

STATE OF THE ONION: TEACHING ENGLISH IN 2007

It is ominous, a presumption of crime, that this word “education” has so cold, so hopeless a sound. A treatise on education, a convention for education...affects us with slight paralysis and a certain yawning of the jaws.

Emerson, *Education*

Hot on the heels of this warning, daunted by the topic and accordingly affected with a slight paralysis but certainly not a yawning of the jaws, I’ll do what Emerson himself does on the subject of education, namely carry on more or less boldly – or, as Samuel Beckett would say, more less than more. I borrow the first part of my title – “state of the onion” – from Phillip Adams who had George Bush in mind rather than pedagogy. Now several decades of poststructuralism have convinced a lot of people in the teaching profession that reality in general and, ipso facto, particulars like education are exactly onions. In line with a (I think to a degree) tendentious reading of Saussure we’ve been told that language refers not to extra-linguistic events but to more language. There can therefore be no core cultural realities but, once you peel off the last layer, only an absence – desire, if you believe the Freudians; will-to-power, if you believe the neo-Nietzscheans. Actually I’m of the opinion that while powerful discourses do indeed structure our lives, the real in which we daily operate is generated by events which can’t be reduced to discourse. So I think that – let’s say at the best of times – education has some sort of core and is accordingly less like an onion and more like an apricot or a plum. Unfortunately I also think we’re presently in a historical situation better illustrated by an anti-essentialist vegetable like an onion – and this due to the fact that we’re probably living in the worst of times as far as education and much else is concerned. What I’d like to do in this paper is briefly to look at the macro situation which, until a better term comes along, we’ve dubbed “postmodernity”, and the micro situation of our own disciplinary teaching which has undergone great change in recent times, perhaps altering the discipline beyond recognition – and to do this, for the sake of concreteness, in the context of two courses I’ve taught in the past semester at the Australian National University, namely a final Honours course in English on postmodernity and an advanced Pass course on Theory which is about hermeneutics or theory of interpretation. I think that what I say about tertiary teaching will, with minimal adjustment, apply to secondary teaching.

In connection with the worst of times and with onions, it should be noted that, two hundred or so years ago, western education undoubtedly had a core, a system of practices and beliefs – good, bad and indifferent – which had grown out of Christian and feudal structures. After the French Revolution this was challenged, but

the new moneyed master class didn't jettison core ideals; it simply demythologized them. So instead of religion we got what Auguste Comte called the "religion of humanity"; instead of Christian-feudal ethics, its secularized humanist counterpart. Instead of waiting for the Second Coming we invoked the progressivist teleology of science. As with all core beliefs or fundamental premises this involved as much exercise of faith as of reason. Not in spite of but because of this act of faith, core belief could function. But at some stage in the second half or perhaps last quarter of the last century, humanism lost its force. Not, I suspect, because of the critique of a very diverse group of European intellectuals, from Heidegger to the more recent French, who sought to demythologize or deconstruct Enlightenment humanism. If only philosophers or Parisian coffee drinkers had this power. Humanism more likely breathed its last at the stock exchange and the shopping mall, done in by the cold profit motive and the hot lust of the consumer. Why this should have come about as it did must be one of the largest questions facing us. Let's just say here that Mammon is a jealous god and will have no other gods beside him. At any rate, on present evidence, a society rooted solely in the profit motive appears incapable of generating a post-Christian and post-humanist basis for, among other things, education – the transmission and creative transformation of culture. We pedagogues have to live out the implications of this sobering momentous fact. Fortunately neither history nor society are ever monolithic: there are always elements in the mix that may make for a less than bleak future. For the moment, however, I think the onion analogy stands.

To say that the postmodern vegetable is coreless is not to say we shouldn't do a lot of peeling. The Honours course I taught last semester encourages students to increase their awareness of present historical reality, something young people with no memory beyond the 1980s might simply take as natural, the way things have always been. I should stress, for anyone weary of modish jargon, that I'm not interested in what I'd regard as loose, superficial use of the term "postmodern". In my usage, and in line with a number of writers on the subject, postmodernity is not a cultural or intellectual fashion or fad, not something that belongs to a particular school of thought or particular cultural theorists; it's a large historical phenomenon which won't go away and in which we all participate in one way or another. The clearest way to see it is as a change to most or all aspects of our lives, and one generated by the communications revolution in alliance with globalizing consumerism. As far as communications is concerned, probably no one better understood the process than Baudrillard, who called it an "ecstasy" of communication. Ecstasy is a term with a long religious history and its significance is precisely ex-stasis, standing outside oneself. The sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, Teresa of Avila, sculpted by Bernini in a famous church in Rome, would be its best-known European exemplar. But

according to Baudrillard and with nice irony, we're all ecstatics now, projecting ourselves virtually via computer networks. In this rarefied existence anything can happen, provided it's virtual. Baudrillard thought it signalled the beginning of the end of that weight we carry around, the body. But how would he have replied to the student who told me, with utmost seriousness, that she had been raped online. "Do you mean emotionally?" I said to her. "Well – it was real", she insisted, and I understood she was correcting me. This story surely says something about contemporary human identity. Baudrillard postulated IT as bringing into being a new kind of human – in the jargon, a new "subject" – highly centrifugal, highly socialized but socialized via virtuality, a cool electronic medium, rather than the old warm body-to-body one. With a little help from Fredric Jameson and his, I think, over-optimistic reading of consumer Babylon as nearing its end, we can chart the fallout of all this in the cultural sphere: the decline of the *Kunst* or high-art model, the attack on modernism and the idea of an avant garde, novel kinds of commercialization of the visual arts and literature, the so-called death of art.

It's a mixed bag, with pluses and minuses. In the area of literature we've seen a vogue for "pastiche", the self-conscious appeal to dated genres and language (think of Calvino or, with less point and panache, Peter Carey). This in tune with a deliberate elevation of kitsch. Kitsch and pastiche used not so much ironically as deadpan, like Andy Warhol's Campbell soup cans or his Elvis or Marilyn. Is Warhol's Elvis – on exhibition in Canberra, at the National Gallery – satirical? It looks ridiculous, Elvis in cowboy gear and guns blazing, but it's not exactly satirical. Jameson would call it a "blank" parody, that's to say not really parody at all, because there's no norm here against which to measure satire, parody, irony. The absence of a norm here amounting of course to another version of the onion analogy. And if you want a political equivalent, consider the issue of ministerial responsibility in the present Australian government, what the prime minister knew he didn't know about Children Overboard or the Wheat Board sales to Iraq. Cultural vogues like quotation or pastiche or the appeal to kitsch come and go. What I'm sure will remain for the foreseeable future is that absent-norm "blank" irony, that *knowing* way characteristic of our culture – we being possibly the most self-conscious, self-regarding humans of all time. Which takes us back to the phenomenon of instant mass communication.

The impact on literary pedagogy is evident, but let me first make some reference to parallel institutional developments, since we teach in an institutional context. The last three or four decades have seen market practices as well as a more or less coherent set of associated goals, ideals and values introduced into areas previously reserved for Christian or humanist ones. Public charity, once the sphere of *agape* or *caritas*, teaching institutions, once dominated by Enlightenment humanism, have come under irresistible pressure to function on the business model. At the

same time IT has radically altered the way we both teach and learn. I'm concerned that deregulated transnational institutions are coming to deliver us e-ducation and would like to defend the teacher with that clumsy, non-virtual, non-bilocating body, the one that sweats and smells, sometimes performs up to scratch, sometimes not. With regard to institutional governance I'm concerned at the shift towards less collegial, that's to say less democratic structures in the university. In response to commercial pressures brought on by user-pays government policies, universities now operate under highly centralized Vice Chancellor's executive control, with non-elected Deans and atomized Schools, Faculties or Centres responsible for microfinance and in direct competition with one another. Intermediate collegial structures – Department, Faculty, Board – carry little weight. That occasionally inspiring tyrant, the professorial Head of Department, has no place in this scheme, unless he or she is good at generating funds. Additionally, scholarship is rated by the capacity to attract funds – or by the – yes – *quantity* of publication, for which the institution is refunded by government. A decade and a half ago I saw some of these factors in operation at a private university. When the originally generous supply of money ran out, the bottom line, ensuring or not the continuation of both courses and disciplinary groupings, was student numbers. Naturally the Invisible Hand could be influenced by energetic marketing and inordinate effort went into that. All Australian universities are now in this situation, with PR and spin on the increase. It signals the end of the tertiary institution as developed over the last hundred or so years. Perhaps a better post-university will be built on its ruins, or perhaps a worse one. In the meantime and while waiting for history's verdict we may assess ways in which such large structural socio-economic events prompt changes in the discipline of English.

“English”: it sounds more than a little quaint these days – as to a degree it should. What about “literature”? Does or should that sound quaint and out-of-date? The fact is that the dominance of commercial considerations and the breathless development of communications technology have, in a general way, dated existing disciplines, scrambled them and regrouped content under new disciplinary headings. The process is not slowing down. A decade ago it was reasonable for an English Literature academic like me to offer a course on film and, with the assistance of the National Film and Sound Archive, I did that. Today film – I mean celluloid and its avatars – seems a very old-fashioned medium. At the same time no one is surprised that once-literary departments now teach what in terms of the old disciplines are interdisciplinary courses and, specifically, ones tuned to IT changes and the commercial turn which is also, on the positive side, a turn to popular culture. That's to say “popular” as distinct from commercially-packaged kitsch. Just as ABC National now plays soft-core pop while “classical” is relegated to FM, so we in English teach

Cultural Studies or Film and Media Studies. In the younger universities we don't expect to find English or even Literature programs but Communications or Media ones. It goes without saying that, in the background, the Internet has altered teaching and research patterns as much as student learning ones. It encourages, among other things, an absent-authority-core democracy – sometimes disastrous for intellectual standards, but even then sloppily attractive, like a student who's just got out of bed for a morning tutorial – as well as, of course, the most virulent form of plagiarism. Though you can counter Wikipedia with cunningly specific exam questions.

What I'm calling commercial/technological pressures can be characterized as an imperative to relevance (from the point of view of the student) and to accountability (from the point of view of society in general and the government in particular). Of course teaching institutions in the past were thoroughly enmeshed in the social, political and economic. They were never ideologically neutral. It was no more accurate in the past than it is now, that picture of academics pursuing arcane scientific projects (which, so goes the propaganda, inevitably turn out great benefits for mankind), or arcane Humanities ones (which never help mankind because Humanities propaganda has been a complete flop). But something has changed nonetheless. As the Hegelians used to say, quantitative change, past some critical point, turns qualitative. The sheer force of the present imperative to relevance or accountability seems to me new. You can argue, as Habermas did, that we're simply witnessing a further stage in the unfolding of the project of modernity – and I think this is a fair argument. Everything that is happening now may be sourced to changes in train a hundred years ago. But the scale, the pace, makes for qualitative change – which is why I accept the much-abused term “postmodern”. That “post” is gesturing (maybe too vaguely) in the direction of something very important. Let me turn to some micro examples in the university, since I've already sketched out the macro situation.

No so many years ago English departmental debates turned on that code word “accessibility” – for which read also “relevance”. Some literary texts were, supposedly or actually, more relevant than others. In terms of structural considerations, both for teaching and for the shape of the major, we argued over semesterization and the issue of compulsory elements in the major. Semesterization meant a more efficient, more consumer-friendly, more in line with the rest of the planet, division of the year. It also meant teaching smaller, necessarily more pre-packaged units, the sort of thing you do in vocational disciplines like Law, not in Humanities. So: less time to think, less time to read long Victorian novels (forget *Middlemarch*, forget most of Dickens; for *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* substitute *The Getting of Wisdom*). In short, and in line with Murdoch media development, a

turn to “dumbing down” the curriculum. I was one of those who did not think semesterization would be the end of civilization as we knew it, and in the event it wasn’t. Some of us even went on teaching the odd three-decker Victorian novel and persuading a reasonable percentage of the class to read it. For which afterwards they tell you they’re grateful. But in retrospect I feel keenly our then lack of understanding of the larger social forces at work. I’m still surprised at current lack of understanding, as for example when some colleagues argue for draconian penalties for e.g. late essays – when we all know or ought to know that the majority of students work longish hours to pay their way through university.

As regards the structure of the English major, the last few decades have seen fewer and fewer compulsory elements. Our students are now required to take only a single “core” unit, chosen from one of the less “accessible” courses covering literature before 1800. I wear my heart on my sleeve in saying I resist the idea of compulsion in education. On the other hand I have enough self-respect to cringe at any mention of “choice”, a term presently as thoroughly devalued, and rightly so, as “excellence”. I think we all realize that, in current usage, “choice” is code for the right to decide between a great many options, not one of which suits you, none of which you want. In short, it’s advertising-speak and, in good *1984* fashion, it means “non-choice”. Certainly most of us arguing for a more open major were not thinking along consumer lines. Now we do think along those lines, wooing student-customers in the education supermarket, keeping a wary eye on Melbourne University’s encroachment on our business. Once more in retrospect, I think that an admirable demand for contemporaneity, relevance and open structures, can and has in some areas led to course-content whimsy, the negative side of that again admirable rehabilitation of the previously marginalized. Most specifically it has led to a weakening of historical perspective.

Here I’m strongly of the opinion that we gloss over history at our peril. In the days of non-relevance, ANU offered a full major in mediaeval literature. I remember the poet Alec Hope doing some of the teaching. Perhaps a full major was overdoing it, but we now offer no courses at all in the mediaeval area. And we’re well aware of the precariousness of pre-1800 courses in general. All this with the exception of those tenacious Greats, Shakespeare and Jane Austen, relentlessly promoted by British nationalism and the movies. I apologize, but insincerely, for my scepticism in this quarter. It brings me to one more aspect of the relevance debate: if there were to be “core” compulsory units in the major, what role would Australian writing play? Of course you might teach pre-1800 First Fleet journals or the journals of Banks and Cook; I have taught all these, as well as other “marginalized” genres of the time, once reserved for historians, such as diaries and letters. But the matter of Australian content in that “English” major is political in a larger sense. The old, self-proclaimed

internationalists argued that “English literature” meant “literature in the English language”. It did, though quite disingenuously, since “English literature” self-evidently carried nationalist baggage, as do film versions of Shakespeare and Jane Austen. Not to mention English class baggage, something we could well do without. But the argument over Australian content, lively in the 70s, lost much of its force in the 80s with the new internationalism which damned any nationalism as master narrative. That internationalism, partly derived from traditional Marxism, came from the disillusionment of French intellectuals after the disasters of Indochina and Algeria. It meant something in France and helped foster the ideal of a united Europe. It had ready application to the conflict in the Balkans. Arguably, however, it had less application in an Australia in the process of cultural colonization, no longer by the British Council and the BBC but by Hollywood. As I suggested in a book entitled *Identifying Australia in Postmodern Times*, postmodernity killed off Australian nationalism before it had time to develop. We went from what historians call Empire Nationalism to the Simpsons without much of an intermediate phase. In the context of the literary discipline we no sooner established Australian courses than we felt the need to de-nationalize them, say by turning them into postcolonial courses.

Postcolonial, as well as women’s, writing was part of postmodern so-called “pluralpolitics”. After 1968 the French gave up the Communist party in favour of, on the one hand, poststructuralist forms of political anarchy and, on the other, consumer comfort. We in the Anglophone world, having no strong tradition of the Left, opted for large-scale consumer comfort plus Gender and Green politics. Whether such politics, perhaps with Internet help, can challenge the corporate juggernaut, remains to be seen. I doubt it. But some of my students argue just that, and I take note of their optimism. At any rate in English course structures we welcomed pluralpolitics newcomers in the form of Postcolonial and feminist studies. With respect to what Elaine Showalter labelled Gynocritics, the study of writing by women, it was a matter of recuperating authors who had slipped into obscurity. I well recall rearguard action from a now-retired colleague who pointed out that there was nothing intrinsically female about writing by women. Why have a course on women’s writing? Why not one on writing by people with red hair? He was right to query the illiberal, anti-Beauvoir notion of a female essence – and indeed no one, not even Hélène Cixous and the post-Beauvoir enthusiasts for *parole de femme*, female-speak, have been able plausibly to put the case for a solely female style, let alone language. But he missed the point of the exercise, which was one of textual and institutional politics, and was appropriately voted down.

Of course there have been diverse feminist influences on the curriculum and its teaching. I suppose that, in general, feminist readings have focussed on ideology, as has Cultural Studies, especially of the Cultural Materialism kind, that product of

Frankfurt and the British Left. Ideology, a concept originally elaborated by the Marxists and given particular force in the Anglophone 1960s by the vogue for Gramsci, could also be applied in the Postcolonial context. This in spite of the fact that in India especially Postcolonial theorists have been at odds with Marxists. For me Postcolonial Studies suffers from serious problems which need to be squarely addressed, something academics influenced by French deconstruction are not good at doing. In Australia there is the insurmountable problem of running settler societies together with non-settler ones: Australia can't be postcolonial in the same sense as India. Nor, given its part in empire, can it be postcolonial in the same sense as Jamaica. Still more problematically, and for the Postcolonial Studies enterprise as a whole, there is that historical link with an earlier incarnation: Commonwealth – read Empire – Literature. An unsympathetic observer may well wonder at anti-empire studies' debt to empire. Of course it's a difficulty inherent in all deconstructive thinking – but we can't get away from it simply by quoting Derrida. To return to the wider issue of curriculum change: I guess the LCD marker of our present state is that we check the course reading list for the inclusion of women and that we sometimes put on English courses with no literature content. My postmodernity course has, on and off, half a dozen novelists and short-story writers, some in translation; sometimes a poet; it also includes study of several cultural theorists; at least one film (last semester, Greenaway's *Belly of an Architect*); a couple of weeks on art history, with a visit to the National Gallery; some museology, old and new, with a visit to the National Museum; and a couple of weeks on architecture, with a visit to Parliament House or darkest Civic and possibly some reference to Tuggeranong. All this gives ample scope for a coffee or lunch with students, at which time you can debate whether the building you're in is postmodern or just late modernist. Unless the students have read Derrida, in which case they'll maintain that everything has always been postmodern, although we didn't know it – because there never was a centre, never a core holding it all together, only the playful rule of Greek Chaos. But in that case why do those same students, sitting next to you at a School of Music concert, utter the "M" word: "this one's *modernist*", they groan.

Now I'd like to make some comment on the adventures and misadventures of the canon in the last few decades. Debates about the canonical are not easy to untangle, but most hinge on the question of value. For a start, are canonical texts intrinsically valuable or do they come into being as it were from the outside, through a process of cultural politics? In short – and this is the way the issue tends to be put and to grab easy headlines – are they value-laden in a way that is transhistorical or, as the Foucauldians would say, simply constructs? For me this is a choice I don't want to make between something like objective and subjective standards. The world, it seems to me, isn't like that. In the first instance, a little knowledge of history –

and of anthropology, which should come naturally to Australians and give us an edge over old-world peoples – shows that there are no constants in culture. Perhaps in biology, assuming no change of significance to the prehistorically recent human body, but not in culture. So textual values are most unlikely to be transhistorical or objective. Sex in *Romeo and Juliet* may be sex, but not sex quite as we experience it. It's in a different cultural context altogether, though you can still understand its operation and appreciate the emotion generated. But if textual values can't be in some sense or other objective, this is emphatically not to say they're merely subjective, product of my cultural reading alone. Of course, if we're totally ignorant concerning sex in Renaissance Europe, we will read Romeo's and Juliet's passion entirely in twenty-first century terms. The text allows us to do this or rather can't prevent it. But in that case we'll in some respects misunderstand the play.

I follow the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer here, as well as pioneers of Reception Theory like Roman Ingarden. No text escapes historical flux because all texts are read differently in different historical – and therefore political – situations. This is because all texts are schematic, incomplete, skeletons to be fleshed out by the reader's own value-laden and history-specific contribution. But it would be absurd to lapse into uncritical relativism at this point. *David Copperfield* and *Ulysses* and *Madame Bovary* and *The Brothers Karamazov* are not the wonderful reading they are because of my own extraordinary readerly genius. And, conversely, if I see nothing wonderful in them, it doesn't mean there isn't something wonderful there. As Jean-Paul Sartre said, reading is a cooperative activity. The skeletal text offers – or doesn't offer – options for the reader to take up. It's in the text all right – good, bad and indifferent – but needs the reader to activate it in the reader's particular way – well, badly or indifferently. The sceptic will ask where these value judgements reside, if not subjectively, in the individual mind of the reader or the collective mind of a given reading public. I reply that if that were the case we wouldn't need texts, only a reader or group of readers. You don't get something out of nothing, not even in these times of crisis in the arts. But of course that "something" is up for debate. The text is to an extent indeterminate and there's no master-reader outside the historical process to adjudicate on the matter. As long as and no longer than we remain in some touch, however tenuous, with the original historical context which produced a text, we can read that text and share in some part of its, and not simply our, value system. We don't see *Hamlet* as Shakespeare saw it (however he might have seen it). But, within certain flexible parameters and bringing our 2007 values into play, we see it in ways that don't simply make nonsense of the text. Roland Barthes didn't get it right: reading may be fun, but it's not play, i.e. not random. Not unless you *insist*, because naturally the text, as I said above, cannot *force* a reading. If I insist on

reading *Hamlet* as being about a pot of jam, I can certainly do so. But the game gets quickly boring.

From all of which I conclude that taste, expectations and presuppositions change, but texts – muted as they are until read – remain the same. Until no one can decipher their content or even their script, at which point they rest quietly in historical limbo until someone comes up with another Rosetta Stone. But even in such limbo a text is not a “nothing”, waiting to be filled with random content, to be assigned merely arbitrary value. I realize my position on this may appeal neither to the believers in Foucault power-politics nor to those who look for something constant to be rescued from the wreckage of time. But I think I’m phenomenologically accurate, that is, describing things as they actually are. We know things change, yet we also make judgements – intellectual, moral, aesthetic – and we take these judgements to be more or less right or more or less wrong. I think a non-relativistic Reception Theory approach avoids those sterile media arguments about, on the one hand, textual politics and, on the other, the transhistorical. Canons are both transient political constructs and made up of texts which speak – through us – in their own right. Ideological, certainly, and to be read as such and in the light of diverse ideologies. I didn’t think *Heart of Darkness* was racist until a postgraduate from Malawi convinced me it was. The reader has to be informed and I needed an African student to sharpen my reader-response – to what was *there*, in the text. But complacent contemporary moral indignation projected onto historical texts is not the answer. You need to be as informed as possible about Shakespeare and his times in order to make judgements about the treatment of race in *Othello* or *The Merchant of Venice*. Literary academics are by no means reliable here. I’ve heard colleagues, most recently Germaine Greer, argue that the presentation of Shylock is not anti-semitic. Isn’t Shakespeare more subtle than that? I think not. *The Merchant* is anti-semitic and *The Taming of the Shrew* is anti-feminist. Does it matter? Well – yes – and no.

Of course, given the larger social premises I outlined earlier, the old canonical structure of English could not survive into the present century. Those who taught me covered English texts from *Beowulf* to the then present. There were American and Australian courses, regarded as extras. The current much wider range of courses available to students, coupled with the imperative of choice, means that even Honours students cover only a modest part of the English historical spectrum. Moreover both staff and students now want to cover material published in the last five or ten years. But should we make that choice to focus on the latest prizewinner featured on Ramona Koval? The phenomenon of presentism is worrying, because historical perspective matters. If more Australians had it, John Howard would not get away with some of his more outrageous revisions of the past. On the other hand it goes without saying that canons exclude. The canon handed down to my generation

excluded – on and off, let it be said – on the basis of race, gender, class. It privileged particular genres, high art over popular, and promoted English rather than Australian loyalties. Much of that has changed, not least because we have a new canon or, in the plural, new canons, but also because of the attack on canonicity per se. It's that issue of intrinsic value again, and reminds me of an occasion at the ANU when Frank Kermode warned us of the danger of "losing" Shakespeare. We had to defend him against the assault of the Young Turks, by which Kermode meant American deconstructionists. I had a gut reaction against this defensive way of putting it and asked: couldn't Shakespeare look after himself? I imagine he can – and if, for a time, he can't, then he'll go out of sight for a time – and then reappear (maybe). At any rate you can't play King Canute with historical change. At the same time, as I've argued, to say this is not to surrender to historical whimsy (itself active, I'm afraid, in a lot of our current course offerings, where the idea of recuperating the margins often dictates content). My last-semester postmodernity course included William Gibson's classic cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*, but also Beckett's *Malone Dies*, Borges' *Labyrinths* stories and Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*. Gibson was there to illustrate a vital point or two about postmodernity and pop fiction, and most students liked it. But I was open about my preference for the others, as well as for Beckett and Borges over Calvino. I buried Leavis' *Great Tradition* years ago, yet it remains perfectly reasonable to say one text might be better, i.e. have more to say, be more worth reading, than another. For all their flaws, the to some degree narrowed focus of all their master narratives, canons that survive for any length of time are like those tourist must-see places, Uluru, the Great Barrier Reef, the Sydney Opera House: they are usually celebrated for good reason.

An addendum on the subject of canons. If the money is right, that commercial pop imperative which demolishes the canon is equally capable of being its cheerleader. Ironically, *Shakespeare in Love* does more for the Bard in an evening than Frank Kermode in a lifetime. I await the inevitable coming of Great Books courses on our postmodern curriculum. It hasn't come to ANU, not yet.

Some final words regarding so-called "theory", that major addition to the discipline. Of course I've already repeatedly alluded to it. It's another child of the collapse of old disciplinary boundaries and the reorganizations brought on by still larger factors mentioned above. More specifically it came to Anglophone institutions mostly from post-'68 France, with the generation of intellectuals inspired by structuralist linguistics and Lévi-Strauss. To which was rapidly added the further "post" of poststructuralism. Traditionally empiricist as we English-speakers are, why *did* we take up the lively and impossible French? On the frivolous side it had something to do with the possibility that intellectuals might have the status of pop

idols. But then Sartre and Beauvoir had been pop stars before the generation of Barthes, Foucault and Derrida. Of course it had a lot to do with the bankruptcy of Anglo literary methodology, subsequently covered by the blanket term, the New Criticism. Admirably practical, “close” reading just didn’t encourage the raising of bigger questions. This while the French theorized, often wildly, on a vast scale, usually on the basis of clever parodies – intended or unintended – of the Germans. The demise of the New Critical model which, I have to say, taught me to read what was there on the page, never posed difficulties for me, since I’d always had a foot in the Continental camp (my PhD, subsequently a book, was subtitled *Literary and Philosophical Perspectives on the Work of Beckett, Genet, Ionesco and Pinter* and took its philosophy seriously). This meant I was not filled with a sense of revelation either, when so-called Theory was introduced – in this country, in the early 1980s. It seemed to me a good thing for the discipline, provided it was done well. To an extent it wasn’t.

On this matter of Theory – “so-called”. “So-called” because it’s nothing new in the sense that we had theory before, and lots of it. Theory began long ago with questions about interpretation and reading methodology in European antiquity. It went on from there, usually focussed on biblical exegesis and legal documents. After all, while nobody gives a damn about how we interpret *Hamlet*, it makes a lot of difference how we interpret a will or papers regarding property or business. And, until recently, interpretation of scripture could be a matter of life and death. Hermeneutics or theory of interpretation was given a modern systematic basis by scholars of the University of Berlin in the early nineteenth century, chief of these being Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher's methodology, still the utterly taken for granted basis of all our studies, requires us to contextualize historically each and every text. It seems obvious, but tell it to a fundamentalist Christian. Or to Shakespeare, who knew the past as a temporal fact but didn’t really know how to think historically. His Romans are dressed as, talk like, think like and behave like Elizabethans. But to return to that overloaded term “theory”. As a student I took a course on literary theory, starting from Plato and Aristotle. The limitation was that it offered a history of views about the role and value of literature rather than a properly philosophical investigation into the nature of literature. Hermeneutics does ask the fundamental questions. It did so in its nineteenth-century form which, Romantic-fashion, privileged the role of the author, and also in more recent forms which have privileged the role of the reader. In a quite different way, recent French theory also asks fundamental questions. Still, regardless of which approach we’re discussing, I want to underline the point that no *one* form of literary theory can lay sole claim to the term “theory”.

Theory or, as it's sometimes called, "contemporary theory", in its present form, that's to say as promoted in our institutions, has problems, some connected with specific arguments put up by particular theorists, some with the very idea of an entity called Theory or Contemporary Theory. As an entity, Theory is a loose coalition of ideas and methodologies, so loose that, on examination, some of these turn out to be incompatible with others. Actually it's a strategic coalition, more textually political than anything else and aimed at the competition, whatever it happens to be: sometimes New Criticism, sometimes Marxism or traditional hermeneutics or Reception hermeneutics. This while it cheerfully allows inclusion of elements of Marxism or Reception or anything else. I'd like to help break up this ragbag coalition which, taken as an entity, inhibits serious analysis of its many and diverse constituents. It's here that I feel Theory has not been done well. Many of my colleagues accept a loosely-coherent conceptual package with practical dos and don'ts and pass these on to students who, like their teachers, are more willing to learn the lesson of what's in and what's out than to think theoretical positions through in a sustained way. Once we had unquestioned New Critical dogma; now it's a different dogma, equally unquestioned. For example, the dogma that human relations are always and before all else power relations (Foucault's contribution). Or that textual undecidability rules (Derrida's contribution). I tell my Theory students that, if they really thought my tutorials were first and last exercises in power, they would walk out. Of course any situation may bring power into play – but there are other equally compelling ways of interpreting human interaction. I also point out to students that, if they really thought linguistic meaning was endlessly deferred so as to render texts undecidable, they would be unable to follow my lectures. I heard Derrida lecture on one occasion and I followed his argument, which happened to be about truth, didn't think it was entirely true and didn't walk out. It was an engaging lecture. And Foucault has something to say too, about the horror of a control-freak society, something I don't imagine will disappear in the near future and may indeed become more Foucauldian. French theory has been bracing after those years of myopic close reading. At the same time it didn't come down to us from Mount Sinai. I think it's a pity we took up poststructuralism without passing, like the French, through a structuralist phase. I also think it's a pity we took up the French without much knowledge of the Germans on whom the French built.

We need to understand Theory in its own historical context, not embrace it as dogma. The Theory course I've just taught begins with the nineteenth century, without which twentieth-century developments make no sense; it doesn't ignore the Germans, without whom French theory makes little sense; it gives due credit to the New Critics, Marxists and that Sartre generation which more recent French thinkers have sought hard to obliterate; it lingers on structuralist ideas without which

poststructuralism, some forms of feminist theory, and much Postcolonial theory would not be there; it doesn't mix all sorts of ideas and practices into a mess called Theory with a capital T, but examines particular methodologies for what they have to offer. Making no bones about the fact that, just as some novels are better reading than others, so some theories make more sense and work better than others. The challenge to think through the basics of what we teachers of literature do is immense and much of the time we muff it. There are so many theoretical ways of approaching a text – and they're all legitimate. Not equally productive, not equally seductive, not equally true – but all legitimate. If there's any advantage in living in the worst of times it's this: pluralism, which these days unhappily offers the food-court choice between one or another junk meal, can, just occasionally, turn up real options.

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