perspective on the constructed nature of literature was problematic. It tended to lose sight of, or fail to realize, the materiality of the text given its focus on the ‘reality’ or ‘life’ that it was understood to convey, and because of the lingering Romantic motivation to keep art “exempt from, exceptional to, what work had been made to mean” (Williams, 1977, p.161).

The study of ‘Culture’ did not adequately distinguish between the “embodying [of] many of the most intense and most significant forms of human experience” and “specific objectifications, in relatively durable material organizations” (Williams, 1977, p.162). The notion of “embodying” – meaning to give tangible form to experience – was problematic in that it would tend to take form for granted as means to an end rather than reflect on it as a ‘sine qua non’ in the production of ‘experience’ in literature. As Williams perceives. “The properties of ‘the medium’ were abstracted as if they defined the practice, rather than being its means” (Williams, 1977, pp.159-160)

Vincent Buckley’s criticism is put in context by his colleague and friend, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, another famous Australian poet and critic, whom I remember too as an inspirational teacher:

Buckley’s third volume of criticism was Poetry and the Sacred (1968). In the essays which flock together there, the poet-critic addressed writers in whom the romantic impulse drives language toward mystery or transcendence. Of the critics in Australia whom John Docker characterised (negatively) as ‘metaphysical’, Buckley was perhaps the most romantic. Indeed, as Australian Leavisism split, many of its company veering into Marxism, he emerged as leader of the other party, standing out in his final decade as scorning ‘theory’. He sought to retain ‘the sacred’ as a living concept, even as his relation to formal religion diffused. (Wallace-Crabbe, Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol. 17, 2007)
To what extent or in what manner can language be “[driven] toward mystery or transcendence”? Such criticism tended persuasively to distract from a focus on the “formal arrangement” of words as an entity in its own right; the text as formal representation was in itself an independent ‘reality’ which, although it might inform ‘life’ or ‘mystery’ (a contradiction in terms?) or even ‘the sacred’, needed to be treated as distinct:

... whatever else it may be, literature is the process and the result of formal composition within the social and formal properties of a language. The effective suppression of this process and its circumstances, which is achieved by shifting the concept to an undifferentiated equivalence with ‘immediate living experience’ ... is an extraordinary ideological feat. (Williams, 1977, p.46)

The “feat” is achieved by the “suppression” or displacement of the text as a material entity in this formal sense by a focus on it as a communication of what is taken to be ‘life’ or, perhaps, ‘transcendence’; and inherent in this concept of reading as an ‘experience’ is a concealed ideology. (Williams’ unspoken reference here is to Leavis). Yet the text does not disappear from view; rather, elements of its status as a construction are summoned to support the perspective which is adduced. Wallace-Crabbe’s own critical perspective is not free of what to a student must look like the juggling of ‘language’ and ‘life’:

Every poet searches for poise in which ‘language’ and ‘life’ are inseparable, in which the process of perception and what is perceived are in harmony as they so seldom are from day to day. And this, finally, is how the greatest are distinguished: their weaving is such that raw experience and conscious art have become warp and woof of the one seamless robe. We cannot separate their attitudes to life from the shape and texture of their poems. (Wallace-Crabbe, 1979, p.71)

This is impressive and tantalizing: the poet keeps the balls of ‘language’ and ‘life’ in the air in so far as they are “in harmony”. The student may think that he can see how the critical trick is performed, yet its material basis remains something of a mystery. “The process of perception” is surely, in effect, “what is perceived”; to separate
them out in this way is misleading. Wallace-Crabbe concludes: “We cannot separate their attitudes to life from the shape and texture of their poems,” but he does not clarify why the attempt to do so might be ill conceived.

“Raw experience”, whatever that may be – and according to Derrida (1967, 1976) it is an infinite regress – is beside the point, since all the reader has available to her is “art”. To entertain a sense of it as “conscious” will, as in Buckley’s account of Yeats’ spiritual progression in Sailing to Byzantium, prove problematic to the extent that it is taken as suggesting that the poem is to be read in terms of “authorial self or consciousness” at the expense of “languages and structures.”

Wallace-Crabbe notes that poets may aim to achieve “verbal texture – significantly, a literary term derived from weaving – with a view to arriving at artistic autonomy through the richness of their crafting” (p.2). This attention to “texture” is characteristic not only of “a succession of poets” from Hopkins but may be discovered also in the work of poets such as Philip Larkin or Judith Wright which at first sight does not display such “richness” of “crafting”. In these cases too, poets depend on the reader’s awareness of how “warp and woof” register ‘life’.

In a piece of criticism entitled ‘Kenneth Sessor and the Powers of Language’, Wallace-Crabbe describes Sessor’s early poetry as that of a “verbal dandy” (Wallace-Crabbe, 1977, p.72). Although its magic with words is illusory because it is largely divorced from ‘life’,

The poet who can write in one of his earliest pieces,

Now the tiles drip scarlet-wet,
Swim like birds’ paving-stones, and sunlight strikes
Their watery mirrors with a moister rivulet,
Acid and cold.

(“Winter Dawn”)

is already making of his diction a fine and flexible instrument which will be capable of transforming all manner of material into poetry. He is also tightening his grasp on the things he knows to be real, so that he may have some means of evaluating the ephemeral spectres of life. In Sessor’s later
poetry, one often feels that nothing but Slessor’s verbal precision could salvage anything from the verbal flux. (Wallace-Crabbe, 1979, pp.72-73)

The “diction” of the “piece” is seen as evidence of the “making” of an “instrument” which will prove its mettle. But does this metaphor do justice to the interaction of ‘language’ and ‘life’? In “transforming all manner of material into poetry”, language continuously reinvents itself: it is not simply ‘instrumental’ in a functional sense. Wallace-Crabbe finds that it is only when Slessor has “gained a measure of experience”, on which these verbal powers can be brought to bear, that he truly becomes a poet: the one would not do without the other. The height of his achievement is *Five Bells*, which “places him among Australia’s foremost poets” (Haskell, 2002):

> For the poem is far more than an elegy for a dead friend: it is an intensely dramatic meditation in which Slessor gathers up all his previous suggestions about time and flux and the value of life in a godless universe. (Wallace-Crabbe, 1979, p.81)

Form is his means of finding rich expression for these “suggestions”. Wallace-Crabbe discerns that

> The form is musical, organic, even to some extent cyclic ... ‘Five Bells’ demonstrates the possibilities of this kind of form for metaphysical meditation (p.81).

Words like “musical” and “organic” are pointers but, at this generalizing level, lack explanatory force. Wallace-Crabbe goes on to explore the power of the poem’s imagery: “The poem opens with bells, darkness and water, and these recur again and again with further accumulations of meaning as the elegy progresses” (p.81). He gives examples of these “accumulations of meaning”, thus setting a kind of explanatory template on the poem. He provides a valuable sense of structure, which turns on a key phrase:

> It is the paradox of ‘a flood that does not flow’ which stands at the heart of ‘Five Bells’. The structure is both progressive and cyclic; Joe both is and is not recalled from oblivion ... (p.81)

He concludes: “‘Five Bells’ is the final triumph of Slessor’s powers of language. He has at last made his world fully articulate ...” (p.82). Or
has he, rather, by means of language, created that world? Language is not instrumental but constitutive. The poem is in this sense “the final triumph of Sessor’s powers of language.” For all the acuteness of Wallace-Crabbe’s commentary, this lack of clarity as to the character of literary language and its relation to ‘life’ leaves the student reader on uncertain ground. The accomplished critic, Wallace-Crabbe, gestures at the possibility that words have the power to say more than might on the face of it be ascribed to the poet’s sense of purpose, but at the same time diverts attention from them:

Towards the end, empathy with Joe has become so complete that the poet’s own fate comes to be the real concern of the poetry:

I felt the wet push its black thumb-balls in,  
The night you died, I felt your eardrums crack,  
And the short agony, the longer dream,  
The nothing that was neither long nor short;  
But I was bound, and could not go that way,  
But I was blind and could not feel your hand.  
If I could find an answer, could only find  
Your meaning, or could say why you were here  
Who now are gone, what purpose gave you breath  
Or seized it back, might I not hear your voice?

But only faint, distant sounds are heard, and the poem ends with the cold ring of bells... (Wallace-Crabbe, 1979, pp. 81-82)

We feel the terror and the pity of this extraordinary poetry flooding into the mind in the wake of the shock of irrevocable sudden death. What is the relationship, though, between words and this apprehension? The reader’s experience depends on the acuteness with which she responds to what might be described as physical particulars:

I felt the wet push its black thumb-balls in,  
The night you died, I felt your eardrums crack

Yet they are in fact physical only in that they are words, images which have the power, given a responsive reader, to make meaning. At one level they are carefully calculated, so that, for example, “black rhymes with “crack”. The mind that is dramatized empathizes so
convincingly with the terrible experience of drowning that now the poetry can turn to balanced understatement – “And the short agony, the longer dream” – for its power of suggestion.

And then the mind finds itself – forced logically to contemplate the illogic of “The nothing that was neither long nor short” – butting against the barrier imposed by a double “but”, compounding puzzlement and pathos:

But I was bound, and could not go that way,
But I was blind and could not feel your hand.

“If I could find an answer ...” precipitates a fruitless search for ultimate meaning while the fact of cold vacancy remains. Yet there is more, given that it is deeply empathetic, to the poetry’s concerns than “the poet’s own fate.” It is just that, for all his empathy, he is the one left behind.

Wallace-Crabbe distinguishes between the poet and the poetry, but tends to foreclose its productivity. Attention to “languages and structures” is constrained or blinkered by the explanation which is apparently on offer from “the attitudes to life” of the “authorial self or consciousness.” Again, the perceived relationship between ‘language’ and ‘life’ creates something of an illusion as to its material basis, or at least diverts the mind from reflection on its sources.

In retrospect, then, I can better understand why, although I found that the criticism of teachers such as Buckley and Wallace-Crabbe invested literature with magnificent human scope – with masterful perspectives and telling attention to detail – its grounds could paradoxically seem uncertain. The student needs to become aware, for a start, of how the technical accomplishment of a given work is critical to its meaning. Wallace-Crabbe comments, for example, on Thomas Hardy’s ‘The Voice’, an elegy for the poet’s wife:

The sense of the lost woman calling, calling, is a strongly figurative way of depicting memory in action; and there is that strange run-on of syntax, trying to get things right:

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,
Saying that now you are not as you were
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,
But as at first, when our day was fair.

One is aware of the mind, groping after the exact thing that is being remembered, the exact nature of the relationship that is being reached back to. (Wallace-Crabbe, 1979, pp. 12-13)

This is a highly sensitive, sympathetic reading, but what will almost certainly not be clear to the student is the kind of expertise needed to take such risks with syntax and line structure. The poetry may dramatize a “mind groping”, but at the same time it is under extraordinarily deft control; it can only appear to throw caution to the winds – as might a jazz performance – because it knows how to pull off the trick. Comparison with the first stanza of ‘The Evening Darkens Over’, by Hardy’s contemporary, Robert Bridges, illustrates its inventiveness:

The evening darkens over
After a day so bright
The windcapped waves discover
That wild will be the night.
There’s sound of distant thunder.

The technical skill of this verse is evident, as is the relative conventionality of its allusiveness beside Hardy’s. Yet the apparent directness and intimacy of the latter’s address is precisely calculated. In other words, the representation is not ‘real’ in the sense in which a student is likely to take it, given cues such as “trying to get things right” or “groping after”. This understanding matters because, without a focus, first and foremost, on what the language is up to, the student may read the poem as somehow muddled and maudlin.

Even if it juggles a double vision though, and hence prompts some confusion in students, literary ‘Culture’ or humanism engages with the language of the text as a “tangible presence” (Eagleton, 2013, p.149) in a way that a view of literature as open to ‘deconstruction’ cannot, as Williams sees it, understand. He finds that the vacuum left by the disposal of the “myth” of “natural” expression” was filled by

... the production (itself not scrutinized) of a new myth, based on the following assumptions: that all ‘signs’ are arbitrary; that the ‘system of signs’ is determined by its formal internal relations; that ‘expression’ is not only not ‘natural’ but is a form
of ‘codification’; and that the appropriate response to ‘codification’ is ‘decipherment’, ‘deconstruction’. (Williams, 1977, pp. 167-168)

This ‘formalism’ potentially leaves students worse off because they have not been led to appreciate the material basis of ‘coded’ concepts.

What was needed was the motivation of formalist perspectives by the passion of a humanist or idealist engagement with the text, or, conversely, the informing of this engagement with an attention to form which could give it both a surer sense of its ground and a clarity of focus. It was one thing to hold “the material keys to intentions and response” (Williams, 1977, p.157) and another to use them. Williams provides direction:

Signification, the social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs, ... is indeed, literally, a means of production... It is not, as formalism would make it, and as the idealist theory of expression had from the beginning assumed, an operation of and within ‘consciousness’, which then becomes a state or a process separated, a priori, from social material activity. It is, on the contrary, at once a distinctive material process – the making of signs – and, in the central quality of its distinctiveness as practical consciousness, is involved from the beginning in all other human social and material activity. (Williams, 1977, p.38)

We find the ‘separation’ of a kind of high flown gesturing at meaning and its actual production – which is “social material activity” – in student writing such as Sam’s (the student referred to in Chapter 1 whose ‘response’ to Ransom was found to be “all show and no substance” yet was awarded a high grade):

Granting Achilles’ wish to break free from his role as the hero, Malouf portrays him in many “voices”, as with all characters in Ransom. The true villain in Ransom is not Achilles, it is human emotion, so is the hero – human emotion.

Sam seems to be alluding to the idea that Malouf endows Achilles, an inarticulate male character, with powers of expression, but instead of focusing on an example of how this works in practice, he resorts to
empty generalities. He does not appreciate the need to ground ideas in the detail of language rather than to broaden his commentary. In Williams’ terms he has not been prompted to pursue “signification” as “a means of production”. He has learned that he should ‘play the game’ by indicating that the novel has substance, but, rather than endeavor to realize it, he in effect, for all his large claims that it exists, withdraws from it:

Malouf intricately explores the lives of central characters, but through his visceral and vivid descriptions, we craft his image of all men, women and children within Troy ... Even Hecuba’s heroic courage ... symbolizes man’s diversity in courage and their views and values.

The novel is seen here, at an abstracted level, as an unwieldy “system of signs”; the commentary is a kind of labeling – idealist here (“Hecuba’s heroic courage”) and formalist there (“through his visceral and vivid descriptions”). Sam is floundering: he cites such “descriptions” but gives no sense of them. The terms which he applies to the novel are effectively jargon.

Why then is Sam’s essay awarded high marks? According to the criteria applied to their ‘responses’ students are required to demonstrate, among other things, ‘Complex discussion and critical analysis of the ways in which the author constructs meaning and expresses or implies a point of view and values’ (VCAA, 2006, p. 22). This ideal is couched in highly formalist terms; it is as if Wallace-Crabbe’s “process of perception”, which involves, in Williams’ terms, “at once a distinctive material process” and “practical consciousness” (Williams, 1977, p.38) in writer and sympathetic reader has been superseded, or rather bypassed, by ‘critical theory’. “The central question of the relations between ‘material’ and ‘symbolic’ production, which ... have always to be related rather than contrasted” (Williams, 1976, p.91) has not been addressed.

For Sam the language of the text is not so much productive of meaning as indicative, like a code, and “the appropriate response is decipherment”. Any sense of “ways in which the author constructs meaning” (significantly, this does not read ‘ways in which the author uses language to construct meaning’) has been overridden by the imperative to locate “a point of view and values”. Or the former is understood in terms of the latter. He reads it as a string of large,
incoherent ideas because he has not learned how to approach its language; he has not discovered what its materiality, its status as “formal composition within the social and formal properties of a language”, has to offer, and he is in this sense effectively alienated from it. Williams searches for the roots of such alienation:

The social history of philology and of comparative linguistics, based so largely in residual or in colonizing formations, prepared the way for this alienation, and ironically, naturalized it. Every expression, every utterance, is within its procedures an ‘alien’ fact. The formal quality of words as ‘signs’, which was correctly perceived, was rendered as ‘arbitrary’ by a privileged withdrawal from the lived and living relationships which, within any native language (the languages of real societies, to which all men belong) make all formal meanings significant and substantial, in a world of reciprocal reference which moves, as it must, beyond the signs. (Williams 1977, p.168)

There is then a great difference between, on the one hand, a word understood as a sign that is endowed with meaning by virtue of its relationship with other signs, but is in itself ‘arbitrary’, and, on the other, a word grasped as a material entity productive of – and in that sense alive with – meaning. Whereas Buckley reads Sailing to Byzantium as expressive of its author in a way which, in straining after meaning, tends to displace the power of its language, the formalist approach which is taken to be the alternative devalues ‘living’ language. Sam does not, as Eagleton puts it, “grasp words as precious in themselves” (Eagleton, 2007, p.69).

The problem with ‘Culture’ was not, in retrospect, the perceived narrowness of a focus on the acquisition of “a heightened appreciation” of literature, but rather a lack of clarity in regard to questions of language and form which were the grounds of this “appreciation”. ‘Cultural studies’ sees itself as – in opposition to ‘Culture’ – offering students access to a breadth of ‘textual understandings’, but this ambition is motivated by a misdiagnosis of the problem. “Understandings” could only be generated on the basis of sensitivity to the language of the text.

For Williams the concept of the arbitrariness of the sign is “correctly perceived”, but it does not take account of the character of the word
in its social context. It has proved extraordinarily useful, but at the same time it is crucially limited:

‘Sign’, from Latin signum, a mark or token, is intrinsically a concept based on a distinction between ‘word’ and ‘thing’ which repeats the Platonic interposition of ‘form’, ‘essence’, or ‘idea’, but now in accessible linguistic terms… Given this starting point, important investigations of the activity of language (but not of language as an activity) could be undertaken … (Williams 1977, p.23)

The distinction is between what language seems to achieve by particular means or strategies and how it works as an entity in itself. The question of the relationship between language and ‘reality’ was, as indicated earlier, at the heart of my students’ difficulties, and it is evident in Sam’s ‘response’ to Ransom: dealing in abstracted “‘form’, ‘essence’, or ‘idea’”, he operates at a remove from the material language of the text, believing that his task is to draw from it large lessons about ‘life’: “The true villain … is human emotion, so is the hero ….” Although this platitude may be drawn at a generalising level from “investigations of the activity of language” it does not understand “language as an activity”. It is so general, so removed from the text, as to be fatuous. A grasp of the productive, contingent nature of a fitting relationship between reader and text would reveal its inadequacy.

4) ‘The Material Keys of Intentions and Response’

“[For Williams] language enables even as it tends to determine the possibility of human thought and subjectivity.” (Higgins, 2001, p. 174)

Problematic implications for literary education of the concept of the arbitrariness of the sign – and hence of readings as multiple and constructed – are manifested in student work that, in attempting to decode a literary text in terms of ideology, is not anchored in attentiveness to its language. Patterson finds that in Australia:

[English] is promulgated through a high-school teaching corps that has been trained in a strong tradition of pastoral guidance and self-reflective practice and through the apparatus of curriculum, syllabi, texts and assessment practices. An
important part of that apparatus in Australia is the Year 12 English examination. These documents afford an opportunity to explore the English teacher–pupil relationship through the comments of examiners on English examination papers written by final-year high school pupils. Each year, various Australian education authorities in states where public examinations are administered mainly for the purposes of ranking students for tertiary entrance selection release reports from the examiners. These reports contain a great deal of commentary by examiners who are, in the main, senior teachers of English and literature. (2008, p. 314)

What might “a strong tradition of pastoral guidance and self-reflective practice” mean in practice? Sam is concerned to achieve high marks in the Victorian Certificate of Education English examination. Sample essays printed as exemplars on examiners’ reports indicate that he has grounds for his ‘modus operandi’ in that students are rewarded for resorting to crude use of social and historical concepts as distinct from attempting to convey the character of their reading experience with specific reference to the language of the given text.

The 2013 report (VCAA, 2014, pp. 3-4), for example, commends the ‘response’ of a student who finds that in Wuthering Heights Heathcliff is “a Byronic hero whose tyrannical actions are seen as the result of an all-consuming love that has been bastardized by the influence of the social mechanisms of his day.” The character’s behavior is down to gross “social mechanisms” and the student proceeds to discuss the novel as if it were a demonstration of the power of these “mechanisms”. Meanwhile the power of its language per se is neglected: Heathcliff’s “horrendous actions, though he finally achieves peace in his end” are “indicative of his status of a Byronic hero, a concept that the people of Bronte’s day would have known and understood ...” Significantly, the word “indicative” gets a work out:

This is indicative of Bronte’s criticism of the influence of social class, her belief that it is a negative influence that promotes a false loves (sic) powered by shallow values of wealth and status. That these influences are the catalyst for Heathcliff’s defection from the Heights is indicative of his motivation, which inevitably becomes his obsession; to seek vengeance on that which took Catherine from him; social class and those who
perpetuated its influence.

This student dresses up (“the catalyst for ... is indicative of”) the second hand idea that Heathcliff wants revenge on those whom he sees as belonging to a privileged class. There is no evidence that the student has made this idea his own in terms of the language of the novel. The semi-colons in the second sentence do not introduce material which might develop it with reference to the text; instead they supplement it with generalities. Yet this kind of writing is taken to be relatively sophisticated (cf. Teese, 2011). It takes no heed of ways in which the novel’s use of imagery regarding Heathcliff is drawn from the natural world:

Tell her what Heathcliff is – an unclaimed creature, without refinement, without cultivation; an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone... Pray, don’t imagine that he conceals depths of benevolence and affection beneath a stern exterior! He’s not a rough diamond – a pearl-containing oyster of a rustic; he’s a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man. (Bronte, 1847, 1979, p. 141)

There is evidently more to Heathcliff’s obduracy than a determination to prosecute class warfare. He is, as “an arid wilderness” or “a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man”, incapable of ‘reclamation’. It is the detail of language and images, even down to punctuation, which counts. But this kind of attention to the text goes missing.

Another student sees A Christmas Carol (VCAA, 2014, pp. 4-5) as evidence that “Dickens intends to convey to the complacent classes of the era the necessity of various traits among society that are vital such as the responsibility to those less fortunate and to employees as well as other necessary lessons such as charity.” In taking the novels or ‘texts’ which they have been required to study as making large claims about society, these ‘responses’ make it painfully obvious that “one cannot raise political or theoretical questions about literary texts without a degree of sensitivity to their language” (Eagleton, 2013, p. ix). More to the point, the raising of such questions substitutes for, or suppresses, sensitivity to language. A novel may be treated, it seems, as an investigation into “social mechanisms” of early nineteenth century society or as a medium of inquiry into the need for social responsibility in Victorian England:

Through Tiny Tim, Dickens also intends to critique the
ideologies expressed by Bentha (sic) and Malthus, popular philosophies (sic) of the time, who believed greatest happiness in the greatest number and that famine and poverty acted as a form of natural intervention to prevent over population. Through Scrooge’s shame upon heaving (sic) his regurgitated words said by the Ghost of Christmas Present in regard to decreasing the ‘surplus population’ and therefore endorsing the notion that the affable upper classes have a responsibility to those less fortunate, through the ‘miser’ Scrooge.

Might this kind of writing be regarded as evidence of “textual understandings”? An historical perspective is useful here: a contrast of present-day examiners’ reports with reports from decades ago enables us to more clearly understand what is at stake. The report on the 1983 English Literature examination (VISE, 1984), which is no doubt interested in students developing “a heightened appreciation of great literature” (Patterson, 2008, p. 311), comments on their ‘responses’:

There is a real difficulty here: candidates must be prepared; they must be thoroughly familiar with the texts they write upon, and must know in advance what they want to talk about. Nevertheless there are kinds of preparation which lead to thoroughly rehearsed, proficient dullness and a kind of denaturing knowledge of the text which has entirely lost touch with the experience of reading it, making discoveries about it, encountering difficulties, and responding to particular moments in the life of the work with delighted recognition (p. 120).

In fact the 2013 examination question or topic seems to require that students treat the novel in this “denaturing” way:

“This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want.”
‘A Christmas Carol contains lessons not only for Scrooge, but for the society of Dickens’s day.’ Discuss.

There is “a real difficulty”, as has been indicated, with the expectation that students should find themselves “responding to particular moments in the life of the work with delighted recognition” since “the life of the work” is by no means as readily accessible as this phrase suggests. Peggy Mares (1988) shows that these older reports were shaped by expressive realist assumptions that were problematic in
their own way.

More than twenty-five years later writing such as that on *Wuthering Heights* or *A Christmas Carol* is clearly removed from “the experience of reading [the novel].” The notion of “a heightened appreciation of great literature” is arguably inadequate not only because it assumes passivity on the part of the reader but also because it glosses the challenges of engaging with a given work; that of “textual understandings”, though, seems in practice to mean dealing with a text in terms of abstractions or second hand concepts. Examiners’ reports reflect the unexamined assumptions of each generation of English teachers.

Patterson’s (2008) finding that the opposition of “traditions” “brings into sharp relief the type of person that English teachers would like their students to become” (p. 311) puts the cart before the horse. The issue is not so much the value of “a cultured individual” compared with “the sensitive, reflective citizen”, but the means by which such ambitions might be realized. It might be assumed that English teachers are interested in developing in their students skills in dealing with language and insights into the rewards that it can offer them, yet it is not at all clear – because these means are subsumed by what are taken to be higher aspirations – how this more fundamental program might be undertaken. If a problem with literature as ‘Culture’ was that its ideological assumptions about ‘life’ tended to obscure the means by which readers might enter into “the life of the work” (VISE, 1984, p. 120), then the ideological ends of literature as “textual understandings” seem in danger, in effect, of withholding the text from students.

The question on *A Christmas Carol* requires students to draw “lessons” from the novel; it does not encourage them “to consider the interrelation between form and content” (Culler, 1997, p. 33). The examiners comment that the exemplary essay or ‘response’ “explores the complexities of ideas” with “broad use of the text to support the ideas presented”; they are looking for what they take to be these “complexities” as distinct from ways in which “the experience of reading” might produce illumination.

What is at stake is how we might conceptualize “the experience of reading”. Eagleton’s (2007) insight: “The question is not how tenaciously you cling to the text, but what you are in search of when you do so” (p. 2) is telling in this context. “Broad use of the text”
means tangential or summary references to it, as in:

Dickens also uses his characters to endorse other lessons that he believed were essential in keeping Christmas ‘well’. Scrooge’s behavior in Stave 1 towards the two portly gentlemen and his rudeness displayed towards his ‘ruddy’ nephew Fred, encapsulates all the attitudes that the misanthropist must reverse in order to be redeemed. Therefore his generous donation to the portly gentlemen in Stave 5 not only act (sic) as proof of his redemption, but also conveys Dickens’ social message of the necessity of charity towards the less fortunate.

The student can only do what seems to be required of him: he seeks to “encapsulate”. He has not been directed and motivated to conceptualize reading the novel in terms of the productivity of its language. He might, for example, have been prompted to reflect on Fred’s perception that Christmas is

... the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. (Dickens, 1843, Stave 1)

The image of “fellow-passengers” who must arrive, no matter what their notions of their worldly status and power, at a common end, is surprising and acute in a context of Christmas merry making. The alternative notion of alienation, of “another race of creatures ...”, gains its sympathetic power when the verb “bound”, which has in effect been withheld in the previous clause, finds its place: “... bound on other journeys”. It conveys confinement as well as motion. There is a “lesson” here, but ‘it don’t mean a thing’ if the reader is oblivious to this verbal construction.

Scrooge can’t help but acknowledge Fred’s use of language, though he deflects its impact by choosing to regard it as empty rhetoric and by putting it in an ironic, worldly light:

“You’re quite a powerful speaker, sir,” he added, turning to his nephew. “I wonder you don’t go into Parliament.”

The brusque movement of the writing here is very different from
Fred’s heartfelt, weighted rhythms. There is no sense, however, in the student’s commentary – “[Scooge’s] rudeness ... encapsulates all the attitudes that the misanthropist must reverse” – that he is alert to the rhythmic variety which is the material basis of the humor, energy and depth of Dickens’ prose. He has not been encouraged to discover its qualities, its ‘life’, by exploring in writing its formal character. It seems that in education the value of this kind of attention to the text has over time dropped out of sight.

Williams foreshadows this neglect by pointing to the ways in which linguistics conceptualized ‘alien’ languages as “‘text’ – the characteristically persistent word in orthodox structural linguistics”. He continues:

Language came to be seen as a fixed, objective, and in these senses ‘given’ system, which had theoretical and practical priority over what were described as ‘utterances’ (later as ‘performance’). Thus the living speech of human beings in their specific social relationships in the world was theoretically reduced to instances and examples of a system which lay beyond them.

The major theoretical expression of this reified understanding of language came in the twentieth century, in the work of Saussure ... (Williams, 1977, p.27)

In his assessment of Williams’ work Higgins finds that with the perspective of time his “reading of Saussure’s fundamental work appears merely tendentious” (Higgins, 2001, p.170). Even so, the tendency that he identifies is evident not simply in students’ writing but in examiners’ expectations. The potential value of theory is one thing and its importation into pedagogy another. The desire to provide students with systems of thought is understandable, but they should not come at the cost of a capacity to engage with language.

In 1983 the examiner identifies “a kind of denaturing knowledge of the text”, but by 2013 the inadequacy of a “reified understanding of language” passes without comment. Indeed, it appears to be actively encouraged. Higgins identifies the value of Williams’ independent thought in this respect:

... Williams differs significantly from one strand of thinking in structuralist and post-structuralist theory. In this profoundly textualist emphasis, the language-system appears to be seen as
entirely constitutive of human subjectivity, a nightmarish view apparent – at least at times – in the writings of a wide range of thinkers ... Against this Williams was scrupulous in assigning a fully dialectical function to language, as a system which at one and the same time enables even as it tends to determine the possibility for the production of human thought and subjectivity. For Williams, the self or subject is never simply an effect of language... (Higgins, 2001, p. 174)

A fundamental element in this “production of human thought and subjectivity” is the physicality of language. In Politics and Letters (1979), a volume of interviews on the course of his life and work, Williams, when asked to reflect on “the possibility of a legitimate materialist conception of the human, which is not ideological in the sense that ... the Leavisian conception of life is ideological”, replies:

I was acutely aware of the potential importance and relevance of this problem for what has traditionally been called aesthetics, in particular. That is why I had more difficulty with the conclusion of the chapter entitled ‘Aesthetic and Other Situations’ than with anything else in [Marxism and Literature]. I was trying to point in the direction of this area by speaking of the quite physical effects of writing, which have certainly been overlooked in a sociologically oriented tradition. For there is a very deep material bond between language and the body ...
(Williams 1979, p.340)

There is a danger then of a focus on “textual understandings” or “complexities of ideas” to the exclusion of the potential of the material or physical text for attentive meaning making. Rather than seeing the text as a contrivance for conveying ideas, “a fitting relationship” with its language finds it, on account of its formal character, conducive to the discovery of – and hence paradoxically ‘alive’ with – meaning. It is not easy for the student reader to reconcile these different levels of apprehension of the text, especially when they are largely left implicit.

This is not to suggest that wider considerations are not integral to the text: by the distinction, “aesthetic and other situations”, Williams means to avoid a focus on form to the exclusion of a more critical and ethical sense. He gives as an example of the intolerable restriction or isolation of the aesthetic, a quotation from the Victorian art critic
John Ruskin: “Does a man die at your feet, your business is not to help him, but to note the colour of his lips” (Cited in Williams, 1977, p.157)

Williams was acutely aware that while a narrow focus on a literary text might consider itself free from any particular agenda, it can become self-satisfied and oblivious to wider issues. He developed strong objections to what he termed “an assumption of critical privilege”:

The incident which crystallized my conviction of this was when I read a whole set of examination answers on Johnson’s epitaph to Levet, which describes Levet as ‘officious’, in the second verse, as well as ‘innocent’ and ‘sincere’.

The poem in question, On the Death of Dr Robert Levet, begins:

Condemned to Hope’s delusive mine,  
As on we toil from day to day,  
By sudden blasts, or slow decline,  
Our social comforts drop away.

Well tried through many a varying year,  
See Levet to the grave descend;  
Officious, innocent, sincere,  
Of every friendless name the friend.

Yet still he fills Affection’s eye,  
Obscurely wise, and coarsely kind;  
Nor, lettered Arrogance, deny  
Thy praise to merit unrefined.

Levet withstands the trials of “many a varying year”, preserving in the face of unpredictable fortune and unsympathetic social pressures his integrity – evident in a capacity for remaining “sincere”. The rhyme with “varying year” is crucial in conveying his openness and steadiness. “Officious”, though, seems incongruous in this context. Williams explains:

‘Officious’ was often positive in the 18th century, meaning conscientious, whereas now of course it would mean bossy or interfering. One could forgive anyone for not knowing that. But
one would expect some openness in the undergraduates who found this problematic word in a list of virtues, some willingness to admit ‘There’s something puzzling here even if I can’t explain it.’ What struck me as extraordinary was the confidence with which the answers either fell back on the technical mystification that came out of practical criticism – that this was an interesting ambiguity: nice and officious at once; or simply declared that Johnson was muddled and confused, unable to make up his mind. (Williams 1979, p.241)

The problem here is that this narrow kind of ‘practical criticism’ lacks patience with the word and a preparedness to entertain the challenges of making meaning. Williams is determined to avoid “technical mystification” which looks for a closed system of complexity at the expense of an openness, a “suspension of the demand for immediate intelligibility”, in regard to questions of language. ‘System’ is perhaps the wrong term because perplexed students are left casting about for ‘hidden’ possibilities of meaning which – in the pursuit of “immediate living experience” – are arbitrary in that they do not self evidently inhere in the language itself. As discussed earlier, they experience difficulties reconciling ‘life’ and ‘language’. Williams also rejects attempts to bypass these questions by reference to a ‘personalized’ author who might be supposed to answer for the reader’s experience of the text.

Language is here obscured by the effort to discern ‘life’ in the form of aspects of Levet’s character: if an “interesting ambiguity” can be identified, so much the better. It is not surprising that the expectation that students should find themselves “responding to particular moments in the life of the work with delighted recognition” fell into disrepute. It seems, though, that the ambition to encourage them to discover a valuable, indeed vital, kind of relationship with the language of literature was abandoned because the reasons for difficulties in establishing the relationship were not clear.

Williams does not discard close reading as such. On the contrary, he pursues questions of language with characteristically scrupulous analysis because he comes to see them as crucial. He sets out to argue at a key moment of his early career, against “the ahistorical abstraction associated with the Scrutiny [or Leavisite] approach” (Higgins 1999, p.56), but he does this by demonstrating that only on
the basis of what is in effect “a heightened appreciation” of language can one “deconstruct the role of culture in the creation of meaning”:

The history of a word is in the series of meanings which a dictionary defines; the relevance of a word in common language. The dictionary indicates a contemporary scheme of the past; the active word, in speech or in writing, indicates all that has become present. To distinguish the interaction is to distinguish a tradition – a mode of history; and then in experience we set a value on the tradition – a mode of criticism. The continuing process, and the consequent decisions, are then the matter of action in society. (Williams 1953, p.242)

The word ‘score’, for example, as used in the passage from *Laps* – “... she scored the swells with her strokes” – metaphorically indicates the idea of Queenie exacting psychological change from her physical encounter with the sea, which, in a bracing way, “hurt”. Winton imaginatively improvises on a secondary dictionary meaning of ‘score’ as marking or cutting – painful if inflicted by the body – in order to realize these ideas. Queenie thinks of her body as instrumental in “etching herself on the sea”, but it is of course she who is “scored” – and ‘scores’ – not the sea.

Criticism is involved in the reader at once grasping and valuing this “interaction” of meaning on the basis of a train of particular words: “a heightened appreciation of language” is essential to “textual understandings” to use Patterson’s terms. To pose them as opposites is to obscure the potential of language for meaning making. The imaginative writer – and reader – is open to a play of meaning of a word, indicating by this play “all that [meaning which] has become present” but has perhaps not been realized so inventively. This invention enters into the continuing activity of the word.

Williams insists that in fact all writing is imaginative in this sense (1977, 1979). The dichotomy proposed by Patterson glosses over the nature and value of close reading in a way that Williams does not – although he is invoked as so doing – endorse. Like Dizzy Gillespie, referred to above, he finds that “For a guy’s [literary] development” it is essential to be able to “collect facts, and study” so as to “figure the alternatives” and grasp how the “same [language]” is “progressing” (Ward and Burns, 2000, p.410).
For Williams considerations of language are fundamental: it is only by rethinking concepts of and approaches to language that he can shift the problematic ideological assumptions which underpin, for example, Leavis’ conception of ‘Life’. In *Politics and Letters* (1979) he describes the chapter on language in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) as “the most pivotal” and adds: “I don’t think any of the rest can be sustained unless that position is seen as its basis” (p.324). The chapter begins: “A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world” and continues:

The key moments ... in the development of thinking about language, are, first, the emphasis on language as *activity* and, second, the emphasis on the *history* of language. Neither of these positions, on its own, is enough to restate the whole problem. It is the conjunction and consequent reevaluation of each position that remains necessary. But in different ways, and with significant practical results, each position transformed those habitual conceptions of language which depended on and supported relatively static ways of thinking about human beings in the world. (Williams 1977, p.21)

Williams concept of language as “a distinctively human opening of and opening to the world: not a distinguishable or instrumental but a constitutive faculty” (Williams, 1977, p.24) is echoed in Eagleton’s articulation of the relationship between language and reality:

... being on the ‘inside’ of a language is a way of being ‘outside’ it as well. It is a way of being among things in the world... language is not what shuts us off from reality, but what yields us the deepest access to it. So it is not a choice between being fascinated with words and being preoccupied with things. It is the very essence of words to point beyond themselves; so that to grasp them as precious in themselves is also to move more deeply into the world they refer to. (2007, p.69)

When Sarah learns to write a sentence such as “Malouf depicts Priam to be ‘bewildered, but strangely (sic) excited’ by his new found freedom, demonstrating he is both liberated and scared by such an ‘unaccustomed’ idea”, she is, whatever her spelling mistakes, productively entering into the life of the words and discovering their power “to point beyond themselves”. Sam’s received idea that “Priam ... becomes ... a universal affirmation of humanity” is, for all its
pretensions, reductive; it leaves him, by comparison, at a remove from language. These students are learning, in effect, different ways of responding to and thinking about language, and hence of understanding its potential for enabling them to “move more deeply into the world”.

While the “citizen” should no doubt become capable of “creatively expressing his or her own experiences in the context of textual understandings” rather than passively operate as an acolyte of ‘culture’, she cannot do so if she lacks words in the sense which Williams and Eagleton explore. Such access to words, understanding how “to grasp them as precious in themselves”, is vital to insights into the role of language in shaping culture.

To approach the study of literature, by contrast, at an abstracted, ideological level and thus to conceptualize it in terms of a reductive notion of “textual understandings” is to miss its particular workings. The problem is not so much keeping a conscious distance from “the work’s tangible presence” (Eagleton, 2013, p.149) as a lack of awareness of its resources of language. Williams identifies a key function of literature:

> Literature has a vital importance because it is at once a formal record of experience, and also, in every work, a point of intersection with the common language that is, in its major bearings, differently perpetuated. (Williams 1958, pp. 248-249)

It is this focus on “intersection with the common language”, as distinct from literature as “a formal record of experience” abstracted to a degree from language, which is critical.
Chapter 3

‘All you got to do is sing’: My History as a Reader (1)

What stages may typically be identified in an individual’s literary education? By what means does he or she gain access to texts which are classed as ‘literature’? What is their value to that individual? In what follows I explore my own ‘literary’ experience in order to shed light on the development of capacities to gain meaning from the ‘literary’ word. I focus, in reflecting on this personal experience, on the part played by an apprehension of form in realizing the potential of particular texts.

This inquiry may be read as an attempt to provide ‘the autobiography of the question’ (Miller, 1995). But while it is indeed motivated by my history as a reader, I am also interrogating that history through exploring my experience of the relationship between words and meaning at different phases in my education.

Parallels might be drawn with attempts to account for the growth of readers as a set of stages comprising a ‘developmental model’, to borrow Jack Thomson’s language from his influential study (1987). However, where Thomson’s model culminated in the ‘critically literate’ reader, my own history is more open ended, leading me to question the nature of close reading and the purposes it might serve in a literary education. As Miller puts it:

So much writing and research about education thrives on its claims to a general usefulness and a dispassionate attention to truth. It is claims like these which can be undermined by the detail and the particularity of what teachers know. (1995, pp. 25-26)

Such knowledge may be drawn not only from classroom experience but from reflection on the course of one’s own life. Miller argues that it is important to maintain

... awareness of the problematic character of all theoretical discourses. An autobiographical approach keeps that sense of
difficulty alive and works to test whether the relations between
theory and practice are understood and productive relations.
(p. 26)

The young reader is encouraged, as the chapter title indicates, to
“sing” – to enter naturally and pleasurably into the world of books
that is available to him. Yet, as this account demonstrates, the
circumstances that conduce to producing the dispositions and skills
that motivate a reading habit are necessarily complex and various. To
acquire a fascination with the printed ‘literary’ word is to touch on a
vital dimension of life – how language can open up the world. At the
same time, realization of this potential may be problematic because
the young reader does not readily identify underlying forms that
enable meaning. The difficulty is that he will, if this capacity lies
dormant, remain a captive of content; he needs to acquire the means
that might enable him to enter into more demanding and potentially
more rewarding works.

The development of a sense of form is to some extent a product of a
breadth of reading experience, but in the absence of explicit
instruction the child is left wanting to know more – to understand
what makes some books stronger and richer than others.

The question of the relationship between form and content emerges
sharply as an issue in a relatively recent controversy prompted by an
opinion piece written by A. S. Byatt and published in the New York
Times (2003). The article, provocatively entitled Harry Potter and the
Childish Adult, concerns the phenomenal success of J. K. Rowling’s
Harry Potter books. Byatt argues:

Ms. Rowling’s world is ... made up of intelligently patchworked
derivative motifs from all sorts of children’s literature ...
Derivative narrative clichés work with children because they
are comfortably recognizable and immediately available to the
child’s own power of fantasizing. (Byatt, 2003)

Byatt’s assessment of the novel depends on identification of its form,
which she finds heavily “derivative” and hence – crucially – limiting
of the child’s imagination. She is not the only critic to find the Potter
books wanting in this way. Harold Bloom (2000) similarly argues
that, “[J. K. Rowling’s] prose style, heavy on cliche, makes no
demands upon her readers.”
Byatt’s article stirred up a range of responses in regard to the relationship between form and content in the production of meaning. Taylor (2003) in an article entitled *A. S. Byatt and the goblet of bile* focuses on content rather than form. While conceding that “Byatt may have a valid cultural point – a teeny one – about the impulses that drive us to reassuring pop trash and away from the troubling complexities of art”, he finds evidence of their power in

... the increasing darkness of the books ... [Byatt] has confused comfort with escaping reality. Not only do all great fantasies relate back to the real world, any reassurance they offer always comes at a price. Kids suffer loss in the great works of children’s literature and then find that they have the strength to cope. (Taylor, 2003)

For Byatt *Harry Potter* does not belong in the category of “great fantasies”; she argues that in the worlds conjured up by “the great children's writers of the recent past” – Susan Cooper, Alan Garner and Ursula K. Le Guin – “There was – and is – a real sense of mystery, powerful forces, dangerous creatures in dark forests.” By comparison:

Ms Rowling’s magic wood ... has nothing in common with these lost worlds. It is small, and on the school grounds, and dangerous only because she says it is. (Byatt, 2003)

In response to this claim, Taylor insists: “Anything exists in any novel only because the author says it does.” I want to argue that in fact a novel depends on the power of its language – its form – as distinct from what an author might intend to ‘say’ in the abstract. The power of “the increasing darkness of the books” can only be gauged in terms of language – of how it means rather than simply what might be taken to be its thematic content. Taylor does not address Byatt’s claim that J. K. Rowling works with “derivative narrative clichés”. It is possible, however, to adopt a less demanding, more pragmatic view of the language of *Harry Potter*:

The author Fay Weldon praised [Byatt’s] courage for speaking out. "She is absolutely right that it is not what the poets hoped for, but this is not poetry, it is readable, saleable, everyday, useful prose," Weldon said. (Allison, 2003)
Taylor envisages Rowling as “keeping company with Dumas and Conan Doyle and the other ‘nonliterary’ writers who live on.” That Harry Potter’s adventures have become compulsive ‘page-turners’ for adults, as well as children, is evidence enough that they are “readable” and “saleable”. Still, Byatt is not impressed:

... some of Ms. Rowling’s adult readers are simply reverting to the child they were when they read the Billy Bunter books, or invested Enid Blyton’s pasteboard kids with their own childish desires and hopes. (Byatt, 2003)

Weldon is inclined to agree, finding “the sight of adults reading the Potter series troubling” (Allison, 2003). And here we touch on a deeper issue. Bloom asks:

Why read it? Presumably, if you cannot be persuaded to read anything better, Rowling will have to do. Is there any redeeming educational use to Rowling? Is there any to Stephen King? Why read, if what you read will not enrich mind or spirit or personality? (Bloom, 2000)

It is a good question, but what might “enrich mind or spirit or personality” will depend on various factors – the stage of life of the reader and corresponding ‘take’ on the work, as well as capacities to engage with it in a formal sense. A literary education involves ‘growth’ in both spheres. Byatt’s argument in this respect is challenging:

A surprising number of people -- including many students of literature -- will tell you they haven’t really lived in a book since they were children. Sadly, being taught literature often destroys the life of the books. (Byatt, 2003)

The issue is what “being taught literature” might involve. To mine it for abstracted content that is considered capable of “enrich[ing] mind or spirit or personality” may be, oddly enough, to disregard “the life of the books” which can only take shape for the reader on account of form. Is it possible to ‘live in a book’ and at the same time be keenly aware of its use of language as distinct from, say, its “troubling complexities”? As has been pointed out, the realization of content can’t be divorced from the apprehension of form. In the case of Harry
*Potter*, this perspective will arguably inhibit escapist pleasure because it will reveal “derivative narrative clichés”. Or perhaps this is unduly hard on the novels’ “useful” prose. In any event, a focus on aspects of form promises to strengthen the reading experience: it can open up the ‘life’ of a book. Byatt herself demonstrates this with her comments elsewhere (2014) on teaching George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*:

I taught *Middlemarch* to many students. Most were uneasy about the narrative voice – the "I think" and "We feel" that introduce many of her observations. Over the years I have come to be almost more excited by this voice – or rather, these voices – than by anything else. The "I" is the authorial voice and we have our relation, as readers, with that voice. The "We" is part of a wonderful ability to move us with generalisations:

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well waddled with stupidity. (Eliot, 1871-2, 1969 p.226)

The “narrative voice” here is understood to be an aspect of form rather than ‘personal’ in any direct sense.

This chapter is aimed, then, on the basis of personal experience, at exploring the development of a sense of form in the young reader and how it might play out in enabling entry into the ‘life’ of books. It draws on my own childhood and school experiences, but it is not written out of nostalgia; rather, it raises fundamental issues of the importance to a young person of a literary education in developing pleasure in the use of language, and a measure of understanding of its power and potential.

I have, in pursuing my inquiry thus far, spoken in various places about the ‘constitutive’ nature of language and it is a key concept in my thesis as a whole. Marx’s precept that we produce ourselves in language is a foundational principle in Raymond Williams’ work, although as a point about language and human agency it is not especially Marxist. Crucially, the view of language on which it depends is pre-Saussurean, before the advent of structural linguistics. Williams’ critical insight is that modern linguistics has
narrowed our picture of what language study might be. He insists that we need to think carefully about our use of the word ‘culture’:

We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction... Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind. (Williams, 1958, 2001, p.11)

Cultures, ‘whole ways of life’, are produced in history by people who share common languages and customs. Williams looks back to Herder and discovers path-breaking ‘theories’ about language and culture. He perceives that for Herder thought is intimately dependent on language:

Verbal language is then distinctively human; indeed, constitutively human. This was the point taken up by Herder, who opposed any notion of language being ‘given’ to man (as by God) and, in effect, the apparently alternative notion of language being ‘added’ to man, as a special kind of acquisition or tool. (Williams, 1977, p. 24)

The emphasis here is not on Providence or Revelation but rather on human making. Williams’ precept that ‘culture is ordinary’ is rooted in this tradition. In the following account of my own reading and literary education I explore the makings of a grasp of ‘literariness’ and reflect on ways in which certain apprehensions of language garnered from the books I read exerted their influence on the course of my life.

I focus on my own perceptions, but they were at the same time the product of a wider culture which, though “ordinary” in the sense that certain meanings were “common” to “every mind” of the society in which I moved, was capable of “special processes of discovery and creative effort”. My inquiry into the “processes” of my reading is intended, for all their subjectivity and idiosyncrasies, to illuminate the encounters of an individual reader with the language of ‘literature’ as it became available to him. While hardly “special”, these encounters necessarily involved “discovery and creative effort”.

99
1) A Fortunate Reader

“We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction... Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind. “(Williams, 1958, 2001, p.11)

The foundations of enjoyment of literature are no doubt finding pleasure and pride as a child in being able to read. I have a distinct memory of the first time I demonstrated this capacity to my family. My great aunt, a warm, bubbly person, had come for dinner on a Friday night. She and my father were in the kitchen, drinks in hand, while my mother prepared the meal. I was able to demonstrate that I could decode in its entirety what was no doubt a very short child’s book. Although details of this event in the life of a very young Paul are sketchy, the sense of accomplishment, of having cracked the code in public, remains with me. My reward depended not simply on my having achieved a degree of mastery of skills involved in reading, but on the receptiveness of my audience – not to mention the attractions for me of the story.

These factors would continue to play their part as my skills and interests as a reader developed. Increasingly, though, I would need to develop intrinsic motivation rather than perform for the approval of the adult world. That would depend, it would seem, on the interest which printed words held for me – and I can even now summon up a sense of my emotional response to certain children’s books. To simply focus on content, though, would be to neglect the circumstances in which – and the exercise of faculties by which – motivation was generated. I attended the local Catholic primary school until the end of Grade 4 and remember being taught to read via the formulas of the ‘John and Betty’ readers. I have some memory of instruction in phonics. I think I understood that they were a means to an end rather than intended to hold interest in themselves, but, in any case, drills are not necessarily devoid of challenge. What counts, though, is whether they have any traction in making meaning.

School was conducted in a hall which on Sundays served as a church in what is now a wealthy inner Eastern suburb of Melbourne. A partition dividing it into two rooms could be concertinaed. On Friday
afternoons the desks would be pushed back and pews dragged into
place. Plans were afoot to build a new parish church nearby.

Teaching conditions for the two nuns of the Josephite order, required
to cope with inordinate numbers of baby boomer children, would no
doubt now be regarded as difficult, to say the least. I remember
feeling some alarm and distress at poor Sister Josephine breaking
down at times in tears. Sister John (an odd name, I thought) was
younger and apparently made of sterner stuff.

By the late ‘50s my mother was busy with the first four children of a
family which was eventually to comprise eight. On week days she
would serve us an early dinner on the chrome laminate kitchen table,
just in time for us to become absorbed in listening to radio serials
such as ‘Smoky Dawson’ and ‘Hop Harrigan’. I remember the green
bakelite ‘wireless’ at the end of the table:

"CX4 to Control.....CX4 to Control.....This is Hop
Harrigan.....coming in" to the roar of a prop fighter plane. From
the control tower: "Control Tower to CX4: Wind southeast.
Ceiling 1200. All clear."

Her strategy minimized squabbling. But words made available by
electronic means formed a very small part of our diet. Occasionally,
on wintry Sunday afternoons, when it was necessary to entertain us
inside, my father played a recording of A.A. Milne’s poems, which I
found wondrously whimsical:

Halfway down the stairs
Is a stair
Where I sit.
There isn’t any
Other stair
Quite like
It.
I’m not at the bottom,
I’m not at the top;
So this is the stair
Where
I always
Stop.
I was hooked on books. I would prop ‘The Famous Five’, perhaps, or ‘Biggles’, against a milk bottle at the table until eventually I would be told to stop being anti-social and save my reading for another time and place. My father was a warm, gregarious man, and although he shied away from having too much to do with children when they were being difficult, he loved to talk. The sharing and the banter of family meals, with brothers and sisters, were a vital part of family life.

In Grade 5, at the age of 10, I was sent, with cap, tie and blazer, to an all boys’ school, run by the Marist Brothers. It was not well resourced. My abiding memory is of footballs flying from one side of the bitumen yard to the other as throngs of boys, ranged in year levels, played kick to kick. At this time and place in Melbourne Australian Rules football rivaled religion in cultural significance. One of the teachers – young, tall, blond – was regarded with awe because, although reputed to be a better player than his older sibling, a recent captain of the famous Collingwood football club, he had put fame behind him to accept a vocation from God and join the Brothers. He could have been a champion. It was hard to know quite how to feel about this course of events.

Deeply impressed and intimidated by the skills of those who were able to pluck the ball from above the pack, I struggled for the crumbs that fell from the clash of high flyers. This was a competitive environment, and not just in the yard. Academic activities involved stress in that the report form recorded one’s place in class from first to fiftieth (and more?), and marks for each subject were compared with the class average. I came to realize that this was an arena in which I could shine, but it wasn’t easy to rise above the pack. I wonder now at the feelings of those who felt inadequate in the classroom.

I liked working with words and sentences. I remember in Grade 6, when I was 11, writing a story in response to the topic ‘A Shipwreck’, or perhaps it started off simply as ‘A Storm’. We had been instructed to use writing techniques such as to vary the length of sentences, and to use descriptive words. As a reader I had access in my mind’s eye to dramatic scenarios and corresponding verbal means. Still, I became somewhat obsessed by the task because I found it hard to distinguish between somehow entering imaginatively into the life of the events I was describing and rendering them in written language on paper. It
was not clear to me that the words and sentences, punctuation and paragraphs I used were always going to amount physically to a representation, not a presentation – they could never actually be the fury of wind and waves, no matter how hard I tried to make them so.

Our teacher, Mrs Love, had high praise for my story and read it to the class. I was deeply pleased, of course, yet overawed because I wasn’t sure exactly what I had done to deserve this exposure to fame. My mother responded warmly when she read my story but – and here was the emotional rub – I became overwrought when my father, after a long day at the office, seemed to me to give it cursory approval. I wanted him to at least see the value in it. At some level I wanted, more precisely, to know what this was, but this was asking too much. There was some simple misjudgment involved on both sides but the fact remains that a sure way of getting his unequivocal approval would have been to be good at football. He would have known in that field what I had achieved.

At any rate, I found refuge and inspiration in reading. I must have developed means of tackling more sophisticated books by a gradual process of challenging myself as I entered into the worlds which the printed word opened up for me. There was no lack of children’s primers on the shelves, or else my father brought them home from the library. I was a somewhat introverted child and content to be solitary, but I could not possibly feel lonely with a book in hand.

There was little at the time in the way of alternative technological entertainment, although my upbringing coincided with the birth and rapid growth of television in Australia. Our parents decided, when we were a little older, to hire a TV (black and white) to keep us entertained during the school holidays. We watched movies that my mother remembered, and sat up late to laugh at Graham Kennedy, the uniquely talented Melbourne variety star. When school began again, the ‘box’ disappeared. This was an indication of priorities at the time.

What reading matter gripped my imagination as I grew older? I made the most of what was available. I remember an adventure story set in the Canadian wilderness, with wonderful illustrations of trappers and Indians, clad in rawhide, striking melodramatic poses. It must have been printed in the 1920s, and had probably belonged to my father. There was The Boys’ Own Annual, with its stirring stories of
sport, and of besting the ‘rotter’ in the Upper Fifth. There was little
evidence, though, of my parents’ childhood and adolescent reading.
They had not been bookworms.

Yet they were keen to feed my reading habit. At breakfast during the
week my father would give my brother and me some of the sports
pages from the paper to put between us, so that we could read as we
ate the bacon and eggs which Mum had cooked. Later, transformed
into a brisk, smiling man of business with shiny shoes, a leather
briefcase and a hat, Dad would offer his soft, shaven cheek for a kiss
before he drove to work.

At bedtime he read to us. Surprisingly, what he read is now pretty
much a blank. What remains is the character of his reading. I do
remember that we got some way into Robinson Crusoe before he
decided the language was too demanding and the novel too long. I
recall vividly, though, Crusoe’s resourcefulness and the shock of the
footprint on the beach. It was a foray into the world of more adult
books.

I was fortunate, then, to be brought up in a warm, secure family in
which – even though my parents were not themselves to be found
immersed in a book – reading was valued. Yet every child’s
experience is different. The brother and sister closest to me in age
did not emerge from the same background as avid readers – perhaps
because I was one. They did not ‘take’ to books in the same way, but
pursued other interests. Reading was for them a utilitarian pursuit
rather than pleasurable in itself.

It is not surprising too that there was some jostling for space. Ours
would have been regarded as a middle class home in a comfortable
eastern suburb of Melbourne, yet the boys occupied one room at the
back of the house, and the girls another – conditions that would now
be regarded as primitive, if not intolerable. It seemed that there was
always a baby in the front room.

I did not feel cramped in a wider sense. This was a moment in time in
an eastern suburb of Melbourne when a child had opportunities and
encouragement to read. My great grandparents, on my father’s side,
had emigrated – separately – from County Clare on the west coast of
Ireland in the 1850s. No doubt they were seeking to escape life as
poor peasant farmers post the famine. They met and married in
Australia (in St. Mary’s Cathedral in Geelong) and settled near Warrnambool. I can’t imagine that they had had much in the way of educational opportunities, but they were able to provide some for their children. Of their large family three sons, including my grandfather, became policemen, thus becoming socially mobile in more ways than one – my father remembered moving too many times for comfort as a child. My grandfather, who was evidently a man of some capacity and ambition, rose to the rank of inspector. He had aspirations for his children and drove their education, but – as my father saw it – softened his approach when it came to the youngest.

My father’s two older brothers graduated as a doctor and a lawyer respectively in the 1920s, while his older sister, who married only late in life, worked in the public service, eventually gaining a position as secretary to the Chief Justice of Australia. These were remarkable advances in just two generations. On my mother’s side too there were similar stories of advantage through education. There was perhaps a cost, though, in feeling driven, as my grandfather seemed to belatedly recognize. My father recalled that when he saw him off on the train to boarding school he told him to enjoy his sport and not be too concerned with academic results.

I had a more settled upbringing than my father. Our house had been in his family since 1939, when, after the death of my grandfather, he had moved in with his mother and sister. It passed into his possession, with his young family, after my grandmother’s death. His family agreed that because he was the youngest and had seen active service in the war – and, on account of the depression, had perhaps not had the same educational opportunities as his older siblings – he should be granted this security. It remained in the family for over 70 years, all told.

Looking back, then, I recognize social and familial expectations that I would acquire reading skills. These skills gave me entry to books, and were in turn strengthened by the fascination that their contents held for me. In becoming a source of pleasure, reading opened up perspectives on the world; I found myself in a position to acquire language in a way that I could not otherwise have done. For me the growth of culture in this sense through “a special process of discovery” was for the most part happily as one with “a whole way of life – the common meanings” (Williams, 1958, 2001, p. 11). Even so,
the relationship between the language of the books I read and what I made of it was by no means straightforward.

2) The Meaning of Form

"It is as though poetry above all discloses the secret truth of all literary writing: that form is constitutive of content and not just a reflection of it." (Eagleton, 2007, p.67)

I had been launched happily into the various worlds of books. I realize, when I join the dots – memories of particular books prompting recall of others– that I was a voracious reader. But what was the character of these serial relationships? In what ways were they formative or motivating? How did language on the pages of different books translate into vicarious experiences?

The intrepidity of ‘Biggles’ and his pals, and the pluck and cucumber sandwiches of ‘The Famous Five’ kept me engrossed, but gradually I moved into other worlds. If I think Australian books, I remember, for example, Seven Little Australians by Ethel Turner and the Billabong series by Mary Grant Bruce. I read, and re-read, Rolf Boldrewood’s (Thomas Alexander Browne’s) Robbery Under Arms (1882-1883), which I borrowed from the local library. I found the characters deeply sympathetic. I’m surprised to discover, when I look at it now, that Robbery Under Arms is more than five hundred pages long, but it was certainly a ‘page turner’:

Robbery Under Arms is deservedly an Australian classic since the story telling is superb, the simple, direct style holds a vivid use of the bush vernacular by Dick Marston as the narrator, and the characters are vital, especially old Ben Marston, 'iron-bark outside and in', and the Marston brothers, described by Henry Green as 'the first thoroughly Australian characters in fiction'. A romantic spirit is skilfully combined with realistic detail ... (T. Inglis Moore, 1969)

This does justice to the vigor and forthright humor that I found in the novel, along with the pathos. It opens with the narrator awaiting his doom:
... I, Dick Marston, as strong as a bullock, as active as a rock-wallaby, chock-full of life and spirits and health, have been tried for bush-ranging – robbery under arms they call it – and though the blood runs through my veins like the water in the mountain creeks, and every bit of bone and sinew is as sound as the day I was born, I must die on the gallows this day month. (Boldrewood, 1889, 1966, p. 1)

Dick Marston will tell his story first, though, and in an energetic, direct way. There is nothing pretentious about expressions like “active as a rock-wallaby” or “chock-full”. It is interesting, in the light of Mark Twain’s use of the first person in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), written about the same time, to note that:

Browne remains ... virtually a one-book author who wrote once above himself, largely perhaps because his device of telling the story in the first person through a bush youth enabled him to write naturally in the bush idiom. (T. Inglis Moore, 1969)

In other words, Browne uses form not simply to address but in a sense to experience social issues and history. Such a colloquial idiom was not, of course, the formal style of some other nineteenth century ‘classics’ that I encountered. For example, I battled through Fenimore Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans (1826), which I was awarded as a school prize at the end of ‘Form 1’ (Year 7):

The hardy colonist and the trained European who fought at his side, frequently expended months in struggling against the rapids of the streams or in effecting the rugged passes of the mountains, in quest of an opportunity to exhibit their courage in a more martial conflict. But, emulating the patience and self-denial of the practised native warriors, they learned to overcome every difficulty; and it would seem, that in time, there was no recess of the woods so dark, nor any secret place so lonely, that it might claim exemption ... (p.1)

I didn’t ‘learn to overcome every difficulty’, but I certainly struggled in quest of adventure through the small print of many pages of such verbiage. This was a considerable effort at the age of 13; no doubt I was expanding my capacities to process sentences, but I’m afraid that, in terms of gaining some critical perspective on the style, or its burden, I remained pretty much lost in the woods. No wonder I was
more than happy to lie back on the innerspring mattress of the prose of Mary Grant Bruce:

The stock-whip cracked again, nearer home this time; and Norah crammed the blue silk sock hastily into a little work-bag, and raced away over the lawn, her slim black legs making great time across the buffalo grass. Beside her tore the collie and Puck, each a vision of embodied delight. They flashed round the corner of the house, scattered the gravel on the path leading to the back, and came out into the yard as a big black horse pulled up at the gate, and the tall man on his back swung himself lightly to the ground. From some unseen region a black boy appeared silently and led the horse away. (Bruce, 1911)

What in the world was I learning from my reading, apart from the fact that good girls darn socks? It is disturbing now to note that “black boy” who “from some unseen region ... appeared silently” and just as silently disappears. *Mates at Billabong* had been published in 1911, the second in a series that spanned the next twenty years, but this “black boy” did not strike a discordant note, for me at least, in the early 1960s. I had been brought up in a comfortable Melbourne suburb; we went on holiday to a bayside hamlet that has now been swallowed up by the urban sprawl. Once I had visited the farm, not far north of Melbourne, of one of my father’s school friends and there had clumsily mounted a horse. Yet I was familiar with all manner of Bush adventures. Did they have sinister undercurrents? The language of fiction was a social phenomenon, yet I had little sense of this possibility, even as I was, in living inside these novels, absorbing something of bygone eras.

As I remember it, the characters in *Robbery Under Arms* remained honorable, even as circumstances conspired – through their foolishness, perhaps, or naivety, rather than turpitude – against them. The vigor of the style itself wove the texture of this stance. The ‘Billabong’ books constructed a most reassuring moral world in which the reader found:

... mixtures of sentimentality and pathos, skittishness and stoicism, challenge and safety, relationships between social classes in which benign patronage and good-humoured servitude were balanced, all united by a philosophy of hard work...
Australians, and not only children, looking at Billabong, could see themselves as they wanted to be — mates in fortune and adversity, sturdy, decent and fearless inheritors of a tough, but rewarding land. (Strahan, 1979)

Mary Grant Bruce idealized the society out of which she wrote. The very form of her sentences constituted this idealism. But the notion that sentences could be themselves skillfully paced and “balanced” in constructing their content was not explored at school. Form and content seemingly belonged in different realms even though we spent a great deal of time parsing sentences. I had little trouble with this activity because, through my reading, I already had control over sentences in a way which this obsessive analysis was supposed to teach but I doubt could because it put the cart before the horse.

I benefited more from larger scale investigation of the clausal structures of sentences and paragraphs. I rather enjoyed manipulating these structures for effect. Mandatory study of Latin, on which this grammar was based, no doubt helped in seeing what was supposed to be what. Still, the catch was that, from my reading, I already had a very strong sense of how a sentence might be organized, and could readily see, or hear, how to improvise, given some materials. I’m pretty sure that this was not the case for most of my classmates.

I’m aware, though, that I did not explicitly apply this sense of grammatical or rhetorical form to wider reading of literary (or otherwise) texts. I’m not sure that such work helped me to see their virtues or deficiencies. I suspect that, with some application, it could have. Questions of mechanics remained in a separate realm from those of meaning. A great deal of time was spent in class on the former. In time attention would turn to the latter, when – it might be argued – what was needed was a means of reconciling the two.

On the shelves at home was a copy of David Copperfield, in two volumes (set for my mother at school, I suspect). I remember reading it in bed, reluctant to turn off the light because I was engrossed in David’s eventful career. I don’t remember the style particularly; apart from what seemed the mustiness of some old-fashioned constructions, it remained pretty much invisible to me. When I
consider the novel now, I wonder at my failure to notice the sprightliness of the dialogue and the rhetorical power of the prose:

'In the name of Heaven,' said Miss Betsey, suddenly, 'why Rookery?'

'Do you mean the house, ma'am?' asked my mother.

'Why Rookery?' said Miss Betsey. 'Cookery would have been more to the purpose, if you had had any practical ideas of life, either of you.'

'The name was Mr. Copperfield's choice,' returned my mother. 'When he bought the house, he liked to think that there were rooks about it.'

The evening wind made such a disturbance just now, among some tall old elm-trees at the bottom of the garden, that neither my mother nor Miss Betsey could forbear glancing that way. As the elms bent to one another, like giants who were whispering secrets, and after a few seconds of such repose, fell into a violent flurry, tossing their arms about, as if their late confidences were really too wicked for their peace of mind, some weatherbeaten ragged old rooks'—nests, burdening their higher branches, swung like wrecks upon a stormy sea.

(Dickens, 1850, 1975, Chpt.1, pp. 53-54)

This last periodic sentence, culminating in an image that is at once disturbing and exhilarating, makes Fenimore Cooper’s clauses look, if any confirmation were required, as if they are on a meaningless forced march, while Mary Grant Bruce’s are simply pretty. I was too young for my reading to have developed this kind of critical insight, and in a way I benefited from the indiscriminate generosity of my reading, but at the same time I puzzled over the springs of certain books’ attractions for me. I was aware that my sense of them was not altogether on the mark; there was more to them than I had perhaps so far realized. I was aware too that I wanted to understand why some books – ‘thrillers’, for example – were superficially attractive. Like the fish and chips that we ate on Fridays, the prospect was alluring, but the reality could be cloying.
3) ‘Literary’ Language

“At first, the thrill of our own brand-new expertise is all we ask or expect from Dick and Jane. But soon we begin to ask what else those marks on the page can give us. We begin to want information, entertainment, invention, even truth and beauty... We finish a book and return to it years later to see what we might have missed, or the ways in which time and age have affected our understanding.” (Prose, 2006, p. 5)

To what extent did I develop some powers of discrimination in responding to what I read? Did I come to see some books as more absorbing, more moving than others, and, if so, how and why? What was the relationship of my reading to the world at large? Critically, how did the language of the books I read figure in all this?

Books came from various sources. I enjoyed visiting the municipal library, which had opened in 1955, when I was four. It was an inviting old building in public gardens. My father would stop there after work and collect a lucky dip selection of books for us. Before long we were able to walk the mile or so on our own.

I don’t recall meeting many books written specifically for adolescents at that time. *The Bunyip Hole* by Patricia Wrightson, a present from my aunt, made an impression on me with its Australian setting, but the books that I eagerly looked forward to receiving as birthday and Christmas presents were more likely to be inexpensive hard-back editions of ‘classics’. I thoroughly enjoyed *The Prisoner of Zenda* by Anthony Hope, another present from my aunt.

On the shelves at home were two imposing volumes: *Fifty Masterpieces of Mystery* and *Fifty Famous Detectives of Fictions*. They introduced me to writers of crime fiction – Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Edgar Wallace, and, of course, Conan Doyle – as well as authors such as O. Henry, Edgar Allan Poe and G. K. Chesterton, whose writing was more wide ranging. I borrowed books by these authors from the library, and found some in the local ‘opportunity’ or charity shop.

Also on the shelves at home were *Captain Blood* and *The Sea Hawk* by Rafael Sabatini (an exotic name!). I felt some guilty pleasure, at first, at the thought that these novels were intended for adults, but went on to read a great deal of what might pejoratively be referred to as ‘sub literary’ fiction. The genre included Sabatini’s *Scaramouche*,

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novels by P.C. Wren (Beau Geste and other stories of the French Foreign Legion), Alexandre Dumas (The Three Musketeers and The Man in the Iron Mask), Baroness Orczy (The Scarlet Pimpernel) and C.S. Forester’s Hornblower books.

It is perhaps easy to underestimate the skill with which these historical romances – swashbuckling adventure stories – were written. Many of them have been made into films or television series because they were full of color and movement. In a sense, they were a version of going to the movies. To watch a story on screen, though, is obviously not the same experience as to devote considerable time to reading the novel. I was strengthening my grasp of what the printed word on the page could do, and at the same time acquiring an interest in, if not systematic knowledge of, historical events.

I read, too, ‘classic’ adventure stories for boys. The inscription on the flyleaf of Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Tom Sawyer reminds me that it was a Christmas present from my father’s business partner, ‘Uncle Arthur’, in 1961, when I was 10. I’m not sure that fifty years later adults would see what might seem a relatively old fashioned story as an appropriate gift for a boy; reading was certainly valued then. No doubt it is now, as the Harry Potter phenomenon attests, but arguably it is harder for the printed word to attract a child’s attention.

My copy of Tom Sawyer was published as a cheap hardback by the ‘Collins Seagull Library’. War stories and westerns – The Fighting Four or Seventh Cavalry – are listed on the back of the jacket, cheek by jowl with Moby Dick and Treasure Island. Other ‘classics’ include Jules Verne’s Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea and R.M. Ballantyne’s The Coral Island, both of which I enjoyed. In a separate category for girls is Little Women, along with titles like Dancing Star and Party Frock. A category for children includes Black Beauty by Anna Sewell, the pathos of which had moved me deeply.

Tricked out on the cover of Tom Sawyer is young Tom himself, happily sitting on a barrel and munching an apple, while the boys he has convinced to whitewash the fence line up to do his work for him. This episode was already familiar to me from one of the ‘Victorian Readers’ – collections of ‘literary’ materials – poems, stories and non-fiction – for each year level at school. The excerpt sparked my interest, making me aware that the novel had achieved some fame.
Although the ‘Readers’ attract justified criticism as having an excessively patriotic and narrowly ideological orientation, they did serve as an introduction to wider interests:

The young readers were to begin at home, to be taken in imagination to various parts of the Empire, to Europe, and to the United States of America, and thus to gain knowledge of their rich heritage and acquire a well-founded pride of race.

(Preface, Victorian Readers: Eighth Book)

The selections in the ‘Readers’ expanded my sense of what was available to the reader, and gave me pointers to what was regarded as writing of some quality. There is, though, something to be questioned here in the notion that “young readers” were to be passively “taken in imagination” rather than encouraged to grasp the constructions which would act on them in this way.

_Huckleberry Finn_, which I read as a sequel to _Tom Sawyer_ was to put “a well-founded pride of race” in a new light. The novel’s dramatisation of race in terms of the human interaction between Huck and Jim – its creation of a context in which a disturbing ‘moral’ imperative, reinforced by religion, was thrown into relief – had for me a telling resonance. I lacked the social and historical perspective, if not the religious, to grasp at a first reading the full implications of Huck’s decision not to betray Jim: “All right, then, I’ll go to hell”...’ but the experience of reading the novel would remain vivid in imagination.

A reading – even that which presents as the closest of ‘close’ readings – can never be conclusive, not only because language cannot be pinned like a lifeless butterfly to a display board, but because it always depends on a reader’s perspective at a particular time. What did I make of _Tom Sawyer_? The character of Huckleberry Finn, who was to be reincarnated in the novel published nine years later in 1885, is introduced thus:

Shortly Tom came upon the juvenile pariah of the village, Huckleberry Finn, son of the town drunkard. Huckleberry was cordially hated and dreaded by all the mothers of the town because he was idle, and lawless, and vulgar, and bad – and because all their children admired him so, and delighted in his forbidden society and wished they dared to be like him. Tom
was like the rest of the respectable boys in that he envied Huckleberry his gaudy, outcast condition, and was under strict orders not to play with him. So he played with him every time he got a chance... (Twain, 1876, 1960, p.52)

I must have struggled with the diction, but perhaps that was no bad thing – it is not so hard to grasp the way in which the character of Huck is framed. The skill of the parallel constructions – “because he was idle, and lawless, and vulgar, and bad – and because all their children admired him so ...” no doubt registered at some level, even though I was of course not explicitly aware of it. An expression such as “juvenile pariah” belonged to a remote adult world and it was well nigh impossible for a child to sense the satire that infuses it. Similarly, the casual precision of “cordially hated and dreaded” no doubt passed me by – I didn’t stop to consider how these apparent opposites could belong together – along with the expressiveness of “gaudy” in “his gaudy, outcast condition”. I read the story for its adventure and what I could glean of its humor: “Tom ... was under strict orders not to play with him. So he played with him...”

It wasn’t easy, despite relatively wide experience of it, to develop a sense of the character and effect of ‘literary’ language. It tended, depending on its striving for realism, to effectively disappear as the story took on a life of its own. In fact, this was what I aimed, as a child, to make happen: I wanted the story to seem ‘real’ so that I could enter – or escape – into its world. I strove to push aside, or to see through, what I took to be obstructions of language, and, paradoxically, as I grew older and became more accustomed to certain kinds of language I was able to do so more readily.

Sherlock Holmes, for example, was a vivid personage to me; he was ‘real’ in a way that people in the world around me were not. At the same time I would have had difficulty explaining how this had come to be the case, since I wasn’t in a position to gain perspective on the language that had created ‘him’. The motivation of my reading in itself confused a grasp of this relationship since I was looking for the ‘life’ ‘behind’ the words rather than explicitly appreciating ways in which words ‘created’ character or incident:

I sprang to my feet, my inert hand grasping my pistol, my mind paralysed by the dreadful shape which had sprung out upon us from the shadows of the fog. A hound it was, an enormous coal-
black hound, but not such a hound as mortal eyes have ever seen. Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smouldering glare, its muzzle and hackles and dewlap were outlined in flickering flame. Never in the delirious dream of a disordered brain could anything more savage, more appalling, more hellish be conceived than that dark form and savage face which broke upon us out of the wall of fog. (Conan Doyle, 1902, Chapt. XIII)

_The Hound of the Baskervilles_ was originally serialized in _The Strand Magazine_; and no doubt this ‘cliffhanger’ was highly effective in gaining a readership for the succeeding issue. Holmes goes on, of course, to explain the fire and flame as a “cunning preparation” of phosphorous, but considerably more cunning are the rhetorical skills which summon up the hound. In a sense the reader’s mind is pleasurably “paralysed” by vicariously finding the “dreadful” creature “sprung” on it. The calculated train of descriptive details, along with commentary, acts out the appalled Dr. Watson’s train of consciousness, as we are “taken in imagination”. It takes a moment to catch oneself being carried away by the melodrama, and as a young reader I did not do so.

Would I have wanted to stop and reflect on the passage as a verbal construction rather than simply immerse myself in it and be carried onwards by the excitement and apprehensions that it generated? I suspect that I would have found instruction in how to do so fascinating and rewarding, but this perspective on literature was not available to me.

Just as I was fascinated by instruction in sports such as football and cricket, so I had an interest in how the stories and novels that I read achieved their effects. When I went with my father to the MCG to watch the Melbourne Demons play football, I had a certain appreciation of the skills involved in taking a high mark or drop kicking a ball 60 meters because I had put a great deal of effort into attempting to emulate them, albeit with frustratingly limited success. I was slow to appreciate the fact that motivation would only take me so far: the skills involved in these pursuits were complex, and their execution required physical and mental attributes along with targeted instruction. A great deal of practice, not to mention patience, was needed to develop and hone them. My tendency to focus, given
pressure to perform, on what I couldn’t do rather than on what I could, undermined confidence and pleasure.

I vividly remember little Lindsay Hassett, former Australian cricket captain, demonstrating sweetly struck cover drives in the nets at school. This was poetry of a kind – just as Conan Doyle’s ability to construct sentences was of another kind – which was not easily come by.

4) ‘Taken in Imagination’

“Actually, language is nothing like a window ... Poetry is an image of the truth that language is not what shuts us off from reality, but what yields us the deepest access to it... to grasp [words] as precious in themselves is also to move more deeply into the world they refer to.” (Eagleton, 2007, p.69)

Because language intimately shaped my view of the world, it mattered in a way that the drama and poetry of sport, for all the interest it held for me, did not. I needed, as I grew older, to establish the bona fides of language which purported to represent the world. In fact it did not simply ‘represent’, but actively shaped the world. Even at the time, for example, some of the material in the ‘Victorian Readers’, aimed at imparting “knowledge of [the young readers’] rich heritage”, thereby encouraging them to “acquire a well-founded pride of race”, carried a strong whiff of jingoism:

They went up at the call of duty, with a bright banner of a battle-cry, against an impregnable fort. Without guns, without munitions, without help, and without water to drink, they climbed the scarp, and held it by their own glorious manhood, quickened by a word from their chief. Now they were giving back the scarp, and going out into new adventures, wherever the war might turn. (Masefield, 1930, 1987, p. 74)

I was too close to participants in the wars to swallow this sort of rhetoric readily, but in the absence of more credible knowledge it remained glamorous. I lacked the insight, even though I was a reader, to see that a phrase such as “a bright banner of a battle-cry” did not simply conceal but constructed a pernicious idea. How could the carnage of the First World War be regarded as so many “adventures”? 
I sometimes accompanied my father to visit little Arthur Steeth, who lived a couple of streets away. He sat in a rocking chair with a crocheted rug over his knees. He had been shot through the legs in the First War. Chirpy old bloke, but it would have struck me as unlikely that he had ever cut a figure of “glorious manhood”. Paradoxically, Mansfield’s prose sits more comfortably today in the nation’s ‘memory’, now that they are all well and truly dead.

My father had endured 120 bombing raids in Port Moresby, as he told me shortly before he died at 86. “Did you count them one by one?” I asked. “Sometimes”, he replied wryly. Assigned to the RAAF ground staff, he certainly didn’t regard himself as a hero. Hanging on a nail in the garage was his old steel helmet, which he had smuggled home because a talented friend had painted a cartoon on it of Donald Duck skedaddling around the rim, kicking up a cloud of dust. I remember it was surprisingly heavy and uncomfortable. He never marched on Anzac Day, but would – with beer under arm – visit a friend, Eric, who had been with him in ‘Moresby’. He joined the RSL only late in life; he was pleased to discover not only that he enjoyed the companionship of his fellow old servicemen, but that he could contribute to their welfare. He volunteered for administrative work, and would visit those who were ill.

His repertoire of stories of his experiences became part of the fabric of our childhood. For me they counted as ‘literature’ at least as much as his reading of Robinson Crusoe. He would begin: “Stop me if I’ve told you this story before ...” Of course, he always had, and, out of regard for him, we never did. It was not only the matter of his stories but the humorous, self-deprecating manner in which he told them, and the relationship which their telling reinforced between him and us, his audience, that counted.

One of his favorite stories was about the plane landing in the harbor. He had watched a Kittyhawk go into a steep dive, trailing smoke, after a dogfight very high above where he was watching, feeling exposed, beside the Port Moresby harbor. He was relieved when, at the last moment, the pilot managed to pull it out of its dive and pancake it on the water, near the shore. The youthful pilot waded towards my father, all of 24 at the time, who realized with some surprise that this fellow was barely out of his teens, if at all. He was even more surprised when the pilot told him that this was the second
time he had been shot down that day. While his survival was good news, the implication, which my father did not spell out, was that his longer-term chances of survival were not good.

Another story involved meeting George Johnston, later to achieve literary fame as the author of My Brother Jack, who was in New Guinea as a journalist. A compilation of his pieces was published in 1943 as New Guinea Diary – “stories of heroism, hardship and comradeship,” as the foreword by H. V. Evatt, a leading politician of the time, puts it. Young men were amusing themselves one night, sitting with Johnston in the blackout, by coming up with collective nouns. My father was proud of his contribution: “a flush of WCs.”

He had been a debater at school, and was interested in the play and rhetorical power of words. I wonder now, though, how, at a deeper level, he dealt with his experiences. His copy of Johnston’s book, given to him by my aunt, is inscribed: “Brian, with love from Helena. Memento of New Guinea: December 1941 – April 1943”. The critical period of the fighting on the Kokoda Track was from January 1942 to January 1943. I think he regarded himself as unreasonably fortunate not to have been involved in the hardship and horrors of this jungle warfare which ultimately saved vulnerable Port Moresby.

Johnston’s book, described as “quasi-documentary”, and as having been written in “a popular, racy style” (Kinnane, 1996), yet contains passages which now give me food for thought in a way that a more stolid history, with less ‘literary’ license, might not. My father must have been interested to read, for example, soon after his safe return, Johnston’s account of his first experience of an air raid in Port Moresby:

The bombs fell far enough away to be safe but near enough for me to experience that awful feeling as I listened to the hissing whistle of the falling bombs and pressed my belly flat against the earth. I felt my innards turn around and then freeze and wondered as I heard the whom-whoom-whoom of the explosions whether they were coming my way and, if so, how far they would travel in my direction. (p.29)

Johnston sketched his impressions of Port Moresby in February 1942:
This place is an outpost of Empire – and, believe me, there is no cliché about that. It’s a new world of swamp and jungle (although the jungle doesn’t come very close to Moresby itself) and flies and mosquitoes, and fuzzy-headed natives with bright-red skirts and frangipani in their hair. It is a world of war, of steel helmets and tommy-guns, and great military convoys lurching and roaring up the steep mountain-sides. It is a world of suspense and sky-searching anxiety ...

For sheer unadulterated loneliness, discomfort and monotony let me nominate Port Moresby as the toughest military station in the Empire...

Allowing for hyperbole and the imperative of propaganda this gives a sense of the kind of place in which my father had found himself. Although the Australians’ lack of military might at the time, especially air defense, was itself anxiety inducing, he had in effect become a very small cog in a very large machine. His amusing, optimistic stories made the best of things and at the same time transformed – or perhaps concealed – them.

He loved conversation, but tended to use his verbal skills to avoid anything ‘searching’. He would joke that he could take a nap anywhere, even in a slit trench with his steel hat as pillow. He was, it seemed, a born salesman. Although he learned to be liberal in his attitudes towards his children, he was conservative in politics and religion. When I consider these intensely discomfiting, not to say potentially traumatizing, experiences, I’m hardly surprised.

However difficult it might have been for him to articulate the deeper character and long-term effects of his experiences, he was interested in stimulating my ability to experience the world through the literary word. I thought I knew what was in store, having read Tom Sawyer, when, one winter’s evening, my father brought home a beautifully illustrated edition of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn from the library. It didn’t take long for me to fall under its spell: an adventure story for boys had metamorphosed into something profound, although just how the trick was done was to remain for a long time a question – one that mattered because, just as a grasp of phonics had generated the capacity to process print, so insight into how the story meant could not only enrich my sense of what it meant, but promised to give me some purchase on other texts that intrigued me. The novel famously begins:
You don’t know about me, without you have read a book by the name of “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,” but that ain’t no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth...

Of course, I had read Tom Sawyer, but this was something completely different. Perhaps I wouldn’t have experienced its quality so deeply if I hadn’t read the earlier book – along with many other adventure stories. The speaker states: “That book was made” rather than: “That novel was written”. He goes on to insist that: “... he told the truth, mainly.” This raised more questions: in what sense can a novel be “made” – crafted like a piece of furniture – and what is the relationship between what is clearly a fictional story and “truth”, which one would have thought belonged to the ‘real’ world.

These questions were pushed into the background, of course, as I got on with the story. I simply knew that this book was ‘alive’ in a way that Tom Sawyer hadn’t been. A comparison of the introduction to Huck in the earlier novel with that of “pap” in the later is revealing. Chapter IV ends on a ‘cliffhanger’:

When I lit my candle and went up to my room that night, there set pap, his own self!

Chapter V
I had shut the door to. Then I turned around, and there he was. I used to be scared of him all the time, he tanned me so much. I reckoned I was scared now, too; but in a minute I see I was mistaken. That is, after the first jolt, as you may say, when my breath sort of hitched – he being so unexpected; but right away after, I see I warn’t scared of him worth bothering about.

He was most fifty, and he looked it. His hair was long and tangled and greasy, and hung down, and you could see his eyes shining through like he was behind vines. It was all black, no grey; so was his long, mixed-up whiskers. There warn’t no color in his face, where his face showed; it was white; not like another man’s white, but a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body’s flesh crawl – a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white.
At the end of Chapter IV Twain uses the first person narration to milk the shock of Huck’s meeting with pap. Huck does a double take – “... there set pap, his own self!” – as he comes to grips with the fact that pap is a physical reality as distinct from a bad dream. The writing achieves a cinematic effect at the start of Chapter V – this time the reader, forewarned, ‘sees’ that Huck is about to be ambushed: “I had shut the door to. Then I turned around ...”

Gone is the stance of the adult humorist, with his sophisticated diction. In forging Huck’s language Twain is free to explore tricks of his character’s consciousness, and hence to ‘discover’ in it a remarkable moral force: “I reckoned I was scared now, too; but in a minute I see I was mistaken.” And Huck, in from the cold of his “gaudy, outcast condition”, is free to speak with inimitable verve.

Yet it is not so much that Huck is free to speak as that the dexterity with words, and the skills in constructing sentences that are evident in the passage from *Tom Sawyer* now has a radical licence for expression. The declaration “[his face] was white”, for example, fenced off with semi-colons, creates a dramatic contrast with the “all black” of the “tangled ... vines” of hair, behind which the predatory eyes are “shining”, in order to create a physical focus for Huck’s revulsion.

It would have seemed very strange to young Paul to think of the novel as a product of technical expertise rather than of inspired insight into the glories of the natural world, as revealed along the river, or into the human heart as Huck confronts crises – given the social context – in his relationship with Jim; yet the one was nothing without the other. Paradoxically perhaps, I needed, in attempting to fathom the relationship between language and ‘life’, to focus on language in its own terms rather than regard it as a kind of container of experience. I had a sneaking suspicion that in attempting to treat it as more or less transparent I was missing something.
Chapter 4

Reading as ‘Rewriting’ the Text

“... might we not see the work as ... so deeply collaborative that there are times when we feel he is writing the novels of Lawrence and the poems of TS Eliot along with them?” (Howard Jacobson, 2011, on F. R. Leavis)

1) ‘To Grasp Words as Precious in Themselves ...’

“It is precisely the sense of language as an indissoluble element of human self-creation that gives any acceptable meaning to its description as ‘constitutive’.” (Raymond Williams, 1977, p. 29)

Raymond Williams, who came from a Welsh, rural, working class family, was a student of F.R. Leavis at Cambridge in the 1930s. Leavis was a member of the lower middle class; his father ran a music shop in Cambridge. Significantly perhaps, both had suffered the trauma of the World Wars, Leavis as a stretcher-bearer in the First and Williams as an officer in command of a unit of tanks in the Second. When asked, “What was the overall effect of the experience of the War on you?” Williams replied:

It was appalling. I don’t think anybody really gets over it. First there is the guilt: about moments of cowardice, but also about moments of pure aggression and brutality. Are these really opposites? It is easy enough to feel guilty about when you felt frightened but much worse is the guilt once you’ve started recovering your full human perspective, which is radically reduced by the whole experience of fighting. Then you realize some of the things that you’ve done ... (Williams, 1979, p. 57)

No doubt literature played a vital part in this recovery of “full human perspective”; it could give expression to events and occasion for reflection: “This was a time when I was reading Tolstoy and he was absolutely right about what fighting is like, how unlike the military history of battles it is” (p. 57).

Leavis and Williams searched not only for meaning in literature but also for the means of making it and for grounds on which it might be considered significant. They differed, however, in that Williams determined, in a way that Leavis resisted, to theorise his practice. He
wanted not so much to identify and warrant a given work’s insights into ‘life’ as to broaden and deepen understanding of “the role of culture in the creation of meaning within modern societies” (Patterson, 2008, p. 311). Which is not to say that Leavis was not also interested in the ways in which literary texts are shaped by and reflect the societies out of which they are written.

Williams was wary of what he saw as a tendency to turn literature into the oppressive preserve of an elitist clique; he aimed to develop, in opposition to this discrimination (a word which Leavis used in a different sense) a grounded, comprehensive view of the growth of culture. He reacted against Leavis’ article of faith that the demonstration of “a heightened appreciation of great literature” (Patterson, 2008, p. 311) could speak for itself. For Leavis such literature was a ‘concrete’ expression of ‘the world’ or ‘reality’ in a way that defied attempts to account for it in terms of concepts or, as he saw them, abstractions. Such was his influence that, as Williams argued:

It is relatively difficult to see ‘literature’ as a concept ... [it claims] the concrete achievement of many particular great works, as against the ‘abstraction’ and ‘generality’ of other concepts and of the kinds of practice which they, by contrast, define. Thus it is common to see ‘literature’ defined as ‘full, central, immediate human experience’, usually with an associated reference to ‘minute particulars’. By contrast, ‘society’ is often seen as essentially general and abstract: the summaries and averages, rather than the direct substance, of human living. (1977, p. 45)

Literature can convey complexities of human experience, but the assumption that it somehow renders experience ‘concrete’ (a term to which Leavis frequently resorts) in so doing blocks inquiry even as it insists that attention to detail is the key to meaning. The issue of a failure to explore the status of language on the page and a consequent tendency to avoid the hard question of how the mind might make sense of it was lost from sight as attention turned, in “modern linguistic thought”, to the possibilities of meaning offered by the concept of the ‘sign’ which Williams sees as “intrinsically a concept based on a distinction between ‘language’ and ‘reality’” (Williams, 1977, p. 23).
Given the apparent abstraction of the means of making meaning – and a reaction to knocking against ‘concrete’ – it is not surprising that, as discussed, literature has come to be seen reductively by students as a vehicle for particular concepts or ideologies. Its language is taken for granted in that it is seen as functional; as such, it is hardly worthy of attention. A sense of the dependence of the reading ‘experience’ on alertness to language has, it seems, been lost. As Eagleton puts it in understated fashion:

Some of the time, it is hard to distinguish what literary critics say about poems and novels from talk about real life. There is no great crime in that. These days, however, this can be true for rather too much of the time. The most common mistake students of literature make is to go straight for what the poem or novel says, setting aside the way that it says it. To read like this is to set aside the ‘literariness’ of the work … (Eagleton, 2013, p. 2)

It is necessary to recover what was valuable in attentiveness to ‘particulars’, while at the same time grasping the force of Williams’ criticism. There is a sense, for example, in which Vincent Buckley’s view of Sailing to Byzantium as ‘full, central, immediate human experience’ – “Here is Yeats facing with his poetic powers at their highest pitch the agonizing realization ...” – motivates attention to the poem’s display of “poetic powers” while paradoxically obscuring the language which enables them. Meaning is not simply a matter of entering into what is ostensibly presented as Yeats’ personal experience. Similarly, Slessor’s “powers of language”, as distinct from his memories of and empathy with his friend, Joe, need to be at the forefront of the reader’s attention if she is to tap the meaning of Five Bells.

Culler observed more than three decades ago that “languages and structures, rather than authorial self or consciousness, become the major source of explanation” (Culler, p. 21, 1982), yet, rather than provide students with grounds for understanding and developing “the experience of reading [the work]” (VISE, 1984), and for meeting difficulties faced in gaining access to it, its language has come to be seen as a relatively immaterial means to an ideological end.

It is necessary to take stock: the pitting of one paradigm of the study of literature against another has, it seems, left the reader at a remove
from the language of the text rather than in possession of common ground which can inform reading of it. The issue is how the reader might gain leverage from perspectives on “languages and structures” in order to make meaning, yet cultivate a sense of signification as “social material activity” (Williams, 1977, p. 38). Culler observes: “A critic of broader ambitions ... might ... contrast the “structuralism” of twentieth century thinking with an earlier “essentialism,” making us all structuralists today, whatever our claims” (Culler, 1982, p.18). At the same time there is more to a literary work than structure.

The reader’s concept of and consequent approach to language is critical. Williams’ protest at the conflation of language and ‘experience’ in ‘literature’ follows from his strenuous efforts to come to terms with the materiality of language. He argues, however, that the language of literature – and he does not distinguish it from language use more generally – is indeed material to and generative of “human living”. The cutting edge language of literature has a “vital importance” in “differently perpetuating” the broad stream of language use in its “major bearings” (Williams 1958, pp. 248-249). Literature can demonstrate that language is not simply instrumental in making things happen:

It is precisely the sense of language as an indissoluble element of human self-creation that gives any acceptable meaning to its description as ‘constitutive’. To make it precede all other connected activities is to claim something quite different. (Williams, 1977, p. 29)

Williams rejects not only what he sees as the “reductive” notion of “the isolated creative word, which becomes idealism,” but also the assumption that language is “simply a response” to ‘the world’ or ‘reality’ (p. 9). Instead, “Language has then to be seen as a persistent kind of creation and re-creation: a dynamic presence and a constant regenerative process” (p. 31). To think of it in this way is to discover “the relations between ‘material’ and ‘symbolic’ production, which ... have always to be related rather than contrasted” (Williams, 1976, p.91).

The student responses to *Wuthering Heights* and *A Christmas Carol* discussed in Chapter 2 see each of these works as “simply a response” to a state of affairs in the world rather than as “a persistent kind of creation and re-creation” in its own right. Under an older
‘Cultural’ dispensation students puzzled over “the isolated creative word”, which they were told, for example, presents in *Sailing to Byzantium* “a sacred possibility,” or in *Five Bells* “metaphysical meditation”. This idealism tends to put language out of any sensible reach, but what is taken to be the alternative – in effect abandonment of the issue of how to think about and approach language – puts students at a hapless, if pseudo-sophisticated, remove from the text.

As noted in Chapter 2, Sarah by contrast, in learning to write a sentence such as “Malouf depicts Priam to be ‘bewildered, but strangely (sic) excited’ by his new found freedom, demonstrating he is both liberated and scared by such an ‘unaccustomed’ idea”, productively enters into the life of the words and discovers their power “to point beyond themselves” (Eagleton, 2007, p. 69).

The difficulty with Leavis’ criticism, as Williams sees it, is that his focus on the moral insights to be located in literature, and his sense of its language as capable of realizing ‘life’ in a way that puts it in a different category from pedestrian expression, obscures the ‘constitutive’ character of language and form. And it was not as if his work could be innocent of political considerations:

To look at the historical high points of literary criticism is to witness a kind of dual attentiveness: to the grain and texture of literary works, and to those works’ cultural contexts... For almost all of these critics, there is a politics implicit in the painstaking investigation of the literary text... F. R. Leavis’ focus on the sensuous detail of a poem reflected among other things his opposition to an industrial order which was governed, so he felt, by abstraction and utility. Poetry, however indirectly, was thus a form of political critique. (Eagleton, 2007, pp. 8-9)

But how effectively did these critics manage this “dual attentiveness”? The political and social – and even religious – concerns that motivated their attention to the language of literature inevitably obtruded on it. “Painstaking investigation” could hardly be disinterested if it was at the service, no matter how “indirectly” of “political critique.” Thus Vincent Buckley, who “was deeply involved in politics, especially where the religious and secular overlapped” (Wallace-Crabbe, 2007), sees poetic language as transfiguring the
world. It is not surprising that he finds in *Sailing to Byzantium* “a sacred possibility which the facts of living would seem to deny.”

It is important to examine more carefully the differences that emerged in the work of key figures so as to not only better understand their significant contributions to literary education, but to recover that which – given the terms of the opposition between Culture and cultural studies posed above – has slipped out of sight: namely, the nature and value of ‘close reading’ – that “attentiveness to the grain and texture of literary works” which preoccupied them in common even if the ends to which they turned it were somewhat different. What were the origins of this “attentiveness”, what were its fortunes, and why has it come to be regarded as at best imparting a “heightened appreciation of great literature” rather than as fundamental to “textual understandings” (Patterson, 2008, p. 311)?

Fault lines of the perceived “shift” of “traditions” may be found in Williams’ assessment in his seminal *Culture and Society* (1958) of the influential work of I. A. Richards, a mentor of Leavis at Cambridge in the 1920s:

> But [Richards] has not offered enough really convincing examples of the intense realization of a rich or complex organization, which in general terms he has often described... One has the sense of a manipulation of objects which are separate from the reader, which are *out there* in the environment. Further, and perhaps as a consequence of this, there is at times a kind of servility towards the literary establishment. (Williams 1958, p. 245)

Williams questions the relationship with the language of literature evident in Richards’ work. On the one hand, Williams is wary of the reader being put in a position of “servility”, of following the party line, but, on the other, he sees that the way to break out of this subjugation is “the intense realization of a rich or complex organization”, which depends on the development of a sensitivity to language. He had not, at this stage of his career, come to theorize the “constitutive” nature of language in the light of the perspectives offered by inquiry into its activity and history. He focuses, as a reaction to the predominance assumed for literature – and a corresponding passivity on the part of readers, on the social capacities that the individual reader brings to it:
... the idea of literature as a training-ground for life is servile...
Great literature is indeed enriching, liberating, and refining, but
man is always and everywhere more than a reader, has indeed
to be a great deal else before he can even become an adequate
reader; unless indeed he can persuade himself that literature,
as an ideal sphere of heightened living, will under certain
cultural circumstances operate as a substitute. (Williams, 1958,
p. 245)

Williams overstates the case here in reaction to this perceived
“servility”: logically, if “great literature is indeed enriching, liberating,
and refining”, then a literary education has the potential to play a
critical part in a person’s development as “more than a reader”. It is
not hard, however, to see the concept of “the sensitive, reflective
citizen capable of creatively expressing his or her own experiences in
the context of textual understandings” (Patterson, 2008, p. 311)
emerging from this characterization; conversely, such ambitions may,
in their ‘common sense’ assumptions of the reader’s capacities to
make sense, distract from the attention to language which is vital to
realizing them. Williams finds that for Richards, “Poetry ... is the new
anthropomorph”: it takes on a life of its own: indeed, for Richards, “It
is capable of saving us.” Williams rejects what he sees as the passivity
of this stance. He notes:

But one has the feeling that Richards, overwhelmed, has picked
out from a generally hostile environment certain redeeming
features, and is concerned thereafter with finding a technique
by means of which these features may be not so much used as
enabled to operate on him and others. (Williams, 1958, p.245)

Williams himself would make strenuous efforts to theorize how
“redeeming features” in the shape of language might be actively
“used” rather than passively suffered to “operate”. Richards was
interested in understanding, from a psychological perspective, the
nature and benefits of engagement with literature, and, while he
tended to be diverted by unsurprising tricks of the mind, provides a
very useful sense of the background knowledge, application and
skills required to respond to its language.

His Practical Criticism – a Study of Literary Judgement (1929) is an
empirical study of the responses of undergraduates – students of
English – at Cambridge University to a set of thirteen poems. The students had no choice but to attempt to engage with the language itself since Richards removed any clues or distractions in the form of authorial or contextual information. He aimed to ascertain the nature of the difficulties which they experienced in coming to terms with the poems. The study had considerable impact because it seemed to reveal the ineptitude in so doing of “products of the most expensive kind of education” (Richards, 1929, p. 292). Eagleton, in his earlier phase, offers an account of Richards’ work which approaches caricature:

Linking a defective utilitarian theory of value to an essentially aesthetcist view of human experience (art, Richards assumes, defines all the most excellent human experiences), he offers poetry as a means of ‘exquisitely reconciling’ the anarchy of modern existence. If historical contradictions cannot be resolved in reality, they can be harmoniously conciliated as discrete psychological ‘impulses’ within the contemplative mind. Action is not especially desirable ... (Eagleton, 1983, pp. 39-40)

More than three decades later he is by no means so dismissive: “For I. A. Richards, the delicate equipoise of a poem offered a corrective to an urban society in which human impulses were no longer harmoniously integrated” (Eagleton, 2007, p. 9). In fact, Richards’ understanding of the language of poetry, the literary means intended to give substance to his psychological theories, seems to anticipate Eagleton’s apprehension of the potency of words: “... to grasp them as precious in themselves is also to move more deeply into the world they refer to.” As Richards puts the relationship between language and experience of the world:

... there is no gap between our everyday emotional life and the material of poetry. The verbal expression of this life, at its finest, is forced to use the technique of poetry; that is the only essential difference. We cannot avoid the material of poetry. (Richards, 1929, p. 300)

Language is seen here as instrumental – as a means of expression or transmission rather than as constitutive of expression (and hence of experience) in itself. In a sense it “precedes” a “connected activity” (Williams, 1977, p. 29). “The material of poetry” for Richards is
“emotional life” whereas Williams and Eagleton frame “experience of the world” as contingent on the materiality of language, which in turn – being constitutive of – gives access to “life”. We can grasp this “life” – “move more deeply into [it]” at least – when it is given form and expression in language. Because he does not see clearly that the reader’s relationship with the language of poetry, as distinct from what is taken to be its content, is key, Richards overreaches:

On the whole evidence, I do not see how we can avoid the conclusion that a general insensitivity to poetry does witness a low level of imaginative life. (Richards, 1929, p.300)

Concern to cultivate sensitivity to literary language, and hence the capacity to tap into its ‘content’, is very different from arriving at this kind of startling social judgment. A difficulty with a certain form of language does not necessarily demonstrate “a low level of imaginative life”. Again, an ambitious, idealistic ideology of ‘life’ obscures literary means of expression. As Williams observes, “enriching, liberating, and refining” as it might ideally prove to be, there is much more to life than literature. And its language, as Richards’ own research demonstrates, is not easily accessed. Yet language is fundamental to life. Richards concludes that “human impulses” can be “harmoniously integrated”, as Eagleton puts it, by language: words can provide resolution and clarity. This is close to seeing words as “constitutive” (Williams, 1977, p. 29) or as “precious in themselves” (Eagleton, 2007, p. 69).

In practice, Richards’ work is ground breaking in revealing the range of students’ approaches to literary language – even from a narrow class of the ‘privileged’ – and the nature of the obstacles which they encountered. He has the good grace to acknowledge: “… candidly, how many of us are convinced, with reason, that we would have made a better showing ourselves under these conditions?” (p. 292) and identifies an obvious problem: “A large number of [student] writers showed clearly (a fact that one knows well enough already) that they had hardly any reading at all to serve them as a background and means of orientation.” (p. 293) Responses to Gerard Manley Hopkins’ Spring and Fall: to a Young Child serve as examples of responses; Richards finds that they “divide with a pleasing neatness” over the poem:
Márgarét, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sorrow’s springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, nor nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

It should be remembered that Richards’ readers did not have even the benefit of the title to help them shape responses. He notes: “How much the poem conveyed to those who admitted it ... few of our chosen poems evoke praise of such quality even when most admired” and gives as an example the response:

Excellent, the emotions of sorrow and forlornness lose nothing in communication; I have never experienced them more poignantly, and could not imagine myself doing so, than in reading the poem. Rhyme words are the (intellectually and emotionally) important ones both separately and in their pairs: grieving /unleafing – very strong associations; nor mind expressed/ghost guessed ... The last two lines stick in the throat like real sorrow. (p. 80)

This writer treats “the emotions” and their “communication” as distinct, and is pleasantly surprised to find that the latter works so well. She experiences the content “poignantly” because she is sensitive to form. She does not spell out the “very strong associations” of the “rhyme words”, but is clearly being led “to move more deeply into the world they refer to” (Eagleton, 2007, p. 69).

Another student notices: “Freedom of words (wanwood leafmeal, unleafing) and the newness of the whole: with its strange simplicity, lend distinction, intimacy, spontaneity.” He too is attentive to the language of the poem and open to its possibilities of meaning. They
are exceptions, however; another subject writes, for example: “I really am quite unable to digest this doughy, heavy, obscure, indigestible and unsustaining piece of whatever it is meant to be” (p. 81). Yet another representative finding is that: “The whole thing is cramped in thought and expression” (p. 82).

Students attempt to explain the poem in terms of a familiar narrative: “Margaret has apparently been jilted ...” or “The parent or whoever it is who is advising Margaret is a bitter, hard individual who seems to be trying to take away all the hope and happiness of the child” (p. 83). This is a means not only of attempting to make sense but also of distancing themselves from the effort and the dangers involved in figuring meanings – the kind of arduous “study” that Dizzy Gillespie employs in order to make meanings in the field of jazz. These may, to the informed listener, sound spontaneous and inspired. Or they may to the uninformed seem esoteric and forbidding.

Another way of turning one’s back on form is to trivialize what is taken to be its content: “The thought expressed is a fairly simple one, and there does not appear to be any reason why it should be expressed in so complicated a manner” (p. 85), or “This is extraordinarily bad poetry, embodying the trite philosophy that the world is a ‘vale of tears’ ... the poet mixes his verbs and his metaphors hopelessly” (p. 84). Richards notes: “As so often happens the reader’s own revulsion at his own [sentimentality] is counted against the poet” (p. 84). He comments: “We may remind ourselves here that these are the opinions of serious and professed students of English” (p. 81). Yet he recognizes:

The extraordinary variety of the views put forward, and the reckless, desperate character of so many of them, indicate the difficulty that was felt, and how unprepared for such a testing encounter the majority of the readers were. (p. 296)

He shows himself to be well aware not only of the potential rewards but also of the corresponding difficulties of the task:

'Making up our minds about a poem' is the most delicate of all possible undertakings. We have to gather millions of fleeting semi-independent impulses into a momentary structure of fabulous complexity, whose core or germ only is given us in the words. What we 'make up', that momentary trembling order in
our minds, is exposed to countless irrelevant influences. (p. 298)

He is inclined here, despite Williams’ perception of “servility”, to tilt the balance between the ‘enabling’ and ‘determining’ functions of language in favor of a fragile subjectivity faced with a task that is, as his work appears to demonstrate, complex to the point of being overwhelming, if not amorphous. As noted in Chapter 2:

... Williams was scrupulous in assigning a fully dialectical function to language, as a system which at one and the same time enables even as it tends to determine the possibility for the production of human thought and subjectivity. For Williams, the self or subject is never simply an effect of language... (Higgins, 2001, p. 174)

But this subjectivity might gain the confidence which Richards takes to be its potential – and “impulses” a corresponding “structure” or “integration” – if it could see more clearly what it has to work with in terms of the materiality of language and its constitutive character. The words, and the form that they take, do not – just as the distinction between language and experience is misleading – provide a “core or germ only” for highly subjective responses, but are what count in generating apprehension. They are not simply a means of reconciling “impulses” but are an end in themselves.

One student notices, for example, the “freedom of words” such as ‘unleaving’ which, with its light touch, is yet suggestive of impecable, inexplicable loss. Another points to the rhymes; the progression of the sentence beginning “Ah! ás the heart grows older,” for example, repays attention as it leads, with the rhymes falling into place, to the inevitability of an adult awareness of mortality:

Ah! ás the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.

The “heart” cannot avoid the knowledge that the fallen leaves represent the way of “worlds” of natural things, turned with their pale and lifeless aspect – “wanwood” – into (piece by piece) so much
“leafmeal” or vegetable matter. Just as its alliteration – sounds seeking reciprocal effects with others – would suggest, the line is not a function of sheer invention from scratch, but emerges from an extraordinary receptivity to the possibilities of language opened up thus far. It is evidence of “a persistent kind of creation and re-creation: a dynamic presence and a constant regenerative process” (Williams, 1977, p. 31).

“And yet you will weep and know why,” coming as a supplementary consideration after the semi-colon, is beautifully weighted by its additional rhyme and the license it takes with the sonnet form. There is a sense in which, for all Hopkins’ inventive brilliance with words, the poem actively draws on the poet’s access to language.

From a pedagogical perspective, Richards had not so much introduced students to the poem as confronted them with it. Ideally, this “verbal expression” would articulate their “everyday emotional life”: they would find “the technique of poetry” up to the task of giving expression to its “material”, which is the human condition. The study showed that in practice students tended to regard the language of Hopkins’ poem as a barrier to content rather than as the means of discovering it. Yet the obvious conclusion – that the reader should be encouraged to focus more narrowly on the language per se of a given text– was not as unproblematic as it looked.

2) Close Reading: ‘A Limiting as Well as a Focusing of Concern’?

“Read without a priori assumptions [Leavis’] books can still teach us, not only about the specific passages and poets they discuss, but more broadly about what it is to have one’s own grasped history of English literature - not something mugged up from text books but an indwelt possession.” (Dean, 1996)

Richards’ pioneering study laid the groundwork for the practice of ‘close reading’ espoused by F. R. Leavis, as the title of the latter’s periodical, Scrutiny, indicates. Higgins comments that Richards and Leavis, “the two literary critics covered in [Culture and Society], [are] rightly seen as the formative figures in the discipline of English studies in Britain (1999, p. 60). Williams finds, however, that

... it is necessary to make a distinction ... between practical criticism and Leavis. Leavis was certainly the most powerful exponent of practical criticism: therefore in retrospect he is
often assumed to be its originator or director. But if you look at
the actual history, the mode of practical criticism was
established within Cambridge English during the twenties by
Richards. It was he, after all, who coined the term. (Williams,
1979, p. 190)

Williams is interested in prizing open to a degree the concept of
‘practical criticism’, even while the adjective claims exemption from
theoretical inquiry. Leavis’ work was open to criticism on the
grounds that it treated “the quality of a society’s language”, as
demonstrated in its literature, as “the most telling index of the
quality of its personal and social life” (Eagleton, 1983, p. 28). The key
difficulty here was not so much that Leavis’ “lingeringly close textual
analysis” (Higgins, 1999, pp. 172-3) was inherently problematic as
that the attempt to impose an ideological edifice on the language of
literature muddied the nature and value of close attention to that
language in its own right. Critics identified ‘close reading’, seen as the
sine qua non of his approach, as the source of the problem when what
was needed was refocusing of the way in which it was being used.
And that required theorization of the practice:

What Richards theorizes are problems of reading and meaning.
That is one level of theory which ... was excluded from the
subsequent development of practical criticism to its great cost.
For this particular kind of reading became unproblematic as
the description of it as practical, which actually begged all the
questions, lost the theoretical dimension which Richards had
sought to give it. (Williams, 1979, p. 191)

It is understandable that this occurred, given that Richards’ focus
was on psychological responsiveness to ‘literary’ language rather
than on the character of the language itself. Williams comments that,
in terms of what he calls “generic analysis,”

... if you look at Cambridge work on the novel or on poetry,
what I would now define as basic problems of stance and mode
were never really posed at all. This is the key to that whole
epoch ... theorization when it appears is always a theorization
of reading – it is not a theorization of composition. (Williams,
1979, pp. 191-192)
The distinction was artificial, given that a reading of a literary work, which ideally “engages readers to consider the interrelation between form and content (Culler, 1997, p. 33), might be thought of as a kind of rewriting of the text. Williams insists that “whatever else it may be, literature is the process and the result of formal composition” (1977, p. 46 – my italics); this “process” must logically involve the reader, who becomes, in effect, a collaborator in the production of meaning.

Leavis did not want a fault line, as he saw it, to open up between words on the page and what he assumed could be the experience of it in common of ‘expert’ readers like himself, but by turning a blind eye to the inevitability of difference – since language is “a persistent kind of creation and re-creation” (Williams, 1977, p. 31) – he undermined, paradoxically, that close attention to the text which he saw as the key to its meanings. His refusal of Rene Wellek’s (1937) call on him to acknowledge and make explicit the theoretical assumptions behind his practice could be taken as confirmation of its ideological myopia:

The reading demanded by poetry is of a different kind from that demanded by philosophy... Philosophy, we say, is ‘abstract’ (thus Dr Wellek asks me to defend my position ‘more abstractly’), and poetry ‘concrete’. (Leavis 1952, p. 204)

Thus, as Anderson (1969, p. 270) points out, a story by Lawrence exemplifies for Leavis that ‘Life’ which is to be found in great literature; the nomination of such a work as great literature needs no explication of the theoretical or ‘abstract’ assumptions entailed in this vision of ‘Life’ because they are beside the point, given that ‘Life’ is ‘concretely’ realized in, for example, the story by Lawrence.

Paradoxically, Leavis was right in the sense that the ideas about ‘life’ that the reader might abstract from the story could only be checked by alertness to its language, but this receptivity was problematic not only because it involved hard if rewarding thinking, as Richards’ study had demonstrated, but because it necessarily involved of itself a degree of abstraction and hence of subjectivity and its inherent ideology. Perhaps the trick was to recognize the limitations of empiricism rather than to discard it. As Eagleton observes: “We also need to find a way of standing back which keeps us in touch with the work’s tangible presence” (Eagleton 2013, p.149). This double perspective might be made available by thinking of reading as a kind of re-writing or composition of the text.
The academic, author and journalist, Howard Jacobson, who was taught by Leavis at Cambridge in the early ‘60s, found himself uncomfortable with what looked like an impenetrably circular argument:

I was the son of a raucous market-man-cum-children’s-magician, later a black cab driver, a man who loved mirth, threw himself into good works and never read a book in his life. If we Leavis men were to embrace “Life” then shouldn’t we be embracing, among others, such people as my father? If we were to take to heart the words of Sleary the circus-owner in *Hard Times*, that “people must be amused”, why didn’t more things, why didn’t more people, amuse us? (Jacobson, 2011)

The implicit assumption here, that Leavis’ views were partial, unsympathetic and ideologically driven in a way that he refused to recognize, became common currency to an extent that would have surprised even critics such as the young Eagleton whose attack on Leavis – “The [Leavisite] case was inescapably elitist: it betrayed a profound ignorance and distrust of the capacities of those not fortunate enough to have read English at Downing College” (Eagleton, 1983, p. 30) – was, it seems, in proportion to his perceived influence: “English students in England today are ‘Leavisites’ whether they know it or not, irremediably altered by that historic intervention” (p. 27). Little more than a decade later, though, we find that this influence has, unaccountably as it seems, shrunk; by 1996 Leavis has been consigned to history; he is remembered not for pioneering work in English studies but for perceived narrowness:

Leavis’ influence has waned but his name still evokes strong reactions, as the reviews of Ian MacKillop’s new biography show.¹ Leavis is variously described as “neurotic,” “petty,” “authoritarian” … he is mocked as “the good doctor,” surrounded by “disciples,” his life “claustrophobically book-based.” (Dean, 1996)

Such “strong reactions” may be taken as evidence of an over reaction to the perceived limitations of his work. Misson and Morgan (2006) in a work entitled *Critical Literacy and the Aesthetic: Transforming the English Classroom* go so far as to assert that “Leavis’ legacy is scorned these days” (p. 114). With the passing of time, it should be possible to
consider his ‘discriminating’ or, as some would have it, discriminatory judgments in a more measured way:

On the first page of *The Great Tradition* Leavis remarked wryly that “the view ... will be ... attributed to me that, except Jane Austen, George Eliot, James, and Conrad, there are no novelists in English worth reading.” He was right. What he actually said was that, given the quantity of novels available, a reader needs some sense of where the highest achievements lie if what is valuable in the rest is to be identified. (Dean, 1996)

How, though, might the reader not simply gain the benefit of Leavis’ opinions but, more important, discern the grounds on which they were made, and so develop her own sense of a given text? The difficulty was that an idiosyncratic, invested conception of ‘Life’ could obscure the ‘life’ of the text which suffered from Leavis’ refusal to theorize his reading of it. Anderson (1969) points to “the logical paradox of an insistent metaphysical vocabulary combined with a positivist methodology” (p. 270), a fundamental issue in the work of critics influenced by Leavis, such as Vincent Buckley, even though they may well have considered themselves to be responding to literature on a very different basis.

This paradox or contradiction involved a kind of imposition in that while the language of a literary text was, given a “positivist methodology”, to be allowed to do its work, “an insistent metaphysical vocabulary” tended to close down meaning. To some extent this might be regarded as inevitable, but it should at least be explicitly recognized. Buckley writes, for example, about the central character of Patrick White’s *The Tree of Man* in an early assessment of the novel:

Stan is either a clod or an enigma; that is the trouble. There is a failure of stamina in White’s account of him... The account loses substance, and becomes casual description, exact in its own terms, certainly, but occasional, cursory, and, in the end, shallow. It is a crucial weakness. It is because of a lack of spiritual stamina in the author that Stan remains an enigma – excellently, scrupulously registered from the outside, but never opened to us in the depths of his being, despite the Biblical pretensions of the prose that flows out in the hope of recording something of his essence. We are given no adequate clue to his
stoicism, and so we cannot see just what it is that the tree of man is rooted in. (Buckley, 1958 in Johnston, 1962, p. 195)

For Buckley the novel is “exact in its own terms, certainly” but is fatally flawed “because of a lack of spiritual stamina in the author”; “its own terms” are not those by which it is judged. Whatever the adequacy of this verdict, it inevitably leaves the student reader uncertain of the grounds on which it is made.

Anderson argues that in England: “… when philosophy [with Wittgenstein] became ‘technical’, a displacement occurred and literary criticism [with Leavis] became ‘ethical’. The two thereafter stood in a relation of structural complementarity” (Anderson, 1969, p. 269). It follows, given this dichotomy, that literary criticism focused on “moral judgement and metaphysical assertion” at the expense of “the neutral investigation of language” (p. 269). Yet, surprisingly: “The rigour and intelligence of [Leavis’s] discriminations established new standards …” (p. 269). How could this have seemed to be the case?

Leavis might well have been surprised to find the terms of his criticism described as “metaphysical”, but he is, in a sense, in search of “spiritual stamina.” For all his insistence that great literature ‘realizes life’ in a way that can only be described as ‘concrete’, his assessment of it does not depend purely on the power of its language to render the world. Higgins observes that for Leavis: “It is not only that great art is mature and impersonal; it is that the one is the condition for the other” (Higgins 1999, p.77). Thus Leavis finds “an emotional flaw in the formal structure” of George Eliot’s Middlemarch in the character of Dorothea:

But the emotional ‘fulness’ represented by Dorothea depends for its exalting potency on an abeyance of intelligence and self-knowledge, and the situations offered by way of ‘objective correlative’ have the day-dream relation to experience; they are generated by a need to soar above the indocile facts and conditions of the real world. They don’t, indeed, strike us as real in any sense; they have no objectivity, no vigour of illusion. (Leavis 1948, p.96)

According to Leavis George Eliot’s characterization of Dorothea is open to question because it is not convincingly, or rather ‘maturely’,
‘realized’. This calls into question the textuality of the novel which should somehow prove “concrete" in that it partakes of “the indocile facts and conditions of the real world”. There are two issues here: first, the critic’s ideological assumptions about the nature of the ‘real world’ or ‘Life’, and second, the status of the text in relation to this ‘reality’. In other words, there is a lack of clarity not only about how content is to be assessed, but at a deeper level about the relationship between form and content, between 'language' and 'life'. Leavis gives an example of what he sees as the weakness of the novel:

For a long while she had been oppressed by the indefiniteness which hung in her mind, like a thick summer haze, over all her desire to make her life greatly effective. What could she do, what ought she to do” – she, hardly more than a budding woman, but yet with an active conscience and a great mental need, not to be satisfied by a girlish instruction comparable to the nibblings and judgements of a discursive mouse... The intensity of her religious disposition, the coercion it exercised over her life, was but one aspect of a nature altogether ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent: and with such a nature, struggling in the bands of a narrow teaching, hemmed in by a social life which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses, a walled-in maze of small paths that led no whither, the outcome was sure to strike others as at once exaggeration and inconsistency.

Dorothea is seen to be at odds with the world around her with its demeaning “girlish instruction”, tenable as “the nibblings and judgements of a discursive mouse”, its “narrow teaching” and “social ... labyrinth of petty courses”. This predicament of “a nature altogether ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent” finding itself in straitened intellectual, emotional and social circumstances is powerfully posed; it is not so surprising that she should have felt impelled, in her condition of “indefiniteness”, expressed by the image of a pall over the blooming time of summer, to take what seems to her the high road represented by the “intellectual manqué” Casaubon (Leavis, 1948, p. 77). For Leavis, however, Eliot’s representation of these circumstances is inherently inadequate not simply because he takes her to be dismissive of them but because they lack “objectivity” or “vigour of illusion”. More to the point, the identification of an “emotional flaw” with “formal structure” makes it easier to reject.
Similarly, Buckley’s antipathy to the character of Stan is located in the “weakness” of “White’s account of him”.

Of course, Dorothea is callow and it is evident to the reader that she makes a dreadful mistake, but to argue that George Eliot’s characterization of her is so idealized as to lack credibility seems to leave the character of the prose out of court on account of an ideological antipathy. To find “an emotional flaw in the formal structure” of the novel is not so much a confusion of categories as the failure to suspend moral judgment – the obscuring of the productivity of form by a pejorative view of content.

The relation of “emotional ‘fulness’” to “an abeyance of intelligence and self-knowledge” is a question of subjective interpretation of character rather than of inherent limitation in the production of that character by means of language on the page. It is a matter of the kind of representation of the world which Leavis would ideally like to find in the novel rather than of what he actually finds in it – just as Buckley is disappointed to find missing in The Tree of Man whatever it is that he might recognize as a demonstration of “spiritual stamina”.

Anderson (1969) finds that for Leavis “the latent form of all literary criticism was: ‘This is so, is it not?’” (p. 271). The productivity of language and form was obscured or left out of court, given the dichotomy of “insistent metaphysical vocabulary” and “positivist methodology” (p.270). What counted in the end was “the idea of ‘life’ that was central to Leavis’ thought” (p. 270). He assumed that he would know ‘life’ when he found it and that others would – given that a “positivist methodology” could substantiate his reading – concur with it: “Leavis’ whole method presupposes, in fact, a morally and culturally unified audience” (Anderson, 1969, p. 271).

Although Mulhern (1979) similarly finds that “[Leavis’s] conception of literary criticism as an act of unmediated communication between critic, text and interlocutory reader, was logically dependent on the idea of a human essence” (p. 169), he takes a different view of the relationship between the terms of the “structural complementarity” which Anderson (1969, p. 269) sees as underpinning it. He resolves what for Anderson is a “logical paradox” (p. 270) by perceiving that “[Leavis’ ‘positivist methodology’ was the determinate effect of his ‘metaphysics’]. He was determined to avoid “abstraction’ [which]
meant the death of ‘unambiguous and effective meaning’” (Mulhern, 1979, p. 170).

Yet in practice, as might be expected, the poles of the ‘paradox’ are not easily reconciled. Although, for example, Leavis casts what he perceives as “exalting potency” and “a need to soar” as evidence of weakness in the characterization of Dorothea, these phrases demonstrate his engagement with it; in fact, they might be taken as appreciation of its strength. Similarly, despite being “either a clod or an enigma” the character of Stan in The Tree of Man is “excellently, scrupulously registered from the outside.” This is close to being a contradiction in terms since whatever is “registered” thus could hardly be “a clod” and is unlikely to prove “an enigma”.

Leavis’ claim that Eliot’s representation of “the real world” doesn’t “strike us as real” fails to distinguish between the character of a form of words as a representation and any ‘reality’ which it might be taken as attempting to convey. The summary account of Dorothea’s perception of her social opportunities as “a labyrinth of petty courses, a walled-in maze of small paths that led no whither” does not aim for what Leavis might recognize as “vigour of illusion” but might be described, rather, as pithy imagery which suggests that for Dorothea there is nothing to be gained from attempting to negotiate these “petty courses” or “small paths” – there can be, as she sees it, no release into a wider world from what amounts to entrapment.

Rather than limit meaning, the reader’s focus on productive relations with the language available on the page can, if a “positivist methodology” is unharnessed from a “metaphysical vocabulary”, discover and ramify significance.

3) ‘Vigour of Illusion’?

“When we treat something as literature, when we look for pattern and coherence, there is resistance in the language; we have to work on it, work with it.” (Jonathan Culler, 1997, p. 35)

“Vigour of illusion” seems an inappropriate phrase in that the reader can only enter fully into the “experience” of the novel by means of a grasp of its form. There is, given this realization, nothing ‘illusory’
about it. A sense of the “experience” that is on offer may, reciprocally, promote reflection on form and in turn a stronger grasp of ways in which it can contribute to meaning. The reader learns how to work with the language that is available on the page. It calls, in the first instance, for openness to its possibilities of meaning. Buckley balks, however, at an image in *The Tree of Man* which registers a key insight into Stan’s world:

We cannot understand the struggle which Stan says he has had, the struggle for understanding, because we are given no clue to his inner life. There is a certain perversity, then, in the conversation which he has, on the day of his death, with the brash young evangelist:

‘Don’t you believe in God, perhaps?’ asked the evangelist, who had begun to look around him and to feel the necessity for some further stimulus of confession. ‘I can show you books,’ he yawned.

Then the old man, who had been cornered long enough, saw, through perversity perhaps, but with his own eyes. He was illumined.

He pointed with his stick at the gob of spittle.

‘That is God,’ he said.

As it lay glittering intensely and personally on the ground.

And after the evangelist goes:

the old man continued to stare at the jewel of spittle. A great tenderness of understanding rose in his chest. Even the most obscure, the most sickening incidents of his life were clear. In that light. How long will they leave me like this, he wondered, in peace and understanding?

(Buckley, 1958/1962, pp. 196-197)

Buckley finds that “this reconciliation with the actual ... is put in gratuitously.” More likely he has difficulty reconciling the metaphysics suggested here with his own. The fundamental issue is the grounds on which productive reading can occur. The language registers a powerful idea – that God is to be identified with what comes from within a man, even if at first blush it looks grossly viscous. Seen in a certain light, as the question of form comes into
play, this is no ordinary “gob of spittle”: “it lay glittering intensely and personally”: it is a “jewel of spittle.”

To separate out form and content so as to enable “reflection on the means of expression” (Culler, 1997, p. 41) is to develop openness to possibilities of meaning by realizing the productivity of language. We can’t know whether or not the author is being “gratuitous” if we don’t approach language in this way.

While we may feel, for example, that George Eliot sympathizes with Dorothea’s experiences of what she finds to be a predicament, it does not follow that the author endorses her “theoretic, and intellectually consequent” conclusions. It is not as if the novel does not go to some pains to present Dorothea ‘objectively’, or at least to set her character in context. For example, Dorothea thinks and, more importantly feels, on a plane which leaves her isolated from the society around her and hence exposed to an “outcome [which] was sure to strike others as at once exaggeration and inconsistency.” The reader can feel pretty sure that this consensus is unlikely to be altogether mistaken.

Despite Leavis’ refusal to enter into the realms of what he calls abstraction, problems of the status of the language of literature as its ‘concrete’ antithesis inevitably emerge. We find him, for example, addressing lines from Samuel Johnson’s The Vanity of Human Wishes (Leavis, 1952/1976p. 102):

Yet should thy soul indulge the generous heat,
Till captive Science yields her last retreat;
Should Reason guide thee with her brightest ray,
And pour on misty Doubt resistless day;
Should no false Kindness lure to loose delight,
Nor Praise relax, nor Difficulty fright;
Should tempting Novelty thy cell refrain,
And Sloth effuse her opiate fumes in vain;
Should Beauty blunt on fops her fatal dart,
Nor claim the triumph of a lettered heart;
Should no Disease thy torpid veins invade,
Nor Melancholy’s phantoms haunt thy shade;
Yet hope not life from grief or danger free,
Nor think the doom of man reversed for thee.
Here Johnson takes a series of what are at one level abstractions – Science, Reason, Doubt etcetera – and renders them in terms of verbal images. The couplets are powerfully constructed: words slot into place with precision, giving the passage a weight that calls for reflection in order to gain appreciation of how it is achieved. “Reason”, for example, throws out “her brightest ray” – no equivocation here – not simply to show up “Doubt” but to dissolve it with “resistless day” – the strength of the emerging sun. One perspective opens up another by virtue of the suggestiveness of word meanings.

Yet the poet doesn’t use the word ‘dissolve’: the light of Reason – not only gaining scale from the analogy with sunlight, but needful weight and fluidity from the choice of verb – will “pour on misty Doubt resistless day”, leaving not a shred behind. To contrive an expression involving an alternative to “pour” – as in ‘Dissolving misty doubt by light of day’ – is to demonstrate its strength. In the following line “lure” – “Should no false Kindness lure to loose delight” – with its suggestion of false promises and of insinuation, has a power that a speculative substitute such as ‘lead’ lacks: “Should no false Kindness [lead] to loose delight”.

Curiously, though, for all his proclaimed intention to identify the ‘concrete’ attributes of literary language, Leavis does not so much find ways to elucidate what Eagleton calls the “tangible presence” of the poem as cast about for labels which claim that such exists:

To call Johnson’s style ‘abstract’ is misleading if you don’t go on at once to explain that abstractness here doesn’t exclude concreteness, or (since these words, at any rate as used by literary critics, are not very determinate in force) to insist that the style is remarkable for body. It is a generalizing style; its extraordinary weight is a generalizing weight … (Leavis, 1952/1976, pp. 101-102

If ‘abstractness’ and ‘concreteness’ “are not very determinate”, why use them? And what could the metaphor of “body” suggest that these words don’t? A sense of the gravity or “weight” of the lines can only be accounted for by the kind of attention to language which aims to reveal the nature and relative strength of words and images. The couplets advance step by step, with a logic that the definition of the rhymes seems to make inevitable – “fright”, for example, is peculiarly
forceful when played against “delight” – to a denouement which throws new light on all that has gone before:

Yet hope not life from grief or danger free,  
Nor think the doom of man reversed for thee.

“Doom” might be regarded as melodramatic, but not when it is brought up short against “reversed”, which dispels any illusions. Leavis comments:

    Johnson’s abstractions and generalities are not mere empty explicitnesses substituting for the concrete; they focus a wide range of profoundly representative experience – experience felt by the reader as movingly present. (p. 102)

What counts in the first instance, though, is apprehension of the means, the language, by which they acquire the power to do so. Leavis’ insistence on what words do is valuable, but here it short circuits attention to how they do it. Close reading does not limit him at this point because he gives it short shrift:

    I won’t offer an analysis of the passage and its working; some of the main points are fairly obvious. What needs to be discussed here are certain conditions of that remarkable power Johnson commands of using so abstract and conventional an idiom with such vitality. (p. 102)

How might the “abstract and conventional” be imbued with “such vitality”? This seems a contradiction in terms, but he lets it lie because he does not want questions of the power of language to interfere with what he takes to be larger issues. By “certain conditions” he means the Augustan society that he is interested in idealizing in relation to his own:

    It is in the verse that we can see most clearly the extremely positive civilization to which Johnson belonged expressing itself as literary convention. The poet to whom such a convention and such an idiom are so congenial exemplifies a relation of artist to contemporary civilization of a kind that we are not familiar with – we should find it the more significant. (p. 105)
He has moved so far so fast that language has become a function of society rather than, as Williams would have it, “an indissoluble element of human self-creation” (1977, p. 29):

Every word in a piece of Augustan verse has an air of being able to give the reasons why it has been chosen, and placed just there. The thoughts that the Augustan poet, like any other Augustan writer, sets himself to express are amply provided for by the ready-minted concepts of the common currency. What he has to do is put them together with elegance and point according to the rules of grammar, syntax and versification. (p. 109)

Close reading reveals, however, that Johnson’s verse cannot readily be accounted for in terms of “ready-minted concepts of the common currency.” It is not a matter of simply selecting a form of words which is adequate to a thought, but rather of lighting on language which recasts a concept with surprising and memorable force. If he uses “an idiom with such vitality”, then it is no longer “abstract and conventional”. The point is that language is not instrumental in the sense in which Leavis here takes it to be. Mulhern unpacks “the apparent contradiction” between his insistence on the need for ‘concreteness’ and the idealization of a particular conception of ‘life’:

‘Life’ [the term chosen by Leavis to describe his supreme moral value] ... did not simply ‘place’ categories of more limited reference; it dissolved them in a protean flux of particulars that no ‘system’ could hope to channel... by the grace of ‘life, particularity became the proper form of the most general of abstractions. ‘Metaphysics’ and ‘positivist methodology’ were linked in Leavis’ thought, not as the poles of a ‘paradox’ but as the latent and manifest levels of a logical whole. (Mulhern, 1979, p. 170)

In fact, Leavis was not successful, as ‘close reading’ demonstrates – and as his critics would claim – in reconciling his ‘metaphysics’ with a ‘positivist methodology’. The character of language is such that, as Williams (1977) argues, this must ultimately prove a fruitless endeavor.

Yet it was not as if Leavis had not brilliantly demonstrated the power of his close reading, which not only redrew the map of English
Literature but modelled radically new means of entering into texts. He was determined to “strike out against previous approaches which saw a literary work in terms of its context ... biographical, genetic, expressionist, historicist, impressionist” (Docker, 1984, p. 44). His reading of lines from Milton’s Comus, for example, is so engaged with language as “a dynamic presence” (Williams, 1977, p. 31) as to in effect collaborate in the production of meaning; it is not ‘interpretation’ in an abstract sense, but rather a kind of rewriting which finds in the language revelations which might have surprised even the author:

Wherefore did Nature powre her bounties forth,
With such a full and unwitdrawing hand,
Covering the earth with odours, fruits, and flocks,
Thronging the Seas with spawn innumerable,
But all to please, and sate the curious taste?
And set to work millions of spinning Worms,
That in their green shops weave the smooth-hair’d silk
To deck her Sons ...

The Shakespearian life of [the ‘Worms’ imagery] is to be explained largely by the swift diversity of associations that are run together. The impression of the swarming worms is telescoped with that of the ordered industry of the workshop, and a further vividness results from the contrasting ‘green’, with its suggestion of leafy tranquility. ‘Smooth-hair’d’ plays off against the energy of the verse the tactual luxury of stroking human hair or the living coat of an animal... (Leavis, 1936, p. 47)

Language is not viewed here merely as a delivery system. Leavis’ approach is in a sense to entertain language in order to plumb its powers of “suggestion” or to let loose its “swift diversity of associations”. He is mindful of the need to be open to its potential for meaning; at the same time his patient focus on differentiating its elements allows for the scope and agility required of the reader’s imagination. But then he continues:

The texture of actual sounds, the run of vowels and consonants, with the variety of action and effort, rich in subtle analogical suggestion, demanded in pronouncing them, plays an essential part, though this is not to be analysed in abstraction from the
meaning. The total effect is as if words as words withdrew themselves from the focus of our attention and we were directly aware of a tissue of feelings and perceptions. (p. 47)

Leavis’ awareness of “the texture” or physicality “of actual sounds” as registered by the body and not just the mind anticipates Williams’ recognition of “the quite physical effects of writing” and “a very deep material bond between language and the body” (Williams 1979, p. 340). Curiously, though, he finds that “the total effect is as if words as words withdrew themselves ...” This is treacherous ground since on the one hand he makes meaning by keeping words very clearly in view, yet on the other finds that the reader can safely let them slip away and focus on the “tissue of feelings and perceptions” that they generate. He contrives to pull the rug from under his own feet since the clarity of his conceptions depends on his reflections on form as distinct from content.

He proceeds on this basis to find that in Paradise Lost “the use of the medium, the poet’s relation to his words, is completely different,” giving as an example the description of the Garden of Eden, where the poet aims

... to tell how, if Art could tell,
How from that Sapphire Fount the crisped Brooks,
Rowling on Orient Pearl and sands of Gold,
With mazie error under pendant shades
Ran Nectar, visiting each plant, and fed
Flours worthy of Paradise which not nice Art
In beds and curious Knots, but Nature boon
Powrd forth profuse on Hill and Dale and Plaine,
Both where the morning Sun first warmly smote
The open field, and where the unpierc’t shade
Imbround the noontide Bowrs ...

Leavis insists: “As the labored, pedantic artifice of the diction suggests, Milton seems here to be focusing rather upon words than upon perceptions, sensations or things” (p. 48). The words do not for Leavis obligingly ‘withdraw’ so that he can enjoy an ‘unmediated’ experience of the Garden. It is hard to see why he finds “artifice” in the one passage but not in the other; the concision of “mazie error”, for example, conveys a perception of luxuriant randomness while tricks of syntax and line structure are characteristically used to
effect: “... but Nature boon/powrd forth profuse ... “ We should not be surprised to find “Orient Pearl and sands of Gold” in the Garden, since a description of this paradisal place must, by definition, rely on hyperbolic touches of the exotic. This is hardly evidence of “labored, pedantic artifice”. For the rest, the verse gives us aspects, at different times of day, of an idyllic scene which is necessarily drawn from ‘nature’: “Thus was this place,/ A happy rural seat of various view ...”

Leavis’ reference to “the use of the medium” is problematic in itself, since, as Williams points out, it involves “a familiar process of reification” which “suppresses the full sense of practice.” From the student’s perspective, it is crucial that this “full sense” be made explicit so that she can grasp the character of “work on a material for a specific purpose within certain necessary social conditions” (Williams, 1977, pp. 159-160). The material here – language – needs to be at the forefront of attention rather than subsumed by ‘life’. Yet Leavis argues:

... in this Grand Style, the medium calls pervasively for a kind of attention, compels an attitude towards itself, that is incompatible with sharp, concrete realization; just as it would seem to be, in the mind of the poet, incompatible with an interest in sensuous particularity. He exhibits a feeling for words rather than a capacity for feeling through words ... (Leavis, 1936, p. 48)

There is an issue here that needs clarification if the student is to find firm ground on which to stand. Like the Garden, the verse must be recognized as artifice even when – or, rather, especially when – it is understood as “sharp, concrete realization” of ‘life’ or ‘nature’. In fact, the one is a condition of the other. Milton is arguably such an exponent of his highly idiosyncratic blank verse or “Grand Style” that he pads it out at times as if by rote, but that is a separate issue.

“A feeling for words” is critical to entering into the world “through words” – or, as Eagleton (2007) puts it, “to grasp them as precious in themselves is also to move more deeply into the world they refer to” (p. 69). In, for example “where the morning Sun first warmly smote/The open field” the sun makes its presence felt in unmistakable and welcome fashion; the firm blow of “smote” is felt all the more for its emphasis at the end of the line before taking luxuriant effect on “the open field”. 

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The question of the status of ‘literary’ language in relation to the ‘life’ which it registers is fundamental to addressing students’ difficulties in dealing with it. Eagleton (2012) puts the case thus:

F.R. Leavis is keen on signs which smack of material reality (Shakespeare, Keats, Hopkins) but takes a stern view of autonomous ones which seem to cut adrift from the real (Milton). There is, however, a fine line between words which are redolent of the taste and texture of things, and words which appear to have become things themselves. (p. 38)

This “fine line” is, as demonstrated by Leavis’ reading of Milton (in the one instance open to the productivity of language and in the other closed to it, at least for the purposes of the opposition which he has established), a function of the relationship which the reader adopts towards ‘literary’ words – so that they “appear” in a certain light – rather than simply of the words themselves, although they need to be regarded as inherently material:

When we treat something as literature, when we look for pattern and coherence, there is resistance in the language; we have to work on it, work with it. (Culler, 1997, p. 35)

It follows that this “resistance” can prove rewarding; indeed, it is necessary to positively seek it out in order to maximize meaning. Such an approach bears a striking resemblance to that of the writer, who in working with language, “on it” and “with it”, benefits from the “resistance” that she finds in it by discovering meaning even while she attempts to establish “pattern and coherence”.

It may be that the stretch of language with which the reader is concerned does not repay this kind of attention. Whether or no, this orientation to the language of literature would seem to put her in a position to make the most of it – or at least to clarify it. Yet the adoption of such an orientation has not proved straightforward.
4) ‘So Deeply Collaborative’

“Given [the concept of ‘sign’], important investigations of the activity of language (but not of language as an activity) could be undertaken ...” (Raymond Williams, 1977, p. 23)

Eagleton assumes in his reference to Leavis quoted above that the concept of ‘sign’ is appropriate to a discussion of his work: “F.R. Leavis is keen on signs which smack of material reality ...”. Eagleton here treats words as ‘signs’, but in fact the concept was foreign to Leavis’ sense of the capacity of language to render the world or ‘life’ ‘concretely’. Williams, who, unlike Leavis, was interested in theorizing the issue, draws a fundamental distinction: “‘Sign’ ... is intrinsically a concept based on a distinction between ‘language’ and ‘reality’”. He argues, crucially, that while the concept allows for investigation of “the activity of language”, it is inimical to a grasp of “language as an activity” (1977, p. 23).

He means by this distinction that, on the one hand, what count are the ends of the “activity of language” – “conceived as an instrument used by men for specific and distinguishable purposes” (Williams, 1977, p. 22) – rather than the means; on the other hand, “language as an activity” – “a distinctively human opening of and opening to the world: not a distinguishable or instrumental but a constitutive faculty” (Williams, 1977, p. 24) – is understood as a material end in itself. This is not an easy concept to grasp because

... all categories, including the category 'language', are themselves constructions in language, and can thus only with an effort, and within a particular system of thought, be separated from language for relational enquiry. (Williams, 1977, p. 20)

Leavis’ work has, even when we discover inconsistencies and reject aspects of it, much to teach us in regard to “language as an activity” in literature. The concept of language inherent in, for example, alertness to “the swift diversity of associations that are run together” in Milton’s lines on “spinning Worms” is not to be explained simply in terms of instrumentality. Language here takes on, in a sense, a life of its own beyond simple use. Misson and Morgan (2006) locate such language in the category of “the aesthetic”, finding that:
... the essential function of the aesthetic is that it is a way of knowing ... the term points to a sense that what we are seeing is saturated with significance and calls forth a heightened perception beyond what one expects in day-to-day existence. (p. 112)

As was noted earlier, however, the capacity to apply such “a heightened perception” more broadly may be regarded as a valuable outcome of a literary education. An awareness of the role that language plays in mediating experience and social relationships is fundamental to an informed and critically engaged citizenry. It is indeed a critical “way of knowing”:

... theory has highlighted the literariness of texts of all sorts. To reflect on literariness is to keep before us, as resources for analysing these discourses, reading practices elicited by literature: the suspension of the demand for immediate intelligibility, reflection on the means of expression, and attention to how meaning is made and pleasure produced. (Culler, 1997, p.41)

When Eagleton revises his earlier judgments by describing Leavis as “a courageous critical pioneer” who, for example, “proclaims the value of [the early T.S. Eliot] in the teeth of the literary institution” (2012, p. 56) he recognizes that Leavis grasps language as a “constitutive” power that resists attempts to resolve it into abstractions. Leavis opens our eyes to the power of language – “language as an activity” – to render ‘life’, as in his swift sketch of Casaubon’s predicament in Middlemarch:

... we feel his torment of isolation, self-distrust having, with terrible irony, been turned by his marriage into a peculiarly torturing form of self confinement. (Leavis, 1948, p. 80)

We are directed to focus on how, through “the activity of language”, this empathy is achieved: Casaubon has, due to his “self-distrust”, come to see Dorothea in a very different light:

And this cruel outward accuser was there in the shape of a wife – nay, of a young bride, who, instead of observing his abundant pen-scratches and amplitude of paper with the uncritical awe of an elegant-minded canary-bird, seemed to present herself as
a spy watching everything with a malign power of inference.  
(quoted in Leavis, 1948, p. 80)

The “young bride” is transformed, by the power of the contrasting images, from an idealized and trivial creature of Casaubon’s “self-distrust” to its nightmarish antithesis. He is utterly self-absorbed, yet – remarkably – we sympathize with “his torment of isolation” because, as Leavis points out, George Eliot’s use of language enables us to grasp his mental plight.

Yet Misson and Morgan assert that by common agreement Leavis’ work can be summarily dismissed: “Leavis’ legacy is scorned these days” (2006, p. 114). They focus on the limitations imposed by his ideological predilections: “Leavis ... assumed that great literature embodied a set of ‘universal’ values that turned out to be remarkably like his own” (p. 113). They miss what his modelling of close reading has to offer by failing to separate out his bracing approach to form from his identification of it with content in the shape of “‘universal’ values”:

Although Leavis would probably have scorned thinking about it in these terms, his whole approach to literature was predicated on the belief that the beautiful (i.e., literature of which he approved) was inevitably revelatory of the true and the good. He saw a deep relationship between the writer’s art and the profundity of her or his thought ... (p. 113)

Leavis would probably have recognized in this summation a caricature of his thinking. As was noted in Chapter 2, Raymond Williams investigates, in his Keywords (1976) the origin and use of the term ‘aesthetic’:

[Aesthetic] is an element in the divided modern consciousness of art and society: a reference beyond social use and social valuation which, like one special meaning of culture, is intended to express a human dimension which the dominant version of society appears to exclude. The emphasis is understandable but the isolation can be damaging ... (p.32)

What Leavis had to say about “the writer’s art” remains worth attending to; his views on how it relates to “social use and social valuation” – which is unfairly glossed as “the true and the good” –
should be regarded, for reasons which have been discussed, with some scepticism. Yet Misson and Morgan’s own treatment of “the aesthetic” or “the beautiful” serves to perpetuate its isolation. Williams’ sentence (above) concludes:

... for there is something irresistibly displaced and marginal about the now common and limiting phrase ‘aesthetic considerations’, especially when contrasted with practical or utilitarian considerations, which are elements of the same basic division. (p. 32)

The opposition of terms of Misson and Morgan’s discussion that is implicit in the title of their book – ‘Critical Literacy and the Aesthetic’ – tends to undermine any endeavour to reconcile them. The difficulty lies in understanding that a critical perspective can only make sense if it is derived from an appreciation of the materiality of ‘literary’ language, which in turn involves the articulation of ‘aesthetic’ and ‘practical and utilitarian’ considerations. For example, Misson and Morgan find that:

Even in some of the great set pieces of [Huckleberry Finn] where Huck’s feelings are educated by an awareness of Jim’s humanity, Jim himself can seem rather limited. The “trash” speech when Huck has played the cruel joke on him after the night in the fog is undeniably powerful, but it depends on Jim’s description of his mourning at the supposed loss of Huck, and so in the end depends on an overly sentimental image of the good and faithful black carer. (p. 117)

If the speech is “undeniably powerful”, then this conclusion is partial at best. More seriously, its imposition may undermine the student’s learning to arrive at a grasp of the material basis of that “power”. Refutation of the straw proposition that “the beautiful [is] inevitably revelatory of the true and the good” (p. 113) does not make “the beautiful” inherently suspect. It needs, in the first instance, to be appreciated as such before any judgments can be made about it.

What counts, if questions raised by critical literacy are to make sense to the reader, is her capacity to make something of the stretch of language that is at stake. Misson and Morgan are uneasily aware of this:
The question is whether the limits of the truth, the fact that it is constructed and partial, are recognised, even as its power is acknowledged and felt. To recognise a truth as partial is not to reject it, but to acknowledge its limitations. (p. 121)

They speak of the “power” of a “truth” as well as of its “limits”. At the same time they insist: “The variability of response is very much the point” (p. 117). They focus on the “activity of language” which makes it susceptible to this “variability” rather than on the grounds of response or “language as an activity” which might conduce to a sense of its power. Hence they find that “Poststructuralism has made us dubious of any claims to a single stable meaning in a text” and cite Roland Barthes as “a central figure in signalling this shift, or at least in popularizing it”:

Barthes argued that the standard mid-twentieth-century practice of reading is predicated on the notion of the author standing behind the text, establishing a meaning that it is the job of the reader to intuit. The author is the authority: a reading is good or less good as it corresponds to what the author (often unconsciously) wanted to show. (Misson and Morgan, 2006, p. 117).

This pejorative account of “the standard mid-twentieth-century practice of reading” may be taken as characteristic of received wisdom which does not do justice to that practice. Although, as has been discussed, Leavis was too quick at times to leave the words behind by “the abstraction of the ‘concrete’” (Williams, 1977, p.45) or by loading and confounding them with ideological preoccupations, he demonstrated how productive close reading could be.

Misson and Morgan represent “the job of the reader” according to Leavis as onerous and limiting, if not mystifying, in that she is constrained to “intuit” meaning that is located behind the words in “the notion of the author”. As has been demonstrated, Leavis was open to suggestion – if not consistently and coherently – not simply from this “notion” but from the material resources of language which the author had made available; his dealings with words were direct and agile as he entered into them as an “activity”.

Patterson (2008) similarly does not take account of what the ‘tradition’ that Leavis represents has to offer when she sets the
passivity of the “cultured individual,” who can do no better than to articulate “a heightened appreciation of great literature,” against “the sensitive, reflective citizen capable of creatively expressing his or her own experiences in the context of textual understandings” (p.211). This opposition forgets what was of value in the strenuous efforts of that older ‘tradition’ to arrive at “textual understandings” through close reading.

The expectation then that simply removing the notional author from proceedings can clarify matters is optimistic, if not simplistic. Yet Misson and Morgan proceed on the basis of what they take to be Roland Barthes’ radical conclusion that, as they put it: “Once the text goes out into the world, the author is dead” and quote him with approval:

We now know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. (1977, p.146)

Leavis’ comment that “The Shakespearian life of [‘And set to work millions of spinning Worms, / That in their green shops weave the smooth-hair’d silk’] is to be explained largely by the swift diversity of associations that are run together” (1936, p. 47) is intended to open up a “space” for meaning rather than reductively abstract a “message” from a thin “line of words”. It aims to produce meaning in collaboration with the available form of words rather than to “release” it. What Leavis makes of these words as they “blend and clash” is a striking perspective on the industry and fertility of nature.

Barthes’ writings here do not have the originality that Misson and Morgan claim for them. They are used, however, to promote an approach to texts which promises to liberate the reader:

[Barthes] reminds us that “etymologically, the text is a tissue, a woven fabric” (p.159) and that

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, ‘run’ (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the
space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced. (p. 147)

The threads come together in the reader’s mind, not the author’s: the reader’s patterning of them is what matters. (Misson and Morgan, 2006, p. 118)

Williams (1979) is critical of a focus on “the activity of reading” to the exclusion of a grasp of “the process of composition” which involves taking account of “language as an activity”:

The result was the subsequent definition of the work as a text, an ideological capture which has persisted relatively intact from English Practical Criticism to American New Criticism right down to Literary Structuralism today. (p. 193)

It is understandable however that, given its promise to loosen the hold of inherent ideologies on meaning by making explicit “the reader’s patterning of them”, ‘critical literacy' should have been seen as giving students vital control over texts. Beavis’s (2001) account of curriculum change in literature teaching in Victoria, which took effect in 1990, is couched in terms of an opposition between the discourse of “Leavisite/New Critical formations of the subject” and that of “Critical theory”:

Taken together, key features of critical theory include an emphasis on readings as multiple and constructed and as serving particular interests; an interest in the ways in which texts and their readings are context-specific and reflect the values and ideologies of particular groups; an interest in the ways texts work to position subjects; a view of both texts and reading as ideological; and a view that what counts as Literature is not a fixed and self-defining body of texts but rather varies according to sociocultural values... [0]ften implied within this view ... [is] ... a focus on reading processes as much as analysis of specific texts. (Beavis, 2001, p. 49)

That is, readings are partial, self-interested representations of texts, which are themselves inherently manipulative representations: both texts and readings are born out of particular contexts and sets of “values and ideologies”. They are, in effect, ideologically charged and historically dependent processes. Such a view may, at a theoretical
level, be justifiable but is itself partial; it drains literature of meaning in so far as it alters the reader’s relationship with language on the page.

The distinction between “reading processes” and “analysis of specific texts” is unhelpful in this respect. The focus on “values and ideologies” would seem to entail, too, an unhealthy selectivity towards, and suspicion of, the text; it recoils to such a degree from what it sees as a narrow humanism that it is in danger of losing sight of the text’s “tangible presence” (Eagleton 2013, p.149) – and hence the productivity of its language – behind a screen or filter of ideologically driven ‘readings’. In practice, it loosens the hold not so much of ideology as of the reader’s attention to language.

It is necessary, paradoxically, to back away from expecting too much of the reader’s ‘take’ on literature in terms of “values and ideologies” and “multiple readings” and suspicion of “the ways texts work to position subjects” in order to allow text and reader to form a productive relationship. For all theory’s apparent complexity, it can diminish literature. Its proponents reacted against critics such as Leavis, but as Williams remarks in relation to Leavis’ assumptions:

To put upon literature, or more accurately upon criticism, the responsibility of controlling the quality of the whole range of personal and social experience, is to expose a vital case to damaging misunderstanding. (Williams 1958, p. 249)

Criticism could paradoxically become ideologically constrained in its efforts to embrace ‘Life’ where what was needed, at least in the first instance, was perceptive, appreciative reading aimed at realizing “the work’s tangible presence” (Eagleton, 2013, p. 149). Similarly, it is not as if, in practice, student readers are in a position to choose from the smorgasbord of interpretations that theory might appear to offer. That kind of discrimination can only come on the basis of a grasp of the text. Reading is not in practice a question of choice in a theoretical sense, but involves, at least in the first instance, “[alertness] to everything that comes under the heading of ‘form’” (Eagleton, 2013, p. 2). It follows that, as Reid (1984) points out:

... it is axiomatic that our acts of reading are unifying acts; we can make sense of texts only by treating them – at least initially – as coherent and complete. (p. 57)
Critical literacy forgets the need for the reader to adopt an attitude to language or form which allows for “suspension of the demand for immediate intelligibility, reflection on the means of expression, and attention to how meaning is made and pleasure produced (Culler, 1997, p.41). Yet Reid, taken by the idea that the reader needs to gain some purchase on the ideologies at work in the text, is not inclined to linger, as the Leavisites were seen to do, over language. It is not surprising that their stance – of taking the text to be “coherent and complete” – should be seen in 1984 as not only a transitory phase in the reading process but compromised:

But this is a more or less arbitrary imposition, inevitably so. It involves subordinating to some interpretive frame a number of divergent or competing meanings in order that one meaning can be assigned to the whole. (p. 57)

Leavisite ‘close reading’ may have tended paradoxically – because of its refusal or inability to explicate its relationship with the text – to obscure the character of language and form. Yet, if it could be frustratingly allusive, it was also engaged with language in a way that theory, for all its pretensions to having a handle – or several – on the text, is not. The assumption, derived from Williams, that critical literacy, understood as a constructively appreciative stance, operates as a “secondary” rather than “primary” or “basic,” literacy (Higgins 1999, p.174) takes the ground from under the reader’s feet.

How might we secure a relationship with the text which is alert to the play of “divergent or competing meanings” rather than undermined by them? Reid’s work warrants reconsideration because he suggests, as will be discussed in Chapter 8, ways of engaging with texts at a material level which, in countering what he calls “unitarian dogma” (p. 55), understand meaning making to involve a transaction.

Howard Jacobson is inclined, at this distance, to reread Leavis’ work with a view to understanding – without allowing his perspective to be coloured by its evaluative mode – what it has to offer in terms of the transaction of meaning with the author, which necessarily involves close consideration of the language available on the page:

... might we not see the work as amounting, almost, to one great discursive novel; alive in the particular and chary of abstraction, funny when it needed to be, vivid in its delineation
of heroes and villains, abstemious by temperament but surprisingly promiscuous in practice, so deeply collaborative that there are times when we feel he is writing the novels of Lawrence and the poems of TS Eliot along with them. A novel whose subject is “creative renewal” – his phrase – practising what it preaches. (Jacobson, 2011, The Telegraph 21.8.14)

The notion of a reader being “so deeply collaborative ...” is surely to be recommended.
Chapter 5

‘Just give that rhythm’: My History As A Reader (2)

This chapter begins with a discussion of the confusion that arose for me at university because of the conflation of the concept of literature and “immediate living experience” (Williams, 1977, p. 46). Close reading promised not simply to show how literature worked but at the same time – if the reader conjured the words strenuously enough – to produce revelations, insights into “the most fundamental questions of human existence” (Eagleton 1983, p. 27). I was struggling at the time to find my feet in the world, so this seemed all to the good. I had difficulty, though, in seeing the language of literature clearly in its own right and so could not confidently grasp it as a “constitutive faculty” (Williams 1977, p. 24) which might or might not produce what was claimed for it.

One way of enlarging perspective might have been to bridge what looked like a gulf between my childhood reading and ‘great’ literature. It was not clear, in terms of the use of language – and hence in terms of meaning – that any connections might be made between the two. As Raymond Williams points out: “… whatever else it may be, literature is the process and the result of formal composition within the social and formal properties of a language” (1977, p. 46), but I had difficulty in identifying this common ground.

Young people inevitably struggle, to a greater or lesser degree, to make sense of the world and their place in it. Language is the key to clarification. I had been led as an adolescent to believe that I had a ‘vocation’ to the priesthood, and although uneasy about this assumption, and disturbed as to what it might entail, did not possess the words which might have enabled me to gain a measure of control over it. I look back now at how an opportunity to do so, through engaging with a literary text in an English class at school, was not made available to me.

A reviewer of Rebecca Mead’s The Road to Middlemarch (2014) writes:

A passionate reader, it’s her conviction that when a person is truly "grasped" by a book, it does not feel like an escape from life but a vital dimension of life itself: "There are some books
that seem to comprehend us just as much as we understand them, or even more. There are books that grow with the reader as the reader grows, like a graft to a tree." (Cooke, 2014)

Mead gives as an example her first reading of Middlemarch as a 17 year old studying for university entrance exams:

When I read about Dorothea Brooke – an ardent young gentlewoman who yearns for a more significant existence – I recognised in her imprecise longing a mirror of my own restless, ill-formed ambitions. (Mead, 2014)

A re-reading a few years on is framed differently:

Now, as I embarked on one misbegotten love affair, and then another, the book seemed to be all about the purpose and meaning of marriage... I could tell that the novel offered illumination, even if I didn't yet know quite how to answer the questions it posed. (Mead, 2014)

And later again in life, as the step-mother of three boys, Mead is “struck by the way it offers variations on the paths that a young man might take”. Such a text for me, offering rich re-readings, was Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. It offered, in a sense, “escape”, as the reader experiences Huck’s relief in returning to the great river after his encounters with ‘sivilization’; yet it indeed felt like “a vital dimension of life itself” as its perspectives on nature, society, religion and race deepened on each re-reading.

At the same time I hankered to know how the language worked, so that in comprehending the novel at this material level I could clarify the sources of the responses that it engendered. This promised to sharpen and amplify my experience of the novel, not diminish it. I can well understand why one reviewer of Mead’s ‘take’ on Middlemarch finds it to be “A wise, humane and delightful study of what some regard as the best novel in English” (Bloom) while the above mentioned (Cooke) is sceptical:

As for reading a novel as if it were a manual, though I’ve often been guilty of this myself, one must be wary. Isn’t it just a more intellectual version of the dreary argument that insists a book cannot be enjoyed unless the reader "likes the characters"?
Yet another reviewer provides a penetrating criticism:

There is no unlocking of Eliot’s language, nor explanation offered for the astonishing perspectives of her prose; *Middlemarch* is discussed as though it were composed of a pastry base of plot and a heavy filling of character, with no other major ingredients. (Frances Wilson, *The Telegraph*, 24 March 2014)

Similarly, I wanted “unlocking of [Twain’s] language” so that I might properly appreciate “the astonishing perspectives of [his] prose”. Mead’s account of her university experience at Oxford provides a clue as to why her experience of the novel lacks this critical dimension:

It was the mid 1980s, and such exotic concepts as critical theory were in the air. Instead of merely reading books I learned to interrogate texts, as if they had committed some criminal malfeasance. Even *Middlemarch* came in for this treatment: “This incoherent, heterogeneous, ‘unreadable,’ or nonsynthesisable quality of the text of *Middlemarch* jeopardises the narrator’s effort of totalisation,” wrote the critic J. Hillis Miller, in a much-borrowed library volume. (Mead, 2014)

Byatt, by comparison, offers an insight into the novel which promises to inform careful reading – in the sense of providing a guiding structure – rather than confound it:

All [the characters] are held together by one of the most complicated and brilliantly worked metaphors anywhere in fiction. It is a metaphor of a web, or a tissue... It is both a field of force, a trap like a spider web, and a pattern of invisible connecting links between humans meeting each other’s eye. (*The Guardian*, 4 August 2007)
1) ‘A specially developed sensibility’

“But in fact it’s essential to slow down and read every word. Because one important thing that can be learned by reading slowly is the seemingly obvious but oddly underappreciated fact that language is the medium we use ...” (Prose, 2007, pp. 15-16)

I am aware that the attempt to reconstruct my literary education is inevitably informed, and hence runs the risk of being falsified, by the knowledge and practices which I have since developed. At the same time, I believe that this reconstruction touches on some critical issues in the development of a reader’s relationship with ‘literary’ language.

I had suspected, as a younger reader, that in attempting to treat the language of the books I read as more or less transparent I was missing something. I discovered when I embarked on the formal study of English at Melbourne University in 1970 that I was indeed missing something, but it remained hard to fathom. F.R. Leavis had spelled out what he believed was required of a literary critic:

But there is, for a critic, a problem of relevance: it is, in fact, his ability to be relevant in his judgments and commentaries that make him a critic, if he deserves the name. And the ability to be relevant, where works of literary art are concerned, is not a mere matter of good sense; it implies an understanding of the resources of language, the nature of conventions and the possibilities of organization such as can only come from much intensive literary experience, accompanied by the habit of analysis. In this sense it certainly implies a specially developed sensibility. (Leavis, 1952, p.114)

This is all to the good; the “relevance” of a given commentary has to do with an explicit grasp of the language of literature – its “resources”, “conventions” and potential “organization” – which in turn involves “experience” of it, along with “analysis”. But is attention to aspects of language simply useful (“relevant”) in arriving at something deeper (“judgements”) or can it comprise “understanding” in itself? What is the status of this “understanding” and how does it relate to the formation of “judgements”? These questions motivate my autobiographical study, and indeed my whole inquiry.

I had had a good deal of reading experience by the age of 19, but how much of it, if any, might have been characterized as exposure to
‘literary art’? What was ‘literary art’ as distinct from what I had been reading? And to what extent could I give evidence of “a specially developed sensibility”? I remember that I was required, as an introductory exercise, to write an “analysis”, based on ‘close reading’, or explicit attention to language, of a passage which begins:

When Miss Brooke was at the tea-table, Sir James came to sit down by her, not having felt her mode of answering him at all offensive. Why should he? He thought it probable that Miss Brooke liked him, and manners must be very marked indeed before they cease to be interpreted by preconceptions either confident or distrustful. She was thoroughly charming to him, but of course he theorized a little about his attachment. He was made of excellent human dough, and had the rare merit of knowing that his talents, even if let loose, would not set the smallest stream in the county on fire: hence he liked the prospect of a wife to whom he could say, "What shall we do?" about this or that; who could help her husband out with reasons, and would also have the property qualification for doing so.

This is satirical in a highly wrought fashion. To me it was esoteric, but perhaps it shouldn’t have been such a stretch. I had no idea at the time that this was an excerpt from *Middlemarch*, by George Eliot, even though *The Mill on the Floss* had been set for English Literature (as distinct from English) in my last year at school. I was not aware of the social context or status of the novel.

I can’t now remember what grade my writing achieved, but I do recall feeling somewhat lost in what seemed to me the thorny thicket of the characters’ relationship. A good deal of the difficulty lay in the fact that I didn’t distinguish it particularly as a product of language; rather, I assumed that my task was to enter in imagination into a world that was – given that ‘life’ and language were entangled – hard to penetrate.

It is not easy to follow the vagaries of the language here: the passage is so suffused with irony that key clauses do not mean what they appear, literally, to say. For example, in response to the categorical phrasing of the opening sentence of the passage – “… not having felt her mode of answering him at all offensive” – the authorial voice demands, incongruously, as if on Sir James’ behalf: “Why should he?”
Either Sir James is obtusely insensitive to Miss Brooke’s “mode of answering”, or he is sublimely charitable. As it turns out, the former is the case: the narrator proves the point by voicing Sir James’ assumption: “She was thoroughly charming to him,” when we have just been told, indirectly, that Sir James persistently misinterprets Miss Brooke’s “manners”. The commentary underplays for ironic effect his notion of their relationship: “… but of course he theorized a little about his attachment”, when what follows is his male fantasy about matrimony with Miss Brooke. Paradoxically, but not surprisingly, it involves him accommodating her superior talent for reasoning.

It might have been helpful to think of the language as a rhetorical performance, following its course as it shifts and modulates between narrator and character. The language is, in a sense, not just constructing inwardness with Sir James, but using him to make a case about such a man in the society of the novel. This perspective was, however, not available to me at the time. By comparison with this problematic, if potentially rewarding, assignment, reading as a child and adolescent simply involved ‘losing’ oneself in the story:

Biggles’s pulses were beginning to beat faster. He didn’t like the trend of the conversation, but he still hoped there was nothing serious behind it. One slip, though, and he was lost. An expression of anxiety on his face would be noted at once by the cold eyes that were fixed on his in unwavering intensity. (W.E. Johns, Biggles Defies the Swastika, 1941)

So what is the difference in language use? Of course, this passage summons up a simplistic fantasy, a world in which the hero is imperturbable in the face of potential disaster. It is not so easy to empathise with the plight of Sir James – in fact, that is the point. Still, the two passages have something in common in that they both involve the construction, in language on the page, of interaction between two characters. A short, simple sentence sets our hero on the brink: “One slip, though, and he was lost.” “Cold eyes” which are, of course, “unwavering”, leave the reader in no doubt as to the pressure he is under. There is a degree of skill here in the manipulation of clichés, even if, to a reader of “much intensive literary experience, accompanied by the habit of analysis” they are entirely predictable.
The point is that, as a child, I was not such a reader (cf. Thomson, 1987, who identifies the first stage of his ‘response to literature developmental model’ as ‘unreflective interest in action’). Even when I had gained “literary experience”, my education had not thus far inculcated in me, to any degree, “the habit of analysis”. I could only gain some leverage on the characters and the ‘world’ of the passage from Middlemarch by paying attention to its language, but so much detail tended to slip under my guard, or refuse to stand out in relief, because I wasn’t at all used to the kind of ‘doublethink’ required. What was the relationship here between language and ‘life’?

I had read what would have been regarded as ‘fine’ writing, ‘classic’ stories for children, but where did they stand in relation, on the one hand, to Biggles, and, on the other, to the kind of writing I was being asked to analyze at university? The fact that I saw no explicit connections between them, in regard to their respective uses of language, did not make things any easier. Take, for example, this passage from Robert Louis Stevenson’s Treasure Island:

"One more step, Mr. Hands," said I, "and I’ll blow your brains out! Dead men don’t bite, you know," I added with a chuckle.

He stopped instantly. I could see by the working of his face that he was trying to think, and the process was so slow and laborious that, in my new-found security, I laughed aloud. At last, with a swallow or two, he spoke, his face still wearing the same expression of extreme perplexity. In order to speak he had to take the dagger from his mouth, but in all else he remained unmoved.

"Jim," says he, "I reckon we're fouled, you and me, and we'll have to sign articles. I'd have had you but for that there lurch, but I don't have no luck, not I; and I reckon I'll have to strike, which comes hard, you see, for a master mariner to a ship's younker like you, Jim."

I was drinking in his words and smiling away, as conceited as a cock upon a wall, when, all in a breath, back went his right hand over his shoulder. Something sang like an arrow through the air; I felt a blow and then a sharp pang, and there I was pinned by the shoulder to the mast. In the horrid pain and surprise of the moment—I scarce can say it was by my own volition, and I am sure it was without a conscious aim—both my pistols went off, and both escaped out of my hands. They did not
fall alone; with a choked cry, the coxswain loosed his grasp upon the shrouds and plunged head first into the water.

I would have said, if I had been asked, that the prose to be found in *Treasure Island* was of a different order from that of the *Biggles* franchise, but I would have been hard pressed to explain why I had this impression. It was ‘real’ in a different, more satisfying way, yet the idea that I might consider the nature of prose as an entity in itself would have seemed odd, at least at first sight. I loved the novel not simply because it involved action and adventure but because it evoked a physical world. How could its prose be distinguished from the world that it rendered? Poetry belonged in a category of its own because it was distinguished by characteristics, such as rhyme and rhythm, but prose, as a means to an end – the ‘life’ of the story – was more or less invisible in that it was transparent. It was only when constructions seemed at all old fashioned or awkward that one noticed it.

Yet, by comparison with Biggles, the treatment here of Jim Hawkins as hero is complex. Jim finds himself sitting pretty, as he thinks, and his language expresses his adolescent cockiness: “One more step, Mr. Hands ...” The progress of Israel Hands’ calculations, on the other hand, is couched in beautifully modulated sentences as he lures Jim into complacency. Phrases such as “the working of his face” carry a double meaning of apparent obtuseness and cunning, but the latter is implicit or hidden for the moment, even when Hands is moved “to take the dagger from his mouth”.

Stevenson obviously enjoys indulging Hands’ pirate talk, designed to preen young Jim. It comes as a shock, both to the reader and to the gullible Jim, “drinking in his words” when “all in a breath, back went his right hand over his shoulder...” The sequence of actions is wonderfully picked out in understated fashion: “Something sang like an arrow through the air; I felt a blow and then a sharp pang...” Jim is caught thoroughly unawares in the “horrid pain and surprise of the moment” – registering a ‘reality’ in a way that thoroughgoing escapism never does.

This is an adventure story rather than the social criticism of *Middlemarch*, but still it should be possible to build some bridges between the two. The authorial comment: “... manners must be very marked indeed before they cease to be interpreted by
preconceptions either confident or distrustful”, for example, might as easily be applied to Jim Hawkins as to Sir James. Jim, in his own way, indulges in a fantasy of power, and is subject to irony. He is “made of excellent human dough”, up to a point, and succeeds, as he admits, more by luck than good management. It is just that George Eliot is interested in delving into, or elaborating, a character’s perceptions in order to deliver a biting commentary on social norms, rather than in preparing the ground for breath taking action. Yet from a Leavisian perspective the link appears meretricious because the one is about ‘life’ in a way that the other is not. The passage introduced above, from *Middlemarch*, continues:

As to the excessive religiousness alleged against Miss Brooke, he had a very indefinite notion of what it consisted in, and thought that it would die out with marriage. In short, he felt himself to be in love in the right place, and was ready to endure a great deal of predominance, which, after all, a man could always put down when he liked. Sir James had no idea that he should ever like to put down the predominance of this handsome girl, in whose cleverness he delighted. Why not? A man's mind—what there is of it—has always the advantage of being masculine, —as the smallest birch-tree is of a higher kind than the most soaring palm,—and even his ignorance is of a sounder quality. Sir James might not have originated this estimate; but a kind Providence furnishes the limpest personality with a little gum or starch in the form of tradition.

Again, the language here articulates, or – more precisely – creates the character’s thinking, while giving an implied running commentary on it. This critique takes devastating, not to say dazzling, twists and turns. It is not, for example, because the “predominance”, the “cleverness” of “this handsome girl” is such that it is to be “delighted” in that Sir James has “no idea that he should ever like to put [it] down,” but because his understanding – confirmed by a kind “tradition” – is that “a man’s mind – what there is of it” is inherently superior to a woman’s.

I needed assistance to explicitly address the question of the relationship between literary language and ‘life’, but at the time it was not available to me. Indeed, even if I had been prompted to look for it, the thinking about the character of literary language that might have come to hand was hardly enlightening. I was not aware, for
example, that F.R. Leavis had explained his notion that ‘works of art act their moral judgements’ in an essay on Samuel Johnson’s criticism of Shakespeare, in the context of the Augustan tradition:

[Johnson] cannot appreciate the life-principle of drama, as we have it in the poetic-creative use of language – the use by which the stuff of experience is presented to speak and act for itself...

Johnson cannot understand that works of art enact their moral valuations... for Johnson a moral judgment that isn’t stated isn’t there... Such a use of language ... must tend to turn forms and conventions from agents of life into debilitating conventionalities, such as forbid the development of the individual sensibility and set up an insulation against any vitalizing recourse to the concrete. (1952, p. 110)

George Eliot is certainly interested in presenting “moral valuations”. In what sense, though, are they ‘enacted’? The run of the language mimics the vagaries of Sir James’ mind, with their absurd assumptions and contradictions, and by this means contrives to put them in an ironic light. Terms or usages – “forms and conventions” – such as “predominance”, “this handsome girl”, “put down” and “of sounder quality” are employed with satiric – even bitter – intent. To call them “agents of life”, however, is to step ambitiously into ill-defined territory.

How might a “vitalizing recourse to the concrete” operate here? Leavis seems to suggest that the language of literature works with reference to some external ‘reality’ – “the stuff of experience”, “life” itself – which is, ideally, made manifest in words on the page. Leavis had also written:

... what we have to look for are the signs of something grasped and held, something presented in an ordering of words, and not merely thought of or gestured towards. (Leavis, 1943/1948, quoted in Buckley, 1959, p. 162)

What was I as a reader to look for – the “something” which seemed to be both prior and external to George Eliot’s “ordering of words”, or the “ordering” itself? The issue presented as a paradox: effort to identify the “something”, “the stuff of experience”, “life itself” might lead me to a sharper sense of the suggestiveness of the words on the
page, but at the same time it would tend to distract from the nature and qualities of that “ordering” in itself. After all, what was ‘real’ or “concrete” here – a “vitalizing” “something” which tended to generate the words, or the words themselves? The two were somehow indistinguishable. For all Leavis’ strenuous empiricism, this was becoming mystical.

One of my teachers, Professor Vincent Buckley, a famous critic and poet, had written a commentary on Leavis’ criticism, along with that of Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot. He had summarized Leavis’ position approvingly – even reverently – and enigmatically:

And the condition of [an impulse nurtured in the inner life of the poet by his continuing experience of an outer reality] developing adequately in and through the poem is that the experience itself should somehow come to be present there. (Buckley, 1959, p. 164)

For a student struggling to discover his world, his language and himself – and the relations between them – this was both inspiring and mystifying.

2) ‘Terms of Discourse’

“For it is not as though many students of literature today do not read poems and novels fairly closely. Close reading is not the issue. The question is not how tenaciously you cling to the text, but what you are in search of when you do so.”(Eagleton, 2007, p. 2)

What stance, then, should the student reader adopt towards the literary “ordering of words” which for Leavis (1943/1948, quoted in Buckley, 1959, p. 162) may be so potent? Is it to be taken as revealing ‘life’, or as constructing a manifestation of it which, in a sense, takes on a life of its own? Are these perspectives mutually exclusive? What is the relationship between words on the page and meaning attributed to them? The notion that it might prove revelatory suggests a quasi-mystical or religious perspective.

Williams argues that the reader, equipped with an alertness to “the social and formal properties of a language”, needs to focus on both “the process and the result of formal composition” (1977, p. 46).
Leavis is concerned with “the poetic-creative use of language”, even if the way in which it produces literary manifestations of ‘life’ is unclear. Buckley rejects what he sees as Leavis’ “undeserved reputation of a simple didact” (Buckley, 1959, p. 180), finding rather:

It is obvious that [his] position is ... in a real sense, an anti-didactic one. For to transform the feeling for moral interests and issues into works of literary value on this level is not to use words to persuade the reader of some pre-conceived moral truth; it is, in a way, to create values. No matter how traditionally the creative writer holds his moral values, his recreation of them in literature removes them from the level of conventional acceptance or rejection. It creates new terms of discourse. (Buckley, 1959, p. 181)

This is a considerable advance in thinking about the language of literature, but much depends on what is meant by these “new terms of discourse” and what the reader might make of them. Are we yet operating at an esoteric, metaphysical level removed from that of “formal composition”?

When I recall the reading that was set at school, and, more to the point, what I made of it, a curious selection come to mind. In 1967, at the age of 16, I was required to study, for the Leaving Certificate, James Baldwin’s Go Tell It on the Mountain. The novel deals with issues of religion, sex and race. The first two of these were certainly on my mind at the time, and the third, in the sense that it involves being identified with a tight knit cultural group, was relevant to me. It came as a shock, many years later, to re-read the opening paragraph:

Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father. It has been said so often that John, without ever thinking about it, had come to believe it himself. Not until the morning of his fourteenth birthday did he really begin to think about it, and by then it was already too late. (Baldwin, 1967, p. 11)

The words of the characters – what “Everybody had always said” – do not so much refer here to a ‘reality’ as create that reality for the central character. The fourteen year old John does not have the resources to refer the state of affairs which seems incontrovertibly established by the assumption that “John would be a preacher” to an
alternative, albeit subjective, version of how things might be. John
cannot see how things might be otherwise, much less begin to forge
his own way in the world, because he needs language – different
“terms of discourse” – to do so. As the reader is to discover, the
inadequacy of his exchanges with people around him, family and
preachers, leave him impotent. He feels intensely uneasy, but the
culture in which he is immersed, struggle internally as he might
against it, has the last word.

I finished secondary school (‘matriculated’) at the end of 1968. In
early 1969, I found myself on the overnight train from what was then
Spencer St. Station in Melbourne. My parents saw me off. I was on my
way to a seminary near Sydney. I had just turned 18.

I was the oldest son of a large Catholic family, and I had a vocation to
the priesthood. So the story ran. Except at the time I didn’t see it as a
story. My mother told me much later that when she got home she
shut the door of the bathroom behind her and cried and cried.

Like John, I felt that a burden of expectations had been placed on me
to become a priest or “preacher” – one set apart. It was hard to tell
when these expectations had been initiated – perhaps, as John does
in the novel, I would have to explore my parents’ lives and beyond for
that – but before I knew it, this burden was, it seemed, nigh
impossible to throw off. I was a ‘good’ boy – dutiful, idealistic: how
could I gainsay the Holy Spirit, much less my parents, whom I loved
deeply? Besides, the notion of a ‘vocation’ involved the lure of ego, as
well as a daunting insecurity as to its basis. Yet the harder I tried to
believe that I had received a personal summons from God, the more I
doubted not so much my ‘calling’ as my own sensibilities.

I don’t doubt now that reading the passage above left me feeling
uneasy at 16, and that I repressed this discomfort. Because I didn’t
think at the time of John’s ‘calling’ as produced by language, and was
certainly not alerted to this possibility, I was left trusting vaguely that
I was in a different category from him – my vocation was in some
sense real and at the same time mysterious, so I shouldn’t attempt to
think too precisely about it; I should have faith. It is apparent now
that an incoherent religious discourse weighed on me.

Baldwin’s novel is semi-autobiographical, so it may safely be
assumed that his “experience itself” has, as Buckey puts it,
“somehow come to be present” in the words on the page, but there is nothing mystical about the literary expression of John’s experience, as it is framed in the opening paragraph. What counts is the way John finds himself verbally ambushed.

Yet I didn’t see it that way, and I wasn’t taught to do so, which raises the question as to why the novel was chosen for study in a school which aimed to promulgate a powerful religious ethos. It is hard to tell now, and memories of how the novel was taught are dim indeed, but I suspect that it was seen as a kind of cautionary tale. John has been placed in an impossible position not because he lacks the leverage of language, but because he doubts – he lacks faith.

Early in Go Tell It John tries to puzzle out his mother’s cryptic encouragement of him:

“... You going to be a mighty fine man, you know that? Your mama’s counting on you.”

And he knew again that she was not saying everything she meant; in a kind of secret language she was telling him today something that he must remember and understand tomorrow. He watched her face, his heart swollen with love for her and with an anguish, not yet his own, that he did not understand and that frightened him.

“Yes, Ma,” he said, hoping that she would realize, despite his stammering tongue, the depth of his passion to please her.

“... You put your faith in the Lord, Johnny, and He’ll surely bring you out. Everything works for good for them that love the Lord.” (pp. 35-36)

Mother and son love each other, but vital considerations remain unspoken. Just what does it mean to be “a mighty fine man”, and how does a boy become one? John’s mother tells him: “You put your faith in the Lord ...”, but it is apparent that for her this is a kind of desperate, blind faith rather than a plan of action that could conceivably work in the world.

The novel, set in 1935 in Harlem, and published in 1953, explores Negro life in America at a time when it was well nigh impossible for black people to make things work in a white world. This is a key issue, but I don’t recall any attempt being made in class to inform the novel with understanding of its wider social and historical context.
That the characters’ discourse of religion might prove inadequate in practical terms is, from a limited kind of religious perspective, beside the point, since this language is not so much a way of dealing with the world as their mainstay against it. In fact, their religious discourse can never be proved to be inadequate because it is, in a sense, not of the world: rather, it refers to a metaphysical entity. Thinking about religion in this way brings to mind my father’s fervent faith; I don’t doubt that, instilled in him by his tribal Irish-Australian upbringing, it was confirmed by his wartime experiences of pressing against the earth in a slit trench in Port Moresby under a hail of bombs.

In reciprocating his mother’s sentiments, John desperately wants to please her, and to communicate this desire to her. He feels “an anguish” which, given that “he knew again that she was not saying everything she meant”, is at least partly of her making. He cannot explain it in terms of his own, specific circumstances; “not yet his own”, it will inevitably wreak havoc so long as it has not been articulated, and in this way acted on, by either party. Still, she has also communicated her faith in him, and that counts for a great deal:

... she was trying to help him because she knew he was in trouble. And this trouble was also her own, which she would never tell to John. And even though he was certain that they could not be speaking of the same things – for then, surely, she would be angry and no longer proud of him – this perception on her part and this avowal of her love for him lent to John’s bewilderment a reality that terrified and a dignity that consoled him. Dimly, he felt that he ought to console her, and he listened, astounded, at the words that now fell from his lips: “Yes, Mama. I’m going to try to love the Lord.”

At this there sprang into his mother’s face something startling, beautiful, unspeakably sad – as though she were looking far beyond him at a long, dark road, and seeing on that road a traveler in perpetual danger. Was it he, the traveler? or herself? or was she thinking of the cross of Jesus?

John is left, in his “bewilderment” – given his awareness of his mother’s perception that he is “in trouble” – with “a reality that terrified and a dignity that consoled him”. He is in a bind. “This avowal of her love for him”, which yet does not spell out its concerns – “which she would never tell to John” – is dreadfully confusing. Failure of communication leaves him “certain that they could not be
speaking of the same things”, so that when he says what he thinks she wants to hear: “Yes, Mama. I’m going to try to love the Lord”, he finds, “astounded”, that he is involuntarily using a discourse that compounds, if indeed it doesn’t create, his problems. He finds that he can’t break free of it.

Yet its effect is not altogether as he had expected. He observes, movingly: “...there sprang into his mother’s face something startling, beautiful, unspeakably sad”. What is, literally, “unspeakably sad” is that he and his mother cannot come to terms with this discourse of religion which binds them and at the same time obscures, rather than illuminates, their actual circumstances in the world, and hence leaves him in danger – because it is, of course, him of whom she is thinking.

Some years after I had found my way back from the seminary I attempted to inquire into what had happened, in an effort to ‘debrief’ myself. My mother told me that she had been deeply disturbed about my leaving home. She felt at the time that I was not old enough to properly know my own mind; perhaps if I went to work for a year I might be better prepared. When she said as much to the priest who acted as a recruiting officer she was rebuffed. She had not, however, explored all this with me.

My father was perturbed at the idea that I would want to revisit – to his mind stir up trouble over – an issue which for him had been, in practice, resolved. I had returned home: that was that, and there was no need to touch a raw nerve.

Of course I understood that he would never want to hurt or damage me, but I needed to trace the kind of thinking that had landed me in difficulty. His discourse of religion, though, was not capable of being grounded in this way. He could not communicate his motivation because in terms of the perspective that I was now presenting to him as his son it did not make sense. And there was no way, given his investment in his religion, that he could possibly say so.

My mother said that he had been very proud of me. I was aware that he had made this pride evident to his friends. No doubt the idea that a son had been set apart to become a priest of the Church over-rode other considerations – such as whether it really made sense to separate me from my family at a vulnerable age and commit me to a life of poverty, chastity and obedience.
3) Literariness and Life

"It would be hard to figure out, just by reading most of these content analyses, that they were supposed to be about poems or novels, rather than about some real-life happening. What gets left out is the literariness of the work." (Eagleton, 2007, p.3)

I think I had, at 16, a reading background which disposed me to inquire into “questions of literary form”, but I lacked the formal direction which might have enabled me to turn this sensitivity to account. An exegetical, didactic style of teaching which was determined to discover in a text pre-determined religious or moral values dulled and misdirected it. I could not discern “new terms of discourse”.

In Go Tell It on the Mountain John talks to Elisha, “who was the pastor’s nephew and who had but lately arrived from Georgia. He was not much older than John, only seventeen, and he was already saved and was a preacher.” Elisha asks, disconcertingly: “Boy, ain’t it time you was thinking about your soul?” and continues:

“You got to remember,” Elisha said, turning now to look at him, “that you think about it with a carnal mind. You still got Adam’s mind, boy, and you keep thinking about your friends, you want to do what they do, and you want to go to the movies, and I bet you think about girls, don’t you, Johnny? Sure you do,” he said, half smiling, finding his answer in John’s face, “and you don’t want to give up all that. But when the Lord saves you He burns out all that old Adam, He gives you a new mind and a new heart, and then you don’t find no pleasure in the world, you get all your joy in walking and talking with Jesus every day.”

He stared in a dull paralysis of terror at the body of Elisha. He saw him standing – had Elisha forgotten? – beside Ella Mae before the altar while Father James rebuked him for the evil that lived in the flesh. He looked into Elisha’s face, full of questions he would never ask. And Elisha’s face told him nothing.

“But when the Lord saves you He burns out all that old Adam ...” chimed with the discourse of church and school, so I could have no
argument, insecure though I felt about it, with the idea that I could “get all [my] joy in walking and talking with Jesus every day.”

Similarly, the disturbingly pleasurable “evil that lived in the flesh” was a staple of my Catholic upbringing. I was an adolescent, and sex was, naturally, a live issue, if suppressed. Somehow I would sublimate all that. I was not so much “full of questions [I would never ask]” as prompted to assume the mantle of guilt. I was introverted by nature, rather than gregarious, but that was a good reason not to retreat into a seminary.

The novel shows how strictures against sex become a source of power, as when “Father James rebuked [Elisha]”. John’s ‘father’, Gabriel (his step-father, as it turns out, and antipathetic towards him) rails against what he is mired in himself:

He paused for only a moment and mopped his brow, the heart within him great with fear and trembling, and with power.

“For let us remember that the wages of sin is death; that it is written and cannot fail, the soul that sinneth, it shall die. Let us remember that we are born in sin, in sin did our mothers conceive us – sin reigns in all our members ... It was sin that drove the son of the morning out of heaven, sin that drove Adam out of Eden ...”

His real sin is his hypocrisy. Fortunately, salvation is at hand: “For the moment of salvation is a blinding light, cracking down into the heart from Heaven ...”

This recalls for me the rhetoric of the Redemptorist fathers, who would conduct an annual ‘mission’ at our parish church in order to jolt the parishioners out of their complacency. It reminds me, too, of the preaching that I was to find uncomfortably familiar in Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist. Temperamentally, I tended to be repelled by histrionic rhetoric, but at the same time I couldn’t counter it. I didn’t realize that a novel could be deconstructed so as to turn one set of words against another. In fact the novel doesn’t let Gabriel off lightly. His sister, Florence, pursues him like an avenging angel:

“No,” she said, “I ain’t changed. You ain’t changed neither. You still promising the Lord you going to do better – and you think whatever you done already, whatever you doing right at that
minute don’t count. Of all the men I ever knew, you’s the man who ought to be hoping the Bible’s all a lie – ‘cause if that trumpet ever sounds, you going to spend eternity talking."

This kind of riposte, delivered in a robust vernacular, potentially had much to say to me, in its puncturing of pretensions, about my discomfort with aspects of the culture in which I was immersed, but at the time I hardly noticed it. I would have needed to read the novel in a very different way to realize this potential. Taken as a whole, it bemused me. As well as finding in it an unsettling reflection of my own circumstances, I was drawn, with what I had been taught to believe was prurient interest, to its more sensational scenes, but there was a good deal that was beyond my ken. We are told early in the novel:

He had sinned. In spite of the saints, his mother and his father, the warnings he had heard from his earliest beginnings, he had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher, he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak. (p. 20)

The homoerotic suggestion here is an undercurrent in the novel that could not possibly be acknowledged in the classroom at the time. I was not even aware of it. Baldwin’s novel deals, as Leavis argues a work of art should do, with “the stuff of experience”, but what counts is the way its words construct a particular ‘take’ on this experience, which is not simply “presented to speak and act for itself”. In fact the novel does not simply let the reader see, if she knows what to look for, what this experience is made of, but also, since this “recreation [of moral values] in literature ... creates new terms of discourse”, provides the potential for a very different experience.

John is burdened by his guilt until near the end of the novel he falls into a quasi-hallucinatory state:

He knew, without knowing how it had happened, that he lay on the floor, in the dusty space before the altar which he and Elisha had cleaned ... He was like a rock, a dead man’s body, a dying bird, fallen from an awful height ...
And something moved in John’s body which was not John. He was invaded, set at naught, possessed. This power had struck John, in the head or in the heart ... (p. 221)

There is much more in this vein; John’s experience of being “possessed” lasts from dusk till dawn, when – finally, it seems – he attains a state of rapture:

Then John saw the Lord – for a moment only; and the darkness, for a moment only, was filled with a light he could not bear. Then, in a moment, he was set free; his tears sprang as from a fountain; his heart, like a fountain of waters, burst. Then he cried: “Oh, blessed Jesus! Oh Lord Jesus! Take me through!” (pp. 233-234)

If you can’t beat ’em, then join ’em:

Yes, the night had passed, the powers of darkness had been beaten back. He moved among the saints, he, John, who had come home ... (p. 236)

I recoiled from the rhetoric of this protracted episode, but there was more to it than I realized because I didn’t possess the means of identifying some of its elements. In fact John finds that his options are limited, for, if he exiles himself from his family and religious community:

Here was no speech or language, and there was no love; no one to say: You are beautiful, John; no one to forgive him, no matter what his sin; no one to heal him, and lift him up... (p. 229)

The rejection of his community’s discourse involves the loss of its love. John feels impelled to remove himself: “He wanted to rise – a malicious, ironic voice insisted that he rise – and, at once, to leave this temple and go out into the world” (p. 221), but cannot respond to this prompting which hardly presents itself as attractive in its persistence: “Only the ironic voice insisted yet once more that he rise from that filthy floor if he did not want to become like all the other niggers” (p. 222). At a deeper level John ‘hears’ – becomes aware of – the suffering of his race:
... rage that had no language, weeping with no voice – which yet spoke now, to John’s startled soul, of boundless melancholy, of the bitterest patience, and the longest night ... the darkness hummed with murder: the body in the water, the body in the fire, the body on the tree... (p. 230)

The ending of the novel is ambiguous as to whether John has joined his parents in their religion’s ‘take’ on the world:

... He turned to face his father – he found himself smiling, but his father did not smile. They looked at each other a moment. His mother stood in the doorway, in the long shadows of the hall. “I’m ready,” John said, “I’m coming. I’m on my way.” (p. 254)

It sounds as if he is on his way to somewhere else. If faux fountains won’t do, then he will in time find a different discourse, one that can give expression to the “rage” and “weeping” of his race. What, though, would I do? I think now that I was the victim of a cult in the sense that I did not have the resources or means, given that I had been somehow plucked out of the crowd by God, to deal with the conflict involved in thinking of entering the seminary as undertaking a role in life – as something I could try on and, if it didn’t fit, take off. Such pragmatic considerations were at odds with the notion of a God-given ‘vocation’. I could have no confidence that I was “on my way.”

Nor, for somewhat different reasons, did my parents prompt me with options. I had been placed on a plane on which the notion that I had a ‘vocation’ usurped the practical question – which, I realized later, deeply disturbed my mother – as to whether I was capable of making such a commitment. She did not see how she could act against the power of the Church or my father’s proud expectations.

I wonder now if things would have been different had they been able to discuss the pros and cons of the ‘decision’ with me – something as simple as: “Give it a go, and see whether or not it is for you.” That would have been to give me words with which to begin to organize and make sense of my experience. It would have been, in a literary sense, to begin to give it some formal shape. It would have fended off the metaphysical – which they could not bring themselves to do – and prompted me to find my feet. Instead I tried to assume the state that had descended on (or elevated) me.
I was under stress, not least because for some reason I couldn’t, no matter how hard I tried, believe in Him who had set me apart. That is, I couldn’t believe in God, that ‘being’ who was supposedly the reference point of the whole enterprise – of every moment of every day. At the same time, I couldn’t say so – even to myself.

I found myself in deep trouble; I had come to doubt not simply God but – much more disturbing – my capacity to grasp His existence. It is not surprising that my doubt turned inward because everyone around me – family, school, and now the seminarians, a large group of, as it seemed, bright, healthy young men – seemed to have no trouble taking Him for granted. Why else would they be there? I guess now they might have been there for all sorts of reasons, but at the time I could not even begin to sort that out.

So I doubted – because my confidence in myself had been so undermined – my ability to tell what was ‘real’. I suspect that my reading background played its part in prompting serious unease with, if not outright resistance to, the metaphysics which underpinned the monastic life. What, after all, would Huck have said? Eventually I had to move in order to stop myself drowning in my own claustrophobic crisis of consciousness, which cut me off from the world. I had to clamber onto some kind of raft...

I recognize, re-reading the novel so many years later, the disorientation touched on early in *Go Tell It*:

He moved to the table and sat down, feeling the most bewildering panic of his life, a need to touch things, the table and chairs and the walls of the room, to make certain that the room existed and that he was in the room. He did not look at his mother, who stood up and went to the stove to heat his breakfast. But he asked, in order to say something to her, and to hear his own voice:

“What we got for breakfast?”

He realized, with some shame, that he was hoping she had prepared a special breakfast for him on his birthday.

When I returned home the waters closed over what had happened. My parents loved me and were glad to see me – I realized later that my mother was intensely relieved and I’m sure my father readily
rationalized my return as being for the best. But nothing was said. They couldn’t countenance the idea that I had suffered trauma. It was too hard, not only because it touched the nerve of their care for me, but also because it involved that of their relationship with the Church.

I needed to find “my way”, and one means of doing so, even if I was not consciously aware of it at the time, was to discover how the pleasure that I found in reading could be turned to account in making sense of the world. That would depend not simply on finding ‘real life’ in literature but rather on identifying how its forms –its *literariness* – enabled and shaped this ‘life’.

4) **Learning Literariness**

After I returned home from the seminary I worked for the remainder of the year in a government office and the following year began an Arts degree, majoring in English and History, at Melbourne University. I did well enough in English to be invited into the ‘honors’ stream in second year. My tutor was Professor Vincent Buckley. My first essay, a substantial piece of work, was a comparative exploration of a passage from Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* and Yeats’ *Man and the Echo*. It begins:

> Both [poems] are filled with the sense of a nameless power which man cannot grasp. His soul is intensely troubled as he seeks to penetrate this overwhelming presence ...

What strikes me now is my conception of the poems as concerned with the metaphysical. I need, as I see it at the time, to turn away from imponderable notions of God, which have in effect pitched me into a crisis of consciousness, yet, far from finding ways of grounding myself in the world, I attempt to identify here with “intensely troubled” poetical personas who are struggling with “a nameless power” and “this overwhelming presence”.

In seeking to ascribe profundity to the poems I have already confused my dealings with the words on the page. This has a parallel with my naïve and idealistic striving after God, which have had the paradoxical and alarming effect – as on a drowning man – of loosening my grip on the world while sharpening my sense that I
need to cling to it. It is not surprising that I develop a passion for music at this time – especially for that of Mozart, which in its formal assurance speaks so ravishingly of the world.

Similarly, I am fascinated by literature. I fail to understand, however, that its profundity lies in its very materiality. What, after all, does this “sense of a nameless power” in Wordsworth consist of? The “power” cannot be altogether “nameless” if it is rendered in language that makes “sense” – which can be “grasped”. The speaker of each poem may be baffled by an amorphous “presence”, but at the same time the language of each articulates perceptions or awareness of it. In that sense it can hardly be “overwhelming”.

I conflate literature and life – “Both [poems] are filled with...” – rather than focus on the language that enables their respective representations. At the same time, my essay shows an intense involvement in the poems, because, as I take it, they convey vividly something of the nature of the world. I am striving, having in effect kicked free of religion along with the seminary, to focus on what is ‘sensible’ as opposed to metaphysical. I value literature highly because it promises to ground me and help me find my bearings. Yet, ironically, I am stuck with “a nameless power” and “this overwhelming presence”.

Of course my ‘failure’ to grasp the language presented to me reflects my state of mind. I am in distress; no doubt I present as quiet and introverted, perhaps painfully so. But how, from the perspective of a literary education, can this ‘failure’ be understood? What does it reveal about my relationship with the ‘literary’ word and to what extent might my experience be representative? Raymond Williams sheds some light on this state of affairs:

[The ‘magical’ or ‘religious’] offer their images as objectively real, transcendent, and demanding belief. Art offers its images as images, closed and real in themselves (following a familiar isolation of the ‘aesthetic’), but at the same time represents a human generality: a real mediation between (isolated) subjectivity and (abstract) universality; a specific process of the ‘identical subject/object’ (1977, p. 151).

My relationship to the language of literature is the critical issue. I don’t have a handle on how it might work as “a real mediation” or “a
specific process”. Yet I can, as a sensitive and practised reader, plunge into the ‘world’ that it summons up for me. Unfortunately, I am out of my depth because I don’t understand how I have found myself there. It is for me counter to religion, but in the sense that I cannot rationally clarify my relationship to it, it too leaves me at a loss. My experience of literature has uncomfortable parallels with my difficulties with religion in that I can’t see with any clarity “its images as images” and tend to talk about them as if they are “objectively real”.

I need, in the first instance, to think of literature as “the process and the result of formal composition” (Williams, 1977, p. 46) so that I can bring into focus questions of form. In the passage from The Prelude Wordsworth dramatizes, from his Romantic perspective, an episode in his youthful persona’s education in and by the natural world. The boy ‘borrows’ “a little boat” in order to row, as evening falls, across a mountain lake. Unfortunately, my focus on the language in which events find expression is clouded: “…the poem is full of dark forces which haunt the boy’s mind but cannot be explained or defined.” He may not be able to do so, but rather than simply summoning up these “dark forces”, the passage itself, in dramatizing them, enables the reader to appreciate their nature and import. I am not at this stage such a reader. For all that I am on uncertain ground, however, I demonstrate a palpable capacity to respond to the poem. As the boy rows his perspective on the horizon changes radically:

Quite suddenly the stillness of the scene erupts in the boy’s mind as

... a huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again.

We feel the vitality and malignancy of this monstrous apparition as the panic stricken rower flails against the water.

I’m not sure that “stillness” can “erupt”, and “quite” is extraneous, but even so this commentary is evocative. It doesn’t deal directly with the poet’s language but is a ‘creative’ paraphrase of it. Evidently my notion of the task, though I do not realize it, is to imagine as strenuously as I can the ‘life’ rendered by the words, and to put what I have summoned up into this kind of paraphrase.
“Vitality and malignancy” are telling at a general level while: “... the panic stricken rower flails against the water,” shows flair for language in conveying shock, even though it misses the wilful intensity of “struck”. I do not consider details such as the way the repetition of “huge” intensifies impact as a camera shot might, drawing back with the boy pulling his oars through the water. Nor do I reflect on how “instinct” reinforces the perception of the “voluntary” power of a nature that is, in revolutionary fashion, thought of as alive. Or how the line break creates the impact of “Upreared”. Nature is here no inanimate backdrop.

I have entered into the ‘life’ of the poem, but am struggling not simply to grasp it but to find a relationship with it as a “formal composition within the social and formal properties of a language”. If, however, Williams’ account of the treatment of literature at the time as ‘immediate living experience’ is accurate, then I am doing what I quite reasonably understand has been asked of me. It is just that I have missed a crucial insight along the way.

Vincent Buckley’s annotations are sparse; they are to me enigmatic. Yet he attempts to be encouraging:

A fair amount of this essay is quite good: sharp and careful. Other parts are both too expository (story telling as it were) and too vague; and I have noted some examples where you seem to me to be using an inappropriate critical language. But there is certainly something here to build on.

Just as I have reason, looking back, to wonder whether those around me in the seminary were really as clear about what they were doing as I, in my insecurity, assumed, so I am inclined to wonder about the apparent confidence of teachers and students in English at that time. It seems a touch heretical, even now, to question Vincent Buckley’s own relationship with literature.

But what is that “something” that I might “build on”? I can’t tell the difference between what is seen as “sharp and careful” and what is “too expository”. I have no idea what he means by “an inappropriate critical language” and I am too withdrawn and over-awed to ask him. The marginal annotations are too sparse, apart from a couple of indications of “vague”, to be of any help. The problem isn’t so much
that I need to use a different ‘language’ as that I can’t grasp the character of literary language in terms of a distinction between form and content. I need direction in this regard.

The only marginal comment of any substance is in response to my generalizing sentence: “The creative power of Wordsworth is in contrast to the mature desolation of thought conveyed by Yeats.” No doubt I think I am uttering – after wrestling with the poems – a ‘big idea’. Buckley responds: “I see what distinction you want to make, but this is a rather vague way of making it.”

It would have been helpful, not to say crucial, if he had pointed out that I needed to distinguish between content (“mature desolation of thought”) and form (“creative power”). But it seems that, for all his sophistication, he too is thinking at the level of content; as he understands it, I have in crude terms posed Wordsworth’s dramatization of the force of nature against Yeats’ reflections in relation to mortality.

It is not as if I neglect form entirely; I approach it in comments such as the following:

And as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan.

[These lines] convey wonderfully, in their rise and fall and slow movement, the surging of the boat through the still water.

Although I could have made more of the impetus created by the line break, this demonstrates a sense of the way in which the rhythm of the lines enacts that of the rower. Yet Buckley gives no specific indication that this kind of attention to language might be productive in a way that my strenuous empathy with the respective personae of the poems is not. I get into trouble by searching, as my essay develops, for Yeats’ tortured soul at the expense of a focus on his poem as a verbal construction. I assume that my task is to intuit a source ‘behind’ the language rather than allow it to stand on its own.

But the over-riding concern in all this is that it matters a great deal, not simply because I want to be rewarded for the effort that I have put into my essay but because I need to discover how the language of
literature can fulfil its promise and thereby help me find firm ground in life.
Chapter 6

Reading Ransom

"It is important to keep in mind that David Malouf is both a poet and a writer of fiction. In novels he pays close attention to structuring an engaging narrative for readers to enjoy, working carefully to express his stories through lively, close-woven patterns of images (word pictures), rhythms and sounds." (Smith, 2010, p.2)

I inquire, in this chapter, into how teachers perceive their task of promoting students’ engagement with a work of literature. I seek to understand how they see the function of ‘close reading’ – that is, close attention to language or literariness – in this endeavour.

My own view, as expounded in the preceding chapters, is that ‘close reading’ is critical not just to a grasp of the language of literature but also to discovery of the grounds of meaning making more generally. How, though, might a group of teachers envisage the difficulties and dangers, as well as the pleasures, of introducing students to a demanding work? What might they see as appropriate strategies in dealing with it? How practicable for them, and purposeful, is a focus on language in relation to the ostensible ‘life’ of the text?

The term ‘text’ suggests a woven fabric of ‘threads’ of meaning, while ‘work’, by contrast, gives a stronger sense of the materiality of language which is in a sense laboured over – or at least closely considered – by the reader and not just the writer in order to exploit its potential. Its very resistance opens up opportunities for meaning making: “When we treat something as literature, when we look for pattern and coherence, there is resistance in the language; we have to work on it, work with it” (Culler, 1997, p. 35 – my italics).

1) A ‘Novel’ Intervention

"More was at stake than technical innovation: the novel brought about a moral renovation when it looked away from the rampages of ruffians like Achilles and instead investigated the quiet lives of those who, like Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch, rest in ‘unvisited tombs’.” (Conrad, 2009)

David Malouf’s novel, Ransom, set as an option for study in English in students’ final school year in Victoria, is germane in considering the
issue of ‘literariness’ because, as a rewriting of the final book of Homer’s *The Iliad*, it offers opportunities to consider how Malouf uses form to intervene in “Homer’s fatalistic universe” (Conrad, 2009).

*Ransom* takes Homer’s *The Iliad* as its ‘text’, aiming, in lyrical mode, to subvert as an act of homage what it sees as a closed, pre-determined world of gods and heroes. It is not easy to grasp its opening pages without some awareness of this context, as expressed with characteristic dash in Pope’s translation. Achilles mourns the loss of his friend, Patroclus, slain in battle by Hector. Achilles cannot sleep; he tosses and turns until, near dawn, he rises, seeking an outlet for his turbulent emotions on the beach:

Now from the finish’d games the Grecian band
Seek their black ships, and clear the crowded strand,
All stretch’d at ease the genial banquet share,
And pleasing slumbers quiet all their care.
Not so Achilles: he, to grief resign’d,
His friend’s dear image present to his mind,
Takes his sad couch, more unobserved to weep;
Nor tastes the gifts of all-composing sleep.
Restless he roll’d around his weary bed,
And all his soul on his Patroclus fed:
The form so pleasing, and the heart so kind,
That youthful vigour, and that manly mind,
What toils they shared, what martial works they wrought,
What seas they measured, and what fields they fought;
All pass’d before him in remembrance dear,
Thought follows thought, and tear succeeds to tear.
And now supine, now prone, the hero lay,
Now shifts his side, impatient for the day:
Then starting up, disconsolate he goes
Wide on the lonely beach to vent his woes.
There as the solitary mourner raves,
The ruddy morning rises o’er the waves ...

Achilles has killed Hector, but that is not enough. The coming of dawn is the signal for him to repeat a frustrating exercise in revenge:

Soon as it rose, his furious steeds he join’d!
The chariot flies, and Hector trails behind.
And thrice, Patroclus! round thy monument
Was Hector dragging, then hurried to the tent.
There sleep at last o'ercomes the hero's eyes;
While foul in dust the unhonour'd carcase lies,
But not deserted by the pitying skies:
For Phoebus watch'd it with superior care,
Preserved from gaping wounds and tainting air;
And, ignominious as it swept the field,
Spread o'er the sacred corse his golden shield.
(Pope's translation of *The Iliad* of Homer, Book XXIV, ll. 1-33)

Nothing will satisfy Achilles, but he must drag Hector's body behind
his chariot around Patroclus' tomb. To his chagrin, however, the gods
are intent on keeping the corpse inviolate.

*Ransom* begins with Achilles at the edge of the sea just on dawn, but
the novel strikes a very different note. The hero is not so much
“disconsolate ... on the lonely beach”, out to “vent his woes”, as
yearning, in the face of the harsh expanse of sea, which yet presents
an alluring aspect, for something that is hard, if not impossible, to
locate:

The sea has many voices. The voice this man is listening for is
the voice of his mother. He lifts his head, turns his face to the
chill air that moves in across the gulf, and tastes its sharp salt
on his lip. The sea surface bellies and glistens, a lustrous silver-
blue – a membrane stretched to a fine transparency where
once, for nine changes of the moon, he had hung curled in a
dream of pre-existence and was rocked and comforted. He
hunkers down now on the shelving pebbles at its edge, bunches
his cloak between his thighs. Chin down, shoulders hunched,
attentive.

Smith (2010), an experienced teacher and an academic who has
written articles on Malouf's work, advises student readers of her 'text
guide' to *Ransom*, published in response to the novel's appearance on
the curriculum, that they should “keep in mind that David Malouf is
both a poet and a writer of fiction”. His attention to “patterns of
images (word pictures), rhythms and sounds” becomes evident when
the line structure of poetry is used to highlight these features of his
opening paragraph:
The Sea Has Many Voices

The voice this man is listening for is the voice of his mother.

He lifts his head, turns his face to the chill air that moves in across the gulf, and tastes its sharp salt on his lip.

The sea surface bellies and glistens, a lustrous silver-blue – a membrane stretched to a fine transparency where once, for nine changes of the moon, he had hung curled in a dream of pre-existence and was rocked and comforted.

He hunkers down now on the shelving pebbles at its edge, bunches his cloak between his thighs.

Chin down, shoulders hunched, attentive.

“This man”, not yet named as the hero Achilles, suffers a modern kind of existential angst: he does not know quite where he stands in relation to the gods. And where does the reader stand as she attempts to make sense of the opening paragraph? The detail of the scene is finely picked out, but how to integrate the more realistic elements with what might seem a fantastic, if not esoteric, flight of fancy? Without an awareness of the passage’s intertextual relations to *The Iliad* as a way of making meaning, the reader inevitably finds herself bemused by it; even with this frame of reference she might well struggle to grasp how the language works because the sentences seem in some respects to be at odds with each other. The first, “The sea has many voices”, might be taken as metaphorical. The second, though – “The voice this man is listening for is the voice of his mother” – is not straightforward. Although the reader might speculate that in a literal sense the sea may be understood to be the ‘mother’ of life – which eons ago emerged from the sea – it would seem curious, to say the least, to have a man expect that his own mother’s voice could emerge from it.
The third sentence, with its “chill air” and “sharp salt” puts the reader firmly in a world of realistic detail, while the fourth is again disconcertingly hard to accommodate in these terms: the sea, as its surface magically “bellies and glistens, a lustrous silver-blue”, is identified with the womb, amniotic fluid and the progress of pregnancy. The man to be feels “rocked and comforted”. Then, abruptly, the reader is back in a ‘realistic’ world rendered by vigorous, colloquial touches: “He hunkers down now ... bunches his cloak ...

“This man” is “attentive”, if frustrated, rather than consumed by anguish. He is drawn to the sea, which is the profound yet elusive element of his mother, only to find himself shut out from it.

As it happens, Achilles’ mother is Thetis, goddess of the sea, who had married his father, Peleus, a Greek hero. Malouf aims to position Ransom at an intersection of the natural world, the world of human agency and the ancient world of The Iliad, which is directly subject to the agency of the gods. The novel sets out ambitiously to reconcile these entities, or at least to find a way of having them interact, with human capacities the focus of its attention. It aims to explore the possibilities of story telling, of literature, for locating human resources and processes in a world which is ostensibly in the clamps of force, whether human or supernatural.

The second paragraph of the novel amplifies a sense of the variety of the life of the sea, of the natural world, which is the elemental basis of human and supernatural:

The gulf can be wild at times, its voices so loud in a man’s head that it is like standing stilled in the midst of battle. But today in the dawn light it is pondlike. Small waves slither to his sandaled feet, then sluice away with a rattling sound as the smooth stones loosen and go rolling.

That the sea can be violent is realized, significantly, in terms of battle; “but today in the dawn light” it is serene – “pondlike” even – while betraying its restlessness. The “small waves” are potently alliterative as they “slither to his sandalled feet, then sluice away.”

In the third paragraph of Ransom’s brief opening section, which acts as a kind of overture, a focus on the elemental is confirmed:
The man is a fighter, but when he is not fighting he is a farmer, earth is his element. One day, he knows, he will go back to it.

This sets up a surprising ambiguity, because it is not farming that ‘the man’ will go back to, but earth:

All the grains that were miraculously called together at his birth to make just these hands, these feet, this corded forearm, will separate and go their own ways again. He is a child of earth.

This is a blunt if poetic way of putting the fact of death. At the same time, given that he is well aware that he is alive, it is “his mother’s element” that commands ‘the man’s’ attention:

But for the whole of his life he has been drawn, in his other nature, to his mother’s element. To what, in all its many forms, as ocean, pool, stream, is shifting and insubstantial. To what accepts, in a moment of stillness, the reflection of a face, a tree in leaf, but holds nothing, and itself cannot be held.

2) ‘Striving Towards the Poetic’

“The big question: ‘Does it work?’” (Doug)

I wanted to discover what teachers might make of Ransom as a text that could serve in the literary education of senior secondary students. I asked a small group of teachers if they would be prepared to help me in my inquiry by meeting to discuss the novel in this light. I had told them of my particular interest in close reading, but they were not aware initially of how this might play out in my own reading of the novel or of how I wanted to introduce it as a key element of the discussion.

Such discussion of a nominated text is, however, familiar to teachers, as they need to engage in it in order to choose texts from a list of options for their students to study. They discriminate not just on the basis of their assessment of the literary merit of a particular work,
but according to whether or not they think it will capture their students’ interest and lend itself to particular teaching strategies.

One of the group of three teachers is Carol, the very experienced teacher referred to in Chapter 1. Carol has specialized in teaching English Literature for the bulk of her career; she is known among her colleagues for bringing to bear on texts in English a ‘literary’ perspective which involves close attention to language and images.

The second member of the group is her colleague, Krista, an English and Drama teacher who is in a younger age bracket by about fifteen years. The third is Krista’s husband, Doug, whose major interest is Drama, but who currently teaches English Literature to students in their penultimate year of schooling. Doug, who is well known for writing and producing community drama projects, teaches at a different State school in this regional city. Unlike Carol and Krista, Doug is not committed to teaching the novel; he is therefore not under any pressure to ‘make the best of it’, and perhaps feels that he is in a position to contribute to the discussion by offering contrary opinions. This is the second year for Carol and Krista of teaching *Ransom* to their Year 12 English students.

The group meets at Carol’s house and the discussion begins after dinner. I introduce the excerpts from Pope’s translation of *The Iliad*, discussed above, before turning to the novel:

Paul: ... All right, so what I’m interested in is ‘what have we got here?’ Now, as you mentioned, Carol, your principal says he’s finding it hard work to ‘get into’ this thing, so quite possibly the kids are too.

Carol: They do ... they find ... they have trouble initially with it.

The question arises as to how students, who are obviously much less experienced and accomplished readers than this group of teachers, might be expected to make sense of the novel’s opening pages. As it happens, the school principal is a former English teacher, yet he finds them ‘hard’ to fathom. The expression ‘get into’ a book warrants investigation in itself because it involves the relationship between form and content.
Paul: So what I’m thinking about, wondering about, is what Malouf is actually up to here ... what he’s doing, and how we might approach it, because I’m interested in close reading essentially. I suppose I’m asking us to do a little bit of close reading.

Doug: Right.

Carol: For us to do what? I thought you were more interested in how we imparted ...

I attempt to establish here the terms of the discussion. I shift ground in order to broaden perspective from investigation of the character of the text to how readers might conceptualize their encounter with it. Carol had evidently expected discussion in terms of teaching strategies, which suggests subject matter in common. To what extent, though, do these teachers share a reading of the text?

More fundamentally, how do they conceptualize it? Teaching strategies are aimed at achieving particular goals. But what do these teachers individually see as the character and qualities of this particular text? That is, what might they aim to teach and to what purpose? It is on this ground, as they see it, that they might decide whether or not they find the text amenable to teaching and hence productive for their students.

The discussion continues with acknowledgement that even an ‘expert’ reader can expect to find the opening pages difficult to grasp:

Paul: Well, okay, so we go back to this page in front of us. When it says, “The sea has many voices” ... At one level that’s metaphorical ... How would you take that? He’s trying to get into the story with this particular first sentence, first paragraph ... and it’s actually pretty perplexing I think.

Krista: For students? Yeah, just for people ...

Krista welcomes the admission of confusion. Doug takes up the challenge by differentiating Malouf’s work from Homer’s:

Doug: Well, he sites it by the sea, and it’s not as if the sea becomes a massive metaphor within the whole piece ... in the
whole piece he seems to want to climb inside the heads of his various protagonists ... much more so than, say, [the Pope translation] does. So, it’s very modern in that it embraces the individual ... ah, embodies it, and that celebration of the individual forms the backbone of the whole piece... So that we see it from within the experiences and perceptions of the various characters he focuses on. And at the same time, he’s interpreting everything for us from the outside ... it’s quite a, quite a tricky concept.

Doug thinks – no doubt with students’ likely difficulties in mind – in terms of characterization, and in this respect finds the contrast with the Pope translation helpful. He remarks that Malouf “seems to want to climb inside the heads of his various protagonists”: that is, Malouf is interested in registering consciousness. It is not easy, though, to reconcile form and content since the novel’s presentation of this ‘naturalism’ is not straightforward.

Krista turns, in response to Doug’s prompt, to the content of the characters’ “experiences and perceptions”:

Krista: Sort of goes against the Greek epic hero concern, doesn’t it? Of deeds speak louder than... You know, there was no concern for Achilles’ pain or his yearning for his mother ...

Carol: ... supposed to transcend all those petty and earthly complaints.

Krista finds that Ransom explores characters’ “experiences and perceptions” in a way that The Iliad does not. But a focus on ‘character’ can tend, paradoxically, to block consideration of how ‘consciousness’ is created and turned to effect:

Krista: It takes a while to get into the psychology of the characters. It’s not as if it becomes apparent from the beginning, because you really do need to unravel the mystery behind the characters by reading on...

I attempt to prompt a focus on the language that might enable the reader to grasp “the psychology of the characters” and to understand “the mystery behind [them].
Paul: When he says: “The sea has many voices”, it’s metaphorical at one level, but at another level he actually means it – literally I think.

Doug: Uh-huh

Paul: Thetis, the goddess of the sea, is actually Achilles’ mother. So it’s both metaphorical and, and in the sense of the Greek story, it’s literal: “The voice this man is listening for is the voice of his mother.” At one level it’s actually literal.

Krista: And that gets quite confusing, I think.

Language is used to marry disparate frames of reference. Krista has good reason, however for thinking in terms of character rather than language because her students need clarity at this level of narrative – what Thomson (1987) calls in his ‘developmental model’ “empathising”, which involves “mental images of affect” and “expectations about characters” (pp. 360-361):

Krista: There’s a line – those lines are merged ... Do the gods exist? Do they influence your life or don’t they? Do you have control or don’t you? ... Well, there’s one that’s there specifically, isn’t there? And then it’s questioned with the – the eagle? The falcon or the bird, I can’t remember the type of bird it is... Some people, the aristocracy, believe it’s a symbol or an actual god, and people like Somax think it’s a bird.

In this instance a peasant, Somax, puts paid to the aristocracy’s credulous views of the gods. As the detail of his observation of the natural world demonstrates, he is not blinded by superstition:

Mmm, the carter thinks, a chickenhawk. Riding the updraught and hanging there, on the lookout for a fieldmouse in the furrows below, or a venturesome hamster or vole.

But prompted by his mother, the priest Helenus proclaims it an eagle. The carter is surprised at this, though no one else appears to be. The whole assembly raises its eyes, and the murmur that fills the court is one of wonder and relief. (Malouf, 2009, pp. 101-102)
Krista points to the ambiguity of the role of the gods in the novel:

Krista: But on the other hand Priam will say he’s visited by the goddess, so then you think well do they exist or don’t they?

Carol: There’s all that speculation about whether we are meant to take the idea that’s come into Priam’s head about going to ... you know ... fetch the body of his son in a simple garment divested of all his kingly apparel. Are we meant to take that, within the narrative, as ... well, the idea comes from Iris [the goddess of the rainbow, the messenger of the Olympian gods], so it’s really quite derivative, it’s not his own? Or, to take it beyond the narrative, are we meant to see that as some kind of allegory for ... well, in other words, Isis as some kind of representation for the idea that it is impossible often to locate or define where ideas come from. You know, that’s impossible – it must have been a god. You know, it’s been placed there – I don’t know where it came from ... it just popped into my head ... it must have been done by a goddess.

Carol escapes, in a sense, from “within the narrative” as ‘realism’ to open up consideration “beyond the narrative” of how “we are meant to take” the ‘artful’ presentation of Priam’s revolutionary idea:

An old, dreamlike passivity in him that he no longer finds it necessary to resist will dissolve the boundary between what is solid and tangible in the world around him – mulberry leaves afloat on their shadows, the knobbly extrusions on the trunk of a pine – and the weightless medium in which his consciousness is adrift, where the gods, in their bodily presence, have the same consistency as his thoughts. (Malouf, 2009, pp. 41-42)

Carol envisages what her students might need to know in order to respond to the novel at the level or stage of what Thomson (19897, p. 360) calls “reviewing the whole work as the author’s creation”, which involves “drawing on literary and cultural repertoires” (p. 361). If “what is solid and tangible” exists in Priam’s consciousness, so “in their bodily presence” do the gods. But Priam, “by nature doubtful”, recognizes that he has been in a state of “dreamlike passivity”: 
... the goddess is gone. Only the last of her shining is on the room, and he wonders – he is by nature doubtful – if even this is only an after-effect of his waking.

But where else could such a dangerous suggestion come from if not from an immortal? One of those who are free to raise blasphemous questions because in being just that, immortal, they will never be subject to what might follow from the answer. (Malouf, 2009, p. 46)

The point is that the novel's language has contrived to intervene in the “fatalistic universe” (Conrad, 2009) of The Iliad in a way which makes it possible for Priam to recognize that, whatever the role of the gods, he has the power to raise this crucial question for himself. This alternative answer to the question posed by his consciousness is unspoken but remains implicit.

Doug is unhappy, however, with what he takes to be inconsistencies between the ostensible ‘realism’ of Ransom and the intrusiveness of the omniscient narrator:

Doug: To take that comment back to its structural form, and harking back to what I said earlier... um ... you’ve got (sigh) you’ve got a guy lying on the beach at the start of the book in the foetal position – now that’s a very modern sort of a ...

Krista: Image?

Paul: “He hunkers down now on the shelving pebbles at its edge, bunches his cloak between his thighs. Chin down, shoulders hunched, attentive.”

Doug: With his cloak between his thighs, you know ... So clearly, he’s in a foetal position, so this is not a book that could have been written before Freud ... and then ... to pick up your point, he shows us this image and ... he invites us into what his man on the beach is thinking and feeling, and we’re supposed to be – I presume – taking that on the level of well, yeah, he’s actually thinking this. But when you read it you start to think, well does anybody think like that? “One day, he knows, he will go back to it. All the grains that were miraculously called together at his birth to make just these hands, these feet, this
corded forearm, will separate and go their own ways again. He is a child of earth.” Is that a thought? “He knows he will go back to it.” That is, being a farmer. “All the grains ... will separate and go their own ways again.”

Is the guy on the beach thinking that? – I don’t think so. “He’s a child of earth” – he’s not thinking that. “But for the whole of his life he has been drawn, in his other nature, to his mother’s element.” So, to me he’s playing a very tricky dance, and he’s pretending to be taking us into the heart and the soul of these people, and nobody thinks or feels as eloquently or as specifically as his characters do.... I believe. So what we’re really reading is the superimposed mind of the writer.

It is becoming evident that Doug has reservations, on account of what he takes to be this problematic presentation of character, about the novel and its use in the classroom. For him the author is “playing a very tricky dance.” Although Mares (1988) argues that the study of literature should equip students with “key concepts” (p. 10), she is frank on this point:

There is no doubt that the main excitement and energy in the lessons I observed came when students were engaged in discussion about characters, surrendering themselves to the story as if it were a slice of real life. In this way the lessons sit well within the stated aims of English as providing the opportunity for personal and moral growth, for achieving self-knowledge through the vicarious experience of literature. (Mares, 1988, p.13)

While the “stated aims of English” have altered radically since 1988 in the light of theory, there is no doubt that Doug’s position is, given the force of this practical and hence enduring perspective, well founded. He cannot imagine his students “surrendering themselves to the story as if it were a slice of real life”. Krista’s comments suggest that she is sympathetic to this perspective, even though she is attempting to make the best of it for her students by posing puzzles such as that relating to the role of the gods.

Carol provides a different, literary perspective on this ‘realistic’ thinking. She suggests, in focusing on the opening sentences of the novel, that what counts is its use of language:
Carol: So much human endeavour or process finds its correspondence in the natural world, picked up very strongly there with the whole business of pregnancy. You know, that’s explored and articulated in terms of a natural force…. natural phenomenon… The sea surface bellying and glistening. But the image is beautiful the way it’s done there … the way he’s done that evoking pregnancy

Paul: “a lustrous silver blue”

Carol: No, the business of the membrane. You know, evoking the bits and pieces of pregnancy – “bellies and glistens, the membrane stretched to a fine transparency”. And again, that business of what Doug was saying before about that foetal position

For Carol what is at stake here is not ‘realism’ but the power of the language to create, through formal means, a ‘reality’ with which the novel can work. She moves from terms such as “finds its correspondence in” and “picked up”, which relate “human endeavour or process” to “the natural world”, to those which refer to the operations of language – “explored and articulated in terms of” and “evoking”.

Paul: And then you’ve got colloquial language like “hunkers” and “bunches”

Krista: Harsh

Paul: And then the poetic touches like “Small waves slither to his sandaled feet.” So why “slither”? 

Doug: Well, because it’s onomatopoeic and alliterative and a lot of it is striving towards the poetic … I find it difficult …

Doug takes a very different view from Carol of the novel’s self-conscious use of language. For him, language that is guilty of pretentiously, as he sees it, “striving towards the poetic” doesn’t belong in a novel which “invites us into what his man on the beach is thinking and feeling”. He has arrived at the conclusion that his reading efforts are not paying off:
Doug: This is ... does it work? The big question: ‘Does it work?’

Carol: Do you believe it does?

Doug: No, I think it’s rubbish; I think it’s pretentious crap ... I know what he’s trying to do ... he’s got a structure there ... it’s all there, but it’s not good... in my opinion.

Carol: Explain yourself man ... 

Doug: Anything that forces you to read it – six times – before ... I’m not talking about the whole thing ... I’m talking about a passage ... that forces you to read it six times

Carol: The opening ... because it is the opening

Doug: Yeah

Carol: Fair comment

Doug: It’s throughout ... before you really, really understand what he’s trying to explain, you know, the who, the where, the what – these are basic elements of any narrative.

Carol: But surely we can ... stay cool ... for pages until the thing gels

For Doug the “big question” or, rather, the pressing question is not “How does it work?” but “Does it work?” He finds the novel wilfully frustrating not just so far as his personal response is concerned but in pragmatic terms of its prospective use in the classroom: “I’m talking about a passage ... that forces you to read it six times.”

It is clear that for him, even though he says: “I know what he’s trying to do ... he’s got a structure there ... it’s all there”, “the thing” doesn’t “gel” as Carol puts it. For him – and, as he sees it, for his students – the means cannot be an end in itself:

Carol: I mean a lot of the significance, I suppose, the value and the appeal of that opening paragraph was ... was done retrospectively. You know, once some of the other things had
been explored ... but ... you know, we talk about willing
suspension of disbelief – isn’t that simply a willing suspension
... for a bit?

Doug: Oh, I gave it a shot.

(laughter)

Carol: But you weren’t making allowances.

Doug: I was waiting for the narrative. You know, you read the
Pope [translation] and there’s narrative from word one

Carol: But they purport to do such very different things

Doug: You know what’s happening, and there’s just as much
beauty in what Pope’s doing there ...

Carol: But the emphasis is quite different. As you said yourself
before, there isn’t that emphasis on psychological subtlety... or
complexity ... I mean – heavens above, Malouf takes how many
pages...

Doug: Absolutely not

Carol: And you know ...

Doug: But someone who knew a little bit about writing said
'brevity is the soul of wit', and if you’re going to tell a story ...
tell the story! And, and allow the rest of it to come to the
surface, allow the rest of it to ... to happen without effort.
Everything that happens in this book requires effort

Carol: Requires effort or reflects effort?

Doug: Requires effort on the part of the reader ... you know,
there are beautiful passages ... the man is a good wordsmith ...
um ... even in that opening ... you know, there are some lovely
literary tricks ... being performed ... but I don’t want to have to
work that hard
Carol: Some would say go and find a different genre... To me those first two pages are like having a mouthful of wine that's reputedly very, very fine, and rolling it round on your tongue and...

Doug: Did your kids really appreciate that? Did they really embrace that or did they go for the story?

Carol: Well, they didn’t at first, no, but hopefully they have later... There were a number of kids there who obviously felt... how can I put this? ... They were almost surprised by the intensity of their response...

It is evident that Doug and Carol bring to bear on the novel very different frames of reference and it is not easy to account for the one in terms of the other.

3) ‘Conventions and Notations’

“If we are asked to believe that all literature is ‘ideology’, in the crude sense that its dominant intention (and then our only response) is the communication or imposition of ‘social’ or ‘political’ meanings and values, we can only, in the end, turn away. If we are asked to believe that all literature is ‘aesthetic’, in the crude sense that that its dominant intention (and then our only response) is the beauty of language and form, we may stay a little longer but will still in the end turn away.” (Raymond Williams, 1977, p. 155)

Just what might be the imaginative possibilities of teaching Ransom? And what part might ‘close reading’ play in realising them? The notion of ‘close reading’ is introduced early in the group discussion only to be quickly subsumed by questions of characterisation before Carol refocuses the conversation on issues of language and form.

I should make it clear that I had no preconceptions as to the likelihood of this clash of views. I simply aimed to gauge teachers’ reactions when prompted to consider the value of close reading. However, what emerged was a valuable reminder of pragmatic considerations in the classroom. It was necessary for me, when editing the data and providing commentary on it, to resist being too easily persuaded by Carol’s point of view, which happened to be in line with my own, in order to ensure that Doug’s concerns were adequately represented.
For Doug what is at stake is not so much ideology or aesthetics as what might work with prospective students. His critique of the novel is understandably motivated by his sense – on the basis of many years of classroom experience – of the importance of ‘relevance’, of engaging adolescents in narrative and the experiences of characters. Carol, on the other hand, sees an opportunity to challenge students with formal, aesthetic considerations. These are posed as alternatives, but can they be reconciled? Mares (1988) finds – nearly three decades ago:

Running through the lessons and examination papers [considered as data] is a theme I have called ‘personalism’. By this I mean something like [in Peter Medway’s phrase] ‘presenting the world as experienced by an individual centre of consciousness’ and I take it to be one expression of the ideology of personal growth. I use ‘personalism’ first to refer to the concentration on the ‘persons’ of the characters in the text, second to identify the pervasive expectation that pupils will give a personal response to what they read or to the questions they are asked, and finally, to the persistent implication in classroom talk and examination questions, that reading is about getting into direct, personal communication with the author. (Mares, 1988, p.10)

Krista and Doug would seem to be, with good reason, in sympathy with this persistent view of the use of literary texts in the classroom. It persists because at one level it works: “There is no doubt that the main excitement and energy in the lessons I observed came when students were engaged in discussion about characters, surrendering themselves to the story as if it were a slice of real life...” (Mares, 1988, p.13). Yet Mares is dissatisfied:

The point to be made is that even if teachers hope that, in the course of studying literature, students will develop key concepts and master complex and disciplined intellectual tools, this is not what the curriculum statements celebrate. It is individual moral growth – whether this is called developing a refined sensibility or formulating an identity – that has traditionally been given pride of place in the rhetoric in defence of teaching English (Mares, 1988, p.10).
What though are these “key concepts” and “complex and disciplined intellectual tools” which Mares finds lacking? Can the engagement with narrative and characters that Doug takes to be of primary importance be reconciled with the attention to – the heightened appreciation of – language that is the ground of Carol’s approach?

Raymond Williams’s work can help us to understand the grounds of these different perspectives. What, for a start, is ‘close reading’? Is it simply a matter of taking the words on the page slowly and carefully – “that lingeringly close textual analysis known as practical criticism” (Higgins 1999, pp. 172-173)? Readers come to the words with certain assumptions, or perhaps with great uncertainty. Williams finds that:

... in looking at actual writing, the crippling categorizations and dichotomies of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, or of ‘discursive’ and ‘imaginative’ or ‘referential’ and ‘emotive’ stand regularly not only between works and readers (whence they feed back, miserably, into the complications of critical theory) but between writers and works, at a still active and shaping stage. (1977, p. 146)

Close reading must be predicated on perceiving more accurately what kind of thing it is dealing with. For Conrad (2009), “Ransom is a philosophical meditation on Homer’s fatalistic universe...” Do students and teachers, in embarking on this text, see themselves as reading a “philosophical meditation” – and should they do so? In what sense is Ransom ‘fiction’ or ‘literature’? How helpful might these terms be in this instance? The ‘novel’ begins with a character, Achilles, drawn from a Greek epic written thousands of years ago, so in that sense Malouf doesn’t ‘make him up’. Williams argues:

To move, by definition, from the ‘creative’ to the ‘fictional’, or from the ‘imaginative’ to the ‘imaginary’, is to deform the real practices of writing under the pressure of the interpretation of certain specific forms. (1977, p. 148)

Given that all writing is, in a sense, ‘creative’ and ‘imaginative’, to think of Ransom as ‘fictional’ and ‘imaginary’ is to lose sight of or to “deform” the potential productivity of its language by the assumption that it belongs in a relatively limited category. Similarly, it is necessary to be open to the construction of characters:
... the extreme negative definition of ‘imaginary persons’ – ‘who did not/do not exist’ ... modulates in practice into the series: who existed in this way; who might (could) have existed; who might (could) exist; who essentially (typically) exist. (p. 148)

We see this ‘modulation’ playing out in the language of the opening pages of the novel, which aims to at once reconcile and subvert “Homer’s fatalistic universe” with a representation of a world that is elemental and susceptible to human agency. Malouf attempts to engage his reader in an exploration of how ‘creative’, ‘imaginative’ use of an ancient story of war might inform the way we “essentially (typically) exist”. That story speaks to a modern culture which, for all its advances, is well acquainted with violence. Bernard Knox writes, in his introduction to Robert Fagles’ translation of *The Iliad*:

Three thousand years have not changed the human condition in this respect; we are still lovers and victims of the will to violence, and so long as we are, Homer will be read as its truest interpreter (1990 p. 29).

This assumption of an unchanging “human condition” does not rest easily with Malouf:

But the opening Malouf makes in the story suffices to question the values of the epic, which enabled poets to glorify violence by extolling "arms and the man", and to propose an alternative function for literature. (Conrad 2009)

And this “opening” depends on Malouf’s use of language. Williams makes a distinction between

... ‘expressivism’, in its simplest forms of ‘psychological realism’ or the writing of ‘personal experience’, or its disguised forms of naturalism and simple realism – expressing the truth of an observed situation or fact – and on the other hand, ‘formalism’, in its variants of instances of a form, assemblies of literary devices, or ‘texts’ of a 'system of signs'. (1977, p. 165)

The focus in the group discussion on how ‘psychological realism’ is managed in the novel to the exclusion of what its language is doing at a more fundamental, ‘formal’ level bears out Williams’ observation
that “Each of these general theories grasps elements of the practice of writing, but commonly in ways which deny other real elements and even make them inconceivable” (p. 165).

The implications of the fundamental understanding that “… whatever else it may be, literature is the process and the result of formal composition within the social and formal properties of a language” cannot be pursued. Instead we find “the effective suppression of this process and its circumstances … by shifting the concept to an undifferentiated equivalence with ‘immediate living experience’…” (Williams, 1977, p. 45).

Although, as has been discussed, there would seem to be good reason for the persistence of ‘personalism’ (Mares, 1988), students may thereby fail to grasp Ransom at a material level that is critical not only to an apprehension of the novel but to their wider literary education. This can be demonstrated by close reading of its opening pages.

The Iliad is concerned, as in the excerpt from Pope’s translation, with Achilles’ anguish at the death of Patroclus, but Ransom, which emerges from and speaks to a different culture, can be introspective and – paradoxically – metaphysical in ways that were not available to the former. It can do without overt gods, finding meaning in detail which to the epic would have seemed out of place in telling of ‘greatness’. Conrad (2009) outlines the dimensions of this enterprise:

Priam bravely chooses to do "something impossible. Something new", and emphasises that his ouverture to the enemy is "novel, unthinkable". There is a literary manifesto in Malouf’s varying of the repeated adjective. In the eighteenth century the novel counted as a new form because it had the courage to secede from classical rules. More was at stake than technical innovation: the novel brought about a moral renovation when it looked away from the rampages of ruffians like Achilles and instead investigated the quiet lives of those who, like Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch, rest in "unvisited tombs".

Although Conrad tends to downplay “technical innovation” in emphasizing the “moral renovation” which the novel brought about, the one can’t do without the other. Malouf frames Achilles as a ‘character’ who – the son of a human father (Peleus) and an immortal
sea nymph (Thetis) – has been disconcerted to discover that, in spite of what he had taken to be his “other nature”, he has become an epic hero. This status comes at a cost: he has lost the fluidity and sense of possibility of his mother’s element; he not only feels confined to the earth but knows that he is pre-destined:

One day when he put his foot down on the earth he knew at once that something was different. A gift he had taken as natural to him, the play of a dual self ... had been withdrawn...

He was his father’s son and mortal. He had entered the rough world of men, where a man’s acts follow him wherever he goes in the form of story. A world of pain, loss, dependency, bursts of violence and elation; of fatality and fatal contradictions, breathless leaps into the unknown; at last of death – a hero’s death out there in full sunlight under the gaze of gods and men, for which the hardened self, the hardened body, had daily to be exercised and prepared. (p. 5)

Paradoxically, Malouf’s Achilles doesn’t have the sort of control over his destiny that Homer’s hero can exercise: he is a creature of subconscious, involuntary motivations. Homer’s Achilles, by comparison, knows only too well the consequence of his decision, as expressed movingly in Pope’s translation:

Lost herds and treasures we by arms regain,
And steeds unrival’d on the dusty plain:
But from our lips the vital spirit fled,
Returns no more to wake the silent dead.
My fates long since by Thetis were disclosed,
And each alternate, life or fame, proposed;
Here, if I stay, before the Trojan town,
Short is my date, but deathless my renown:
If I return, I quit immortal praise
For years on years, and long-extended days.

(Book ix, ll. 186-196)

Malouf wants to avoid having Thetis intrude; instead, he has Achilles demonstrate awareness – of his own volition – of his mortality. Malouf uses the beach setting to effect in realizing this intimation:
A breeze touches his brow. Far out where the gulf deepens, small waves kick up, gather, then collapse, and new ones replace them; and this, even as he watches, repeats itself, and will do endlessly whether he is here or not to observe it: that is what he sees. In the long vista of time he might already be gone. It is time, not space, he is staring into (p. 6).

“... kick up” suggests a sudden spurt of self willed energy which can only “gather” – contriving a precarious grace – before inevitable “collapse”. Malouf plumbs the consciousness of his hero to show in physical terms concepts of time, space and mortality. His Achilles is alerted to his fate by observation of the physical world rather than by communication with the gods.

Williams argues: “The really severe limitation [of the concept of ‘literature’] is the line drawn between all [its] variations and other ‘non-literary’ forms of writing” (1977, p.146). He traces from an historical perspective how

... especially in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, [the concept of “‘literature’ as a body of ‘polite learning’] ... broke down. ‘Literature’ became either the conceded or the contemptuous alternative – the sphere of imagination or fancy, or of emotional substance and effect – or, at the insistence of its practitioners, the relatively removed but again ‘higher’ dimension – the creative as distinguished from the rational or the practical” (pp. 146-147).

Beyond the question of the nature of the characters and whether or not they are ‘realistic’ – as Doug puts it: “Nobody thinks or feels as eloquently or as specifically as his characters do” – is the issue of whether or in what sense “what we’re really reading is the superimposed mind of the writer.” The writer is here using his ‘characters’ to give an account of the world:

From his first book, Johnno, [Malouf’s] themes have focused on "male identity and soul-searching”. He said that much of the male writing that preceded him "was about the world of action. I don’t think that was ever an accurate description of men’s lives”. He believes that it was Patrick White who turned this around in Australian writing—that White’s writing was the kind "that goes behind inarticulacy and or unwillingness to
speak, writing that gives the language of feeling to people who
don't have it themselves." (Gilling, Tom, "David Malouf: Writer", The Weekend Australian Magazine, 2–3 August 2008, p. 28)

It is necessary to make a distinction between a character being
presented as aware of his mortality and having the capacity – as if
“superimposed” – to articulate this awareness “eloquently” and
“specifically”. Achilles doesn’t, in the opening pages of the novel at
any rate, possess this capacity for himself; he is not, however, as a
character in a novel, ‘real’ and hence can be endowed by the author
with “the language of feeling”. The reader needs to bear in mind too
that while his characterization may have been influenced by
Freudian psychology, it has been drawn fundamentally from The
Iliad, and he was therefore conceived, given that his mother is
goddess of the sea, under unusual circumstances.

The question is not how ‘realistic’ we find this scenario, because of
course at one level it can’t be, but how effectively or productively the
language of the novel deals with its structural elements. It is for the
reader, in the first instance, a matter of coming to understand “the
specific elements – conventions and notations – which are the
material keys to intentions and response” (Williams, 1977, p.157). A
focus on the ‘reality’ or otherwise of the character distracts from the
question of how certain “conventions and notations,” drawn from the
Greek epic, are transmuted. Again, it is necessary to bear in mind that
this “modern sort” – to use Doug’s phrase – of a novel has different
ends in view. Its “technical innovation” enables it to “investigate the
quiet lives” of characters such as Dorothea Brooke; Malouf aims to
use it to “bring about a moral renovation” in Achilles himself.

The place of judgment in acquiring a literary education has been
notoriously problematic because it brings into play questions of a
canon or hierarchy of texts. Williams finds:

It is still difficult ... to prevent any attempt at literary theory
from being turned, almost a priori, into critical theory, as if the
only major questions about literary production were variations
on the question “how do we judge?” (Williams 1977, p.146)

Yet understanding involves evaluation. Williams was writing in
reaction to what he saw as judgments which confounded “literary
production” with blinkered ideology (Williams 1979, p.335). The philosopher David Best puts the point nicely in terms of education:

It is an aim of education to encourage students’ likes and dislikes to coincide as far as possible with their evaluative judgments. (Best 1985, p.37)

**Evaluative** judgment, thinking things out, involves finding firm ground on which to do so. Doug’s aversion to Malouf’s text is understandable, given the reader’s difficulties in getting his bearings. At the same time, elucidation of how the novel ‘works’ in terms of its language has the potential to prove revelatory.

After the introductory section quoted above, the reader finds some illumination regarding “[the man’s] mother”, but even then it is hard to marry different conceptions of the kind of text we might be dealing with:

As a child he had his own names for the sea. He would repeat them over and over under his breath as a way of calling to her till the syllables shone and became her presence.

It seems that his mother is in some sense physically present – “... he felt himself caught up and tenderly enfolded as her low voice whispered on his skin” – but it is not easy to disentangle this ‘reality’ from the suggestion that her “presence” is engendered by a child’s fascination with the power of language to conjure up the world. No doubt this merging of perspectives, which may at first seem like a blurring, is what the novel intends, since – although the gods smooth the way at times – what happens in it is essentially motivated by men rather than, as it is in *The Iliad*, ordered by the gods. The child’s mother is not named or distinguished as Thetis, goddess of the sea, but is identified with his sense of her watery “element”: “He floated in the long soft swirlings of her hair,” evocative of luxuriating in a play of currents. What belongs to the realm of the gods in *The Iliad* is here rendered by the metaphoric power of language as physical. The goddess is as one with the “shifting and insubstantial” nature of water, as opposed to earth.

And when Achilles, in his growing up, takes on a more masculine, not to say macho, role in a sword and sandal world, this might be read as the normal movement of a boy from his mother’s sphere to his
father’s as his mother steps back. The notion that this involves the withdrawal of a goddess lends an experience which is familiar enough at a psychological level dramatic impact and mythic resonance:

But she had warned him from the beginning that she would not always be with him. She had given him up. That was the hard condition of his being and of all commerce between them. One day when he put his foot down on the earth he knew at once that something was different...

“Commerce”, the exchange of goods, might seem a strangely neutral, technical term to use following intimations of the warmth of the relationship between mother and child – “... he felt himself caught up and tenderly enfolded ...” – but it is appropriate to “the hard condition of his being”. Ransom throws into sharp relief and amplifies aspects of experience that are so ‘normal’ as to be invisible. Achilles comes to understand that

He was his father’s son and mortal. He had entered the rough world of men, where a man’s acts follow him wherever he goes in the form of story.

Again, “story” is a matter of words. The distinction between man and god marks out the terrain of the novel, enabling the reader to see more clearly this “rough world” which Ransom finds fearfully constrained. What might seem “fixed, inevitable”, preordained is not easy to accept:

But the sea is not where it will end. It will end here on the beach in the treacherous shingle, or out there on the plain. That is fixed, inevitable. With the pious resignation of the old man he will never become, he has accepted this.

But in some other part of himself, the young man he is resists, and it is the buried rage of that resistance that drives him out each morning to tramp the shore...

Ransom will “resist” the world of The Iliad by means of its scrupulous attention to “the form of story”. This is not ‘real life’ in the sense that looking for “the who, the where, the what ...” might imply, but a work
which – by what has been shown so far to be ambitious yet exacting use of language – has something ‘novel’ to say in relation to *The Iliad*.

4) Literature and Biography

Simone Weil wrote in 1940, in an essay entitled *The Iliad or the poem of Force*:

The true hero, the true subject, the centre of *The Iliad*, is force. Force as man’s instrument, force as man’s master, force before which human flesh shrinks back. The human soul, in this poem, is shown always in its relation to force: swept away, blinded by the force it thinks it can direct, bent under the pressure of the force to which it is subjected. Those who had dreamed that force, thanks to progress, now belonged to the past, have seen the poem as an historic document: those who can see that force, today as in the past, is at the centre of all human history, find in the *Iliad* its most beautiful, its purest mirror.

Weil goes on to define what she means by force: “Force is what makes the person subjected to it into a thing.” Her essay may be read as a commentary on Europe under the Nazis, but obviously it remains relevant.

*Ransom* was written in the aftermath of 9/11, and in essence was first conceived by a 9 year old in Brisbane in 1943 when, as Malouf notes in an afterword, his primary-school teacher read “the Troy story” – but had not finished before the bell rang:

... I was devastated... I had immediately connected Miss Finlay’s ancient and fictional war with our own. We too were left hanging in the midst of an unfinished war. Who could know, in 1943, how our war too might end?

My father had found himself, as a young man, in a world which was subject to extreme force. He too could not have known how the war might end. He had not disowned God in these circumstances but had looked to him for security. He held padres in high regard. It was not so surprising then that he had been filled with pride at the idea of his oldest son entering a total institution of what seemed to him a totally different stripe.
In the opening pages of *Ransom* the young Achilles, striving to find his place in the world, finds himself locked into a role which can win him lasting acclaim, but which he is well aware condemns him to being cut down in his prime. By contrast with *The Iliad*, Malouf’s Achilles does not have a choice: he finds himself, in keeping with the novel’s concern to achieve psychological realism, involuntarily compelled to submit to his fate simply by virtue of being born to a human father. He has “entered”

A world of pain, loss, dependency, bursts of violence and elation; of fatality and fatal contradictions, breathless leaps into the unknown; at last of death – a hero’s death out there in full sunlight under the gaze of gods and men, for which the hardened self, the hardened body, had daily to be exercised and prepared.

This “rough world”, full of confusion, where “a man” finds himself prone to “bursts of violence and elation”, demands that the “self” be “hardened”, so that it might be prepared to deal out, and to meet, sudden death. My father, like so many others, found himself in such a world in 1942-43, even if he trusted that death was not inevitable. *Ransom* is interested not only in the force which the world brings to bear on “human flesh” and “the human soul”, but in ways in which “the form of story” might deal with such conditions.

Malouf gives us on his opening page a man – Achilles – looking out to sea at dawn and doing a great deal of thinking. Malouf goes on to reveal in poetic prose the “woes”, which drive Achilles to “distraction” or “anguish”. His principal “woe” is that he is mortal, and hence feels that despite his better nature and its ‘intimations of immortality’, he is foredoomed.

*Ransom* is, potentially, a rewarding text for the adolescent reader to explore because it involves not simply questions of content – of reflecting on how one might find one’s place in a “rough” world which can exert such pressures – but investigation of form, which in a sense makes such literary experience possible. This in turn leads to questions of the fundamental part played by language in registering ‘experience’. The implications of metaphors, such as Simone Weil’s of a literary text acting as a “mirror”, need to be considered carefully:
[Literature] is an image of the truth that language is not what shuts us off from reality, but what yields us the deepest access to it ... (Eagleton, 2007, p.69)

As Raymond Williams recognizes, “language and form are constitutive processes of reference, meaning and value” (1977, p.155). To see language as like a window on the world won’t do “because a window clearly separates an inside from an outside, which is the last thing language does” (Eagleton, 2007, p.69). And to view the _Iliad_ as a mirror, as Weil does, again treats its language in a way that is misleading because language does not present a simple reflection.

Malouf provides a clue in his afterword to a key verbal strategy or experience of the opening of _Ransom_:

Thirty years later, in a poem called ‘Episode from an Early War’, still haunted by the characters in Miss Finlay’s story, I tried to bring the two parts of my experience together:

Sometimes, looking back, I find myself, a bookish nine year old, still gazing down through the wartime criss-cross shock-proof glass of my suburban primary school. Blueflint gravel ripples in my head, the schoolyard throbs. And all the players of rip-shirt rough-and-tumble wargames stop, look on in stunned surprise; Hector, hero of Troy, raw-bloody-boned is dragged across the scene and pissed on and defiled, while myrmidons of black flies crust his wounds and the angelic blunt-faced ones, the lords of mutilation, haul off and watch.

The nine year old finds himself “gazing down”, by virtue of a child’s version of an ancient work of literature, at a brutal reality from which no amount of “criss-cross shock-proof glass” can protect him. The first sentence, occupying the best part of four lines of verse, is ‘realistic’ enough, but then things turn surreal: the verbs “ripples”
and “throbs” in the next, short sentence – “Blueflint gravel/ripples in my head, the schoolyard throbs” – suggest an hallucinatory state which is yet intensely insightful. Just as he attempts to do in *Ransom*, Malouf uses “the Troy story” to discover deeper, disturbing aspects of ‘reality’:

Thirty years later, again, *Ransom* is a return to that unfinished story; to my discovery, once in 1943, once again in 1972, that

... the war, our war,
was real: highways of ash
where ghostly millions rise out of their shoes and go barefoot
nowhere ...

A fictional story has, paradoxically, led the child to discover – by connecting “parts of [his] experience” – a reality which, for all their “rip-shirt rough-and-tumble/wargames” is not available to his school mates. They could only “stop, look on in stunned surprise”. He can at least, by virtue of literature, begin to name this reality – which ultimately he can’t avoid – and thereby gain some control over it.

The image in the opening paragraph of *Ransom* of the “sea surface”, which, just on dawn, “bellies and glistens, a lustrous silver-blue”, similarly aims to marry what might seem disparate perspectives or frames of reference. The verbs, “bellies and glistens”, prompt a surreal conflation of ‘realities’. As it turns out, however, the novel is circumspect in the ways in which it manages the borderline between the natural or ‘realistic’ and the supernatural.

The notion that, in Leavis’ terms, Malouf’s prose has a “vitalizing recourse to the concrete” distracts from the fact of language and the ways in which it can itself constitute the world. We can detect, for example, a “vitalizing recourse” to literary antecedents in the advance and retreat of the waves in the opening scene: “Small waves slither to his sandaled feet, then sluice away with a rattling sound as the smooth stones loosen and go rolling.” These are not the first stones to be set “rolling” on a literary beach:

Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanced land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.
(Matthew Arnold, Dover Beach)

There is an echo of this “grating roar”, and something of “the eternal note of sadness”, in the recurrent “rattling sound” of the “the smooth stones” constantly falling back.

This kind of recognition of the cultural context and sources of literary language is of course not available to students unless the teacher takes the trouble to point it out, and even then it may seem unduly esoteric. What is fundamental, however, if the teaching of texts such as Ransom aims not only to have students write essays which win high marks, but to develop their capacities to name aspects of their world is a grasp of how expressive ‘content’ of the novel might be realized in terms of its form.

An essay written by Carol’s student, Sarah, on the topic Fate and Choice. How does Malouf highlight the importance of each? shows her coming to grips with the issue of how the language of the novel deals with the question of human agency in relation to the intervention of the gods (original spelling and punctuation):

... Malouf insists that the gods, despite there common influence on human behavior, can have different levels of importance and influence depending on how one perceives them.

Malouf shows there is a sense of comfort and security in knowing that ones fate is ‘fixed, permanent’, allowing one to trust that if ‘it was the [gods] intention’ it would happen.

... Malouf shows [Priam] to be ambivalent and ‘bewildered’ when he discovers that life may have an element of ‘chance’. Suddenly the realm of the conventional, the established is tainted by a ‘dangerous suggestion’ that humans may be able to shape their own lives, ‘to force events into a different course’.

‘Malouf’ is invoked here, not in an effort to “intuit” ‘established’ meaning that is located behind the words in “the notion of the
author” (Misson and Morgan, 2006, p.117) but to establish a sense of the purposefulness of language use. In effect, ‘Malouf’ could be replaced in each instance by ‘the novel’ or ‘the novel’s language’ but a sense of agency as personal no doubt heightens a sense of the potential of the language on the page for communication.

The student is in no doubt that meaning is to be discovered through close attention to language rather than through attempting to fumble behind it for the author’s purpose or through talking in terms of characters or ideas abstracted from it. She has something to work with in making sense of the novel and, in turn, the wider world. The ‘suggestion’ made available by language may be ‘dangerous’ but it is also – for her as for Priam – liberating.
Chapter 7

Teaching ‘Literariness’

“... we can see that the presentation – how that’s done – is just so central to how we respond.” (Carol)

I focus in this chapter on Carol’s teaching because she has over decades achieved significant success in enabling students to engage with the language of literary texts. This period has seen, as has been discussed, radical shifts in both literary criticism and education. She has worked at the sharp end of change.

Carol commenced her teaching career in 1973 at the age of 21. Or, more accurately, she began by teaching literature to a group of adults in 1972 when she was studying for her Diploma of Education. She was highly successful from the beginning. A reference from the headmaster of the suburban High School at which she taught evening classes in 1975 certifies: “Carol’s results were excellent with twenty-one out of twenty-three passing. Of those twenty-one, seven obtained a grade of A.”

In 1978 she was teaching at a high school on the south-eastern fringe of Melbourne. A reference from the Deputy Principal states:

Of the 23 students in [her Higher School Certificate English Literature] class, 21 obtained a Grade of D or above:

3 students obtained a grade of A
9 obtained B
6 obtained C
3 obtained D

These outstanding results reflect the teaching skills of [Carol] Her dedication and her enthusiasm have helped to make English Literature a most popular subject at this school.

In 2014 Carol taught VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) English in a secondary school in the regional centre referred to earlier. Much had changed in education over the intervening decades, yet her class still achieved results well above what might have been anticipated.
The great majority of students in Victoria now completed Year 12, although there was a wide gap between the results of high and low socio-economic status. Carol was teaching in a school which, unlike expensive private schools, was not regarded as of high socio-economic status. Patterson (2008) explains that

The English examination paper for the state of Victoria for 2007 is divided into two sections... A perfect score for the examination would be 60 marks. Section 1 is titled ‘Text Response’. This section is divided into two parts and has 40 marks allocated out of a total of 60 marks. The two-thirds weighting for this section suggests that the activity associated with ‘text response’ is highly valued. Part 1 requires ‘a sustained interpretative point of view about a text, supported by detailed analysis and reference to the text’. Part 2 requires a ‘developed and sustained discussion that analyses the underlying social or cultural values embodied in a text’.

It appears that the paper attempts to strike a balance among the pedagogic elements through these two parts – one focusing on critical analysis of textual features (and presumably, language), the second focusing on the intersection of social values and texts. The inclusion of ‘social and cultural values embodied in a text’ provides opportunities to explore what the popular press disparagingly refers to as ‘ideology’. (p. 318)

A revised ‘study design’, which was implemented in 2008, modified this arrangement in that the examination paper was divided into three parts: Section A was titled ‘Text Response’, Section B ‘Writing in Context’, and Section C ‘Analysis of Language Use’. Each section was allocated 20 marks.

‘Writing in Context’ required students in the end of year examination “to write an extended written response for a specified purpose and audience, exploring ideas and using detail from at least one text...” Contexts included, for example, ‘Encountering conflict’, ‘Exploring issues of identity and belonging’ and ‘Whose reality?’

The percentage state mean for the ‘text response’ section of the course in 2014 was 57. The school’s mean was 49 while Carol’s class achieved 60. Of course, her class lifted the school’s score overall. The scores indicate that just as it did back in the 1970s Carol’s work with
her students on what might be regarded as ‘literary’ texts improved their results on the high stakes end of year examination significantly – by more than 11 percentage points.

Carol’s work makes a revealing case study in how a teacher who demonstrates expertise in teaching literary texts negotiates the current policy environment in Victoria in the interests of her students.

1) The Quality of Attention to Texts

Terry Eagleton finds that students’ “accounts of works of literature” are too often deficient:

It would be hard to figure out, just by reading most of these content analyses, that they were supposed to be about poems or novels, rather than about some real-life happenings. What gets left out is the literariness of the work. (2007, p.3 – emphasis in original)

When asked in an interview to comment on this observation, Carol responds with an anecdote which she has shared with her students at the start of each year over decades:

I can remember the first year out ... it was with an adult group ... we were doing Anna Karenina, and I gave them ... it was the first class of the year and I was just giving them a broad outline ... and I was saying, “Of course, we’re moving to one of the great Russian novels ... you know, Anna Karenina, about the tragic heroine, who falls in love with a dashing cavalry officer and leaves her husband – with his big ears that stick out – and her son, and rushes off with Vronsky, this dashing chap.”

And I was aware that a woman in the front row ... and I said to the kids when I was telling them this ... she had enormous bosoms and they were trembling in front of me in the front row, and I realized they were trembling with indignation, and in the end I said, “Sue” ... we all had name tags – and hers was fluttering there – I said, “You’ve got a problem with something here?”

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She said, “Absolutely!” She said, “Any woman who rushes off ... who leaves her husband and son to some ...” (well, how did she put it? – I don’t know) “sleazy affair”, she says, “... is nothing more than a slut!”

Well, of course, my Year 12 kids ... there was a ripple of laughter around the class ... and the class that Sue was in, of course you could have heard a pin drop ... this was the first class ... there’d been no dynamic established ... no-one knew anybody ... and here was this very strident woman with the aggressive tones saying that just wasn’t acceptable that [Anna] was cast as a tragic heroine – this slutty woman – ... and I tried to make the point that she was perfectly entitled to that opinion ... and of course if a woman who lived up the road from her behaved in that fashion, then that opinion is entirely relevant ... “But”, I said: “Your job, Sue, is not to impose your standards here on whether you think any woman ... she’s not any woman – she’s Anna Karenina, she’s not real, she’s a construction of the text – and your job is to be sensitive to how Tolstoy presents Anna, not how you would judge her in an everyday, real life situation.”

Anyway, the bosoms subsided – temporarily – and later, after we’d studied the novel, I actually said to her teasingly, “Well, what do you think now?” And she said, “Yes, I can see what you mean – she is presented as a tragic heroine”, and I’d stressed the idea of, you know: “How does Tolstoy invite us to react to Anna – what sort of judgments does he tease from us?”

She could see that in the end, but when I tell that anecdote to my Year 12 kids they can see the point of that ... you know, we’re doing Cosi, and Doug is coarse – coarse grained, foul mouthed – he’s like a smutty school boy – he’s quite gross in many ways – yet I’m saying to the kids, “Why is it that you don’t condemn Doug? Why don’t you just dismiss him as an appalling human being?”

All right, they can start to see that Nowra presents him in such a way as to invite a kind of ambivalence: whereas we wouldn’t want to go to bed with him ... we wouldn’t want to marry Doug,
but we can see that the presentation – how that’s done – is just so central to how we respond.

This cautionary tale obviously has dramatic impact and indeed the way Carol tells it reinforces the concept that what counts is not simply the content of a story or work of art but how it is told or presented. Carol focuses on what students need to do: “... your job is to be sensitive to how Tolstoy presents Anna”, and she elaborates on the idea that the reader needs to work with the motivated, purposeful language that is available: “I’d stressed the idea of, you know: “How does Tolstoy invite us to react to Anna – what sort of judgments does he tease from us?”

As was noted earlier, Misson and Morgan (2006) cite Barthes (1975) in asserting: “... the standard mid-twentieth-century practice of reading is predicated on the notion of the author standing behind the text, establishing a meaning that it is the job of the reader to intuit (p. 117). Carol does not, even though she received a mid-twentieth-century literary education, ‘predicate her practice on this notion’; rather, she points to the material language – “the presentation” – that her students need to work with in making meaning. While she invokes the author, she does so in order to encourage them to engage constructively with what “Tolstoy presents”. She insists that Anna, for example, is “not real, she’s a construction of the text”.

She concludes by expressing this concept in terms of the text that her class is currently studying: “... we wouldn’t want to marry Doug, but we can see that the presentation – how that’s done – is just so central to how we respond.” What, though, do examiners’ reports reveal about the dealings of early twenty-first century students in Victoria with the language of a given text?

An excerpt from a student’s response to Stasiland by Anna Funder, published in the 2014 English Examination Report, provides some insights. The student responds to the topic:

‘Funder shows that victims of the Stasi were never fully healed following the collapse of the East German regime.’
Discuss.

The reader who is in search of guidance as to what examiners are looking for in students’ work is told:
The following response explores the implications of the topic and makes sound and thoughtful conclusions particularly well. The student is able to use examples from the text to interpret aspects of the topic. The response shows an excellent control of language, is fluent and uses appropriate vocabulary. This piece was assessed as an upper-range script.

Curiously, the focus in this commentary seems to be on the topic rather than on the text. One might have expected the comments to read, for example: “The following response is alert to the implications of the topic in developing a thoughtful interpretation of the text.” In other words, the focus is on ideological content – “the implications of the topic” – rather than on the language and form of the text, when meaning making depends fundamentally on the way in which ideas are realized in terms of its material basis. The second paragraph of the ‘response’, which launches into “examples from the text”, begins (original spelling and punctuation):

Funder’s most tragic character, Julia was the perfect GDR citizen. Growing up in a good home in which communism was believed, Julia only wished to contribute to this society and broadcast the advantages of her home. Yet her romance with a foreigner brought her to the Stasi’s attention. ‘Overtly’ monitored and restricted, her ‘private sphere’ was invaded looking back on her past, Julia confides in Funder revealing that the surveillance ‘damaged the worst’. Manipulated by the Stasi, her education and career were tarnished and her faith in the East German reign swayed as she was interrogated by Major N, her entire romance put under a ‘microscope’.

Despite nods to the language of the text, and a reference to Julia as a “character” there is little sense here of “the literariness of the work”. It might be argued that the student is dealing with a work of non-fiction so her “content analysis”, as Eagleton puts it, justifiably refers to “real-life happenings”. The form of the book is crucial, however, to its meanings, as reviews suggest:

It is the unorthodox style of Stasiland that has divided opinions. Written in a style more commonly associated with investigative journalism, Funder’s account is highly personal and therefore subjective, which is not to everyone’s taste. Descriptions of her urban wanderings, of distracted trails of
thought, and her quirky Berlin encounters, could be deemed superfluous, but there is an honesty and directness in her style that is extremely evocative. (Worth, Book Drum)

Even though the student understands how to read Stasiland with considerable insight, there is no suggestion that the grounds of response in this deeper sense are available to her. At the same time the use of words such as “broadcast” and “tarnished”, together with constructions such as “her ‘private sphere’ was invaded” and “her faith ... swayed”, indicate possession of the cultural resources needed to express herself with some elegance.

The other example of student writing in the 2014 report also concerns what would be categorized as a non-fiction text, in this case a memoir, Tobias Wolff’s This Boy’s Life. It is as if, after the crude ideological analysis of Wuthering Heights and A Christmas Carol, discussed in Chapter 2, which appeared in the 2013 report, students are being given a license to deal with “real-life happenings”. A lack of literariness, of attentiveness to the language of the text, can then seem justifiable. What is noteworthy, however, is not just whether or not students demonstrate attention to language and form in making meaning but the extent to which this awareness is acknowledged and rewarded. The student responds to the prompt:

“I had my own dreams of transformation…”
“The reader feels that Toby and his mother are never going to be able to improve their lives.’ Do you agree?

The response includes discussion such as the following, again taken – to parallel the first example – from the second paragraph:

The societal norms and expectations of the 1950’s post-war America inhibit Tobias and his mother’s ability to transform their lives. Toby’s sense of self worth is completely broken by his inability to meet the era’s stereotypes of masculinity. The notion that he ‘could not break down [his] sense of being at fault to its components’ who he is reveals his inability to reconcile his identity with social expectations. Wolff juxtaposes Toby’s ‘natural’ desire to ‘seek status’ with his complete and total discomfort with this own self. The contrast between the pacifistic and loving young boy who cries at a squirrel’s funeral and the gun-toting, rebellious teenager is a stark one. It reveals the overpowering need that Toby feels to conform.
The report comments:

This piece shows close meaningful textual analysis and develops a sustained argument. There is an awareness of the topic and exploring its implications throughout the essay. It is a thorough discussion that uses the text well, although better responses found more breadth in the discussion. Its expression is sound without being exceptional. This piece was awarded a score at the lower end of the top range.

How can it be that a “thorough discussion that uses the text well” lacks “breadth in the discussion”? There is certainly evidence here of “close meaningful textual analysis”, even though it is regarded as relatively inferior to the Stasiland example. The response begins with some sophisticated and derivative social analysis of “societal norms and expectations …” but then goes on to articulate, in a way that is missing from that first example, how form is productive of meaning. The student notes where a particular formulation of words (“The notion that he ‘could not break down [his] sense of being at fault to its components’”) and “contrast” (“between the pacifistic and loving young boy who cries at a squirrel’s funeral and the gun-toting, rebellious teenager”) are used to effect.

The student’s response is grounded in the text in a way that the commentary on it is not. Again, what are surely at issue are not simply the implications of the topic but the ways in which they are understood in terms of the text. The student or teacher who might turn to the report for guidance in this respect must be left at a loose end. It is clear, at least, that students do not benefit from focused attention to the grounds of meaning making as distinct from what is taken to be the ideological content of texts.

Comparison between these examples of student writing and a response to Ransom, a practice piece written under exam conditions, by one of Carol’s students, Kate, is telling. Kate writes in response to the question, “In what senses can Priam be seen to have succeeded?”

The most obvious of Priam’s successes lies in the fulfilment of his immediate plan to persuade Achilles to return to him Hector’s body for burial. This achievement involves enormous courage as Priam confronts the risks of venturing out into the unknown. Malouf’s emphasis on the conventions of Priam’s kingship – a role in which he was compelled to be “fixed and
permanent”, “unchangeable, therefore unchanged” – serves to accentuate the novelty of Priam’s undertaking. Moreover, Malouf’s imagery of Troy denotes the elements of security and familiarity which render Priam’s leave of such a sanctuary as all the more ambitious. Indeed, Malouf’s description of “snails the size of a baby’s fingernail” connotes the delicate and precious nature of the environment Priam has elected to leave behind.

Malouf is mentioned three times in this short example, not in an attempt to personalize the author, but to focus attention on “conventions” and on “imagery” or “descriptions”. Kate develops her ideas by attending to elements or aspects of form. Thus “Malouf’s emphasis on the conventions of Priam’s kingship” plays its part (“serves”) in terms of the larger scheme of things in making meaning, while even a detail such as “snails the size of a baby’s fingernail” is understood to be significant. Kate’s use of “denotes” and “connotes” indicates her sensitivity to the constitutive character of language and imagery. She has taken to heart Carol’s dictum that “the presentation – how that’s done – is just so central to how we respond”.

Kate is obviously an able student, and in fact she scored the maximum marks possible on the end of year exam. Her writing represents what Carol’s work makes possible for the most attentive and diligent of her students. At the same time, it is even more important that weaker students have articulated for them formal considerations in making meaning. Kate may be able to get by if left largely to her own devices, just as the writer on Stasiland manages by dint of the resources she has acquired as a practised reader, but those who lack such resources need a great deal of explicit assistance. The response to This Boy’s Life shows the benefit of this kind of direction even if its treatment at the hands of the examiners leaves something to be desired.

2) ‘The Basis of the Text’

“It is odd how enslaving a practice our efforts at liberation can be, how dictatorial our invitation to free response, how narrowing our widening of horizons, how leaden our feet on the ground.” (McAuley, 1968, p.20)
It seems that from the beginning of her career Carol relished the challenges of the classroom. Aged 21 and studying for her Diploma of Education, she wrote an assignment on her approach to teaching Chaucer’s Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. In effect, she formulates, at the start of her teaching career, elements of her “practical approach” to teaching literary texts. Considerations include:

- Clarification of the relationship between form and content
- Referral to the author as the source of meaning in order to focus attention on language as motivated and purposeful as distinct from ‘personalising’ (Mares, 1988) the author or characters
- The generation of meaning from attention to language as distinct from dealing in relative abstractions
- Conceptualization of language as constitutive rather than as instrumental or as simply a medium for narrative and ideology
- A sense of the reader as entering into a collaborative relationship with the words on the page
- A grasp of language as “a socially shared and reciprocal activity” (Williams, 1977, p.166)

While Carol’s interaction with students over the years has no doubt honed her skills in interacting with them, she very quickly developed an unusually clear sense, given the exigencies of the classroom, as to how the fundamentals of her own literary education might be applied to helping her students to engage with the language of literary texts.

In fact she had already begun her teaching career: “During the year I’ve been responsible for seven or eight literature students at a tutoring College ...” She reflects on her experience of teaching Chaucer’s Prologue:

... from the beginning, it’s become apparent to me that they have somehow been incapable of seeing ... the Prologue as poetic verse. That’s to say that an appreciation of how Chaucer organizes his poetic form to devise his character-portraits is neglected or overlooked in the analysis of the more obvious traits of the characters themselves. This tendency to see Chaucer primarily as a ‘candid cameraman’ of the Middle Ages, and the resulting tendency to see the pilgrims almost as spontaneous creations transferred to paper, operates drastically at the expense of the perception of the Canterbury
travellers as *dynamically created* through the verse by Chaucer, first and foremost a poet. (emphasis in original)

In the same way, the writer on Stasiland tends to think of its ‘characters’ as people “transferred to paper”. The young Carol understands, by contrast, that a focus on form can leverage meaning for her students because “meaning is always *produced*; it is never simply expressed” (Williams, 1977, p. 166). For example, she explores in her commentary on ‘The Wif of Bathe’ Chaucer’s use of poetic form:

We are told she has been to many religious centres, and if this implies a motive for her present pilgrimage, a closer look at the rhythm may well lead us to a different conclusion:

At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne, In Galice at Seint-Jame and at Coloigne.

The rhythmic movement is actually acting out a very different impulse ... we are now convinced her motivation for this pilgrimage has much to do with her own restless vitality ... This is where the students must be made to see how important is the *verse*.

Carol received what would be regarded as a 'Leavisite' literary education, but what counted for her was not so much keeping the torch of Culture burning as how she could apply considerations of form to helping students grasp meaning. She enjoyed the challenge of teaching texts which richly repaid attention to form and laments the loss from the curriculum of works which have come to be regarded as inaccessible because they are not seen as relatively transparent, and because they are taken to be removed from students’ interests and concerns. Chaucer’s ‘Prologue’, which she delighted in teaching, has fallen into this category. She argues that *Ransom* warrants selection for study because its language represents a rewarding challenge for students.

While her students have continued to enjoy success, Carol has lost some confidence in the equity of the examination system, and behind this loss of faith are deeper questions in relation to curricula and pedagogy. She does not see that the ‘system’ has a clear idea of what it is looking for in students’ responses to literary texts. She cannot
take it for granted as she once could that the ‘system’ regards the elements of her practice, as outlined above, as fundamental to students’ meaning making.

Carol’s concerns are born out in an email exchange between English assessors and a teacher, Russell, a very persistent inquisitor who wants to know what the expression “the basis of the text” might mean as used in marking criteria. This thread, which ran from 9 to 18 July 2012 (edulists.com.au), was aimed at clarifying for English teachers criteria used by examiners. I was provided with a transcript of the inquiry, which had been a topic for discussion at a faculty meeting at Carol’s school.

The exchange reveals problematic assumptions that lie behind assessment. Russell is puzzled:

‘[Students] demonstrate an understanding of the implications of the topic...exploring its complexity from the basis of the text.’ I note that this expected quality is only referred to in the 8-10 mark range. One would like to think that most students would use the text as the basis for their response; or am I missing the point...?

As noted above, the criterion itself is curious: it might be expected that the word “complexity” would refer to the text rather than to the topic, and this goes to the heart of the problem: the substance of the text itself tends to be lost in a focus on the “complexity” of potential responses. The exchange between Russell and the assessors reveals a great deal about the language in which expectations of students’ responses to literary texts are couched and which in turn shapes that of pedagogy. One assessor, Julie, writes, for example:

The key words in this description, for me, are: 'implications', 'exploring' and 'complexity'. The thinking associated with these words is quite sophisticated. While we hope that all students respond 'from the basis of the text' it is usually clear that the best responses take the ideas so much further. The basic response 'describes' the ideas in the topic while the best response moves way beyond this and understands the text in the wider world.
It should be possible to identify the grounds of “sophisticated thinking”; otherwise, students who merely appear ‘sophisticated’ – and this is most likely associated with socio-economic status – will be advantaged (cf. Teese, 2000, 2011). Julie refers to ‘the basis of the text’ as if it was a limiting concept – and “basis” might be taken as suggesting this – rather than the relevant source of meaning: “... the best responses take the ideas so much further.” She then shifts from ‘the basis of the text’ itself to “the basic response [which] ‘describes’ the ideas in the topic”, as if they were coterminous. The focus is now on ‘ideas’ rather than on the text (which presumably has the potential, if read carefully, to generate them). She further appears to suggest that ‘the basis of the text’ and “the best response” part company as the latter “moves way beyond this” in order to abstract significance from the text in the context of “the wider world”. Of course, as Eagleton (2013) puts it:

... a text is a transaction between itself and a reader... A text is a pattern of meaning, and patterns of meaning do not lead lives of their own, like snakes and sofas. (p. 46)

But this does not mean that the printed words on the page can somehow be left behind. The text is in danger of being lost in a focus on context. Russell is left feeling uneasy:

I have a nagging feeling that the phrase ‘from the basis of the text’ is redundant. I mean the exam topic itself invariably refers to the text. Unless it’s referring to something else ...

Julie does seem to suggest that the exam topic refers to ‘ideas’, as distinct from the text itself. Another (former) assessor, Mary, contributes to the discussion:

... given that there are multiple readings of texts I guess that what this descriptor is saying is that any reading must be grounded in the text and recognizing that such readings will be different. Presumably the ways in which students interrogate the text should show the complexity of their response and the choices they deliberately make to express their reading. Appropriateness suggests they make choices.

Students’ readings should be “grounded in the text and recognizing that such readings will be different”. The syntax has trouble
reconciling these ideas. Russell queries the notion of “multiple readings”:

If I understand you correctly you’re suggesting that the idea of multiple readings constitute (sic) the basis of the text. As I understand it a basis is one thing, so I’m not sure if this is possible.

At stake is a concept of both ‘the text’ and an appropriate stance towards ‘it’. Beavis (2001) gives an account of curriculum change in literature teaching in Victoria, which took effect in 1990, in terms of an opposition between the discourse of “Leavisite/New Critical formations of the subject” and that of “Critical theory”.

Taken together, key features of critical theory include an emphasis on readings as multiple and constructed and as serving particular interests ... [O]ften implied within this view ... [is] ... a focus on reading processes as much as analysis of specific texts. (Beavis, 2001, p.49)

This is clearly the discourse of the assessors in 2012. Beavis goes on to comment, with some asperity: “In [the discourse of Leavisite/New Critical Literature] literature is characterized as containing riches that are available to those who make right readings” (Beavis, 2001, p.53 – my italics). By “right readings”, though, Beavis means not so much accurate as ideologically acceptable. It is understandable that, given the perceived limitations in this respect of the Leavisite/New Critical approach, that offered by “critical theory” should have seemed to open up exciting new perspectives. Beavis explains that her research

... uses poststructuralist views of discourse to explore ways in which school subjects, such as Literature, are discursively constructed across time, while teachers too are positioned within discourses that shape the ways they understand the subject and themselves as teachers of it. (p. 38)

She writes approvingly of Miriam, a participant in her study of teachers’ reactions to what amounted to radical change. Unlike those who clung to their conservative habits, as the proponents of ‘Critical Theory’ saw them, Miriam “transformed” her teaching:
Where the discourse of Critical Theory came into conflict with the pleasure she took in teaching in older ways, she needed to create new avenues. In large part she made this change by shifting her focus to the “thrill” of resisting dominant subject positions, reading for ideology, and reading dangerously confronting texts. (Beavis, 2001, p. 57)

Beavis points not simply to what she takes to be the shifting natures of texts, but to their shiftiness. The reader must be a ‘wake-up’ to account for them. It would seem, however, well nigh impossible to pin texts down, since readings themselves are ideologically driven and self-interested. This would seem to suggest that texts can hardly exist in a sense which would make them amenable to close reading. Certainly the focus is elsewhere: there is no mention of language or form. Eagleton (2013) insists, in arguing for a renewal of attention to the language of literary texts:

The truth is that almost all major literary theorists engage in scrupulously close reading... [They] are not only close readers, but are sensitive to questions of literary form. And this is where they differ from most students today. (p. 2)

He finds that the ways in which theory has been taken up are deficient in practice: “Most students ... give accounts of works of literature which describe what is going on in them, perhaps with a few evaluative comments thrown in.” He continues:

To adopt a technical distinction from linguistics, they treat the poem as language but not as discourse. ‘Discourse’ ... means attending to language in all its material density, whereas most approaches to poetic language tend to disembody it. (Eagleton, 2007, p. 2)

Mary (the former assessor referred to above) believes that ideally students ‘interrogate’ the text; they arrive at ‘difference’ and ‘complexity’, as they make ‘choices’. These poststructuralist terms have evidently acquired motherhood status, but what do they mean in practice? Requiring students to “interrogate” a text, as she puts it, is very different from “attending to language in all its material density”. The term suggests that the text is on trial for its ideology. As noted earlier, Eagleton observes, “... one cannot raise political or theoretical questions about literary texts without a degree of
sensitivity to their language” (2013, p. ix). And Russell is unimpressed by talk of “choices”; it can hardly be, as he points out, “that students would put up one strategy, and then another, then demonstrate that they’ve chosen one.”

No doubt Mary would agree that students should demonstrate “a degree of sensitivity” to the language of literary texts, but her use of language here amounts to jargon which in effect distracts the reader from the language and form of the text. Attention has to be paid, after all, to those printed words on paper. Still, it is not as though she believes that they are to be disregarded:

I would be looking for not only the capacity of the student to have developed a complex reading of the text which is supported by that text, but I would be looking at the fluency through which he or she could express that meaning cogently, and succinctly using appropriate metalanguage which is at the same time evocative of the language of the novel.

It would seem more helpful, at least in the first instance, to regard the text rather than the reading as “complex”. If the reading has due regard for the text, it will turn out to be so. Nor does “supported” seem a strong enough word here. It suggests that so long as the student touches base, more or less, with the text her reading passes muster. Whether or not its ‘complexity’ is adequate to the text is another question. And the more fundamental issue is the extent to which these concerns are indicative of a crucial deflection of attention.

What might constitute “appropriate metalanguage which is at the same time evocative of the language of the novel”? This expression is neither cogent nor succinct. As was noted in Chapter 1:

All knowledge depends to some extent on a process of abstraction. In the case of literary criticism, this means being able to stand back from the work and trying to see it in the round. This is not easy, partly because literary works are processes in time which are hard to see laid out as a whole. We also need to find a way of standing back which keeps us in touch with the work’s tangible presence. (Eagleton 2013, p. 148)
A different assessor again, Gail, informs Russell: “The phrase which worries you is a reminder to the Assessors that these discussions need to be in a context which has a substantial link to the content of the text.” There is more to “the work’s tangible presence” than “content”. And “a substantial link” is something of an oxymoron.

Mary concludes her contributions by finding that “the basis of the text has a kind of uncertainty to it because it is so rich and generative.” At last the focus is on the nature of the text.

It should be noted that by the end of the thread, prolonged by Russell’s dissatisfaction with the responses to his queries, he cannot see that, obscured by the weight of opinion, the Emperor is unclothed. He recommends, on the basis that “the topic invariably refers to the text, so any student that (sic) thoroughly explores its complexity must be connecting it to key elements of the text”, that the criterion read:

Demonstrates an understanding of the implications of the topic, using an appropriate strategy for dealing with it, and thoroughly exploring its complexity.

Any reference to the text itself has disappeared. This is in effect a ‘reductio ad absurdum’ argument to the contrary, even if Russell proffers it unwittingly, and it is too much for Julie:

Couldn’t resist one more comment! ... I think of some of the students I’ve taught over the years and I know they would 'wander off' to deal with the complexity of the topic, including how they think it relates to 'modern politics' or even their lives. In their own minds they are still relating these things to the text ... How does your suggestion inform these students? ... A reference to the text is necessary.

3) The Groundwork of Meaning

We have gained understanding from Carol’s conversation with Doug and Krista as to her reasons for choosing Ransom as a class text, and now we need to gain some insight into how she handles the relationship between words and meaning in her teaching practice.
Her close work with *Ransom* can be illustrated by a paragraph from a students’ response to the question:

*War has more casualties than those who die in combat. How does Ransom demonstrate this?*

The response, the first of the year on *Ransom*, is the work of a student who, although capable and diligent, would not be regarded as possessing any particular literary ‘insight’ or flair. At the same time she is disposed to make the most of what is on offer from the teacher. In fact, it is the work of Sarah, whose writing was characterized in Chapter 1 as “all substance and no show”.

I include Carol’s marginal notations in order to indicate the character of her responses to Sarah’s efforts. Spelling and punctuation are the student’s:

Malouf’s opening does not depict Achilles to be the ‘traditional hero’ as expected by the description in Homer’s ‘The Iliad’. Rather he is presented in a situation of grieving; yearning for his mother’s element, ‘he is a child of earth. But for his whole life he has been drawn, in his other nature, to his mother’s element.’ (Double tick) Malouf aligns the sea as it ‘bellies and glistens’ with femininity and constantly reaffirms its shifting, flexible, insubstantial, comforting nature. (Double tick and smiley face) Malouf reminds readers of the sacrifices that are required by the archetypal hero to forgo these softer emotions (smiley face); presenting Achilles as a character who longs to ‘slip out of his hard boyish nature and become eel-like, fluid, weightless, without substance in his mother’s arms’. (Double tick) It is through this outlet (underlined) that Malouf immediately demonstrates that to be a warrior hero requires sacrifice and the repression of one’s emotions. (Summary comment: Excellent choice of quotations)

The paragraph opens with a contrast between Homer’s “depiction” of Achilles and Malouf’s. In the following paragraph Sarah will go on to explore the ‘hero’s’ “situation of grieving”, but here she focuses on his “yearning for his mother’s element”. She develops the paragraph through exposition of the opposition between the “repression” required of the masculine ‘traditional/archetypal/warrior hero’ and the fluidity of the feminine dimension of life.
These are large, abstract ideas, but they are firmly grounded – as Carol highlights – in Sarah’s “excellent choice of quotations”. She starts with “He is a child of earth ...”, a nicely judged metaphor which, working at more than one level, enables her to realize in terms of language the opposition which is in play. Her focus on language as ‘presentation’ dissolves the “tricky concept”, to use Doug’s phrase, of ‘realism’ as opposed to formal considerations.

Sarah uses the verb “aligns” to grasp how the image of “the sea as it ‘bellies and glistens’” is at once metaphorical and literal in terms of the epic world of heroes and gods. No doubt it echoes Carol, but it opens up to Sarah, or enables her to conceptualize, the repressed, feminine dimension of Achilles’ psyche as “archetypal hero”.

In persistently attending to “the presentation – how that’s done,” Sarah applies the lesson of Carol’s ‘Anna Karenina’ anecdote; she understands that “[the presentation] is just so central to how we respond”.

She refers to the author, Malouf, four times in the paragraph, but she is not, as Misson and Morgan (2006, p.127) claim is the practice of Leavisite criticism, attempting to “intuit” ‘established’ meaning that is located behind the words in “the notion of the author”. Rather, the reference gives her a sense of direction in that it reminds her that the novel’s use of words should be thought of as purposive and productive. Her task, given that her attention has been drawn to how Malouf’s words lend themselves to meaning making, is to articulate what she can discover. She does this on the basis of class discussion. She does not lose sight of formal considerations by attempting to look ‘behind’ the words for what the author might have intended.

Another excerpt, with annotations, from Sarah’s essay demonstrates her capacity to develop ideas through close reading:

Malouf makes no reservations when describing how the victims are profoundly dehumanized in battle, depicting them as ‘bits and pieces’; as ‘scrag and bones’, but Malouf places perhaps greater emphasis on the profound similarities between the warriors who are committing the killings and their machinery like operations. Achilles, described as possessing a ‘terrible machinery’ quality, is suggested to be a
ruthless, mindless, de-human, very efficient killing machine. (tick) Further, Malouf constantly aligns Achilles and his warriors with predatory animals, ‘they have minds of hawks’ who are ‘secure in their animal nature, unacquainted with second thoughts’. (tick) This imagery is suggestive (suggests) that they are untameable (untameable?) cunning creatures who occupy ferocity, power and sheer force. Through this constant reference to behaviors and imagery of animals and machinery, Malouf makes clear war is dehumanizing to the warriors as well as those who die in battle. (tick and good)

Sarah’s ideas are not second hand abstractions but are generated by close attention to language. Obviously Carol has done a lot of work behind the scenes to prompt them, but Sarah is making determined efforts to, in a sense, realize them anew by giving them expression. Her final sentence is evidence of complex thinking:

> What is particularly interesting is Malouf’s emphasis on the warriors being so adversely compromised by the ferocity of war, positioning readers to not (merely) despise their murderous actions but rather (also) to feel a sense of empathy and compassion towards them.

“My Marvelous first essay on Ransom, Sarah!” is Carol’s summary comment, with a toothy smiley face, at the end of the essay. It is evident that she has made available to Sarah “material keys to intentions and response” (Williams, 1977, p.157). While Carol’s performance in the classroom is not, as her encouragement indicates, just an intellectual exercise, her material grasp of Malouf’s text is its lynch pin.

We also get a sense of the amount of work that Carol puts into assessment of her students’ essays; fortunately she is so experienced and so clear as to what she is looking for that she can annotate them swiftly.

But does the high stakes examination system that her students must negotiate at the end of the year have such a clear understanding of what it is looking for? An essay published as an “example” of an “upper-range response” in the 2011 English Assessment Report begins:

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‘Despite his family’s fears, Priam brings his son home.’ Why is he successful?

Priam brings home his son but also a ‘ransomed and restored’ self, which is why he is so successful. It is in what one offers when they ‘com[e] as [they are]’ and the freedom this derives that explains not only Priam’s success in retrieving his son’s body, but assists every character in finding and retrieving that which they, as men, long for the most. All good things, David Malouf demonstrates, lie in this ‘acceptance’ and ‘going’ as one’s true self.

The back-story, in summary, is that Priam, Hector’s father and king of Troy, is in mourning for his son, as are Hector’s mother, the queen Hecuba, and all the Trojan people. Priam decides to set off, sitting on a simple cart pulled by mules, on a mission to carry a ransom of precious goods to Achilles’ camp. He trusts, beyond all reason and in opposition to the wishes of his family, that they can be exchanged for the body of his son. He is accompanied by the carter, Somax. As it turns out, he is “successful”. How, though, might a student set about explaining this ‘successful’?

The question is couched in terms of character rather than the focus being on “the presentation – how that’s done” to use Carol’s terms. Whereas Sarah was asked “How does Ransom demonstrate this?” the question short-circuits the issue of how the novel shows or constructs Priam’s ‘success’. It might, by failing to explicitly refer to the language of the novel, be construed as inviting the student to ignore “how that’s done”.

That the writing generalizes to an extent that renders it incoherent becomes evident when it is compared with the opening paragraph of an essay by Carol’s student, Kate (referred to earlier), on a topic that is, on the face of it, almost identical:

In what senses can Priam be seen to have succeeded?

Central to David Malouf’s Ransom is the notion of a ‘journey’. Priam, in his quest to retrieve the body of his son from Achilles, completes not only a geographical journey from his Trojan palace to the Greek camp, but also a personal journey in which he makes new discoveries and secedes from the burdens and expectations associated with his role as ‘king’. In this way,
Malouf shows us that Priam’s success incorporates far more than the realization of his initial mission.

The word “senses” in the question prompts a grasp of the metaphorical character of the novel as a representation – it is to be understood as working on more than one level. Kate focuses on a key structuring device, “the notion of a ‘journey’”. She thereby anchors the concept of ‘success’ and at the same time “incorporates far more” than a limited definition of it.

She understands that making meaning is not simply a matter of abstracting content; rather, form is constitutive of meaning – readers are ‘shown’ it. The examiners’ example, by comparison, gestures vaguely and repetitively towards a notion of “finding ... one’s true self”, whatever that might be. It deals in abstracted content which is not grounded in form. The difficulty for the student in juggling concepts that are not adequately anchored in the text becomes evident as the example continues:

Priam’s ‘family fears’ are made manifest in Priam’s confrontation with Hecuba. Here it is revealed that Priam ‘rattle[s] about like a pea in the golden husk of [his] own dazzling eminence’. In other words, Priam expresses that in his role as king, to appear ‘fixed and permanent. Unchangeable therefore unchanged’ he is hollow, empty... SO what Malouf makes ostensibly clear, is that Priam is lacking something, substance.

In fact, Priam himself is not “hollow, empty”; rather, he finds that his role as king is a “golden husk”. Kate doesn’t confuse the role and the man; she gives succinct expression, by attending to detail, to her understanding that Priam musters the initiative to escape from this role:

By adopting the role of an ordinary man, Priam is given the room to transcend all that is limiting about his role as king – the “awful responsibility” it requires, and the impression of durability he is forced to maintain, whereby “so much as the twitching of an eyelid or – god forbid! – a yawn” may suggest to the public that he is “impermanent and weak”.

Why, though, is writing which is inadequate not only rewarded with relatively high marks but also published as an example for students?
The assessors comment that the response is “Very well written, with a particularly strong and relevant vocabulary”. Could it be that verbal flourishes like “made manifest” and “makes ostensibly clear” are taken to be examples of impressive vocabulary? In fact, the inappropriate use of a word such as “ostensibly” betrays the lack of substance of the writing. Similarly, “derives” is clumsily inserted (“and the freedom this derives”) into the first paragraph. Is glitter taken for gold?

Further comments from the assessors that the example shows “A strong understanding of the implications of the topic in relation to the text” and “Excellent use of the text to develop ideas implied in the topic” suggest that, as discussed earlier, a focus on ideology obscures the grounds of meaning.

The failure of the assessment ‘system’ to recognize the deficiencies of such writing has implications for recognition of the validity and value of Carol’s practice. It does not – and the difficulty that Russell, a persistent inquisitor, experiences in cutting through obfuscation confirms the problem – provide teachers with clear direction. Its failure has further implications because students in a state secondary school do not, unlike those from expensive private schools, typically possess the ‘cultural capital’ required to contrive an impression of “a particularly strong and relevant vocabulary”.

As was noted in Chapter 1, Richard Teese finds that “It is not the intellectual demands of the curriculum as such that are problematic, but their imposition without parallel improvements in how the weakest students learn and without controls over how power is exercised by the strongest students and their institutional patrons” (2000, p. 7). It was suggested, in response to this claim, that it seems unlikely that “intellectual demands” on the “strongest students” can be effective in giving access to literature if they do not produce “parallel improvements in how the weakest students learn.” It may be inferred, if they do not do so, that they provide little more than occasion for the reinforcement of cultural advantage.

The 2014 Examination Report for Literature finds that a response to *The Tempest* which begins “At its core, it is Shakespeare’s preoccupations with ‘bondage’ and servitude which constitute the essence of *The Tempest*” is of “a very high standard”. To what extent, though, does the student manage to ground such a bold claim, which
on the face of it seems reductive, in the language of the text? The second paragraph begins:

The characters of *The Tempest* are bound in an intricate web of power dynamics. Despite this, there is revealed to be something akin to a co-dependency in these relations. Though Prospero, through a combination of magic and rhetoric, has no qualms in commanding the obedience of his servant, the dainty Ariel, the success of Prospero’s “project” for vengeance is intricately linked to Ariel’s powers. Despite the implicit superiority discernible in Prospero’s use of a possessive pronoun in referring to Ariel as “[his] brave spirit”, it is solely through his command of Ariel that the events of *The Tempest* are able to take place. (p. 5)

The student seems to be saying little more than – with a glancing reference to the language of the play – that the plot depends for its progress on the interaction of Prospero and Ariel. Prospero has power over Ariel but needs Ariel’s powers. This is hardly evidence of ‘intricacy’. Teese (2013) finds in a critique of “literature as a specialist field” that

Again and again the examiners demand subtlety of candidates, and candidates with strong writing skills and a breadth of vocabulary respond by uncovering complexity in the presence of simplicity. Complexity in the human condition underlies complexity in the way good writers work, and students must capture this or fall into the sin of simplification (p.14).

This student builds an ideological edifice on the suggestiveness of few words:

Her tentative inquiry to Ferdinand, “Do you love me?” is vulnerable and exposed – here, Miranda defies her father and offers herself fully to Ferdinand. The syntax of this query is starkly juxtaposed against Ferdinand’s impassioned response, the breathlessness of his assertion that he does “love, prize, honour” Miranda betraying his emotion. The use of the word “prize”, however, once again reduces Miranda to little more as (sic) a possession and her self-deprecating description of her “unworthiness” advocates that such societal constraints cannot completely be overcome. (pp. 5-6)
The student dresses up the responsiveness of her description of
"[Miranda’s] tentative inquiry” as “vulnerable and exposed” with
“The syntax of this query is starkly juxtaposed against ...” The
moment of clarity in response to language is obscured. Similarly, she
catches “Ferdinand’s impassioned response, the breathlessness of his
assertion ...” by attending to his words, only to fall back on talk of
“Miranda ... as a possession” and “societal constraints”. This kind of
ideological analysis is in this context a crude imposition which blunts
sensitivity to language. Ferdinand’s “use of the word ‘prize’” does not
“reduce[s] Miranda to little more [than] a possession”. That would
hardly seem congruent with his “impassioned response”.

What are teachers and students – especially “the weakest” – to make
of such modelling? It is not clear that attentiveness to language as the
basis of meaning making counts for much amongst thickets of pseudo
sophistication. “The intellectual demands of the curriculum” do
seem, as exemplified here, to be “problematic”. The Report
summarizes:

The most successful responses showed good control of
language. These responses were characterized by the ability to
use a wide and sophisticated vocabulary and to tackle complex
ideas (p.1).

As close reading of the ‘model’ response indicates, however, the
Report does not demonstrate, coherently and consistently, how these
ambitions, which relate to content, might be realized in terms of the
language or form of a given text. Although it notes, as something of an
afterthought, that “The most successful responses ... demonstrated
the ability to work closely with the passages [provided] and to
analyse and explore the language”, it neglects the issue of the
relationship between form and content.

The ‘Report of Examiners’ for English Literature in 1990, was the last
in Victoria under the dispensation of “Leavisite/New Critical
formations of the subject” before – as noted above (pp. 234-235) –
that informed by “Critical theory” was ushered in (Beavis, 2001). It is
clear that this is regarded as something of a watershed moment; the
writer of the report evidently believes that there is much to be lost:

The English Literature course has been highly successful and
well regarded for many years. The most convincing evidence of
the strengths of the course is to be found in the students’ own written responses. (p.10)

A sample of the “evidence” is a response to stanzas from James McAuley’s *Because*:

Small things can pit the memory like a cyst:
Having seen other fathers greet their sons,
I put my childish face up to be kissed
After an absence. The rebuff still stuns

My blood. The poor man’s curt embarrassment
At such a delicate proffer of affection
Cut like a saw. But home the lesson went:
My tenderness thenceforth escaped detection.

‘Small things’ seems a gross understatement in this context, for how could it create something as painful and unattractive as a cyst? The enjambment of the end of the stanza only serves to emphasise the shocking impact of the ‘rebuff’, in harsh contrast to the delicate alliteration of ‘proffer of affection’.

‘Cut like a saw’, here, can be seen in the light of both its verbal meanings, being physically painful as a ‘saw’, and as mentally painful as a proverb. The complete lack of emotion and almost business-like tone of ‘my tenderness thenceforth escaped detection’ only serves to embellish this sorry fact.

This response works with the language and form of the poem to elucidate meaning. By comparison, a 2014 response to T. S. Eliot’s *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*, assessed as “of a very high standard”, refers to the language of the poem but could hardly be said to work with it. Instead, the student gives a jumbled second hand account of the social context of the poem (original grammar and spelling):

The “fatalistic drum” of “street-lamps” reveal the light not to illuminate goodness, but what is “crooked”, “torn and stained”. The woman “throws up” “twisted” memories of decay and death and “dust” showing society at the time to be likewise “twisted” due to the isolation and fragmentation of war. The "morsel of rancid butter” and “dead geranium” show corporate indulgences now decayed also as Eliot communicates both
modern society’s dependence on false social ritual, but its’ inability to renew life or bring fulfillment. (p.9)

The student may aim ambitiously to give an account of how the poem speaks of and to its society, but cannot do so without close work with its language. A smatter of references to it won’t do. It seems that something vital has been lost over the intervening years. And if able students can’t find firm ground on which to stand in making meaning, then how are weaker students to manage?

This comparison suggests that more work needs to be done to enlarge and refine understanding of that process of curriculum change. I can only outline some pertinent issues here. The work of Mares, cited earlier (p. 206) shows that in the 1970s and 1980s – before the reforms in Victoria and elsewhere – English education already suffered from a failure to concentrate adequately on textual particulars. Examiners’ reports can be criticised for resorting to question-begging statements about individual response and emotional involvement.

The 1990 report cites, for example, “criteria which markers have used consistently over several years” (p. 1). These include:

- knowledge of the text and the ability to use the text in an answer
- involvement with and responsiveness to the text

The reader is left in some doubt as to what “knowledge” might consist in and how it might articulate with “involvement”. This might have been remedied by closer attention to students’ “responsiveness to [the language of] the text”. An answer “ranked as average quality” on McAuley’s Because notes, for example, “His bitterness is captured in the abrupt enjambment – “The rebuff still stuns/ My blood.”

By comparison with the response quoted above, which finds ‘the shocking impact of the ‘rebuff’ [to be] in harsh contrast to the delicate alliteration of ‘proffer of affection’”, “bitterness” may be seen to be something of a shot in the dark: this writer works at a certain distance from the language of the poem and applies what appear to be learned terms to it without – and this is the critical point – using them to initiate more probing reflection. He finds that “[McAuley’s] father’s rejection ... has pained him with hurt and incomprehension.”
While this holds up to a point, a more careful accounting for how the language works shows that the speaker comprehends only too well: “But home the lesson went ...” Yet we are told that despite his indifferent ranking, this student “does have a close knowledge of the text, and a responsive, thorough sensitivity to the texture of the language.” His work is not clearly differentiated from the “much stronger reading” (p. 6).

It seems clear enough that the need for “responsive, thorough sensitivity” on the part of teachers and examiners, as well as students, was not addressed by curriculum change – indeed, close reading was displaced as a central activity in English lessons – but quite how new ideas such as ‘critical theory’ were taken up remains to be addressed. What did teachers make of them? How were they mediated in secondary education and to what effect? What did teachers actually read? It might be hypothesised that rather than turn back, as it seemed, to deal more carefully with the language of literature – a move which was regarded as carrying ideological baggage and hence as reactionary – teachers embraced a brave new world of theory which promised to ‘free up’ students’ responses.

Carol’s work demonstrates through persistent attention to language, that it is possible to enable young people, including “the weakest students”, to discover a wealth of meaning that would otherwise have been lost to them. Students need to work with the language of a novel or memoir or ‘non-fiction’ account just as they might ideally do with a poem. They need to take account of the given text’s literariness.

The ‘upper range’ response to Ransom might be compared not just with the work of Kate, but with that of Zach, a boy who had a history of experiencing difficulties in English yet, as it turned out, showed himself to be capable of writing such as the following:

Prior to the start of Ransom Priam is already seen as a hero by the citizens of Troy, a “ceremonial-figure-head” that was treated with royalty. That’s what he felt on the outside, but on the inside lies (sic) deeper and more emotional thoughts. Priam no longer feels the satisfaction of being king anymore and he is just getting too old. Malouf demonstrates this by using imagery to visualize Priam’s fragileness and old age by using “sunken cheeks”. Priam is king on the outside, but on the inside he is a common man.
This is very different from the platitudes offered in the examiners’ ‘upper range’ example. Zach is not capable of using phrases like Kate’s “room to transcend” or “impression of durability” – much less go in for talk of “an intricate web of power dynamics” – but he has, on the basis of Carol’s demanding and encouraging teaching, gained a great deal of confidence and has responded to the text accordingly. He works with the language of the text tentatively but to effect. His response was assessed in the mid-range, accorded to the standard rubric, as “A generally well-sustained interpretation ... supported by textual evidence.”

4) ‘An Invested Interest in Language’

“... [students’] need to be put through the discipline of close study of some texts, so as to acquire the knowledge and skill involved in truly perspective reading... [This study] can be an immense step forward in one’s ability to penetrate a lot of other texts.” (McAuley, 1968, p. 23)

A conversation with Alison, the mother of one of Carol’s year 9 students, and Nalan, a student teacher in her early twenties, offers insights into the strategies that Carol uses to facilitate her students’ engagement with the text.

Alison is a casual or relief teacher, having entered the profession only recently and relatively late in life. Her son has been enjoying Carol’s classes so much that, intrigued, she has asked Carol at a parent-teacher evening if she might observe a couple of her classes. A colleague of Carol’s has recommended to Nalan that she seek her out as a supervising teacher.

We met in a coffee shop not far from the school. There seems to be no doubt that for Alison and Nalan Carol’s teaching stands out:

Nalan: She’s teaching them to have a grasp on the language and sort of the broader concepts within that language, so not just ... like the character analysis or the themes or the plot; she wants you to really sort of delve into the bigger concepts that are articulated through the language, and that’s – if you’re trained or if, you know, you study literature that’s something that comes more naturally, but if you’re an outsider or you’re a student, and I realized that today as well, then it’s quite a
foreign concept for them to be reading between the lines and to be reading the language critically

Paul: So it’s not exactly ... I mean when you say “between the lines” – it’s a common expression, but, in a way, actually she’s focusing on the language

Nalan: She’s focusing on the language, but like, you know, you could look at it - a sentence, and you could read that ... you know, it could be four words ... And you could have like a surface level understanding of it, but she takes it to a deeper level... (to Alison) Did you get that ...?

Alison: Yeah, look, as I say, I’ve only been there for two lessons and English isn’t my subject, so I don’t get the ... I don’t know the word I’m looking for, but what I think is ... with Carol is ... she loves language and ...

Nalan: Yeah, she’s articulate too; her vocabulary is extensive

Alison: For me, I see that she wants to pass that love on, and that comes through in her teaching, and I’ve seen that in my son who hated school, hated English, and now loves English ... And I think a lot of it is, she’s enthusiastic, there’s a passion, there’s a ... yeah, she loves language, she loves the book, and I could see that she really does love David Malouf and ...

Nalan: Her enthusiasm rubs off on the students, because they’re really perceptive – like if they know you don’t care or you’re not interested they have no reason to pay attention or to want to learn. She’s energetic and she’s like a beacon; you just watch her and ... you watch her movement and, you know, all her gestures; she exaggerates, like her actions ... you know, and she’s got these sayings like: “True?” and the students repeat it back to her: “True!” And “Marvellous!” (laughs; Alison joins in)

Alison: My son uses the term, “Marvellous!” – “That’s marvellous, Mum!” – makes me laugh

Nalan: She’s starting it with the Year 9s now – “True? True!” – just bits and pieces. Yeah – she’s infectious; you’re with her ...
Alison identifies the source of Carol's success as “enthusiasm” and “passion” for language. Nalan perceives that her students are attentive because they are intrigued to discover what could generate this “love” affair. I am interested to discover, without making invidious comparisons, how the ‘trick’ is achieved. What lies behind the ‘magic’ of her success, as these observers see it, in the classroom?

Paul: So what makes her different, if you like?

Nalan: What makes her different is ... her passion is distinct – and I think at the same time she’s actually knowledgeable about what she’s teaching ... she’s not winging it ... that’s a sense of crediblility in itself, the fact that she can actually analyse language, and – a step further than that – she can teach kids or assist them in how they can analyse language – that’s what makes her distinct.

Alison: She has a deep understanding of that text; I noticed that in Ransom, just in the one lesson, that she really does understand the text.

Paul: So, you’ve watched other teachers – what do they do compared with what Carol does? I don’t mean ...

Nalan: No, no, no ... I’m just trying to think... They stick to a more structured plan of attack and classrooms can be a bit more rigid, and also it depends on the dynamic; the classes and teachers I’ve observed – one was a co-ed but the other was single sex – so it was just different in terms of their ... the fire that they had, and also ... I’m just trying to think how to word it ... they were good teachers and there were good lessons, but you didn’t leave the room with, say, more of an invested interest in language ... if that was the intention, it wasn't the result ... it was more, well students are here because, you know, that’s where you’re meant to be, you’re meant to be in class, and this is my English class, and now I’m going to go on to Maths – it’s like they’re in this space for fifty minutes, but that’s all they’re investing in, that fifty minutes of time, it’s not like you’re developing further sort of knowledge or insight, it’s just, they’re going through the process
Paul: Yes, so do you think they have the same interest in language or is it to do with ...

Nalan: There wasn’t a specific interest in the language, you know, in the Literature classes that I’ve observed, one teacher was, she was quite exceptional and she did have that interest in language, but she found it hard to communicate or teach that to the students, to get them to read the language ... And to have, you know, this deeper understanding ... in a separate literature class, with a separate teacher, different school, there was no real emphasis on the language – it was more looking at – the thing was Gothic fiction and horror, so they were looking more at the genre itself than the language ... and the themes and ideas associated with it; there wasn’t a connection to the language

Paul: Right; so, in a sense you’re kind of missing...

Nalan: Yeah, you’re missing the point ... she liked The Great Gatsby, so that’s what she taught them initially, because that was her interest, and she also has this fascination with Gothic fiction; she thought it’s a way to lure in the students because at the end they get to watch Buffy (laughter)

Nalan: Yeah (laughs). Well, to an extent you get marketing ploy, like, well, how are you going to get students interested to take the subject again next year ...

For Nalan it is not only Carol’s “specific interest in the language” that stands out, but also her capacity “to communicate or teach that”. The question remains as to how she specifically achieves this – how she deals in the classroom with “the presentation – how that’s done” which is “just so central to how [her students] respond”, to use her own words.

In order to understand more clearly her own “presentation – how that’s done” I ask Carol if she would be prepared to take a recording device into class. She agrees and puts one of her students in charge of recording the following sample from a lesson.

The passage under discussion connects with the opening pages of Ransom in that it involves water. Priam and the carter, Somax, have
set off to carry the ransom of precious goods to Achilles’ camp. They stop to rest on the way and are surprised to meet Hermes, the messenger of Zeus, who is in disguise and visible only to the travellers. When they set off again a river, Scamander, confronts them:

Carol: “Just on dusk, with the light beginning to fade but the air still heated and thick, the wagon creaked down to where Scamander, in its leisurely winding across the plain, scoops two channels out of the bone-white gravel of its bed.” Marvellous imagery! “One bubbles and is milky-green. The other, which runs deeper, is a smooth-flowing blue”.

Can anyone remember, from their reading of the book how Malouf presents that double facet of the stream – the two channels that run parallel? Do you remember? Well you’re extremely naughty because you should have remembered ... All right, let’s have a quick look please – where they front, they front that and it’s dangerous. Remember? There’s a near catastrophe when the wagon nearly ends up in the drink. Can you find that for me, Fiona? Please, where they nearly have that ... (shuffling pages)

Carol conveys, through the feeling which infuses her reading of the prose, how its sound contributes to its meaning. Her interpolated “Marvellous imagery!” leaves students in no doubt that there is something here worth attending to. Her focus in the first instance is on “… how Malouf presents that ...” as distinct from content.

She puts them under some pressure with her expectation that they “should have remembered”; her brisk admonition – “Well you’re extremely naughty ... - when they look blank is playful but at the same time puts them on notice that they had better not be “naughty” now; they need to pay attention if they don’t want to be treated sharply. In the process of attempting to find the place she primes their attention – “… it’s dangerous. Remember?” – and she provides a neat précis of the episode: “There’s a near catastrophe when the wagon nearly ends up in the drink.”

Carol: Now this is where the accident happens ... I’m just looking to see where ... Malouf gives us two streams ... keep in mind that he gives us a series of images here ... about the river.
In many ways you’re going to tell me how that corresponds to the nature of Pram’s journey itself. Sarah, do you remember just vaguely what he says about the nature of the stream?

Sarah: There’s like something ‘eddies’ like ... I dunno...

Carol: Something along the lines of on the surface, you know, it appears to be, well, relatively stable, but what’s operating underneath here – do you remember? The dangerous eddies, the swift running currents and deceptive treacheries underneath the apparently smooth surface of the water – look, we’ll find it in a minute... Oh, she’s found it, God love her, she’s found it – where?

Carol is evidently struggling to find the place but at the same time keeps up an improvised, purposive introduction to the reading task that she intends to pose her students. Upon being given some slack – “do you remember just vaguely?” – Sarah, who can be relied on, summons a word – ‘eddies’ – and Carol runs with it. Her potent account of “The dangerous eddies, the swift running currents and deceptive treacheries underneath the apparently smooth surface of the water” is calculated to engage their imaginations.

She does not stint in her expression of relief and gratitude when Sarah finds the place, “God love her”. She knows how to overact for warm effect before quickly focusing on the task in hand:

Carol: Thank you; can you please mark this section:

They had come to the water’s edge, and the driver halted now to let his mules take in what lay before them. Moonlight ran fast over the river pebbles. Ten paces beyond, where the channel deepened, the stream, with its many eddies, was moving thigh-deep in a rolling sweep.

Have a look at it again, and get Arachne in front of you there, dear little thing ...

Arachne is Carol’s pet name for the ‘spidergram’, as she calls it, which she employs. Nalan explains:
Nalan: ... it is fascinating – you become one of the students; that’s what I feel like – that’s when you know you’re really invested in the class; like, I observe quite a bit because we have to at university, and some lessons you’re like, oh, this is just, it’s tedious for the students, but in her classroom, and there have been few others like it, where you sit there, and I’m taking notes – its not observation notes; it’s Ransom and Malouf does this and key questions (Alison: Yeah) you become one of them!

Paul: So is that part of the thing, that she’s using the board a lot?

Nalan: She does use the board; she gives these ‘spiders’ – that’s what she calls them – so it’s a circle, and she’s got all ... it’s a mind map; to the kids she says “Draw a spider” and she’s got – always they’ve got to be ready with books open; they’ve got to be ready, on the ball, ready to write... And she’s not writing these big, drawn out sentences – it’s key and it’s direct and it’s punchy (Alison: Yeah) and that’s another thing, like with using her language, she’s direct and she’s to the point, and it’s ... keeping your attention span

Alison: Very punchy, isn’t she; it’s like this ... 

Nalan: It’s erratic, too; you’ve got like something over on this end of the board, and then she’ll draw a massive line and connect it down ...

Alison: It’s exciting; she makes it exciting ... but then she feels excitement for the subject – it spreads to the kids

In this instance Carol primes students’ attention by having them reread and connect the relevant passages:

Turn back – Jess, read out that first bit, please, where we’re first introduced to the river Scamander. Come on, it “scoops two channels out of the bone-white gravel of its bed... 

Okay, now he says at this time of year both are fordable, both can be crossed. Have a look again at page 150: “They had come to the water’s edge ...”
Then the students are exhorted to

All right, get it down – quick – get it down here...

“Many eddies” Come on, this cluster of images here... Come on, collectively, what does that cluster of images suggest, Zach?

Zach: Water element?

Carol: Well, all right, fine, good ... Marvellous, Zach and remember, hot tip, it’s not just the sea, it is water in its various forms that Malouf is exploring. In the beginning, Achilles is standing, or rather hunched, sitting, at the edge of the sea ... longing to hear his mother’s voice. The next element of water here, the stream, which they must ford to arrive safely at the Greek camp. So, Chad ...

Carol was no doubt expecting reflection on the suggestiveness of the description of the stream as a metaphor for “the nature of Priam’s journey itself” as she had earlier put it. Zach offers instead “water” as a structural “element”, and Carol, quickly regaining her balance, congratulates him enthusiastically – “Marvellous, Zach”. She makes the most of his contribution by recapping how water works in this structural sense before picking out her next target, Chad. It seems that students can’t be sure who will be asked to contribute next:

Paul: So, sounds like Carol to some extent just grabs them by the scruff of the neck

Nalan: (laughs) No-one escapes

Paul: You don’t have a choice; you’re going to love this stuff

Alison: It seems to work

Nalan: She doesn’t exclude anyone; like everyone is treated equally, and, you know, they’re all sort of probed and questioned; you know, and if they’re asked for a response, then they offer it; there’s no real pass – you know, unwilling participants; there’s an expectation that you’re in this room and you will contribute
Paul: High expectations

Nalan: Yes, high expectations

Chad is let off for the moment, though, because Carol needs to clear something up:

Girl: What’s an ‘eddy’?

Carol: Oh, a sort of a current, loopy thing ... you can tell us what a loopy thing is, can’t you?

Boy: Uh, nuh

(laugh)

Carol: (happily expostulating) What’s a loopy thing? Come on, in the water?

Girl: A whirlpool

Carol: Little currents and mini whirlpools and ...

Boy: More like a rip

Carol: Haven’t you guys ever been to the beach?

Girl: You mean like when you throw a rock in and its ...

Another girl: No, that’s ...

Boy: Is it like a rip?

Carol: *What* does any or all of these suggest?

Carol deals with the question playfully; an eddy, strictly speaking, is a circular movement of water which is formed by a counter current, but Carol calls it, suggestively, “a loopy thing”. Students are invited to imagine such a thing and to find a name for it. A boy associates what she describes with a rip and Carol picks up this suggestion by prompting them to think of currents they have encountered at the beach. A rip is a particular phenomenon created by breaking waves.
Perhaps because she is aware of her lack of technical knowledge, and also because there is some danger of ideas becoming diffuse, Carol recalls students to a focus on the language of the passage; she asks what this discussion of currents might contribute to their sense of “the stream, with its many eddies”.

It is likely too that she hasn’t heard the final, faint question: “Is it like a rip?” While she enjoys her interaction with students it takes a great deal of effort:

Paul: So what does she actually do in the classroom?

Nalan: She’ll use her tone; she’ll get really loud or ... she’s animated

Alison: Very animated ... she doesn’t allow the kids, they know they’ve got to be tuned in because they can be called on at any second, and I think they like her so they don’t want to be called on and let her down

Nalan: Yep ... And I think there are like two rules – there’s ‘don’t yell out’, because I think it’s something to do with her hearing – she can’t pick where it’s coming from – and respect others when they’re talking (Alison: Yeah) ... these are two things that she really shares with the class ... but it’s always reiterating ‘these are my expectations’.

Students respond to her question or, rather, demand: “What does any or all of these suggest?”, but she will not let them off lightly:

Girls: Danger (loud call)/unpredictable/danger (small laughter at echo)

Carol: Danger, unpredictability... Come on, you know jolly well I’m not happy with two

Zach: Chance

Carol: Who... who said that? Zach?

Zach: I did
Carol: That probably comes in here to a degree. What else? ... Look, it’s “moving thigh deep in a rolling sweep.” What constitutes its danger here?

Girl: Force

Carol: Good, that sense of something powerful, forceful. Come on, we’ve seen that, we’ve talked about that at the beginning – with the imagery of the water and the glistening membrane, you know, all those vital forces at work there – well here again, a cluster of images about these currents rolling thigh deep ... What else?

Girl: Violence

Carol: All right, possibly, yes ... that’s the threat, Jade, yes

Girl: Uncontrollable

Carol: Yes, good, um ... (writing on board) ... Hey, what does uncontrollable remind you of? We talked about animals before

Boy: Untameable

Carol: Oh, love you, Cam

Cam: Me too, Hobbsy

Carol pursues “what constitutes” the idea of “danger” in terms of the representation or imagery of this body of water. From the beginning of her career her focus has been on

- The generation of meaning from attention to language as distinct from dealing in relative abstractions
- Conceptualization of language as constitutive rather than as instrumental or as simply a medium for narrative and ideology

This focus has if anything intensified because, as is evident, it enables her students to elucidate meaning for themselves. It requires effort, however; Carol is well aware that they can’t simply be left to their own devices; rather, they must be encouraged to find the very resistance of language productive (Culler, 1997).
The final exchange, in which Cam returns Hobbsy’s (as she is known to students) expression of endearment, has become a running joke in the class; it is an example of another aspect of Carol’s ability to engage them:

Nalan: Your flair or your passion – it could be worn away by, you know, unruly students or really sort of problematic behaviour ... and other, you know, sort of outside influences. At the same time Carol just seems to engage them – you can see them, they have different capabilities ...

Paul: So how does she deal with that?

Nalan: She ... there’s a student right on the end who you can tell is not like a high performer, but for some reason there’s a joke or there’s a nickname between them, so every now and again, like she always acknowledges them, she doesn’t exclude anyone .... if you identify someone as being problematic and you automatically dismiss them then that’s half the problem, you’re not then going to win them back.

Paul: Right

Nalan: Whereas – going back to before – you’re all prisoners there (laughs) ... you’re all in it (Much laughter and Alison joins in)

Paul: So she’s got to set up this relationship

Nalan: In-jokes, and that’s her space – the shed she calls it, her classroom. So it’s inclusive.

Alison: There’s lots of humour in there, and a little bit of sarcasm, teasing, and I notice the difference between the humour she uses with the Year 9 and Year 12 – she alters it – definitely more sophisticated with the Year 12 ... almost like play acting in a way – there’s nothing false about it, but there’s definitely a performance going on

Nalan: It’s a bit of a theatre
But it is theatre with the fundamental purpose of collaborative meaning making. Carol reminds her students of broader perspectives on what they have discovered, so that they may bring them to bear on the passage before them. She wants them to realize another dimension of this body of water:

Carol: Uncontrollable, untameable. Look, we talked a lot about elemental imagery before ... remain mindful of how Malouf is presenting that in a number of ways, in a variety of contexts; it’s not just the life giving waters of the amniotic fluid in the beginning; it’s not just the sea, with all its power etcetera, but it’s also the stream in its elemental, uncontrollable, untameable ... or whatever you like. What also is the stream, apart from all that this cluster of images suggests?

Girl: Shifting

Carol: Good, yes ... Look – these images – it’s not static; that’s part of its awesomeness, if you like

Girl: Dynamic

Carol: It’s also critical to its power – the dynamic thing, a body of water shifting ... dynamic, restless, whatever you like – all those things that we looked at in the opening so closely. So that is one of the major manifestations of water. What’s the other one?

Girl: Life

Carol: Yes, of course, water in its life giving ...

Girl: Protectiveness, (insistent) comfort

Carol: Where do we find that sense of solace, of comfort? ... Hey, how many of you guys are not familiar with that, well it means comfort. What does the stream offer by way of comfort, of solace?

Girl: There’s fish
Carol: True, true ... Come on, you’ve got the sodding stream here, I mean it’s full of those little affairs, those little tiny fish that they ... you know, even the royal, bony feet are put there, and, you know, he’s watching the fish. So look ... the fingerlings, you know, the fish that are hanging around ... what does that suggest, what are the associations here?

Girl: Cute

Carol: Oh, stop that ... (laughter) ... Cute ... you write that in the exam and I take no responsibility, none! Come on, the little fingerlings

Boy: Harmless

Carol: Good, all right then, yes, and what constitutes their harmlessness?

Girls: (A sequence of ideas) fragility/fast/fizzy/curious

Carol: Yes, good – the curiosity of the fingerlings ... But what quality does it invest the stream with? We’re talking about how Malouf presents that cluster of images to establish the danger, the unpredictability and the sheer force of a moving stream, a powerfully moving stream. What are some of the positives that are associated with this stream apart from just the danger and all that negativity we’ve just identified?

Girl: It’s a home ... it’s a place where things live

Carol is quick to reject – humorously, though with a serious eye to “the exam” – a trite contribution. She doesn’t give students answers; rather, she elaborates or summarizes in such a lively and eloquent way that they are prompted to discover what they did not realize they knew. They are, in a deeper sense, discovering the potential of “language as a socially shared and reciprocal activity” (Williams, 1977, p. 166):

Carol: All right, good, so you’ve got ... I don’t want to call it biodiversity – it sounds like something out of a biology task. What’s another way of putting it? Look again – it’s something dynamic, it’s a medium where dynamic things happen, and it’s
teeming with life. All right? But what else does the stream offer the poor old, weary king?

Girl: Water/refreshment

Carol: Thank you, it offers refreshment. Look, the poor old guy, he’s got feet that are aching like the devil ... relief, the cooling effects of water ... I don’t think he’s dehydrated exactly, Sarah

Girl: Soothing

Carol: Water is life giving, life enhancing, but just in plain simple terms the king has white, bony feet ... there’s a sense in which his spirit is rejuvenated, refreshed, he’s energized because of the water of the stream... True?

Girl: True

Carol: Well, why aren’t you telling me this? Right, let’s move on

It might be argued that there cannot be one ‘true’ reading of a text Carol is not here, however, imposing at a relatively abstract level a reading on her students; rather, she is insisting that they collaborate with her in figuring out what the passage in question “suggests” in the context of the novel as a whole.

Alison perceives that “With Carol, I think her main objective is she wants the kids to ‘get it’”. By “it” she means not a particular reading, but the capacity to understand how a reading might be generated by close reading of the available language. As Nalan observes: “... she wants you to really sort of delve into the bigger concepts that are articulated through the language.”

It might be considered too that she is out of step with the democratic temper of the times in that hers is the dominant voice in the classroom, at least this example of her teaching practice. Yet, while hers is no doubt the governing voice, she uses it to draw her students out; she works very hard to have them engage with language and articulate ideas on the basis of their individual readings of it. Nalan comments: “... through her own work, she’s elevating their quality of work ... so she has that real investment, from where they started at the beginning of the year and where they end up.”
Alison observes: “It’s only because she’s so engaging that she can talk for that length of time ... so many teachers would lose them so quickly.” As has been noted, however, she employs certain routines and strategies, such as her ‘spidergram’ (“Arachne – dear little thing”), to focus their attention.

Interestingly Carol does not here comb over the exact words of the passage. A student brings up “eddies”, but she moves quite quickly to a summary account of what the “cluster of images” suggests. At the same time she draws students’ attention to language: “Look, it’s ‘moving thigh deep in a rolling sweep.’ What constitutes its danger here?”

She does not dwell on how the short sentence “Moonlight ran fast over the river pebbles” achieves its effects (how can moonlight be said to ‘run fast’?) or how water might be said to move “in a rolling sweep”. She refers to “a cluster of images about these currents rolling thigh deep” but in general works at a certain distance from the tangible words. She does not treat them in myopic fashion but works with them in a way that allows students to generate broader meanings and, in turn, perspectives on the novel as a whole.

She does demand, however, that when students construct their written responses they use actual language from the text and – crucially – that they comment on it to effect. An essay by Sarah, written under exam conditions, in response to the question: ‘Are there any true heroes in Ransom?’ gives a sense of what she has gained by this kind of discussion:

The river Scamander is another fundamental aspect of Malouf’s purpose. The imagery of water, a reflection of Priam’s journey, shows to have a duality, representing both the liberating and dangerous nature of Priam’s quest. On one hand Malouf describes the water as it ‘bellies and glistens’ to be a place of refuge, of security and solace; aligning it firmly with femininity and its shifting, flexible, elusive, insubstantial nature. Yet he also describes its turbulent (sic) nature ‘with its many eddies’ that move ‘thigh deep in a rolling sweep.’ The use of these powerfully dynamic verbs gives it a shocking unpredictability – of being deceptively attractive – which alignes (sic) firmly with
what Priam – outside the security and confine of his ‘royal sphere’ is to face, making his journey all the more heroic.

This might be regarded as labored to a degree with for example its somewhat mechanical use of the verb “aligns”, but because it is so thoughtful and thorough it also gives rise to telling expressions such as “liberating and dangerous”, “security and solace”, “shocking unpredictability” and “deceptively attractive”. It is clear enough that because Carol ‘scaffolds’ (cf. Vygotsky, 1934/1986) her students’ work in class, they can in a sense rise well above what they might otherwise have been able to achieve.

And it is not as if Sarah’s work lacks ideas: on the contrary, attention to textual detail gives her access to them in a way that is closed to the ‘upper range’ student who has been led to believe that writing a ‘text response’ requires him to deal in abstractions or “glitter”. What has become of considerable concern to Carol, however, is mounting evidence that examiners cannot see the need for this groundwork much less detect it when it is put in place.

“Close textual reading” gives Kate, Carol’s high achieving student in the previous year, the confidence and freedom to exercise her verbal flair. In response to the question, ‘In what senses can Priam be seen to have succeeded?’ she writes:

Malouf’s image of the river Scamander is fundamental to his exploration of this idea of free choice and thus, to Priam’s triumph. On the one hand, the water is suggestive of solace and life with references to the embryotic (sic) fluid – “the sea surface bellies and glistens ... a membrane stretched to a fine transparency” – as well as the swarms of fish that surround Priam’s feet in the river ... Yet Malouf insists that freedom is a two-edged sword as Priam and Somax later encounter “the stream, with its many eddies ... moving thigh deep in a rolling sweep” – now demonstrative of the sense of chaos, randomness and unpredictable (sic) that infiltrates the world into which Priam has chosen to strike out. Embracing the concept of one’s own choices is therefore shown by Malouf to be a somewhat treacherous path, which serves to accentuate the enormity of Priam’s success in his pursuit of this modern theory.
While Kate’s word choices occasionally misfire (“enormity”) this could only be described, as the ‘assessment rubric’ puts it, as “highly expressive, fluent and coherent writing”. Kate scored the top grade available of A+ on the end of year exam, while the steady and thorough Sarah was awarded B+. The highly experienced Carol has good reason to believe that this very significant difference (equivalent to more than ten marks out of 50) is not warranted.

There is no doubt that the glitter of Kate’s work is evidence of real gold as distinct from the ‘fool’s gold’ of the ‘upper range’ response cited earlier. It would seem that if examiners could tell the difference then Sarah’s writing should have been marked higher. If Kate’s work has both ‘substance’ and ‘show’, then all that Sarah’s is missing is a degree of the latter. The substance of their respective paragraphs is essentially the same and is obviously founded on the work that Carol has done with them in class. Both students have proved attentive and diligent.

The principles on which Carol has based her teaching have not changed over the years while her practice in the classroom has, if anything, improved, yet she has noticed that over the last decade or so students such as Sarah have not obtained the marks which they deserve and which once they would have obtained.

Carol detects some disconcerting trends. Although she succeeds in elevating the results of students such as Zach who, without her attention to the grounds of ideas, would struggle to make sense of texts, their work is not properly differentiated from that of high calibre students such as Sarah. There are justifiable concerns here regarding equity and access if students who come from socio-economic backgrounds that encourage verbal facility are rewarded for ‘glitter’ while the fundamentals of Sarah’s achievement go unrecognized.

I have attempted to develop a sense of Carol’s practice in order to identify some of its key elements. These include:

- A passionate interest in language – a “fire” for it, as Nalan perceives
- The generation of ideas through a focus on language as distinct from a generalizing, abstracted approach which deals in genre or themes to the exclusion of a more material sense of the text
• A high degree of facility with language, demonstrated for example in her reading, her ability to engagingly gloss aspects of the text, and the ways in which she capitalizes on students’ contributions
• A vigorous, direct, animated teaching style
• The use of diagrams or graphic representations of verbal material
• High expectations of students and strong relationships with them, developed on the basis of their confidence that she can deliver a grounded, revelatory understanding of texts
Chapter 8

Conclusion: Literary Practice

“Just give that rhythm/ Ev’rything you got.” (Duke Ellington)

1) A Critical Distance

Raymond Williams argues that the ‘truths’ of theory can have the paradoxical effect of trumping the textual rather than of motivating attention to it. His pioneering “call for a critical attitude towards all forms and practices of representation” (Higgins 1999, p.134) might be seen as contributing to this unintended outcome if a “critical attitude” prosecutes its case at the expense of a sensitive, appreciative reading of the text. Yet he was to find himself intensely uncomfortable with the excesses of criticism:

... I cannot help feeling that this culture is rotten with criticism. That is why I now think it is important to restore the sense that unless criticism is related to some advocacy of literary practice, it is going to be much nearer to what is described in a philistine way as merely nagging and fault-finding ... (Williams 1979, p. 240)

Williams was responding to what he saw as the “spirit of hostility” engendered by “the Leavisite critical tradition” (p. 240). The repudiation of ‘Culture’ and the reframing of a literary education as cultural studies has only exacerbated the underlying issue. More than three decades on what is evident, at least in the field of education, is not so much a critical stance as a lack of engagement with the language of literature – in effect, “some advocacy of literary practice.” Students’ writing goes through the motions as it deals with texts as though they are fabricated of second hand concepts rather than of language which is constitutive of meaning.

Misson and Morgan in their Critical Literacy and the Aesthetic use as their prime example Huckleberry Finn which, as I have discussed, was a profoundly formative text in my own childhood and adolescent reading. Their “emphasis [is] on readings as multiple and constructed” (Beavis, 2001, p. 49):
Thus, if we think about *Huckleberry Finn*, we can see that it is perfectly possible to highlight the thread of the representation of Jim as a black person and to find the book wanting, even racist. It is equally possible to pick on the thread (as most people do) of the developing relationship between Huck and Jim and see the book as a triumphant assertion of a common humanity beyond racism, a strong assertion of an anti-racist position. Both views are perfectly defensible. One could equally read the book as a terrifyingly accurate critique of the violence and rapacity of American society ... Or one could read it as a book about the demands made by this society’s way of doing masculinity, or as a book about the economic basis of class structure and class values. There are endless possibilities. (Misson and Morgan, 2006, p. 118)

There may well be, but there is loss as well as gain in this abstracted view of the novel, especially as it may be played out in the classroom. It is like looking at the book through the wrong end of a telescope. It involves arbitrariness and a kind of alienation:

For the ‘sign’ is ‘arbitrary’ only from a position of conscious or unconscious alienation. Its apparent arbitrariness is a form of social distance, itself a form of relationship... (Williams 1977, p. 168)

Williams, with his focus on the productive character of language in a social and historical context, points to the problem of “... a privileged withdrawal from the lived and living relationships which ... make all formal meanings significant and substantial, in a world of reciprocal reference which moves, as it must, beyond the signs” (Williams 1977, p. 168 – italics in original). In a literary “world of reciprocal reference” it makes no sense “to highlight the thread of the representation of Jim as a black person and to find the book wanting, even racist” (Misson and Morgan, 2006, p. 117).

Consideration of Jim’s ‘trash’ speech in terms of “reciprocal reference” might well lead to a different conclusion. Significantly, Misson and Morgan do not quote it; they do not work in this instance with the actual language of the novel:

It had clouded up pretty dark just after I got onto the raft, but it was clearing up again, now.
“Oh, well, that’s all interpreted well enough, as far as it goes, Jim,” I says, “but what does these things stand for?”

It was the leaves and rubbish on the raft, and the smashed oar. You could see them first rate, now.

Jim looked at the trash, and then looked at me, and back at the trash again. He had got the dream fixed so strong in his head that he couldn’t seem to shake it loose and get the facts back into its place again, right away. But when he did get the thing straightened around, he looked at me steady, without ever smiling, and says:

“What do dey stan’ for? I’s gwyne to tell you. When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin’ for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos’ broke bekase you wuz los’, en I didn’ k’yer no mo’ what become er me en de raf’. En when I wake up en fine you back agin’, all safe en soun’, de tears come en I could a got down on my knees en kiss’ yo’ foot I’s so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin’ ’bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren’s en makes ‘em ashamed.

Misson and Morgan find that this speech is “undeniably powerful”, but that “in the end [it] depends on an overly sentimental image of the good and faithful black carer... the dominant mode is sentiment. Sentiment ... simplifies human emotion” (2006, p. 117). It might be argued, rather, that its ‘undeniable power’ depends on the moral force which is generated when Jim feels impelled to shift out of the register of the “black carer” in order to reveal to Huck in no uncertain, human terms what the latter has done: “What do dey stan’ for? I’s gwyne to tell you...”

The word ‘trash’, which Huck as narrator has already used, is reiterated and deployed metaphorically with powerful effect. And Jim’s unsentimental candour achieves a result when Huck is reciprocally driven to discover that he is capable of a discourse in kind:

It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger – but I done it, and I warn’t ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn’t do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn’t done that one if I’d a knowed it would make him feel that way.
Misson and Morgan propose that *Huckleberry Finn* is arguably “wanting, even racist.” At the same time: “It is equally possible to ... see the book as a triumphant assertion of a common humanity beyond racism ... Both views are perfectly defensible” (p. 118).

They may be – if the book is treated as providing evidence of social attitudes at the time rather than as a literary work. These ‘threads’ cannot, given their “reciprocal reference” (Williams, 1977, p. 168), be regarded as independent of each other. To use Misson and Morgan’s metaphor, following Barthes, they are integral to a “woven fabric” of meaning (Misson and Morgan, 2006, p. 118). “The reader’s patterning” of them necessarily involves “the representation of Jim as a black person” taking on new meaning – indeed “a triumphant assertion of a common humanity beyond racism” – when Jim is motivated to speak directly to Huck in a way which makes his status, or lack of it, “as a black person” beside the point – and vice versa.

To think of a text as a “woven fabric” of representative “threads”, any one of which may become the relatively isolated focus of the reader’s attention, must distract from “attending to language in all its material density” (Eagleton, 2007, p. 2). My inquiry has drawn heavily on the work of Raymond Williams because, as has been demonstrated, he sets out to discover deep relationships between language, literature and culture:

... I had decided, from within the tradition of literary criticism itself, that its categories of literature and of criticism were so deeply compromised that they had to be challenged *in toto*. It was necessary to show that all kinds of writing produce meaning and value ... by modes of composition and deep conventions of stance and focus. (Williams, 1979, p. 326)
As an interpretation of modern cultural history and a framework for interpreting its products [the cultural critique inaugurated in and around *Scrutiny* in the 1930s] was awkwardly useful to Marxists, the awkwardness being not the least useful or productive aspect of the connection. The significance of the *Scrutiny* movement is to be found in the energies it released unpredictably as well as those it channeled. (p. 3)

I referred earlier (p. 47) to the false dichotomy between “the personal and emotional” and “a detached aesthetic response” promoted by Jack Thomson in his *Understanding Teenagers Reading* (1987). The place and function of ‘the aesthetic’ in relation to language is a vital consideration for Williams, following Leavis. Eagleton in turn looks back to these pioneers in attempting to recuperate attention to literariness: words cannot be regarded as “precious in themselves” if reading is not informed, and hence motivated, by alertness to the part that an “aesthetic response” plays in making meaning.

Misson and Morgan declare in their introduction to *Critical Literacy and the Aesthetic* that this is “not a book about literature teaching, but about the importance of acknowledging in the English classroom the range of aesthetic experiences that texts give, whether such experiences occur in literary texts or elsewhere” (p. xii). This formulation would seem to run the risk of drawing a distinction between “aesthetic experiences” – which are taken to be inherently suspect – and the material language that may give rise to them. If the one is given attention in isolation from the other, then both are diminished.

Thus Jim’s “undeniably powerful” speech can be treated with suspicion because it is couched in a way that conveys too powerfully, it seems, a sense of “the good and faithful black carer”. At least, we are led to believe that such is the way a hypothetical reader might experience it. This is to miss, however, Jim’s anger registered in his use of the word “trash” – the production of meaning is a function not simply of the reader’s response to the directness of Jim’s expression of his feelings but also of recognition of ways in which his speech is framed to achieve certain aesthetic effects. To simply point to a “dominant mode” of feeling does not take this into account. Rather than illuminate and motivate reading, casting an “aesthetic
experience” as a feature of language use, yet one that is not indissolubly wedded to the production of meaning, can work to compromise it.

This dichotomy may be traced back to the work of the Russian Formalists which, although aiming to identify the character of ‘literariness’, tends paradoxically, as Williams makes clear, to narrow our sense of what language study might be. To use his terms, its focus on “the activity of language” displaces a deeper sense of “language as an activity” (1977, p. 23). Goodrich (1997) notes that, “From the beginning of [Roman Jakobson’s 1960 conference paper, ‘Closing Statement’] ... there seems to exist a tension between poetics as a linguistic enterprise and poetics as an aesthetic enquiry” (p.54).

Jakobson stands behind the influential work in English on language and learning of James Britton (1908-1994) and his associates. To place the legacy of this work in the context of the insights into ‘literariness’ of Leavis, and in turn those of Williams and Eagleton, is to open up possibilities for future research which I can only touch on here. In his ‘Closing Statement’ Jakobson sets out the functions of language, which include the ‘poetic function’ that defines ‘literariness’ for many theorists for decades to come. He argues:

Language must be investigated in all the variety of its functions. Before discussing the poetic function we must define its place among the other functions of language. (Jakobson, 1960, p. 353)

Goodrich finds that this effort to delineate “the poetic function” in relation to “the other functions of language” has the perverse effect of excluding aesthetic considerations:

When launching this examination [of Jakobson’s paper], I noted an internal tension in Jakobson’s conception of poetics between its linguistic and its aesthetic dimensions ... Even more obvious is the exclusive attention given to the linguistic thereafter ... (p. 64)

The work of the formalists is taken up by Britton and his associates in a way which paradoxically puts a premium on reader response to a given “linguistic enterprise” at the expense of “aesthetic enquiry” or “reflection on the means of expression” (Culler, 1997, p.41). Thus we
find in John Dixon’s (1967, 1969) account of the Dartmouth Seminar (1966) that pejorative view of directed work with the language of literature which ‘informs’ Thomson’s version of reading pedagogy:

So we may bluntly point out to pupils or delicately elicit from them parts of the pattern, we may talk over relationships of the story with reality, but we cannot do the work for our pupils – to feel those relationships as one is carried through the experience and be deeply involved in it is a different matter from recognizing them at a cool distance away. (p. 57 – italics in original)

To stand “at a cool distance” rather than “to feel” is, it would seem, hardly an option. These theorists do not entertain the idea that to strengthen students’ grasp of the language that is available to them might be to strengthen their feelings in response to it. A grasp of the construction of a fictional character cannot, for example, be taken for granted, given that, as Best (1985) points out: “Unless one understood the concept one would be unable to respond appropriately to a fictional character” (p.94). It is necessary to mobilise a reasoned approach to a text in order to create conditions in which appropriate ideas and feelings can come into play:

... it is doubtful whether one can be said even to understand [an artistic] judgement which one has not reasoned through for oneself... the making of it implies one’s own first-hand experience of the work. (Best 1985, p.44)

This grounded approach requires that, in order to deepen response, the literariness of the work become the focus of attention. Students need to grasp its characteristics and qualities. Best concludes:

... it makes no sense to suppose that, in the arts, what is expressed could be comprehensively characterised apart from the particular way in which it is expressed (Best 1985, p.167).

It is understandable, however, that teachers should have reacted against what was seen as Leavis’ censoriousness. He was understood to have given “cool” assessment of literature a bad name; his legacy was coming under siege:
Leavis’ students are often impressive because of the quality of their caring about literature and about teaching. They are not, however, in so far as one can generalize about a group of disciples, impressively open-minded as judges... Of course, events have moved swiftly in the last decade, and we are already finding that some dents have been made in the Great Tradition. (Hardy, 1973, 1984, pp. 100-101)

Unfortunately, “the quality of their caring about literature and about teaching” pretty much disappeared in the ensuing demolition of the Great Tradition. Carol’s approach to ‘literariness’ survived through decades as a rare example of it. A focus on the ‘functions’ of language led theorists to delimit, as they saw it, the language of literature in ways that for all their idealistic intent to treat language as instrumental – or, rather, on account of it – served to frustrate and divert students’ attempts to get in touch with its “material density” (Eagleton 2007, p. 2):

In making things real, language cannot help but give them value and meaning... Thus literature invites us into ways of evaluating aspects of life as we experience them. But when we experience life through literature, we do so in the role of spectator and not participant. (Dixon, 1967, 1969, p. 57)

In what sense can language “make things real”? The reader can only deal, in the first instance, with the words on the page. We do not have, as Eagleton (2007) points out, “a choice between being fascinated with words and being preoccupied with things” (p. 69). Yet the notion that students might engage in “literary practice”, as (“deeply collaborative”, to use Jacobson’s (2011) characterization of Leavis’ criticism) they work with the language that is available to them, is effectively ruled out of court. The “role of spectator”, as distinct from that of “participant”, tends to exclude the possibility that they might “[entertain] particular aesthetic formulations of problems” (Reid 1984, p. 14). Teachers can only vainly trust that “things” will in some sense appear to have been “[made] real”. Literature becomes something of a hall of mirrors.

Advocates of critical literacy reacted, however, against what looked like the passivity of students who were being left to their own, inadequate devices: Misson and Morgan characterize the ‘personal growth’ model as “horticultural”:
The student is the plant, and [a great work] is the fertilizer. If
great works are applied in sufficient quantity, the student
seedling will turn into a wonderfully sensitive and mature
adult. If young people just read the classics, they will realize (in
all senses of the term) their true humanity. (Misson and
Morgan 2006, p.122)

Misson and Morgan find that “The problem is that [the personal
growth model] naturalises the processes of identity construction ...”
(p.122). For them what is at stake is “identity construction”. What
counts, however, in the first instance, is the capacity of students to
work with the language of literature. In effect, ‘reader response’ has
taken on a different shape at the expense of that attention to
literariness which might inform it.

2) The ‘Functions’ of Literary Language

James McAuley, poet, Professor of English and (1971) president of
AATE (Australian Association of Teachers of English) has been
described as “always an inspiring teacher [who] instilled in students
love and respect for the craft of poetry” (Pierce, 2000). His address
entitled Evaluation or Interpretation to the AATE Conference in 1968 begins:

My thesis in this paper is directed chiefly at the senior levels of
senior school studies. It is simply that we should aim at the
greatest possible understanding of texts by the student.

This might seem so patently obvious as to hardly need stating, much
less restating more than four decades later. What might it mean,
though, in terms of a balance between attention to ‘literariness’ and
‘reader response’? How might ‘literariness’ be addressed? And to
what extent might the cultural and historical context of a given text
come into play?

The revised ‘study design’ for English which takes effect in Victoria in
2016 aims, among other things, at enabling students to
• understand how culture, values and context underpin the construction of texts and how this can affect meaning and interpretation
• understand how ideas are presented by analyzing form, purpose, context, structure and language (p.5)

Language is framed in this second point in a way which recalls the analytical and, in effect, delimiting approach of the Formalists. As Goodrich (1997) puts it:

In effect, Jakobson clearly believes his references to a purposeful, goal-directed system of language license the search for its functional components. All functions of language, we are therefore urged, ought to be examined in order to pinpoint the poetic function. (p. 55)

Questions of ‘form’, isolated from those of language, relate to what Jakobson calls the metalinguistic function of an act of verbal communication. Similarly, a search for ‘purpose’, or the conative function, which for Jakobson “concerns the effect the statement is striving to have on the addressee” (Eagleton, 2007, p. 51 – I use his gloss on Jakobson’s ‘functions’ in the following) can tend to distract from the means of expression rather than bring it into focus.

“To direct attention to the context is to examine the referential function” (p. 51), while a discussion of ‘structure’ may contrive to direct attention to little more than what Jakobson nominates as the phatic function of language – “the [mode of] contact between speaker and listener” (p. 51).

The emotive function, which involves the problematic notion of detection of tone of voice, is omitted from this ‘functional’ scheme. It might well, however, creep into a discussion of ‘purpose’. As Reid (1996) notes:

... the idea [of finding a personal voice in writing] is unhelpful because it is associated with an untenable concept of selfhood as an entity thought to be independent of language. (p. 17)

We are left with a ‘pinpointed’ component of language, a “focus on the message itself” (p. 51) where the specialised poetic function can come into play. Attentiveness to this function notionally motivates recognition of the literariness of verbal signs, which are consequently defamiliarised from everyday uses of language. Literariness is not
though seen here as productive of meaning in the sense in which Williams, following Leavis, came to understand it because “...the prior commitment to construing functions exclusively in terms of superordinate and subordinate operations prevents Jakobson from conceptualising other alternatives” (Goodrich, 2011, p. 60).

As Jakobson himself puts it, where ‘poetry’ is nominated as such the “[poetic] function is superimposed upon the other functions of language” (p. 359). One problem with this concept is that it would seem to assume an effort to delimit the category of ‘poetry’. A deeper issue is its blindness, given that ‘literariness’ is reduced to jostling for attention among a crowd of ‘functions’, to the critical part that aesthetic considerations play in “...all kinds of writing [which] produce meaning and value ... by modes of composition and deep conventions of stance and focus” (Williams, 1979, p. 326). It is difficult, given the confusions inherent in this kind of analytical scheme, for students to arrive at a heightened sense of language as a material entity in itself. It is not surprising then that, as has been demonstrated, they are reduced to looking for distorted reflections of ‘ideas’ in the language of literature.

The point to be made here is that while the curriculum has at different times mandated attention to ‘structures, features and conventions used ... in a range of literary texts’ (VCAA, 2006, p. 29), or apparent equivalents of these terms – that is, they have contained definitive statements which would appear to have exactly the same emphasis – different generations of teachers have understood them to mean very different things. As has been demonstrated, current ‘exemplary’ essays show at best only glancing references to language. And different generations of examiners have construed these strictures in different ways: assessment of the work of Carol’s students has not been consistent over time.

It is not just that a sense of what language study might be has narrowed; more to the point as far as the latest curriculum advice is concerned, “meaning and interpretation” are shaped by “culture, values and context”. An ambition to enlarge meaning – motivated, at least in part, by the presumption that the reader is in danger of remaining oblivious to potentially insidious influences – may have the effect of closing it down. As McAuley puts it:

I don’t want to deny some social and cultural value to literary discrimination, but I don’t think literature can bear an earnest
mission to save us all. Above all I fear that an over-emphasis on
critical evaluation will have unfortunate unintended effects.
(1968, p. 20)

This might seem a curious stance for a man who has been described
by Docker (1984) as “Australia’s most spectacular Cold [War] literary
Warrior”, a cultural critic who prized in poetry “a rational
contemplation of the divinely ordered world” (p. 75). Yet McAuley
focuses, as his title, Evaluation or Interpretation, suggests, on how
students might make meaning for themselves from their reading of
literature as distinct from having meaning imposed on them or being
left uncertain as to its material basis. This stance may be contrasted
with that of Misson (1990), as described by McLean Davies and
Doecke (forthcoming, pp. 13-14):

Misson’s ‘vision’ of good readers is [like that of Thomson,
1990] of readers ‘who can get the pleasure that the text gives,
but who will maintain a critical awareness of the way the text is
working to manoeuvre them into accepting the messages it is
aiming to transmit’ (p.25). This means that it is the teacher’s
job to make ‘explicit how texts work to involve us, how they
create for us particular ways of seeing the world, and how they
create a particular subject position, a particular self for the
reader’. It is, indeed, a dangerous world out there, with
unsuspecting students needing to be alerted to the text’s
‘coercion’, requiring teachers ‘to demystify the whole textual
process’ (ibid.)

The student can hardly be left alone with the text, since to take
pleasure in it is a suspect pursuit. McLean Davies and Doecke note
that for Misson: “…‘aesthetic’ value [is] a ‘pleasure’ that needs to be
simultaneously acknowledged and discounted, as in Misson’s concept
of a trade-off between an acknowledgement of ‘pleasure’ and a
notes in regard to Jakobson’s (1960) ‘Closing Statement’, we find
here “a tension between poetics as a linguistic enterprise and poetics
as an aesthetic enquiry” (p.54)

And what is meant by the ‘text’? McLean Davies and Doecke draw
attention to “…the unmediated character of the concepts of ‘text’ and
‘ideology’ as they are applied by both Thomson and Misson,
foregrounding the complexity of form and content, of language and
meaning, as a legitimate focus for literary studies, in
contradistinction to any identification of the so-called ‘ideology’ of
the text” (p. 14). They go on to argue that, given this failure to attend
to “the complexity of form and content, of language and meaning”:

Far from providing a means for students to reflexively engage
with the social and historical conditions that have made them,
the version of ‘textual literacy’ espoused by Misson – which is
not only peculiar to him, but arguably characterizes much of
the rhetoric of those who advocate ‘critical literacy’ – produces
obfuscation ... (p. 15)

Culture and ideology are at the forefront of attention of the new
‘study design’ in Victoria, with language something of an
afterthought. This “earnest mission”, as McAuley would no doubt
characterize it, is a curate’s egg: it threatens to blindside that
attention to language and form which might stand a chance of
realizing it. It is not clear that what counts is a grasp of ways in which
“culture” and “ideas” are constituted, by language. Advocates of
‘critical literacy’ arguably succeeded in replacing Leavis’ species of
“critical evaluation” with another – and with similarly “unfortunate
unintended effects”.

McAuley is impatient with “F. R. Leavis refusing to enunciate a
general theory of literature, but nevertheless re-valuing English
literature by mysterious criteria like ‘life-enhancement”’ (1968, p.
18). While he doesn’t dispense with questions of relative value he is
concerned initially to clarify the character of works which cannot be
“simply objects out there which we can inspect with a cast of the
mind’s eye ... [because] these structures of meaningful words are not
presented to us in such a simple fashion” (p. 20). He observes that as
we come to know a work better over time:

We become ... more and more convinced, perhaps, of the
intrinsic and objective value of the work, but also aware of the
partiality and variability of the particular judgments we might
at any one time make according to our variable point of view,
mood, line of interest, and so on. And it may strike us as a
comforting probability that the differences of evaluation
amongst competent readers need not lead us to the conclusion
that their different cognitions of the work have nothing in
common ... (p. 20)
He proposes a relationship with the work that, taking into account what he sees as its uncertain ontological status, is rather more grounded than the detection of ‘life-enhancement’. Yet this relationship of the reader with the words on the page has proved a critical issue. As has been argued, the rhetoric of Misson and Morgan about the availability of multiple interpretations of Huckleberry Finn is effectively unanchored in any recognition of the language that comprises the text.

Ian Reid (1984) finds that “In a fuller sense, text is a semantic process by which meanings are transacted through the verbal material, not deposited in it”. Thus he arrives at a "concept of text as exchange rather than of object" (p.56). Reid’s work was to prove highly influential. McLean Davies and Doecke find that: “The distinction between the ‘Literary Gallery’ and the ‘Literary Workshop’, which provides the focus of the opening chapter of Ian Reid’s The Making of Literature (Reid, 1984, p.10ff), became part of the professional language of teachers, not only in Victoria but around the country…” (p. 10). At the same time, as will be discussed, the implications of his notion of a ‘transaction’ of meanings were not realized.

The transactions involved in playing jazz music serve as an illuminating parallel with concepts of the productive use of “verbal material” and of “exchange”. Jazz musicians, by contrast with classical, are nothing without a highly developed ‘ear’ for the ‘language’ of their music because they must use its elements inventively in engaging in a ‘conversation’ with other improvisers. The metaphors of ‘language’ and ‘conversation’ refer to patterns and textures of sound. Jazz players must develop means of recognizing how the ‘language’ is being used (“the presentation, how that's done”, as Carol puts it) and respond in kind. Their focus is on the nature and potential of the musical materials at their disposal.

It is only when jazz players are in possession of ‘plenty of language’, as they call their grasp of the music, that they can produce convincing ideas in their improvisations or ‘solos’. Similarly, it is only on the basis of a (Carol directed) focus on language that Sarah can arrive at writing such that discussed in Chapter 7:

What is particularly interesting is Malouf’s emphasis on the warriors being so adversely compromised by the ferocity of
war, positioning readers to not (merely) despise their murderous actions but rather (also) to feel a sense of empathy and compassion towards them.

This sample of Sarah’s work (with Carol’s corrections) demonstrates that “understanding of how culture, values and context underpin the construction of texts” and “understanding of how ideas are presented” that the Victorian study design seeks to impart. It is built on the kind of attentiveness to language which is evident in the following:

[Malouf] describes a sense of exultancy and majestic force as Neoptolemus, the “bronze-haired avenger” [of] his father’s death, “cannot wait to burst through the doors”. However, he then starkly contrasts this lively image [with] the brutality, the awkwardness and sheer dehumanizing nature of war. He describes bestial, machinery-like images: Neoptolemus now “a raging furnace, a round mouth shouting ... drunk with slaughter ... hacking at cartilage”. This starkly contrasts with the ‘heroic ideal’ and is demonstrative of how Malouf builds up the traditional heroic ideal, and then constantly subverts it and arrives at a new, re-defined version.

It is not at all clear, however, that the curriculum can discriminate between a strong ‘solo’, which (as in jazz) depends on a grasp of language and form, and one which does not grapple with language and hence has no ideas to speak of. An example is a student’s writing in response to The Tempest, which was also discussed in Chapter 7:

The characters of The Tempest are bound in an intricate web of power dynamics. Despite this, there is revealed to be something akin to a co-dependency in these relations... Despite the implicit superiority discernible in Prospero’s use of a possessive pronoun in referring to Ariel as “[his] brave spirit”, it is solely through his command of Ariel that the events of The Tempest are able to take place. (VCAA, 2015, p. 5)

McAuley’s comment is pertinent:

We set up an academic rat-race in which distinction may go all too often to the bright operator who can give the text a quick once-over after or before a whirl around the critics. It is not
clear enough that someone who has kept the critics in their ancillary place and dwelt lovingly on the text is really going to shine with the same brilliance (p.22).

3) To “Dwell Lovingly on the Text”

More than four decades on the evidence is that the attention of markers is readily diverted from writing of substance: students are encouraged to treat texts as repositories of large ideas. The notion that they might “dwell lovingly on the text” does not enter into calculations.

This applies not only to the section of the course which requires students to write what might be seen as a narrowly literary critical essay. Under the ‘older’ study design in Victoria, which was introduced in 2008, in the section of the course entitled ‘Writing in Context (Creating and Presenting)’ students were prescribed at least two texts (with the option of a film), intended to stimulate ideas about a ‘context’ such as ‘The imaginative landscape’ or ‘Whose reality?’ They were not required in their writing to demonstrate an appreciation of the experience of reading these texts. Indeed, the 2008 Assessment Report stipulates: “Section B is not text response; it focuses equally on ideas and writing” (p.6). It follows, however, that it was not clear how reading would help students to arrive at ideas that were to be ‘creatively’ deployed in their writing.

Even so, the Report provides a “sample [which] is engaging and effective and draws extensively on [David Malouf’s novella] Fly Away Peter”. For example, in response to the prompt:

‘Events and experiences influence the way we connect to place.’

Brutalised by the landscape of his childhood, Wizzer wanted to go to war because he loved fighting, he relished it. It gave him a freedom which made his soul soar ... And the truth was he needed that escape – especially seeing as he spent the majority of his day trapped deep underground, the black dust clinging to his face, tracing its way into his lungs, leaving grit and a foul taste which he could never seem to be rid of... (p.10)
It is not hard to see that this writing is “engaging and effective” because of the way in which it draws on the language of Malouf’s text. The study design requires that students “draw on the ideas and/or arguments they have gained from the texts studied to construct their own texts,” but the effectiveness of this student’s work is not simply a matter of ideas.

A comparison with the opening sentences of one of Malouf’s short stories, chosen pretty much at random, demonstrates that the writer has grasped the characteristic mode of his writing – not just its diction and rhythms and use of images, but the way in which the authorial persona informs the perspectives of the protagonist. The clauses have a reflective, meditative way of leading and enlarging imagination while firmly grounding it in the material world:

It was dark in the church, even at noon. Diagonals of chill sunlight were stacked between the piers, sifting down luminous dust, and so thick with it that they seemed more substantial almost than stone. He had a sense of two churches, one raised vertically on Gothic arches and a thousand years old, the other compounded of light and dust, at an angle to the first and newly created in the moment of his looking. (Malouf D. *The Sun in Winter*, in *The Complete Stories*, p.400)

The key word here is “stacked”, which gives this particular perception of “chill sunlight” solidity; the image of “diagonals … sifting down luminous dust”, in turn, opens up larger conceptual perspectives of the story which, as one might suspect, has to do with a kind of resurrection. It is a way of seeing.

We can readily find examples of this kind of complementary vision in *Ransom*. For example: “Moonlight ran fast over the river pebbles”, where what is attractive is also deceptively dangerous, or

The man is a fighter, but when he is not fighting he is a farmer, earth is his element. One day, he knows, he will go back to it. All the grains that were miraculously called together at his birth to make just these hands, these feet, this corded forearm, will separate and go their own ways again. He is a child of earth. (p. 4)
Similarly, in the excerpt from the student’s work, the rhetorical flourishes of “relished” and “made his soul soar” are earthed by the physicality of “the black dust … tracing its way into his lungs …” The character’s love affair with war is motivated by “grit and a foul taste.” The point is that language gives access to ideas, not the other way round. The student who does not possess the language of a text in the sense exemplified here will have difficulty generating ideas that are informed by that text.

Unfortunately, this is a rare example of a student working with words in a way that demonstrates a heightened sense of their use in a literary text. Such writing was scant in 2008 and by 2014 it has disappeared from the examples printed on the assessment report: “Most pieces of writing could be described as expository” (p. 5). For example (original spelling and punctuation):

What Brecht recognised in both Germany and America, which is examined in Life of Galileo was the recurring situation of a dogmatic authority suppressing the opposing views of those within their jurisdiction. This is done often by use of rhetorical device, just as Brecht’s fellow playwright, Arthur Miller, noted. In his doctrine of ‘contemporary diabolism’ he stated that time and time again, the people in positions of power would associate their political or philosophical enemies with something demonic: Galileo had his ‘famed telescoped dubbed a ‘Devil’s tube’; Brecht was seen in association with the ‘Red Hell’; Miller’s The Crucible deals with the trial of witches, and those involved with ‘witchcraft’. Each time, an ‘inhumane overlay’ is given to a group within society, allowing the abrogation of all normally applied customs of civilised intercourse. This way, authorities can inflict harm, and the public – if only tacitly – condones it. (p. 8)

To be fair, this is sophisticated political and cultural commentary, and it does show a sense of the power of language – of “rhetorical device” – but what is not clear is how it articulates with a grasp of the cited texts. It could have been derived by a “bright operator” from “a whirl around the critics” on the internet, as McAuley, if he were still with us, would no doubt suspect.

Students are not encouraged to “dwell lovingly” on the text; indeed, they are positively discouraged from doing so because, we are told,
ideas must come to the foreground at the expense of its language. Attention to language and the articulation of ideas are seen as quite distinct entities, and even as opposed. Hence ideas are effectively divorced from the text even if they refer to it.

The report asserts: “There is no good writing without good ideas” (p. 5), but it does not appreciate that, as for the jazz player or for Carol’s students, close reading is vital for their realization: “The more successful responses [such as that on Brecht] explored the core ideas of the prompt instead of treating it like a text response” (p. 5).

‘Writing in Context (Creating and Presenting)’ has been replaced under the new dispensation by ‘Reading and Comparing texts’, which requires students to “explore the meaningful connections between two texts” (p. 24). While, on the face of it, this initiative is promising in that comparison would seem to constrain attention to the paired texts, the design does not – unsurprisingly – specify the fundamental importance of a grasp of language if students are to “gain a deeper understanding of the ideas, issues and themes that reflect the world and human experiences” (p. 24). It seems unlikely that, on this basis, students might be able to at any point “dwell lovingly on the text” (McAuley, 1968, p. 22) rather than have it clouded by abstractions.

It would seem that, having realized that ‘writing in context’, which explicitly steered away from paying close attention to the language of texts, was not proving successful, examiners have determined to resume a focus on texts. Yet it also seems clear that they do not envisage with any clarity the need for students to develop a heightened awareness of the language of these paired texts.

No doubt implementing a well-intentioned curriculum has always been a troublesome challenge for teachers and for examiners because these intentions themselves make it hard – for reasons which have been discussed – to touch on the constitutive character of language. Although Reid (1984) is well aware that his “polemical opposition between two models of literary study ... ‘the Gallery’ and ‘the Workshop’” renders the former “to some extent a convenient caricature” (p. 8), he considers that its use is justified in order to pursue reform. It would seem, however, that opposition to ‘the Gallery’ or ‘Culture’ and consequent resistance to what are taken to be its terms have paradoxically obscured the value of his (Literary) Workshop recommendations. For example:
... what the Workshop model can encourage students to see is that the problem solving activity of literature is inseparable from particular aesthetic formulations of problems. What we need to do is bring life back into that phrase ‘entertaining an idea’. We need to facilitate the perception that a valuable inventiveness is involved in the peculiarly literary embodiment of ideas, preoccupations, situations ... (p.14).

What might it mean to ‘entertain an idea’ or ‘dwell lovingly’ on the text? Reid aims not to reject the works of the ‘Literary Gallery’ but rather to have students “ ... come to understand the many material processes through which a text is woven, through which a work is laboured over, through which a literary product is made” (p.31). In the context of the theoretical influences which have been discussed teachers train their attention on students’ responses to a given text to the exclusion of attentiveness to “the many material processes” which might inform them.

These responses have come to be couched at a level of abstraction which touches on the text only tangentially; the precious baby of close work with language has disappeared along with the bathwater of mindless admiration of the Gallery. It is not just that, as has been demonstrated, students’ readings are inadequate; more seriously, the curriculum has lost sight of how enquiry into “the peculiarly literary embodiment of ideas, preoccupations, situations” can strengthen students’ grasp of language, of the relationship between words and meaning.

Which is not to downplay the active role that the reader must play in making meaning. On the contrary, Reid suggests that in working with words on the page, unlike in face-to-face communication:

The dealings between author and reader cannot be so direct; guidelines for constructing significance must be mediated through words alone. Often this is done in terms of small ‘models’ of communicative exchanges, embedded within the text. (Reid, 1984, p. 64)

The reader must play an active part in this exchange. Mulhern (1979/1981) finds that for Leavis the notion of collaboration with
words on the page was, for all his insistence that they be attended to, limited:

To criticize was to bear witness to meanings that were already adequately constituted in the words on the page, needing only to be ‘realized’ in the consciousness of the reader. (p. 171)

An example of a “‘model’ of communicative exchange” is a passage from *Huckleberry Finn*, which I encountered in an academic context in an article, ‘Time and Pastoral: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn’ by Graham Burns published in *The Critical Review* of 1972. I was a student at Melbourne University at the time. *The Critical Review* has been described as “the departmental organ” of “this last outpost of Leavisite imperialism” (Felperin, 1985, p. 8). Burns introduces the passage which was very familiar to me:

Huck himself, speaking the vernacular language he does, appears to the reader as immediate and real, his responses instinctive and his expression casually vivid:

I was pretty tired, and the first thing I knowed, I was asleep. When I woke up I didn’t know where I was, for a minute. I set up and looked around, a little scared. Then I remembered. The river looked miles and miles across. The moon was so bright I could a counted the drift logs that went a-slipping along, black and still, hundreds of yards out from shore. Everything was dead quiet, and it looked late, and *smelt* late. You know what I mean – I don’t know the words to put it in.

The prose movement here is beautifully light and flexible, characteristically so of Huck’s voice for most of the book. The voice itself has a remarkable immediacy. (Burns, 1972, pp. 58-59)

The passage is so “vivid”, so “immediate” that it takes my breath away, no matter how many times I read it, but how are its effects achieved? It is not surprising to me now that I experienced Burns’ commentary as tantalizingly vague. Huck “appears ... real” because the way he speaks is “vivid” and has such “immediacy”. This is tautological: Huck seems real because he speaks in such a real way: a
circular assumption of ‘life’ obscures ways in which Huck’s actual language registers the character of his consciousness.

The metaphor of voice, the ‘personalising’ of Huck, is unhelpful in this respect. Burns finds Huck’s “responses instinctive and his expression casually vivid”; a revolutionary virtue of the novel is of course that it sounds so ‘natural’, as if “Huckleberry Finn’s voice flowed unaltered from Mark Twain’s raw imagination onto the book page” (Powers, 2005, p. 477). As his biographer demonstrates, however:

Far from it: the author constantly rummaged through Huck’s (and Jim’s) dialect, weeding out words and phrases that bore any taint of a mature, well-read man’s syntax. “Always” became “awluz”, “never heard anything” became “didn’t hear nothing.” In draft Huck might have remarked that “I had about made up my mind to stay there all night, when I heard horses,” but by the time the presses rolled, he’d corrected himself to “… when I hear a plunkety-plunk, plunkety-plunk, and says to myself, horses coming.” (p. 477)

Reid points to the benefits for students of “increased sensitivity to the way in which the dual power of language to confine or to liberate is registered in literary texts” (p. 21). Twain’s “integration of literary with non literary language” (p. 16) in Huckleberry Finn is liberating in a way that opened up radically new possibilities for literature

In the case of the passage quoted, Twain avoids the construction “before I knew it, I was asleep”, choosing instead an ‘uneducated’ but more active form, even if it is – taken literally – contradictory: “… the first thing I knowed, I was asleep.” Huck knows stuff… Then, rather than have Huck reflect: “… it took a moment for me to get my bearings”, Twain has him say, again more directly: “I didn’t know where I was, for a minute.”

We experience the shifting states of Huck’s awakening: “I set up and looked around, a little scared. Then I remembered.” Consciousness, prompted by apprehension, comes flooding back. Burns points to the material character of these shifts, but somewhat vaguely: “The rhythms quite subtly mime Huck’s sleepy consciousness as he awakens, brightening and slightly quickening …” (p. 59). The focus is on character or content here at the expense of form. Huck is disoriented – “I didn’t know where I was …” – rather than “sleepy”.

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The commentary is apt, however, when it notes: “the world re-asserts itself to him in all the acuteness with which he habitually sees it...” The drift logs are on the move with the current, “a-slipping along”, yet give the illusion, with perfect clarity in the moon light, of being “black and still, hundreds of yards out from shore”. Detail is picked out not only to provide perspective but also to register, as Burns notes, Huck’s “acuteness”. Twain’s use of the vernacular is marvellously effective in this: “a-slipping along” conveys Huck’s awareness of irresistible movement which he can’t pick up visually.

Its liberating power also becomes apparent, with satiric effect, in Huck’s reflections on his moral education:

Mark Twain also fine-tuned Huck’s capacity for reasoning, especially moral reasoning ... [For example] Huck suffers a guilty conscience after he fast-talks some slave hunters out of searching the raft where Jim is hiding ... “I am a mean, low coward, & it’s the fault of them that brung me up.” [became] “I see it warn’t no use for me to try to learn to do right; a body that don’t get started right when he’s little, ain’t got no show ...” (Powers, 2005, pp. 477-478)

In pursuing character development, and hence authorial greatness, Burns skates across the surface of the language. His focus is on Huck’s ‘consciousness’ or ‘sensibility’: “His presence is so pervasive, his sensibility so alive that by the end Twain can rely on the suggestiveness of the very pretence, the literary strategy, that Huck is at a loss for words”. More to the point, Twain explicitly co-opts the reader in the making of meaning:

Everything was dead quiet, and it looked late, and *smelt* late. You know what I mean – I don’t know the words to put it in.

In effect, Twain addresses an ideal reader who is well aware that she has been provided with words that enable her to collaborate in the production of meaning:

Thus to address an account to another is, explicitly or potentially, as in any act of expression, to evoke or propose a relationship. It is also, through this, to evoke or propose an
active relationship to the experience being expressed ...
(Williams, 1977, p. 166)

And this “active relationship”, which depends, as Reid puts it, on the
capacity to “entertain” “particular aesthetic formulations” (1984, p.
14), is founded on close reading which is itself integral to the
“material processes” through which “a literary product is made”
(p.31).

4) The Pleasures of Meaning Making

As it happens, the new ‘study design’ in Victoria requires students,
along with the area discussed above, to “present sustained creative
responses to selected texts, demonstrating their understanding of the
world of the texts and how texts construct meaning” (p. 18). This will
be seen by many as a welcome return to an activity which has been
dormant for a number of years. McLean Davies and Doecke (p. 10)
remind us that:

The forms of response listed in the original [1990] Design
included, amongst other possibilities ... ‘creating a text in a
manner consistent with the stylistic features of the original text
by rewriting it in a different mode or from a point of view of a
different character’ (VCAB, 1990, p.6)... This was as distinct
from treating literary works in a traditional manner, as though
they belonged in what Ian Reid called a ‘Literature Gallery’,
where the only appropriate attitude was one of reverential awe
at the greatness of the thoughts and feelings embodied in them.
The diversity of responses that students might explore also
represented a powerful challenge to the essay as the privileged
form of responding to literary works. It was not, in short, just a
matter of what texts were read, but how students responded to
them and appropriated them, moving beyond a notion of a
reified literary ‘tradition’ to a sense of themselves as actively
making their own culture ... (Barnes, 2000, p.46).

Yet this form of response evidently fell out of favour; we should
consider how it might in resurrected form meet these expectations.
More to the point, it is necessary to ask how activities such as
“rewriting a text in a different mode or from a [different] point of
view” might enable students to ‘creatively’ develop (and thereby
‘demonstrate’) “understanding of ... how texts construct meaning” in ways that “the essay as the privileged form of responding to literary works”, by implication, does not. And what is meant by “consistent with the stylistic features of the original text”?

An example, in the case of Ransom, might be to rewrite the episode of King Priam’s encounter with the river Scamander from the point of view of the carter, Somax. Carol’s students would conceivably be well placed – having been supplied, in a jazz musician’s terms, with plenty of ‘language’ – to undertake this activity. A student’s piece might include something like the following:

I well knew, as of course the king did not, how dangerous and unpredictable the stream could be when it was swollen, but when I looked from the bank at its rolling sweep, I realized that I had underestimated its force: it was untameable. Yet I also understood that this frail old man was set on reaching the Greek camp.

Such writing might make use of phrases which Carol drew from the class such as “the curiosity of the fingerlings” around the king’s “white, bony feet”. It might bring out the contrast between the rigidity of Priam’s role as king and the perilous freedom to which he is now exposed. He is, to Somax’s surprise, out of his depth in the natural world, yet “rejuvenated, refreshed, energized”. The carter must negotiate a relationship with his king that previously was beyond his ken.

An initial activity aimed at having students sharpen their sense of how the novel’s language characteristically works might be to have them attempt to reconstruct from memory the short paragraph beginning “They had come to the water’s edge ...” (pp. 150-151). They should know that they have three sentences to play with. They might then be asked to ‘transcribe’ the following paragraph which begins: “They edged forward, the mules resisting... “ (p. 151). Clearly, the mules know better.

An alternative to retelling events from the carter’s point of view might be to have him engage later in a dialogue with Priam – that is, in “a different mode” in which these characters reciprocally reflect on events. The close work with the language of Ransom which Carol prompts in her students would prove important in laying the
foundations for this ‘Workshop’ activity – in demonstrating how language can be productive of meaning – because, as Reid (1984) observes, “... [issues involved] need to be posed in literary terms and not short circuited by summary moral judgements ...” (p. 15). This kind of verbal play needs – just as a jazz player improvises on given musical materials – to be in touch with and ‘creatively’ make use of the language of the text. The simple abstraction of an idea or theme for the purposes of the ‘creation’ or ‘recreation’ of a text will not serve, as Reid is well aware:

We know that it’s usually not hard to get secondary students talking about social responsibility [for example] ... But we also know that discussions of this sort often tend to become glib and diffuse, and that if encouraged in a literature class they are more likely to lead attention away from the particulars of any text than to sharpen verbal and aesthetic perceptions. (p. 14)

“Verbal and aesthetic perceptions” are mutually “sharpened” in a probing responsiveness to the text. Yet it is not clear that the proposed ‘creative response’ understands what this kind of meaning making might look like:

In developing a creative response [students] explore issues of purpose and audience and make key choices about structure, conventions and language. They develop a credible and effective voice and style ...

The fundamental importance of attentiveness to the materiality and productivity of language is hedged about and obscured by the grid of ‘functions’ discussed earlier. Meiers, (1996) provides an example of the application of this kind of “model for responding to writing” (p. 45). It has been “used [at the time of writing] since 1991 for the VCE English school assessed CATs [Common Assessment Tasks]” which were subsequently abandoned under pressure to return to the end-of-year examination as the predominant instrument of assessment. Meiers’ example, which was written by a 13-14 year old girl in response to Caroline Macdonald’s dystopian novel, The Lake at the End of the World, includes the following:

There’s radiation everywhere. They’re trying to kill me! I can tell. They got Mum, they’re getting Jules, and I’m next. Chris is alright. She’s got all her family. She’s probably trying to kill me
too. In fact I’m sure of it. She keeps bringing me to this damn paddock ... (p. 46)

Meiers, who “has been [since 1992] State Reviewer for VCE English” (p. 53), finds that “The language used has been chosen for specific effects: for example, the mainly short, simple sentences used to create [the character’s] feelings and conflicts” (p. 52). This characterisation says almost nothing about “the language used” – it simply ticks a box in that the language can be seen to be ‘functional’. In fact, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that “the mainly short, simple sentences” are banal and that this is not the student’s fault. There is no hint in them of a capacity to take pleasure in the exercise of literariness. As McAuley observes: “It is odd how enslaving in practice our efforts at liberation can be, how dictatorial our invitation to free response, how narrowing our widening of horizons, how leaden our feet on the ground” (1968, p. 20).

By comparison, Carol has for decades taught what she calls an “animal interview” assignment with her Year 9 (14 year old) students. It is based on a book which as a first year out teacher she recalled from her childhood. As the title suggests, students are required to develop a story/interview with a creature of their choice. They must, on the one hand, provide information about this creature in a number of categories, and, on the other, give ‘him’ or ‘her’ a distinct personality. Olivia sets the scene for her 2012 “Interview with a Narwhal” (with Carol’s annotations):

The swells of the freezing ocean are rocking the small boat furiously. I keep calling out to my newly hired crew to help me steer the ruddy thing, but of course with my luck, they are from the parts of Canada that speak French ... (Good opening)

“Regarder dehors!” (Tu parles francais, hein?)

I hear one of the short, stocky men calling out to me but what the hell is he saying? And then I realise, the boom is coming straight for my head, but too late. I am thrust into the freezing waters of the ocean. (double tick)

Fortunately the narrator finds himself on “one freezing big, floating block of ice” where he is surprised to be addressed, in an “accent which sounded Russian but also a bit Canadian” by a “huge whale thing, with a massive horn on his face like a unicorn”:
“Vot the hell are you?” he finished off my sentence for me. A
smile spread across his rounded face. “That iz the usual
question I get asked by lost ones like you.”
He chuckled to himself and I saw his huge belly wobble,
making the water he is in slosh and splash around him.
“I, dear fellow, am a Narwhal.” He put his head proudly in the
air and showed me the entire length of his huge tusk. It was
around two and a half metres long! (Great description)

There are some fine touches in Olivia’s piece that are all the more
effective for being understated:

He chuckled slightly again. “No, my matez tusk wasn’t
‘znapped off’” he said sarcastically. “Femalez don’t grow them,
only the males. Zpeaking of which, I have the longest!” He
seemed a tad big headed about that. (double tick and good)
“Do you use them to fight?” I asked, a little bit wary now. I
think he noticed.
“Gosh! Don’t worry, boy! Ve only play fight or fight to prove
our power, nothing to worry about. Zucks for us though, ve
hardly have any defence against enemiez.” His smile faltered
for a second. (double tick)
“What type of enemies do you have? They must be bad if you
can’t defend yourself.” I racked my brains for some answers
but it came up blank.
“The Orca,” he quietly shrieked.

Carol puts a great deal of effort into modelling the kind of writing she
wants from students; it is clear from her annotations on Olivia’s story
that she values the literariness that goes into developing the
narwhal’s character. And it is evident that Olivia has responded to the
direction provided in this respect. No doubt her story will be used to
amuse and motivate next year’s students. Carol’s summary comment
reads:

A most entertaining, as well as informative piece, Olivia!! I was
amused, as well as wiser, for having read this! Its attention to
detail, as well as the humour and descriptions, are excellent.
Bravo! (smiley face) (A+)

Carol’s students develop their abilities to understand “how texts
construct meaning” because they have been encouraged to play with
language in the process of constructing an informative piece. They have been amply provided with examples of how they might improvise on language materials that they have to hand. And her annotations focus attention on particularly felicitous instances of meaning making. She is a highly appreciative audience and demonstrates to her students how they in turn can appreciate the work of their peers.

Like Carol, Reid (1984) is determined to promote the value of a heightened sense of ‘literary’ language because it gives access to meaning. He notes that attention to literariness is not congruent with the influential ‘growth’ model, which, although intended to encourage students to use and to respond to language in ‘personal’ ways, turns out to be restrictive:

To integrate reading with writing as proposed here is to reject some assumptions behind the work of such respected figures as James Britton and Douglas and Dorothy Barnes... Britton seems not to see how valid and useful it may be for young writers to fabricate a verbal experience, perhaps using a half borrowed, self consciously ‘literary’ language to bring into being something not felt or known until uttered. (p. 27)

More than a decade later, post the 1990 reforms, and as a contributor to the same collection of articles, Responding to Students’ Writing (ed. Doecke, 1996), as Meiers, it is evident that he is swimming against the tide:

It seemed to me, and still seems, quite misguided to reject a piece of student writing as ‘pretentious’ just because it bears in some obvious and half-assimilated way the traces of others’ writing. I have no patience with the magisterial presumption of criticising student work on the grounds that it merely shows an ability ‘to manipulate words so as to present oneself elegantly without risking commitment to anything of weight’ (Barnes and Barnes, 1983, p. 47). (p. 18)

While Carol’s student, Olivia, isn’t “risking commitment to anything of weight”, her playful yet searching attribution of human characteristics to her Narwhal enables her to realize something of the power and pleasures of verbal artifice. Meiers’ student example, by contrast uses the ‘weighty’ “circumstances of the Chernobyl
disaster... to provide the themes of [her] story” (p. 50). Earnest use of such material bears no necessary relationship to effective writing.

Reid finds that “The moral category of ‘commitment’ is [not only] dubious in this context ...” but tends to distract from “focusing on the rhetorical strategies discernible (though perhaps inexpertly developed) in what a student has produced” (p. 18). He argues:

Writing is not a natural growth ... If we are to help students develop the rhetorical skills that they need to act on their environment rather than be merely subject to it, we have to find ways of responding to their writing that will encourage them to see it as practice in using ingredients from the texts they encounter to cook up texts of their own. (p. 19)

Students need to learn how to use “others’ writing”, both in producing meaning as readers and in developing capacities as writers to “fabricate a verbal experience”. ‘Literariness’ and ‘reader response’ are intimately related; they do not belong in opposing camps.

Yet it might be argued that this is unfair to Britton, Dixon et al. in so far as these proponents of ‘growth’ pedagogy were not so much opposed to the promotion of ‘literariness’ as to a pedagogy that they saw as privileging ‘literature’ (i.e. ‘Cultural heritage’) at the expense of the worlds of experience that students brought into classrooms. They were concerned to create conditions in which students might meaningfully engage with literary works on the basis of their own knowledge and experience. For them culture was surely ordinary (Williams, 1958, 2001, p.11).

At the same time the oppositional terms of this mission tended to obscure the value of attention to ‘literariness’:

... response is a word that reminds the teacher that the experience of art is a thing of our making, an activity in which we are our own interpretive artist. The dryness of schematic analysis of imagery, symbols, myth, structural relations et al. should be avoided passionately ... (Dixon, 1967,1969, p.60)

The notion of active “making” suggests, for all that it is posed as personal, the need for materials with which to work. Moreover, the
relationship between ‘response’ and the introduction of formal knowledge of a given literary text is something of a chicken and egg dilemma. It is not as if Dixon is unaware of this:

So there are two levels: at the first the structure the teacher bears in mind; at the other, his observation of the individual’s development and his sense that at some point in that development, this is the appropriate moment – to judge by the pupil’s signals – for the creation of a particular frame of reference to be meaningful. (p. 78)

There is a danger here of idealising or romanticising “the individual’s development”, and hence leaving him to his own devices. The adequacy of the teacher’s own “frame of reference” is also open to question given that there is a lot more to literariness than “the dryness of schematic analysis”. Carol is well aware that a student can’t make an “experience of art” without materials or “ingredients”, as Reid refers to them; far from belonging in an abstracted, desiccated realm, the cultivation of literariness can animate what might otherwise be taken to be relatively arid information. Indeed,

... all kinds of writing produce meaning and value ... by modes of composition and deep conventions of stance and focus. (Williams, 1979, p. 326)

In the case of her ‘animal interview’ assignment Carol insists that students should get to know – that is, research – their chosen creature particularly well. It is only on the basis of having substantive material at their disposal that they can exercise and develop literary flair with language. Another of her students, Mitch, who is considerably less able than Olivia, tentatively discovers the pleasures of turning written language to effect, given that he has to hand knowledge that he can dramatise:

... When I looked back to the mongoose he was gone. He had bravely charged at the [cobra]. The snake noticed his presence and fled. Slithering away into the desert. (good description) “Wow he really was afraid of you,” I said in awe. (good response) “Yes, us mongooses rule the land around here ...
Mitch’s ‘Interview with a mongoose’ comprises two typed pages, no doubt considerably more than he would ordinarily produce. Yet Carol makes perfectly clear what – for reasons she has demonstrated – she wants to see from all her students:

Mitch – This is very pleasing work so far: entertaining and detailed (smiley face)
However, you have not covered a number of fact categories in the interview: e.g. mating, young, diet etc.
Still – keep up this improvement!! (B-)

Her expectations of Mitch are clear and attainable. She aims to ensure that he has plenty of material at his disposal; interestingly, her criticism focuses on a shortfall in his preparation or organisation rather than on his ‘literary’ treatment of his material. Given that he knows how to set about his task, and has shown interest in doing so even if it is incomplete, her comments are not discouraging. His “work so far” is “entertaining and detailed”: that is, Carol has prompted him to enter into ways in which his mongoose might experience the world by consciously – playfully – creating a verbal artifice.

Mitch is a Year 9 student, but Carol deals too with a much larger proportion of working-class students with comparatively low levels of literacy in her Year 12 English class than she did three or four decades ago. What I have identified as a shift away from the Leavisite close reading of literary texts can’t be accounted for then without reference to evidence of wider educational and social changes.

I have touched in the present study on ways in which Leavisite practical criticism was displaced by ‘growth’ pedagogy, and later – when the vocabulary of ‘critical theory’ had become available – by ‘critical literacy’. My research reveals the need for further investigation into how such ideas were taken up by teachers and how they played out in practice in classrooms. It is evident that close reading didn’t fall into neglect solely as a consequence of intellectual debate, paradigm change or backsliding; rather, it came about through a multiplicity of factors – definite conjunctures which can only be ascertained through further research.

I have aimed “to ascertain the ‘degree of sensitivity’ which students demonstrate to the language of literary texts, and to trace how this
may have altered”. I have been concerned, though, to ‘drill deep’ rather than to extend the breadth of the study. I have attempted to clarify what this sensitivity might look like – and to demonstrate its import for my own young life – in order to inform prospective teaching of it.

This leads me back to my observation of my two sons learning their craft as musicians, and, in particular, that of jazz improvisation, with which I began. Jazz players typically learn – at least initially – not only by listening to, but also by transcribing, favourite foundational recordings. Jazz is an aural art, but notation may be used as a means of identifying sound, and hence of sharpening a sense of form and detail. It demands, and is evidence of, attentive listening.

The learning of music in this way is explicit and, at least initially, painstaking, but it is also rewarding because it gives access to the art of great improvisers in a way that relatively casual listening does not. The study of rhetorical and aesthetic effects enables apprehension of the ‘force’ of jazz solos; it thereby alters the student’s disposition or ‘attitude’ towards the music, and reciprocally sharpens attentiveness and appreciation.

While jazz players vary not only in their ability to identify aurally features of musical language but in the means by which they do so – some, with an accurate ‘ear’, understand instantly how to harmonise a colleague’s contribution, for example, and thus create a ‘setting’ for it, while others rely on a sure sense of shape or colour – they all need means by which they can come to terms with a musical text.

Because of its improvisatory nature jazz might be thought of as a highly individual art form. At the same time, it involves a social and cultural transaction, not only in that it is most often created by an ensemble of players who listen intently to each other and give each other space as they “speak to each other in the language of music” (Wynton Marsalis, cited in Ward, 2000, p.116), but because they are acutely aware that what they play is informed by the history and culture of jazz. They value form as stimulus for creativity:

It’s like basketball, once the net is gone, once you don’t have to stay in bounds, you’re just out in the street dribbling. Which can be fun, but it ain’t basketball. (Marsalis cited in Ward, 2000, p.116)
Without a sense of form, meaning making is frail and uncertain. It dissipates; the student is “just out in the street dribbling”.
Postscript

Tom and Marty both completed a jazz music degree and are still playing music together, having gained professional, full time employment in the same band.

Carol is due to retire. She looks forward to a different stage of life, but feels deeply ambivalent about leaving the classroom. Alison and Nalan provide an assessment of the impact of her work on her students:

Alison: It’s just this is the book, this is the story, it’s fabulous, it’s wonderful …

Nalan: And she focuses; she’ll call out like a quote or a sentence – she’ll spend the whole lesson drawing out each word – well, what does this mean, you know, signify …

Alison: Just a simple word – I can’t remember what it was now – she said the word and then she said: “Ooh, don’t you love that word!” … so the kids get it … yes, great word, doesn’t matter what the meaning of the word is, the sound of the word is fantastic.

Paul: So in a way, less is more … She’s got that focus on something that might look small, but there’s actually an awful lot there.

Alison: Demonstrating to the kids … this is just a word, but look at how I feel about this word.

Nalan: Because you can get overwhelmed.

Alison: It’s language and it’s fantastic – that’s what she puts out there.

Paul: So the depth and complexity … you kind of open it up for them … then they can think critically about it … but you’ve got to have that first.

Alison: Absolutely … You’ve got to appreciate something … surely the art of teaching is not just about passing this exam, it’s to take with them a life-long love … you know, when they’re done with school they’ll still have an appreciation for language … I think that’s what Carol does…
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Memorandum

To: Prof Brenton Doecke
    School of Education

    B

From: Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (DUHREC)

Date: 25 November, 2011

Subject: 2011-192

Senior secondary students' dealings with the language of literature

Please quote this project number in all future communications

The application for this project was considered at the DUHREC meeting held on 26/09/2011.

Approval has been given for Mr Paul Duck, under the supervision of Prof Brenton Doecke, School of Education, to undertake this project from 25/11/2011 to 25/11/2015.

The approval given by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee is given only for the project and for the period as stated in the approval. It is your responsibility to contact the Human Research Ethics Unit immediately should any of the following occur:

- Serious or unexpected adverse effects on the participants
- Any proposed changes in the protocol, including extensions of time.
- Any events which might affect the continuing ethical acceptability of the project.
- The project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.
- Modifications are requested by other HRECs.

In addition you will be required to report on the progress of your project at least once every year and at the conclusion of the project. Failure to report as required will result in suspension of your approval to proceed with the project.

DUHREC may need to audit this project as part of the requirements for monitoring set out in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).

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