

The English Literature Classroom as a Site of Ideological Contestation

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'The test of a truly radical aesthetics will be its ability to operate as social critique without simultaneously providing the grounds of political ratification.'

(Eagleton, 1990, p.119)

(i) Literary sensibility as an instrument of policy

Much has been written about the ideological role that literature performs within educational settings. Literature – and, within Anglophone contexts, English literature in particular – has been seen as a key mechanism in the production of human subjects of a particular type, that is to say, forms of subjectivity that rob people of any capacity to engage critically with the society around them (Eagleton, 1980, 1985-86; cf. Althusser, 1971/2008). A literary education performs this role by requiring students to cultivate a sensibility that is responsive to the language of a literary work and the 'potentialities of human experience' that it realizes (Leavis, 1932/1967, p.19). This is at the expense of any recognition of how literature is mediated by the values and beliefs that are current at the time of its production, or indeed the values and beliefs that have since continued to shape how people have variously read and responded to it. Literature floats above a grubby world of social and political conflict in which people are driven by 'ideology' (a word that from the standpoint of a 'literary' sensibility inevitably has negative connotations). In this version of a literary education any judgment about a work's value derives from its capacity to invite us to 'feel into' or "become" – to realize a complex experience that is given in words' (Leavis, 1952/1972, pp.212-213). We are quoting here from Leavis's account of the 'complete reader' (ibid., p.212) as someone who is supremely attentive to the words on the page and the relationship between language and experience that a literary work supposedly embodies.

Yet the paradox is that this valuing of close reading and the human experience that it purports to reveal has also involved privileging a peculiarly 'English' sensibility, as though the English language is inextricably bound up with being English. Critics have pointed to documents in the history of the formation of subject English, such as the Newbolt Report of 1921 (which arguably established the conditions in which Leavis's literary critical project became possible), to show how notions of literary value have been conflated with a specifically English literary canon and an English national identity. The discourse that emerged to justify the work of English teachers and the place that English assumed within the school curriculum combined a sensitivity to the complexities of experience conveyed by language with an affirmation of the civilizing achievement of British Empire nationalism (cf. Anderson, 1983/1991). The overarching aim of the Newbolt Report was, in this reading, to prevent the emergence of a working-class consciousness within England after the crisis of the Great War and its aftermath through promoting a spurious notion of national identity embodied in an English literary canon. This was in order to blunt any recognition of class struggle and to privilege a middle-class culture over other cultures, other ways of reading and responding to the world (Eagleton, 1980; Baldick, 1983; Batsleer et al., 1980). What was at stake, according to Eagleton, was 'less English *literature* than *English literature*' (Eagleton, 1980, p.28), that is to say, an all-embracing sense of a national community that effaced class conflict and the other issues that divide people. The rationale for introducing literary studies into the curriculum not only involved a recognition of the specific character of the literary imagination as a form of response to the world but a national identity that

involved all the inclusions and exclusions – a privileging of ‘us’ against ‘them’ - that nationalism typically entails.

In the countries where we work, an ideology of English and Englishness still shapes much debate about English as a school subject, and specifically the role that literature teaching should play in the curriculum. Even in a post-colonial society like Australia, where to speak English patently does not necessarily mean identifying as English, traces of this heritage can still be found in the form of a lingering British Empire loyalism that is espoused by prominent conservative pundits who periodically proclaim the need for students to learn about ‘Australia’s Anglo-Celtic culture and the growth of Western civilisation’ (Donnelly, 2004, p.58; cf. Doecke and McClenaghan, 2005, pp.247-249). The fact that Shakespeare continues to occupy a prominent place in the school curriculum might itself be interpreted as evidence of Australian English teachers’ continuing identification with a traditional version of an English literary canon that somehow embodies ‘the universal nature of the human spirit’ (e.g. de Reuck, 2017, p.229). But the most astonishing example of the perpetuation of this legacy is obviously England itself, where a conservative government has quite explicitly sought to restore the ‘best that has been thought and written’ (DfE 2013, p. 3) to the centre of students’ education, requiring them to study a select number of texts, all originally written in English and by authors who might somehow be categorised as ‘British’, that enable them to ‘appreciate the depth and power of the English literary heritage’ (ibid.).¹ The curriculum guidelines stipulate that the texts chosen for study should include at least one play by Shakespeare, at least one 19th century novel, and a selection of poetry written since 1789, including the English Romantics. This has seen English teachers teaching texts like *Lord of the Flies*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and *A Christmas Carol*, even as they seek to negotiate a curriculum with students from the rich variety of cultural and linguistic heritages that constitute multicultural England.

At the center of this chapter are interviews with four early career teachers working in London that show the struggles they experience as they attempt to teach such texts to their students. Yet we want to resist telling a tale of gloom and doom, as though both the teachers and their students have no option other than to adopt the forms of subjectivity that the official curriculum stipulates, becoming willing (and unthinking) recipients of ‘the best that has been thought and written’. We are proposing, indeed, to reconsider many of the claims that we have just considered about the ideology of literature, in order to present an account of the productive work that teachers and their students can still do with literary works in classrooms, even with the narrow range of texts prescribed for them. Our aim in this chapter is to look again at the ideological role that literature teaching can play from the standpoint of the exchanges that actually occur around literary texts in classroom settings as they have been reported to us by those teachers. Our analysis will involve a reconsideration of the ideological nature of the literary text, and whether it is meaningful to ascribe an ideology to the text itself, as though choosing a select number of ‘British’ texts will do the ideological work that is intended. We shall, by contrast, be contending that the meaning (or ideology) of a text is always a function of the situation in which it is read and appropriated, which is to say that classrooms should be conceived simultaneously as sites for the imposition of ideological hegemony and for voicing alternative values and experiences.

(ii) Institutional protocols and constraints

This chapter draws on interviews conducted with English teachers in the UK – Lowri, Hannah, Rizal, and Nurjahan² - in which they give accounts of their professional practice as literature teachers,

¹ The document misquotes Matthew Arnold’s (1869/1993, p. 6) ‘the best that has been thought and said’. It is entirely consonant with the cultural conservatism of recent education policy in England that any hint of the value of oral language is thus effaced: speech is transitory; the canon is timeless.

² All names are pseudonyms chosen by the interviewees

reflecting on both the constraints under which they work and the possibilities opened up for their students through their engagement with literary texts within classroom settings. All four teachers work in London, in state-funded, comprehensive (that is, non-selective) secondary schools, with pupil populations that are representative of the cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity of London as a city. The classrooms in which they teach are polyglot spaces. Although the dominant language in each class is English – this is the language of the texts the students are required to study, as well as of the forms their responses to those texts are expected to take – the classes might still be said to comprise a variety of Englishes that are inflected by the various community languages and dialects that students bring with them into class. The teachers also reflect that diversity: Hannah and Lowri are white (though Lowri identifies strongly as Welsh), Nurjahan is of South Asian heritage and Rizal is of Irish and Filipino heritage. At the time of the interviews, they had been working as teachers for between three and five years. The interviews were originally conducted as part of a larger comparative study involving teachers in both England and Australia that inquired into how the literary knowledge of English graduates mediates their practice when they become English teachers.³ Or perhaps it would have been better to pose the question as one relating to how the institutional settings in which they were working mediated their knowledge as English teachers. For all the interviews (both in England and in Australia) showed teachers endeavoring to negotiate relationships with their students that were severely constrained by the regulations imposed on them, both in the form of mandated curriculum and the practices enforced at a school level that were designed to ensure that teachers and their students met the requisite standards of performance.

Here is how Lowri describes the protocols that she is required to follow when teaching *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*:

‘And so they have to... on the first slide of every lesson you have to have a three-tiered differentiated learning objective which must be marked by gold, silver and bronze. It can’t be marked by anything else. We have consistent medals – you can’t put stars or something, you have to put medals, and the learning objectives have to be differentiated according to the exam mark scheme and have to be like really specific. So you can’t be like learning objective – to think about the character of Dr Jekyll. It has to be like “to insightfully explore the character of Dr Jekyll with reference to quotations”; “to clearly explore the character of Dr Jekyll with reference to relevant quotations”.’

The kind of procedures that Lowri describes shape the interpretive possibilities that might be generated by the text chosen for study as effectively as any prescriptions relating to a British national heritage. Ideology is never simply a matter of the content of a lesson, but of the formal procedures imposed on students and teachers when they read the texts chosen for study. It is about the things they are required to do when engaging with the set text.

Althusser famously borrowed Pascal’s remarks about religious belief as involving more than accepting Christian doctrine: ‘Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe’ (Althusser, 1971/2008, p.42). For Pascal, kneeling down obediently was a way of resolving religious doubt. For Althusser, Pascal’s injunction serves to illustrate that ideology is as much about what you do as about what you believe. It is not simply a matter of people being exposed to beliefs to which at some conscious level they give their assent, but of following patterns of behaviour that constitute the world as they experience it. What Lowri’s comments open up is a sense of the way in which the ideological work performed by the school, including the work accomplished in English classrooms, embraces pragmatic

³ The project was entitled ‘Investigating Literary Knowledge in the Making of English Teachers’ (2015). Funding: Melbourne Research Office Researchers, Larissa McLean Davies (University of Melbourne), Lyn Yates (University of Melbourne), Wayne Sawyer (University of Western Sydney), Brenton Doecke (Deakin University), Philip Mead (University of Western Australia), John Yandell (University College London), Andrew Goodwyn (University of Bedfordshire).

considerations, such as the way to commence a lesson, as well as the specification of learning objectives to be accomplished, not to mention the division of the school day into lessons, the protocols enforced on students when they enter the classroom, the organisation of the desks and chairs that they find in the room. The protocols that Lowri describes were, in her school, enforced across all subjects. The other interviewees all described similar regulatory mechanisms. Every classroom, in short, stages a complex interaction between the consciousness of the participants and the patterns of behaviour they are obliged to enact, with everyone marching to the beat of the same drum in order to realise the social designs imposed by government and mediated by particular institutions.

(iii) Teachers reflecting on contradictions and complexities

But do they?

Although the interviews conducted with these early career English teachers were obviously driven by our purposes as researchers (the project, as we have noted, was designed to elicit a sense of how their literary knowledge mediated their professional practice as English teachers), all the interviewees seized the opportunity to give accounts of their work on their own terms, exploring the contradictions and complexities that constitute their everyday lives. Their intentions did not necessarily conflict with our own, but the meaning-making that occurred in the course of the conversations exceeded our purposes as researchers because of what they were able to invest in the interviews. To anyone who is familiar with Mishler's arguments about 'the joint construction of meaning' (Mishler, 1986/1996, p.52) that occurs in an interview, when the research interview is conceived as an opportunity for an interviewee to share stories about his or her life with an attentive interlocutor, this would hardly come as a surprise. But the fact that these early career teachers used the event of the interview to inquire into their experiences is central to any judgment that we might make about their capacity to negotiate a pathway within the complexly mediated environment of the school as an ideological apparatus. They were quite consciously seeking to achieve an understanding of situations in which they were active participants, taking the opportunity provided by the interview to reflect on their day-to-day practices in order to achieve some insight into the meaning of what they do (cf. Allard and Doecke, 2017) and to enact a socially-critical praxis.

This meaning-making impulse was apparent in just about all the anecdotes they related about the exchanges they had facilitated with students in their classrooms. Hannah makes no bones about the ideological intent of the new curriculum, recounting the struggle that she and other English teachers in her faculty had experienced in choosing from the narrow range of literary texts set for study. In her view, the curriculum 'just reasserts a kind of imperial and patriarchal world'. Although she 'loves' writers like Steinbeck and Golding – 'I think they're fantastic writers' – novels like *Of Mice and Men* and *Lord of the Flies* hardly provide any compelling female characters. And there are also other significant aspects of the imaginative worlds of these texts that flatly contradict the curriculum's claims to be presenting students with literary works that have universal appeal. As Hannah remarks, in *Of Mice and Men*:

'the only female or black characters are incredibly marginal, don't have proper names, and I think there's a problem, even if you explore the issues with that; even if you say, oh how terribly racist it is, how terribly sexist it is, there's a problem with just constantly reasserting white men as the authority, and never having any strong role models...'

As for *Lord of the Flies*, it 'is an imperialistic text', and in contradistinction to treating this novel as an example of what, according to the curriculum specifications, is the 'best that has been thought and

written' (DfE, 2013), she sees it is part of her job 'to get students into the habit of challenging the canon rather than accepting it as a canon':

'And so the idea of these texts are here to challenge and say well are the women in there, and that's a perfectly legitimate question to ask, rather than feel like these are the authority, these are the ... this is the established norm or whatever, even today when we're surrounded by a huge feminist discourse in media and huge you know racial statements and things like that.'

Sitting behind these comments is a belief that, as Hannah remarks elsewhere in the interview, it is possible to provide 'a framework for students to interrogate a text that we give them'. Indeed, Hannah and colleagues at her school have drawn on the literary-theoretical knowledge they have brought with them from their university studies – she mentions Marxism, Feminism and Postcolonialism as providing important 'critical perspectives' - in order to encourage students to think about how they 'are positioned in relation to the texts' chosen for study. Against the assumption underpinning the curriculum prescriptions, that the meaning of such texts can be delivered to students by compelling them to read them attentively, as though their meaning as examples of 'the best that has been thought and written' simply inheres within them, she holds on to the view that 'the text doesn't have meaning until it's completed by them as readers', describing instances where her students have become conscious of the meaning-making practices in which they are engaging when they grapple with aspects of texts that initially seem puzzling or questionable to them.

She recounts, for instance, the time that she was teaching Blake's 'London' to a group of students who were 'baffled and bored by it in a way that I wasn't', when she was confronted by the realisation that her own enthusiasm for the text was no guarantee that her students could engage with it in any meaningful way. She partly accounts for their resistance by pointing to the 'huge wealth of contextual and cultural understanding' that she had available to her that was not available to them:

'What was this poem really to these students, and I think I changed how I looked at literature when I became a teacher so that it almost ... and it goes exact back to what I started saying as well, it wasn't the sort of meaning that I understood of it and how you decided to teach that piece of literature changed as well because rather than get them to see it through the lens that you build up to you, you can't possibly expect a Year 9 student to know about you know French Revolution and all those kinds of contextual backgrounds, and that came from years of study for me, and they haven't done that yet. So what would I have elicited from it as a Year 9, and is it relevant to them? And I think I completely changed the way I looked at things... literature in that way, like it wasn't really about what I enjoyed about it, well that's not what it is... and obviously that comes through in your teaching that you enjoy the topic and you're enthusiastic about it, but it was ... there's a different ... just knowing lots of literature doesn't make you a good English teacher at all, and it helps in some ways, but it's not really it.'

Douglas Barnes gives a similar account of the transition he made from being a student of literature, when he had studied under Leavis, to becoming a school teacher, when the rich interpretive discussions that he facilitated around literary texts in classroom settings challenged his belief that his 'task as an English teacher would be to make the riches of English literature widely available to my students' (Barnes, 2000, p.8). The professional learning that he experienced on becoming a teacher involved switching from 'a reified version of culture to a culture that inhered in interpersonal and social interaction, and the active meanings that they generated' (p.47). This moment of growth - for Hannah, as for Barnes - is not simply a matter of swapping old knowledge for new, for it is clear that the literary theoretical understandings they brought with them from their university educations

remain salient frames of reference for them as teachers. It is a matter, rather, of being responsive to the generative nature of the interactions between students that occur around literary texts within classrooms and trying to learn from them. Such growth involves more than 'knowing', but learning how to get along with people, accepting their presence in our lives, and respecting all that they bring to their conversations with us. This is to conceive the classroom as a social space where people from a range of cultures and languages come together in order to engage in meaningful communication with one another (cf. Barnes, 1975/1992).

(iv) Reification

The word that leaps out to us in Barnes's account of his education as a teacher is 'reified', which brings to mind a rich body of social critique that distinguishes between positing the world 'only in the form of the object' and consciously experiencing it as 'human sensuous activity', as 'practice', as 'real, sensuous activity'. These words are taken from an English translation of Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach' (Marx, 1969, p.13), written prior to the revolutions of 1848 (and their brutal suppression), and containing the germ of the socially critical standpoint that he was subsequently to elaborate in *Capital*. Rather than supposing that 'knowledge' should take the form of a disinterested or 'scientific' understanding of a reality existing independently of us, this standpoint assumes that we are all deeply implicated in the world, all active participants in it, even as we seek to understand it.

Marx was famously to pose the 'mystery' of the commodity form - when any recognition of the use value of something is displaced by a recognition of its value as a commodity, when the emphasis falls on quantity rather than quality, on the calculations that we typically associate with the operations of an economy that appears to follow its own logic regardless of human interests - as the key to understanding all the forms of life in capitalist society (Marx, nd, p.55, p.76). This, at least, is how Lukács saw the significance of Marx's understanding of the 'fetishism' of the commodity, using it to begin an essay on the reified forms of consciousness and being that in his view characterize life under capitalism. 'The essence of commodity structure', as Lukács observes at the beginning of this essay, 'is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a "phantom objectivity", an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people' (Lukács, 1971, p.83; cf. Marx, nd, p.77, p.79). For Lukács, the word 'reification' not only names the workings of an economy to which we are all in thrall, but yields 'insight into the ideological problems of capitalism and its downfall' (Lukács, 1971, p.84). That is to say, the relationship between consciousness and being that can be traced in the fetishism of commodities - 'the contemplative stance adopted towards a process mechanically conforming to fixed laws and enacted independently of man's consciousness and impervious to human intervention' (Lukács, 1971, p.89) - also shapes the way people experience and understand other fields of human activity.

For our purposes, the concept of 'reification' provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex relationship between consciousness and being that structures the transactions in literature classrooms as they were reported to us by Lowri, Hannah, and the other early career teachers who participated in our project. By invoking Marx and Lukács we have obviously travelled a long way from the rich particularities of the scenes and personalities that these early career teachers recounted to us, not to mention the institutional settings that mediate their work. Yet the larger context in which they are trying to achieve an understanding of their professional practice as English teachers is nonetheless one that involves a brutal imposition of policy initiatives designed to reduce people to the status of compliant spectators of a world over which they have no control. These initiatives

include a huge apparatus of standardized testing, whereby curriculum and assessment are marshalled to enact the work that Althusser sees as the chief function of schools as ideological state apparatuses, classifying students according to their abilities and dispositions and then allocating them their place within the economy (or refusing them a place, as the case might be) (Althusser, 1971/2008; cf. Yandell, Doecke and Abdi, forthcoming). This ideological work is also reflected in attempts to reify literature and culture as ‘the best that has been thought and written’, and – what is more – specifying that only works that have originally been written in English should be studied in schools, giving rise to an institutional hypocrisy that claims to provide students access to the best that culture has to offer, while simultaneously devaluing the languages and cultures of their local communities and heritages (e.g. recent rhetoric about ‘bringing knowledge back in’ [Young, 2008; Young et al., 2014]). The creativity that ordinary people show in response to the situations and people they encounter each day, the talk in which they engage with others as they weigh up their experiences from the standpoint of the values and beliefs that they have formed as active players in their local communities – all this rich creativity is marginalised vis-à-vis the assemblage of fossilised subjectivities that comprise ‘the English literary heritage’ of the mandated curriculum with which all these early career teachers are obliged to work.

(v) Meaning-making as resistance

But far from identifying with this ideological project, the early career teachers we interviewed all demonstrate that they possess the resources within themselves to re-envision their practice and open up other meaning-making opportunities for their students than simply to genuflect before the texts chosen for study. ‘To posit oneself, to produce and reproduce oneself – that is *reality*’ (Lukács, 1971, pp. 15-16) - so Lukács opens up the prospect of defying the reified structures that are a feature of life in capitalist society. Or, to borrow from Marx’s analysis of the commodity form, the challenge is to find ways to move beyond perceiving the world in the form of ‘a fantastic relation between things’ (in this case the monuments of ‘culture’ that exist in a realm apart from life as we experience it) to recognizing that the world around us is constituted by the social relationships with one another that individually and collectively we renew each day (Marx, nd, p.77)

All these early career teachers showed themselves to be sensitive to such moments of ‘making’, attending to the languages and experiences of their students, and acknowledging the legitimacy of readings from the standpoints they bring to the texts chosen for study. Indeed, in Rizal’s case, the need to be responsive to the experiences that his students bring into class is at the centre of his pedagogy. He is talking about a unit of work that he has developed with younger students (i.e. within a space where the requirements of the high-stakes tests do not yet weigh on teachers and students so heavily) that focuses on the language and culture of hip hop:

‘Hip hop of course, kids enjoy it and they feel more secure because they think hip hop is not something which is academic, but if you actually look in terms of rhyme schemes and external rhymes and you know yourself, actually hip hop is a very big deal, it’s just the culture surrounding it has never been considered academic. But in terms of getting kids to do language analysis and things like that, that’s one reason which I think hip hop is valuable. The second reason, which is kind of linked into that, is that you know there’s... even teaching hip hop, what you’re teaching kids is to come to the classroom you don’t have to leave yourself at the door right?’

The last sentence echoes James Britton’s statement nearly fifty years ago, that there can be no alternative for an educator but to begin ‘from where the children are’, that ‘there can be no alternative in the initial stages to total acceptance of the language children bring with them’ (Britton, 1970/1975, p.134). We might also think of Harold Rosen’s plea for educators to be open to the stories

and languages that children bring into classroom settings, when he even entertains the prospect of building a whole curriculum around the stories that children have to relate – this is in contradistinction to what at the time of his writing Rosen saw as a marked tendency to ‘close down the options’, and to ‘limit school time to the production of measurable, marketable merchandise’ (Rosen, nd, p.20) . The difference is that Rizal’s message to his students, that ‘you don’t have to leave yourself at the door’, is even more poignant, given how market forces have come to dominate schooling in a way that has probably exceeded even Rosen’s worst fears about the fate of schooling in an advanced capitalist society. Yet Rizal is remarkably aware of the forces arrayed against him and his students, where everything is directed at ‘meanings being handed on’, rather than enabling students to make their own meanings. His work as an English teacher is driven by a belief that ‘English is all about how meaning is made, sustained and perpetrated’, by which he means not only the ‘official’ meanings of the mandated curriculum, but the meanings that students themselves can make, as they create and reflect on hip hop.

The conversations that the interviewees offered us provided tentative insights into moments when meaning-making possibilities emerged through their exchanges with students that disrupted the official meanings enshrined in the curriculum. We say ‘tentative’ because the huge weight of the ideological apparatus of curriculum and assessment could still be felt in what they had to say, mediating their accounts of what they had learned from their students, even when they were critical of the practices they were obliged to implement. Although they recognised that the insights they had gained from their interactions with pupils gave them better guidance as educators than the expectations imposed by the official curriculum, they were still conscious that what they were saying derived its authority from their personal experiences, and that this counted for nothing vis-à-vis official mandates. Yet their tentativeness can also be explained in another way, as arising from their refusal to judge their students solely according to conventional performance indicators such as standardized testing and the criteria imposed for assessing students’ work. They were, instead, observing the protocols involved in any respectful exchange between people, seeking to acknowledge the experiences their students were bringing with them to class, and trying to develop some appreciation and understanding of their world views. This is what we understand by Rizal’s statement that he did not want his students to leave themselves at the classroom door, and by Hannah’s carefully reflexive account of her becoming more attentive to the cultural resources that her students brought to their work in English.

Such a disposition is also a strong feature of the conversation with Nurjahan. All the early career teachers were invited to bring an artefact to the interview that might serve as a prompt for conversation about the complexities of their professional practice as they were experiencing them. Nurjahan brought along a book by a Year 9 student whose work did not conform to the model of ‘what a good one looks like’ or ‘wagoll’ (the teachers at her school were encouraged to use the acronym ‘wagoll’ with their students in order to establish at the start of each unit of work a clear expectation of the outcomes that students should achieve). She focuses, in particular, on this student’s response to ‘Strange Fruit’, when he was ‘meant to write about the extent of metaphor’, but instead:

‘...he just went off on a massive rant about how certain cultures are killed when they’re innocent, and he just kind of compared it to Palestinians and went off and then talked about like what’s happened in Mexico and how Hispanics have been killed and how there’s a lot of prejudice in America about that, but obviously nothing to do with kind of picking out quotes and analysing language. And then in the context of my school and the kind of hyperawareness of radicalisation, I had to kind of practically write loads of comments on this and flag it up and say look not even a safeguarding thing but writing it up that he’s had this stuff written up in his book and I’ve talked to him about it. And’

The issue of radicalisation signifies yet another level of surveillance that has been introduced along with the centrally mandated curriculum and the apparatus of assessment. Nurjahan remains responsive, however, to the fact that this student has dared to express ideas about right and wrong and injustice, rather than performing the formal exercise of identifying metaphors, that he wants to 'actually try and make sense of the world and how it works'. She plays, in fact, a dual role, marking his work 'according to the school marking policy' and writing questions for him to answer, aware that his writing and her response might be scrutinised by the school leadership team, whereupon the student takes her commentary as an invitation to continue arguing his case:

'So I marked it according to the school marking policy and I've written questions for him to answer. So I wrote okay, but is there evidence in the poem to support this rant? *[laugh]* And his answer to this, in green pen, is 121 Palestinians were killed since October when the violence began. Where this evidence had come from I've no idea, but ... and still nothing to do with the poem but you know he's *[laugh]* given some sort of response to my question.'

But although 'if the SLT (Senior Leadership Team) were to scrutinise my books, they'd be like they haven't done this skill, and on the assessment policies he should be achieving this and this and there's no evidence of it', his response is still 'fine for me on a personal level and I love him for doing it'. The fact that Nurjahan has brought this artefact to the interview indicates that at a personal level she is responding to the meaning-making impulse invested in this writing, and that she recognises – and is ready to explore through the interview – the unresolved contradictions in her practice.

(vi) The responsiveness of professional praxis

We shall now draw the threads of our discussion together by asking what we have learnt about the nature of the literary classroom as a site of ideological contestation from these conversations with early career teachers.

All that these early career teachers say about their teaching is inextricably bound up with their sense of who they are. English teaching has often been characterized as an autobiographical project – as Garth Boomer once remarked, teachers 'teach what they are' (Boomer, 1985, p.203). When student teachers are asked to explain why they want to become English teachers, they often tell stories about how they loved reading when they were children, and how they now want to share that love of books with others (see Doecke and McKnight, 2003). Others recall how they were inspired by an especially impassioned English teacher to become English teachers themselves (*ibid.*). But although Lowri, Hannah, Rizal and Nurjahan certainly tell stories of this kind – Nurjahan, for example, relates that 'we always had books at home', that as a child she enjoyed 'sitting down on someone's lap' and having a story read to her – such accounts of their histories as readers are combined with other anecdotes about their education and upbringing that disrupt such storylines. For Nurjahan, reading *Antony and Cleopatra* in the senior years of secondary school was decisively shaped by her awareness that she:

'was born into one of the very few ethnic minorities at my school, and I just remember ... talking about how Antony is this man torn between the east and west, and I just remember thinking in Year 12, well that's how I feel – I feel just completely torn between these two cultures.'

Nurjahan's dialogue with the student who creatively misread 'Strange Fruit', which she saw as an attempt to 'make sense of the world and how it works', arises from her consciousness of the divided nature of her own identity. They share a sense of 'between-ness' (Hourd, 1949/1968, p.125) that opens up the possibility of a conversation that unsettles the hierarchical structure that governs the

relationships between teachers and students within this particular school setting. This sense of between-ness is what makes her receptive to this student's protest against a world that discriminates against minorities so violently and where he himself is struggling to find a place. She expresses the divided nature of her identity as she is now experiencing it as a teacher as one between her obligation to emphasize the value of 'picking out quotes and analyzing language', of insisting that her students 'use apostrophes accurately' (when she gives them 'a nice sticker indicating a target achieved'), and her recognition of their need 'to make sense of the world and understand what's going on around us, and to work out your own identity within that world'. Indeed, she says at one point in the interview that she wants English 'to be personal to them, I don't want it to be about my experiences superimposed on them'.

The word 'personal' as Nurjahan uses it signifies far more than its common sense meaning, namely a 'personal' life in contradistinction to a 'public' world of politics and society (and indeed schooling), that might be set up over and against that 'public' sphere as some kind of inviolable and precious space. The 'personal' for her is indeed inviolable and precious, but it can only find expression in social relationships that provide the conditions for an individual's growth as a human being. The 'personal' as she uses the word to give an account of her experiences as a student and a teacher and to gesture towards the worlds of thought and emotion that her students bring with them into her classroom might more appropriately be characterized as (to borrow again from Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach') 'the ensemble of social relations' (Marx, 1969, p.14). For her, the word 'personal' signifies the conditions of her own and her students' making as human beings. As Gramsci remarks, the starting point for any critical engagement in the world is a 'consciousness of what one really is', is reflexively knowing the 'self' as 'a product of the historical process'. Gramsci then poses the need for each person to make an 'inventory' of the traces of that process of becoming at certain moments in his or her life – this is what he understands by the injunction to 'know thyself' (Gramsci, 1971/1986, p.324). The account that Nurjahan gives of herself in the interview is one such inventory, as are the accounts that Lowri, Hannah, and Rizal give of their lives. That this remains an urgent task today is shown by the fact that one of the leading advocates of the neoliberal reforms that are currently being imposed on education pointedly takes issue with the notion that a teacher should continually strive to 'know' his or herself, arguing that the injunction should instead be 'to know thy impact factor' (Hattie, 2009).

Our interviews with Lowri, Hannah, Rizal and Nurjahan showed that they were all reflexively engaging with the binaries that continue to shape consciousness within advanced capitalist societies, such as that between a personal realm and a larger public sphere. This division between the personal and larger social and economic spheres is symptomatic of a reified consciousness that is split between subjectivity and objectivity, between the world of 'my' experience as it is registered in my thoughts and emotions and a larger public space characterized by anonymous structures with which it is impossible to identify (Lukács, 1971). Vis-à-vis a world that is governed by regulations to which everyone must conform – rules of grammar that must be obeyed, formulaic models of essay writing that dictate how to fashion a response to the texts chosen for study, a literary canon before which everyone must genuflect – the personal lives of students are marginalized and devalued, reduced to subjective realms characterized by anomy and isolation. This is what Nurjahan's student is arguably hitting out against. In defiance of the reified mentality of standards-based reforms, these early career teachers affirm the social relationships that they experience everyday as a necessary condition, not only of their professional practice but of their sense of themselves as human beings. Nurjahan affirms the need to be responsive to the personal lives of her students. Rizal strives to create a situation where 'you don't have to leave yourself at the classroom door'. Hannah insists on the need to respect the worlds of experience that students bring to texts as a necessary condition for making meaning – indeed, she remarks at one point in her interview on the 'fresher ideas' that students relegated to 'the lower band' of achievement are able to bring to their reading of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, unburdened by the expectation that they should perform at an academically acceptable level. Lowri

recounts in her interview how she negotiated putting a quotation from C.S. Lewis up on a wall at the school: 'We read to know that we are not alone' – this is what she counterposes to the extraordinary proliferation of templates that her school requires teachers to use when assessing just about every piece of writing the students produce.

The anecdotes these early career told all reflect the deeply felt or 'personal' character of their professional praxis – as we have seen, Nurjahan even uses the word 'love' to describe her feelings about the boy whose writing she found so challenging. Their praxis, in short, does not simply generate some kind of rational reflection at a remove from the circumstances in which they find themselves – that would hardly constitute a 'praxis' at all, no matter how 'critical' those reflections might be. For Marx the word 'praxis' (to invoke 'The Theses on Feuerbach' yet again) means 'knowing' 'real sensuous activity', that is to say it entails a form of consciousness that seeks to transcend the binary between subjectivity and objectivity, and with that all the other antinomies that characterize bourgeois consciousness: between thought and feeling, fact and value, science and ideology (cf. Lukács, 1971). Marx undoubtedly uses the word 'ideology' in some of his writings to signify 'false' consciousness, a term that Lukács also employs to characterize the limits of bourgeois class consciousness (Lukács, 1971, p.54). Yet even at these moments – we could think, for example, of the way that Marx and Engels characterize the 'illusions' of 'the Young-Hegelian ideologists' in order to expose the disconnect between 'German philosophy' and 'German reality' in the 1840s (Marx and Engels, 1973, p.41)– the alternative to 'false consciousness' is not simply a 'scientific' understanding of the world, but an understanding of the world conceived as human activity, in which all the forms of human activity ('science', 'culture', 'religion', 'law', 'economics') are mediated by a specific standpoint, situated within the historical conditions out of which they emerge as representations of human experience. Marx and Engels invoke 'real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity', as the premises for critical inquiry into any sphere of human activity (ibid., p.42). We are likewise interpreting what these early career teachers had to say to us as emerging out of the situations in which they are implicated, involving a complex dialectic between the institutional settings in which they are operating and the social and cultural affiliations that constitute their identities – as, in short, the product of a complex dialectic between their consciousness and social being. Their situatedness is an inescapable condition for their reflections on the complexities of their work as English teachers, as opposed to the large generalisations of standards-based reforms that efface any recognition of the culturally specific nature of the settings in which teachers and their pupils interact with one another.

(vii) **Towards a radical aesthetic**

But it would be to diminish the significance of the standpoints they articulate in the course of the interviews, when (as we observed earlier) they used the interview as an opportunity to inquire into their professional practice as teachers of literature, to characterize them simply as having reached some kind of 'critical' consciousness vis-à-vis the conditions of their work and the larger contexts that mediate it. What they say undeniably conveys critical insights of this kind, but the force of those insights derives from the fact that these are deeply felt responses to the people around them, to others who are participating in the world they hold in common. The knowledge they bring to their judgments of the interactions with students and teachers that they experience from day-to-day is, after all, literary theoretical or 'aesthetic' in nature. They cannot be accused of playing an identity politics that treats the text as some kind of expression of a particular viewpoint and fails to acknowledge the way the meaning of any text is mediated by its form and the contexts of its reception. As John Guillory has argued, to focus simply on the standpoint of a text with reference to race, class or gender, at the expense of any recognition of its formal qualities, is a diminished form of cultural politics (Guillory, 1993, p.11). Throughout the interviews we were struck by the insights these

early career teachers achieved by drawing on their literary educations, which typically prompted them to highlight the complexities of reading and the value of adopting a certain disposition as a reader that recognizes the provisional nature of any interpretation of a text. This was in connection with not only the texts set for study, but the classroom itself as a site where past judgments do violence to the complexities of the social relationships being negotiated there, where multiple points of view are in play, and where the exchanges that occur are always subject to varying interpretations by the actors involved. The social relationships within a classroom setting, involving an obligation on the part of both teachers and students to acknowledge and respect the histories that everyone is bringing into the room, provide the necessary conditions for literary texts to become a focus for meaningful discussion and a joint exploration of how to read and respond to them. For these early career teachers this awareness of relationality or 'sociability' (Hourd, 1949/1968, p.172) inevitably prompts critical reflection on how language is used in literary texts, giving rise to a recognition of the way texts speak to other texts, opening up a sense of multiple reading communities, and of how (as Hannah remarks) through our activities as readers we 'complete' a text's meaning from within our own time and place and the social relationships that shape our lives.

'The test of a truly radical aesthetics', as Terry Eagleton remarks, 'will be its ability to operate as social critique without simultaneously providing the grounds of political ratification' (Eagleton, 1990, p.119). This is the concluding sentence of a chapter in which Eagleton explores how the 'aesthetic' (specifically Schiller's understanding of the place that the aesthetic should occupy in anyone's education and upbringing) blunts any recognition of the social and cultural determinants that shape our lives – an argument that obviously connects with our opening remarks about the ideological role that literature and literary criticism have performed in the English speaking world. Yet despite his extensive exposition (in both this chapter and the other chapters of *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*) of the way that notions of the 'aesthetic' have been coopted for culturally conservative purposes, Eagleton still gestures towards the possibility of an aesthetics that is 'truly radical' and capable of generating 'social critique'.

Their professional practice as English teachers as represented to us by Lowri, Hannah, Rizal and Nurjahan involves an 'aesthetics' in a spirit of 'social critique'. They each evince an understanding of the complexities of reading and responding to literary works that is far removed from a disposition to trace the relation between words and experience that excludes any recognition of the social and political contexts that shape our lives. They are supremely aware of those contexts, partly because of their education and upbringing, and partly in reaction to the way the conservative government in England has attempted to use the English curriculum as a blunt instrument to effect its social and economic agenda. They all evince a literary sensibility without any of the baggage that we discussed in the opening section of this essay, providing insight into how literary theoretical perspectives might be applied in an effort to understand the complex social transactions that comprise any schoolroom and the world beyond the school. Curiously, as is most clearly evident in Hannah's anecdote about her students' resistance to Blake's 'London', when she was brought around to acknowledging the legitimacy of their resistance to the poem, this kind of cultural praxis might be said to involve a suspension of accepted ways of valuing, indeed, a suspension of the 'aesthetic'. The very notion of the 'aesthetic' and of the 'literary' is what is being contested in the literary classroom when it is conceived as a site of ideological contestation. But Hannah knows that any authentic valuing can only emerge out of the social relationships that provide the context for exchanges around literary texts, that any sense of the value of a literary work must continually be renewed if it has any value at all, as part of a continuing process through which people make themselves and their world each day.

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