

'Ask not what Literature can do for you, but what you can do for Literature.'

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'Ask not what Literature can do for you, but what you can do for Literature!'



Associate Professor Patrick Buckridge, Griffith University

The brief I've been given, as I understand it, is to put the case – or a case, anyway – for teaching the dreaded Canon in school English. I'm comfortable enough with that brief, but I feel I should say at the outset that I haven't set foot in a high school classroom – apart from the odd parent-teacher evening over ten years ago – since December 1964, so my first-hand experience of the blackboard jungle is pretty limited, one-sided and old. So I'm not going to chance my arm with much in the way of practical suggestions for the classroom. On the other hand, I've spent most of the last 30 years lecturing and tutoring in first-year literature courses, mainly at Griffith; and my 17-year olds are probably not that different from your 15 and 16-year olds – in fact they're largely the same kids a year on. So I'd be surprised if the sorts of attitudes and aptitudes I've encountered in them weren't pretty similar to those you're familiar with.

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For the last seven years I've run two quite large first-year courses, one in each semester, called, very imaginatively, 'Great Books 1' and 'Great Books 2'. We study five or six classic works in each course, ranging from Antiquity to the end of the 19th century, and I change the books every couple of years to keep it interesting for me. If I had to characterize the quality of the students, it wouldn't be in terms of a shocking decline in standards. I think the best of them are as capable of writing and talking about literature thoughtfully and appreciatively as their parents' generation was, which is as far back as my own observations as a teacher go. It may be that their writing is a little worse, that 'the best of them' is a smaller sub-group, proportionally, than it used to be, and that they're a little more brazen and blasé than they used to be about turning up at tutorials with the book unread. It's difficult to be certain. But my feeling is that on the whole it's not significantly harder or easier to get 17-year olds interested, stimulated – and on a really good day excited or moved – by great literature than it was thirty years ago.

So whatever it is that's going on in Queensland school classrooms, it's not harming their ability to do what I want them to do, which is to engage curiously and appreciatively with great literature. The one area where I do notice a real difference from thirty, or even ten years ago – and this won't surprise you – is how much English and world literature they've never heard of, let alone read. Most of them have studied, in some fashion, a couple of Shakespeare plays, but unless they're from interstate, or overseas, or an older age group, they know of nothing beyond that but a few mid to late 20th century novels. That's not a problem for me; it means I get them fresh and unspoiled for Homer, the Old Testament, *Beowulf*, Chaucer, Milton, Keats, the Emilie Bronte and Dickinson, and the rest. But it might just be a problem for the very large number of 17-year olds in Queensland who don't do one of my *Great Books* courses, or something very like it, to give them **guided access** to some of the classic works of world literature. Because frankly, they won't get that anywhere else. They **could** get it in various other places – on the web, through publishers' book clubs, in books of literary history and criticism – but let's face it, they're not likely to.

Does it matter? I seem to hear the voices of the framers of the current English Senior Syllabus saying wearily, 'Well no, not really.' And indeed why should it matter? All three of the assessable criteria can be equally well met by studying contemporary texts. Even the non-assessable 'affective objectives', which are said to 'permeate the other objectives although they are not assessed formally for summative purposes,' can probably be achieved more readily using texts which are neither great, nor past, nor literature. I must say, by the way, that those 'Affective Objectives' in the Syllabus – enjoying, engaging, appreciating, relating and the rest – look terrific, and if I thought they were being seriously implemented I'd be a lot less worried than I am. My strong impression, however, is that there's not a lot of 'affective permeation' going on in schools, which is hardly surprising given that it's not assessable; and given also the quite extraordinary – I would say utterly hubristic – range of social, political, intellectual, and creative good works that Senior English puts its hand up to perform on behalf of the education system as a whole. Worth the sacrifice, you might say, if English can be

used to save Australian society, humankind and the planet, as some parts of the Syllabus seem to suggest it can.

But let me return to the question of whether it matters – and if so why it matters – that students should be offered guided access to past literary classics. Yes, I do think it matters; I do think they should; and over the years I've spruiked versions of pretty much all the standard arguments as to why they should. I still do. In my Course Outlines and introductory lecture for *Great Books*, for example, I say that the study of classic literary works gives you a better understanding of yourself, of your personal and professional relationships, and of other people in general; that it develops a degree of ethical sophistication, and a capacity for emotional and moral empathy across cultures and historical periods; that it exposes you to a wide range of literary forms and writing styles, thereby quite possibly expanding your own expressive repertoire and sharpening your powers of analysis and synthesis. I also say that really getting to grips with a great literary work can be a source of deep and lasting pleasure, in and for itself. I never tell them it will make them into better people, but I do say it might make them into more interesting people, not least to themselves, and that they'll 'get' more of the references in *The Simpsons*. And if I'm feeling crass and manipulative I sometimes even say that the *Great Books* provide a cheap form of cultural capital, and that some employers value that, and might give them a job or a promotion on the strength of it.

I happen to believe that all of those claims are true, or can sometimes be true for some students. But eminent people, here and overseas, have been wielding them as weapons against the new linguistic, theoretical and cultural studies trends in school English for the last twenty years; and it hasn't had much effect, especially in Australia. Part of the problem, I suspect, has been that its advocates have been too eager to emulate the 'citizen-forming' pretensions of Critical Literacy, and on that ground – if only because of the breadth and contemporaneity of its subject matter – a Crit Lit model of subject English will always manage to look more convincing than a classics-based one. It's the wrong battleground; and it might be fun to pull up stakes and try to occupy, or as you'll see *re-occupy*, a different bit of territory to fight on.

An interesting thought-experiment would be to consider the diminishing presence of past literature in Queensland schools not as an issue of English teaching as such, but as an issue of cultural ecology, or more specifically of heritage preservation. I think it's at least arguable that what we're looking at in Queensland and Australia at the present time is the imminent disappearance of

the literary canon. Not the *discrediting* of the canon, which is easily and frequently done with no lasting effects, but the *disappearance* of the literature of the past in the only form in which most people know about it, and that's the canon. I don't mean disappearance in a physical sense – though as a matter of fact books do fall to pieces and digital files do become corrupted unless they're properly housed, preserved and maintained, by human beings whose salaries are paid by governments or corporations, which have flexible policy priorities. So we can't afford to take its physical survival entirely for granted over the much longer term. (Think of the Library of Alexandria: if only they'd cared enough to install fire extinguishers!)

But I'm speaking here really about the loss of the canon as a loss of effective contact with, and at least subliminal awareness of, the literature of the past as a living presence in contemporary culture. In ecological terms, the thing we're on the brink of losing can be thought of as a huge and priceless piece of cultural heritage, to which everyone in Australia (and the rest of the world) has an inalienable *right* of access, and to which – if they want it – everyone in Australia should be offered the *means* of access. My assumption would be that as with any comparable public heritage asset – Antarctica, for example – there would be overwhelming support for its preservation, even from those who might never have any intention of availing themselves of the delights it has to offer, or who simply never get around to it. There might even be widespread agreement that society should give a high priority to the task of preservation, and that public institutions (like schools) which have a particular stake in its survival, should shoulder some of the responsibility for keeping it alive.

This is not actually a new idea; it's a reprise of an old one. As some of you would remember, when the 'personal growth' model of English teaching came in with the Radford Report in the 1970s, it was presented as the successor to a 'cultural heritage' model which was felt – perhaps rightly at the time, given its 'Empire' associations – to have reached its use-by date. So in a sense what I'm thinking about is a return to the model *before* the model before the current one. (I've got to be kidding!) But I'm proposing it in the face of a more serious and immediate threat than existed in the 1970s – pre-Theory and pre-Cultural Studies, if you can imagine it! – but also in a context where various other forms of natural and cultural heritage conservation are indeed now part of the ethos of contemporary Queensland schools, many of which are strongly committed, for example, to environmental protection and habitat preservation. So the landscape has changed pretty completely, and a similar commitment to conserving the literature of the past might well be

mobilized. If it were, it would have a number of interesting implications for English pedagogy and curriculum.

Pedagogy, for example, wouldn't be directed at helping students to understand 'how language works' or 'how discourses construct texts', but at helping them to develop an appreciative relationship with a range of canonical literary works. I've used that word 'appreciative' a couple of times now, so let me break cover and say that I think 'appreciation' is probably the most accurate general term for the kind of learning activities I have in mind. Deeply unfashionable now, of course, but universally used in English education in Britain, North America and Australasia for the first half of last century. (In fact, I seem to remember writing 'appreciations' of poems myself in early high school, so it must have lasted until the early '60s, at least.)

The great advantage of 'appreciation' as a concept is that it places the commentator – both student and teacher – in an essentially *deferential* relation to the literary work, respecting its historical authority and its agreed literary value and attempting to rise to its depth, power and complexity rather than dragging it down to an equivalence with the texts of popular culture. I know how fawning and un-democratic that sounds – and perhaps 'respectful' might be a less provocative word – but bear with me: a deferential disposition, as I'm conceiving of it, isn't so much a general attitude to capital-L Literature as a heuristic willingness to impute total coherence and autonomy to the individual work of literature for the sake of analysis. It's the attitude that says, 'OK, I can't see what that line means, or why that character, whom we're clearly supposed to like, seems like a pompous windbag – but this is a 'classic text,' so maybe I'm not getting it. Maybe I should think again, try another angle, look for hidden ironies, before I arrogantly dismiss it as either 'dated' or just 'not that great.' Remember – this is literature, not politics. They're not the same thing, though I can understand the impulse to think they are. I remember being excited in the 1980s by the boyish bravado of Terry Eagleton heroically refusing to bow to the authority of the great works, vowing to read them defiantly 'against the grain.' We all grow up, and I now think of this as one of Eagleton's sillier effusions – he probably does too – and I was sorry to see it enshrined in the Syllabus as 'resistant or oppositional reading', together with the 'gaps and silences' of his even sillier Althusserian phase.

'Appreciation,' as the word itself suggests, is largely a matter of reading *with* the grain, not against it: learning to understand a canonical work in its own terms, and learning to enjoy it in our terms. This doesn't mean students can't question a work's assumptions, recognize its biases,

disagree with its ideologies, even dislike its characters or style. It does mean that such responses and opinions won't be accorded undue weight, won't be regarded as final, and certainly won't be taken as spontaneous intimations of a whole hermeneutics of resistance and suspicion. It means that they'll probably be pedagogically contained, eventually, in a more tolerant, comprehensive and respectful view of the work in its context.

A pedagogy of appreciation can be, and ought to be, highly eclectic, using a variety of analytical methods and comparative perspectives. It can afford to be, because it's not tied to any particular theory of language or culture. (It really isn't!) And its main discussion topics would be inductive and text-centred ones: genre, character, structure, metaphor, versification, narration, theme. But there would be no reluctance – far from it – to explore such topics as the author's life, the historical context, reception history, and contemporary relevance. And in the classroom: enactments, reading aloud, debates, rewritings – all of that. The over-riding purpose is to bring the works themselves to life, to make them interesting, entertaining, moving, and memorable to as much of the class as possible. Anything and everything that helps with that is grist to the mill; but methods and approaches that call attention to themselves, or become ends in themselves, are of no use. Actually they're worse than useless. Political and theoretical readings of the canon are fine in academic journals and books, and in later-year university lectures. They're part of what keeps the discipline healthy and vibrant in the tertiary academy. But when they migrate to school classrooms I'd be very surprised if they didn't become obstacles rather than aids to appreciation, obstructing or at best severely filtering the students' affective access to the literature. And that's precisely what a number of former students have told me it feels like. People need to come at sophisticated, counter-intuitive readings (if at all) *after*, not *instead of*, the stock standard, appreciative reading that gives them some sort of immediate access to the work. Depriving them of that is a version of kicking the ladder away. Personally, I think there may be a special Hell for teachers who introduce students to *King Lear* by telling them it's all about the advent of competitive market capitalism (O'Flinn, *Them and Us in Literature*). Try using that to bring Cordelia's death scene to life!

For better or worse, literary appreciation – pretty much along the lines I've been describing it – was the dominant mode of English teaching in British and Australian schools for at least forty years. It gained that status at the time of the (British) Newbolt Report in the 1920s, which not only placed English at the centre of the school curriculum but at the same time recommended

strongly that schools give greater attention to the affective and aesthetic dimensions of literature, rather than using literary texts as vehicles for teaching grammar and philology. (Shades of the role of functional grammar in the current Syllabus: we seem to have come full circle!). The post-Newbolt phase of appreciative pedagogy began with people like Greening Lamborn in Britain and, in Australia, George Mackaness, and it lasted well into the 1960s, with lots of Guides and Handbooks being published all through those years to help students and beginning teachers how to do it. I picked up a 1966 reprint of a Teach Yourself Book on Literary Appreciation at the Alumni Booksale at UQ just a couple of weeks ago. So there's plenty of update-able material around.

So much for pedagogy. What are the curricular implications of a revamped cultural heritage model for English teaching? I don't want to get into a detailed discussion of booklists, except to say that there should obviously be a spread of literary genres: novels, poetry, plays, and essays; that as far as possible whole works rather than excerpts should be studied; and that the chronological range should be from Antiquity to the 20th century. While I assume there might be some variations from one region to another, the provision of wide choice doesn't strike me as very important. What would be important would be to have committed teachers who have read and studied the classics themselves, or are working on it.

The kind of subject I've been talking about couldn't, as far as I can see, be accommodated within the current English Syllabus. Even if all the options for studying literary rather than other texts were being taken up; even if the 'affective objectives' were being met – and I'm led to believe neither of those things is true – the Syllabus is still deeply and I would guess immovably hostile to the notion of the literary canon as a precious heritage and to literary appreciation as its appropriate pedagogy. On my side, the value and importance the current Syllabus vests in second-order critical discourse, and in linguistic and ideological modes of textual analysis, make its treatment of literature antipathetic to the cultivation of a wide range of affective engagements and aesthetic satisfactions. In short, critical literacy and literary appreciation are not just different approaches to the study of literature; they seem to me to involve fundamentally different and incompatible *reading dispositions* – one judicial and magisterial, the other deferential and sympathetic, in its relation to texts. Written critical analysis and argumentation, the indispensable basis of assessable student

essays and examinations, is possible within both paradigms.

In practice, I have no doubt that many teachers who love literature simply abandon the critical literacy approach in the classroom from time to time, and fly blind. But they shouldn't have to; clearly they have a right to expect that their syllabus should reinforce their efforts at appreciation and resource them. In theory, the best solution would be to split the subject into two independent parts: the existing subject could be called 'Language and Society' – or for that matter 'Critical Literacy' – and would deal with what Ian Howlett calls 'informational texts,' to which as he says, those methods are eminently well-suited. The one I've been describing would be called 'Literary History and Appreciation', or simply 'Literary History'.

I'm a little surprised to have arrived at this conclusion. In fact, I'd originally intended to trumpet the praises of a new publication some of you would know about, which professes similar aims to mine but espouses an 'assimilationist' model. The book is called *Masters in Pieces: the English Canon for the 21st Century* (Cambridge), and it demonstrates, in considerable detail, how the classics can be inserted into the existing English curricula in most Australian states, including Queensland. But on further reflection I've come round to the view that it wouldn't work, not in Queensland anyway.

The advantage of the separatist model I've proposed is that 'Literary History' could be emancipated from its larger, more theoretical and deconstructive twin. (Images from Patrick White, A.S.Byatt and even R.L.Stevenson come to mind!). I imagine the big twin could and would maintain its case for compulsory status in the Queensland curriculum, but 'Literary History' couldn't, and shouldn't, be compulsory. This is a recognition of the fact that some kids just don't go for literature, and there's nothing to be gained by pushing their faces into it for two years. It also recognizes that many of those who opt out of it at school will come to it later in life. At least they'll know it's there. And the reduced size of the student cohort would mean that uninterested and under-read youngsters fresh from a one-year teaching diploma wouldn't have to be dragooned into teaching it. Whether the subject would survive for long under these conditions I don't know; but I don't think it would be beyond the wit of committed teachers to make it look pretty attractive to a viable number of students. And I don't believe literature itself will last long under the existing conditions.