Beyond the Pleasure Principle?

Confessions of a Critical Literacy Teacher

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1. Introduction: context and background

The story begins in an unlikely place: the unisex bathroom facilities of a university student hostel in New Zealand. (I’m at an English teachers’ conference to give a keynote.) Emerging from a shower cubicle, I bump into – Allan Luke, who’s also giving a keynote (at the conference, not the bathroom mirror). We get talking – as you do in such surroundings – moving quickly from the supply of hot water to critical literacy. By the time I’ve towelled my hair and he’s sluiced his face, I’ve asked a question that had recently been engaging me – and here’s my first provocation: But what about poetry? Is there room for poetry in critical literacy? No, he says. No room. Poetry’s a minority interest, a kind of cultural and aesthetic speciality. Let people do poetry, if they choose, outside school, like any hobby. (Like playing in a rock band, for instance.) In classrooms, he says, we’ve got far more important work to do, to help students understand how texts work ideologically, to help them become critical, resistant readers and viewers.

Well, I think there are several things wrong with Allan Luke’s argument – even with the less caricatured case he’d make if he were presenting his views on a podium or in a book, rather than a bathroom. But it does bring into sharp relief the difficulty critical literacy has with literature – and with enjoyment in it. His brusque dismissal of poetry did have one positive outcome: it so troubled me that it was one of the things that led Ray Misson and me to write our book, The Suspicion of Pleasure and Beauty. (In this talk I’ll be drawing on the arguments in the book that Ray and I have worked over together so thoroughly it’s often difficult to say who came up with this point or that, or helped shape it.) Our book’s title, The Suspicion of Pleasure and Beauty, is meant to sum up the anxiety that much critical literacy has about aesthetic texts and the responses to them that English teachers have traditionally valued and fostered in their students.
This brings me to the title of this talk, which as some of you know comes from one of Freud’s books, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (though my title has a question mark). He argued that babies are driven by the need to have their desires (for the breast and other creature comforts) gratified immediately, and the need to avoid pain. This is the pleasure principle. But we adults are governed by another principle, the ‘reality principle.’ We know it’s often more useful to defer pleasure and endure pain, to gain rewards of a different, more mature, kind. Gratification, or reality? Critical literacy comes down firmly on the side of reality – meaning the political reality of an inequitable world, not the partial, fabricated ‘reality’ that texts offer us. According to the critical literacy story, if we take pleasure in a text, we’re all the more likely to be seduced by the dubious ideological messages it purveys, and we’re all the more likely to ignore the unpalatable realities that underlie the dominant cultural and political values it presents.

It’s precisely the pleasures that readers take in texts I want to explore today, and to see how we can rethink the relationship between pleasure and critique. (By the way, when I talk of ‘reading,’ I’m taking it in its widest sense to refer to our making sense of visual, auditory and multimodal texts.)

### 2. Agenda for the talk

Critical literacy has taught us to look for the not-said, for the gaps and silences in any text. I wonder therefore if there are hidden opposites implied in the conference terms: against pleasure and passion, resistant reading based on political critique, the dispassion of analysis, perhaps even the pain of boredom? I’d argue that we can’t ultimately separate terms for emotions like pleasure, passion and provocation, from their opposites – those terms for rational thinking like critique and analysis. As we know from the recent work of researchers into brain functions, like Antonio Damasio, the functions of thinking and feeling dovetail with each other. So I’m not going to set the pleasures of going along with all the emotions and feelings a text offers against the power we can get over that text when we distance ourselves from its charms. Instead, I’m going to argue that a better critical literacy needs to respect, value, understand and work with the pleasure that’s on offer in aesthetic texts.

At the outset I need to stress that I’m not setting up critical literacy and the aesthetic as alternatives. In fact, they couldn’t be, because the two things are quite different in kind. Critical literacy is a particular kind of teaching practice that aims to help students see the inherently social nature of language and the ways in which texts are positioning them ideologically. The aesthetic, on the other hand, is a quality inherent in certain kinds of texts, or perhaps rather, it’s a particular kind of text that readers (and viewers) recognise as aesthetic and that activates a particular kind of reading or viewing. Everything that critical literacy says about language as a social practice that inevitably carries ideology is as true of aesthetic texts as of any other kinds of texts.

Now, at the heart of my argument today are three propositions:

- That we need to feel and understand better the complex pleasures aesthetic texts offer, as legitimate in themselves;
- That we need to understand better the work that textual pleasures do when they offer us certain kinds of knowing and feeling, and thereby offer to make us readers and viewers of certain kinds;
- That a critical literacy that doesn’t work fully with pleasure will never work.

Before I come to develop these arguments, I need to say a few words about my sub-title, ‘Confessions of a Critical Literacy Teacher.’ I’m not taking a defensive stance on critical literacy today or recanting what I’ve said on previous occasions (though some aspects of my thinking continue to evolve, as they should). That agenda of critical literacy is clearly very valuable, when it aims to give students a powerful understanding of the culturally constructed nature of texts and their entanglement in larger social and political forces. But it’s also the case that critical literacy, like any model of English teaching, is in some places close to becoming an orthodoxy, and risks hardening into dogma. That’s why I want to unsettle it a little today, and contribute to a richer conception of critical literacy, one that involves a fuller understanding of how the aesthetic works with the social and political.

To begin, I need to explain what I mean by ‘aesthetic texts.’ I prefer the phrase ‘aesthetic texts’ to ‘literary texts’ or ‘literature,’ for several reasons. First, the term ‘literature’ has been based on a system of mutually exclusive categories (‘literary’ vs ‘non-literary’). And it has smuggled in sometimes dubious assertions about canonical quality, which have rightly come under suspicion. Moreover, to many people the word ‘literature’ suggests only works in book form, not films, electronic texts and the like. To define aesthetic texts: these structure our reading experience in ways that are designed to
lead us to think and feel in certain ways: they do this by offering us particulars that are suggestive of a broader significance. It may help if you compare aesthetic texts with expository or argumentative texts: aesthetic texts aim to make us apprehend significance rather than comprehend facts and arguments; the shaping of the text is vital; and feeling is as important as thinking in the response they elicit. We can’t simply reduce these texts to rational understanding. Since the meanings we make of an aesthetic text are bound up with affect as well as cognition, and the specific particulars are given a human significance, there will always be a stronger interpretative element in reading these texts, more room for readers to expand their understanding, whereas expository and argumentative texts aim for tight closure, comprehensive comprehension. It’s this interpretative openness that enables us to read a poem or see a movie over and over – each time knowing our pleasures afresh, or knowing new pleasures.

3. Critical resistance – an exemplary instance

I want to set the scene for my discussion of pleasure with an example of a critical literacy reading of a literary text. My text is a seventeenth-century poem, John Donne’s ‘A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning’ – the poem that famously compares two lovers to a pair of compasses. I’ve chosen the poem because it concerns the deferral of pleasure while the lovers are parted. Incidentally, the poem’s deconstructed in a critical literacy textbook, Studying Literature. I’m not going to single out that book for critique: its approaches are characteristic of a great deal of critical literacy work. This book, like a lot of critical literacy teachers, assumes that students will take up the compliant, or ‘dominant’, reading position offered by the text and endorsed by traditional literary criticism. In the case of Donne’s poem, this means appreciating the wit and surprise of the comparisons that organise the poem and carry its argument, that the lover who’s about to depart on a journey is still attached emotionally and spiritually to his beloved, however many miles are between them. And it’s this argument that critical literacy teaching interrogates critically.

A Valediction forbidding Mourning

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
The breath goes now, and some say, No

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move,
’Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.

Moving of th’ earth brings harms and fears,
Men reckon what it did and meant,
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers’ love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love so much refined
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assurèd of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to aery thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th’ other do.

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must
Like th’ other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

Now a characteristic critical literacy teaching approach will move very swiftly to identify a difficulty with a compliant reading. This is the problematic gendered ideology in these images of the male lover and female beloved. Such teaching will therefore reject this out of hand, and will move to analyse the poem for its ‘partiality’ (in this case, the patriarchal view of sexual relations), and to identify and query the subject position the poem invites the reader to take up (to celebrate this view). The poem does this in part by generating emotion through what it represents and how it is shaped. We’re caught up in the human situation of two people in love being forced to spend time apart, and we
don’t notice the gender power relations being played out; or we’re caught up in the beautiful formal lyrical movement and lulled by its aesthetic power and so we don’t notice the gender power relations being played out. In other words, according to critical literacy, the experiential and emotional impact of the text is largely there to distract us. So we’d better not linger appreciatively over the poetry.

In our critical literacy classroom, therefore, students will be asked to analyse the comparisons to see which character is mobile and which is static, who’s emotional and who’s rational, who speaks and who listens, and so on. The discussion will move very quickly from the particular comparisons of lover and beloved to a more general critique of gendered oppositions within patriarchy. This swift move from the particular to the general, from concrete details to more abstract formulations about the text’s meaning, is very characteristic of critical literacy. More traditional approaches to literature teaching have also encouraged a similar kind of move: the better kinds of students have learned to state that ‘Valediction’ is about the power of love to transcend distance; it’s not simply about this man who goes away speaking to this woman who’s left behind. Readers need to develop a sense of the meaningfulness of the particulars they’re offered in an aesthetic text – and indeed the text may well hint at this. But this is rather different from the radical kind of abstracting that often goes on in critical literacy – which refuses to take at face value the meaning of those particulars, and substitutes a different, political, order of significance. The kinds of questions that are typical of critical literacy approaches are designed to shift the focus in this way:

- Whose views are being represented?
- What interests are being served?
- What reading position are you being invited to take up?
- What cultural assumptions is the text taking for granted?
- What are the gaps and silences in the text?

Some of you who, like me, took up critical literacy early, may remember the exhilaration of asking these kinds of questions of literary texts – disrespectful questions. Questions that were asked of all kinds of texts alike, none exempted by their privileged literary status. It shifted the whole ground of inquiry; it opened up new ways of reading. Now you can ask these questions of any aesthetic text and you’ll get answers, many of which will be interesting. You could probably answer them very easily for ‘Valediction.’ It’s not that the questions and answers are wrong, or misguided, or even irrelevant: it’s that they often seem simply inadequate to the experience that the text is offering, if that’s as far as you go. There’s no doubt that the poem expresses a view (at some points) of the woman as dependent, operating in a limited private world of feeling, whereas the man goes roaming about. But to make that your whole reading, you’d have to concentrate on the last three stanzas, and ignore the remarkable mutuality of the relations presented in the first six, where the metaphors make the two absolutely equal. The only thing you might point to is the fact that it’s the sober intellectual male speaker who’s comforting the female – but still, he credits her with being able to understand his complex images. Even in those last three stanzas, there’s something of a tribute to the woman in the notion of her anchoring firmness, her centrality.

The point is not that the reading of the compass image as masculinist is wrong or uninteresting – it’s a point worth making about the poem – but as a response to the whole poem, it gets nowhere near first base. It would be a great pity if students felt able to write the poem off as unworthy of their attention, on the basis of some sexist elements in some of the comparisons. I’m not saying we shouldn’t identify these; indeed, to a modern reader they may be quite evident anyway and even distracting, though there’s little point in blaming Donne for not being a feminist. But it would be a pity if there’s no space for students and teachers to also explore and enjoy the wit and daring of those comparisons, drawn as they are from such diverse discourses – astronomy, geography, geometry, metallurgy and religion. And it would be regrettable if there were no room for students to feel the urgent rhythms of the speaker’s rhetoric.

It’s interesting, by the way, that many critical literacy approaches assume that readers are going to be compliant with the text, and that the teacher’s role is therefore to move them to a resistant position. But of course, a compliant reading doesn’t have to precede a resistant one. Many students today are ‘naturally’ resistant readers of such a poem, and part of a teacher’s role may be to help them take up a more aligned reading, at least for a time. I’d want my students to know and feel what a pure and noble love is being celebrated here, in which the partners can part with dignified restraint. I’d want them (while they’re reading) to glimpse the satisfactions of the kind of relationship represented in the poem.
I’m not advocating an utterly compliant reading, one that denies any uneasiness or wry recognition of what can be read in the metaphor of the beloved as the fixed, stay-at-home point. I’m precisely not advocating any single reading. Many readers today may feel ambivalence: the threads of our aesthetic response to the poem’s rhetoric and imagery, and imaginative assent to these, may be interwoven with the strands of our critique of the gendered relations so beautifully presented in the poem. At some point, for some readers, such critique can outweigh the pleasure. But it needn’t lead to a denial of pleasure.

4. The range of pleasures

This brings us to the term ‘pleasure,’ which is often taken to be a by-product, or the end in view, of reading aesthetic texts. Pleasure is an enormously complicated phenomenon. It’ll be differently defined and understood if you’re a psychotherapist, a psychoanalyst, a psychologist, a postmodern theorist, or an English teacher. I’m using the term ‘pleasure’ very broadly, to encompass the range of thoughts and feelings we experience during and after our reading that lead us to want more of the same. Texts can rouse in us laughter, confirmation when our hopes for a character are realized, a satisfying sense of balance and harmony in a text’s structures, and so on. But there can also be a kind of pleasure in feeling sharp despair, sorrow, fear, revulsion and horror in our reading. We desire to have this intensity of feeling – and to have the experience time and again. One such sad or horrifying experience doesn’t turn us off from seeking it again, as those who are addicted to horror movies can attest. Moreover, during the course of reading a single text we can be swept by a succession of different feelings and know a range of satisfactions, which are thought as well as felt.

Shortly I’ll argue that such intensity of response is more complex than ‘sheer’ mindless pleasure – is indeed positive. Before that, it’ll be useful for us to recall something of the range of pleasures aesthetic texts offer, through their structuring and texturing. These are often underplayed in critical literacy, which has tended to concentrate its critique on content (what’s represented) rather than form (how that representation is structured), as the source of that troubling pleasure.

For the most part I won’t mention specific texts, because the ones that offer particular pleasures to me may not do the same for you, or for your students. And I’m not so naïve as to suggest that all this range of pleasures is available to all kids in classes – though there would be very few students who take no pleasure in any aesthetic texts, especially perhaps visual and interactive ones. My point in dwelling on the pleasures texts offer is to revalue the diversity of these pleasures. I’ll say something first about the forms of texts and the sense of shaping and meaningfulness they offer. Then I’ll come to the dynamics of our engagements with texts.

In reading some texts our pleasure has to do with the sense of meaning they offer – and of course as readers we actively contribute to that meaningfulness. With detective novels or TV police dramas, for instance, by the end the last jigsaw piece has been locked into place and we’ve got a seemingly complete picture of motives and actions, causes and consequences. With other texts – Shakespearean tragedies, for instance – we’re given a sense of an inherent, even cosmic, ordering working itself out. A sense of order, and the pleasures this brings, can derive from the formal elements in texts: the clinching rhyme of a couplet in a poem, the structural balance of a sonnet, the unexpectedly right resolution of a storyline. That sense of order can be found even in the neat, surprising aptness of irony, as our minds play over the difference between the apparent order of things and the ironically different actuality we’re invited to see. (What a pleasure it is, to be so knowing!)

By contrast with those texts that emphasise order, some texts are deliberately informal: anecdotes, for instance, oral histories, or those kinds of contemporary poems that have burst out of the constraints of metrical verse and rhyme. Such stories or poems can seem shapeless, but the very naturalness of their discourse can be pleasurable, if we’re able to find in their low-key prosiness an unspoken significance, a subtle emotional tone, and a patterning of elements we can hardly put our finger on.

Then there are the pleasures of complexity, even difficulty. Some texts are far more complex than others; whether we find such complexity pleasurable will depend on our preferences as well as our reading expertise. Some of us find satisfaction in the entanglements of emotions and motivations at play in the storylines of certain novels or movies. Our pleasure here lies not in expecting a simple resolution, but in understanding how unendingly complex the human world can be. Hyperfictions like Stuart Moulthrop’s Victory Garden present another source of pleasurable difficulty: that of holding in our minds a complex array of bits of incomplete information. Worse (or better): in a hypertext there’s no single, fixed order for all these pieces: it’s
the reader who structures the text by choosing links – and making mental links across those fragments.

By contrast there are texts that offer a subtle pleasure, when we sense a world of meaning in something very simple: in a haiku, or a laconic story (those of Hemingway, say, or Annie Proulx). Here we’ll find a meaning in the elements, however minimal they may be, and the way they’re selected and ordered. And that simplicity, that restraint, will be sufficient – will speak volumes.

And while we’re talking of form, let’s not forget the sheer pleasure to be had from the elements out of which texts are formed: language – crafted sentences and paragraphs that are just right in conveying a thought or a scene or character; telling details of a world; the visual intensity of a tight shot or an economical gesture, the sheer pleasure of colour, line and pattern.

What we’ve been talking about so far has all been predicated on order and meaning. But some texts offer us instead pleasure in the chaotic. Their elements seem to have no order of form or meaning (though we’ll always tend to seek one – even if the meaning we find in the text is the lack of meaning in the world so depicted). Some texts have an organization that offends against our sense of ‘normal’ harmony and balance, or they may be (dis)composed of heterogeneous, discordant elements. (These kinds of texts are often avant-garde – they’re outside the present norms of taste, reason and order.) If you’ve got a liking for such texts, you probably enjoy losing touch with the firm ground of reasoned meaning, giving yourself up to textual elements that can’t be comprehended, only experienced. And then there are texts that revel in the comic, carnivalesque subverting of the rules and hierarchies of normal social order – at least for a while. (Some kids’ books, like those of Andy Griffiths or Paul Jennings, do this.)

5. The dynamics of alignment and resistance

It’s a remarkable array of formal structures and textual features. I’m now going to focus on the range of our responses to this variety of texts. I need to dwell for a moment on the complexity and dynamics of these responses, because, as I said in my opening remarks, critical literacy has worried about what happens when we submit to the pleasures that an aesthetic text offers – how they distract us from the ideological work it’s doing. That’s why critical literacy tries to head off students at the pass before they’ve experienced such potentially corrupting pleasure, why it encourages a resistant reading, a reading ‘against’ the grain of the text. There are two ways in which this agenda of reading against the text is inadequate. First, it denigrates the legitimacy and value of taking pleasure in texts. (I’ll say more about this shortly.) Second, resistant reading suggests that we take up a single, uncomplicated stance in relation to a text or part of it. But it’s not so simple. The dynamics of our reading correspond to the multiplicity of the text. No one reading can encompass all that an aesthetic text has to offer – and indeed, it’s just this sense of its inexhaustible potential that can delight readers.

I talked earlier about the forms of texts, but in fact any text is an unfolding event as the reader engages with it; ‘form’ means the gradual structuring of our understanding and responses. (This is also true of static visual texts as the eye moves over its terrain.) That ‘unfolding’ or ‘structuring’ isn’t always smooth and consistent. Uncertainties, impulses, interim resolutions, hypotheses, realisations, corrections, and complications – all these succeed one another in the course of our reading. With those shifts can come changes in our feeling and thinking. And we may read backwards as well as forwards (even without flipping back through the pages or rewinding the video): a seemingly unimportant detail can take on new significance in the light of later information. And even after we’ve read it, the text can continue to unfold dynamically for us, as we sift through our memories of it, re-evaluate bits, and find new patterns and points of significance.

Let’s consider for a minute the range of our alignments with or resistances to texts. At one end of the continuum, we may feel completely satisfied with a text, so we can respond fully and freely in ways that it invites us to. We sense how its form is leading us on towards emotional and intellectual satisfactions. We find ourselves in sympathy with the world-view being represented in it, or we find it enlarges our view. And so we feel replete as readers: we’ve had our desires evoked and satisfied. In a word, we’re ideologically aligned with the text, and we’re aesthetically satisfied, because both form and content seem to complement each other so beautifully.

In other cases we may find ourselves aligned with the content and ideologies of a text but feel dissatisfied with aspects of its form. However worthy the text may be, the writing or shaping of it fails to move us. There may be several reasons for this. We may think that the
content has been handled in a way that's technically inept. Or we may feel that the rhetoric of the language is too strident. For whatever reasons, we simply fail to be swept up in the work aesthetically and affectively, however closely aligned we may be ideologically. As an older, somewhat sceptical reader, I respond in this way to those kinds of novels for adolescents which take a 'problem' such as living in a dysfunctional family, being cast as the misfit at school, nursing an unlikely ambition, and the like. When those novels show how the main character, after a number of obstacles, triumphs at last, it all seems too pat, somehow, the triumph too neatly contrived, and its designs on readers too obvious. When we feel aesthetic disappointment (with the form or the crafting of a text) we may be less able to give our intellectual assent or belief to it, however sympathetically inclined we may be to the stance of the writer or the situation that's being dealt with.

Then there are texts that we don't agree with ideologically, or that seem unworthy in some way, but that engage us, move us, nonetheless. Take action movies, for instance. If you stand back and consider the nature of the world represented there, it's a nasty place where harm lurks round every corner, physical violence gets positive results, and bystanders and lesser characters are expendable. This isn't how many of us see our world, nor do we approve of its casual brutality. But if we accept this world for the time (after all, it's vividly present to our eyes), we get the payoff: a ride on a roller-coaster of anticipation, suspense, fear, until the final climax, after which the hero walks away, wounded perhaps but undefeated. In such cases, there’s pleasure in the stylish treatment of the action. And the onward drive of the storyline catches us up, so that we make its questions our own. (Will the hero get out alive? Will the bad guys get their come-uppance?) At times during or after the film, we may feel some disquiet about this world and its values. But we’ve also known the exhilarations of participating imaginatively in such a world. That is, we’ve assented to the text’s aesthetic and affective structuring, even though aspects of its content are unpalatable.

At the far end of this continuum of alignments and resistances, the form and substance of a text, its ideological and aesthetic elements fail to satisfy us. The result is boredom or disapproval. We may think a text offers too easy resolutions of the narrative problems it poses. We may find its form too neatly contrived or too shapeless, its language too lax, too self-indulgent, too bombastic. Or we may find its values repugnant. We may not even be able to put our finger on all the sources of our disappointment: 'I just couldn’t get into it,’ we say with a shrug; or we make a wry mouth: 'It simply wasn’t my cup of tea.' And we move on to another text.

In other cases our responses are ambivalent or contradictory: simultaneously aligned and resistant. (Perhaps you felt this about 'Valediction'.) We’ve seen how some aspects of a text engage us while others don’t. In a case where a text – or a passage within it – is woven out of several discourses, we may find ourselves in sympathy with one and not with another, yet be unable to disentangle the threads of our response, because of the way the discourses are working together in the text. For instance, To Kill a Mockingbird offers a plausible depiction of the complexities of race and class relations in the American South during the Depression. And the interwoven discourses of family, religion, race and the law invite us to be moved by the unjust tragedy of Tom Robinson, disgusted by the brutal self-interest of Bob Ewell, and inspired by the wise counsel and abiding sense of justice that Atticus demonstrates. And yet even as on one level we may become engaged with the working out of those discourses and find the story’s denouement richly moving, we may also see how those same discourses pull together to secure a particular set of race relations. Patriarchy, family, law and religion encourage white benevolence – and black dependence. Our alignments and resistances collide, with the novel’s discourses.

6. Producing pleasure-taking selves
To return to my earlier point about the legitimacy and value of taking pleasure in texts, I now want to put the case that pleasure is positively productive. (Here’s another P word to add to the conference theme trio.) We’ve already seen how various kinds and degrees of pleasure are produced as we engage with aesthetic texts. It follows that particular kinds of reader are created by texts in this process. Let me explain.

When we give ourselves over to aesthetic pleasures, our submission can paradoxically be liberating. When we desire the pleasures an aesthetic text can give us, we’re active: we improvise on the hints we’re given in the text, we play imaginatively over it, we collaborate with the text in creating our experience of it and making its pleasures ours. An energy is released by such creative activity. Through being involved in these acts – submitting, releasing our imaginations – we become selves with expanded capacities for enjoyment: selves as various as texts and the pleasures they offer. This is
rather different from the claim that once used to be made about the value of literature teaching, that our human sympathies are enlarged, and we ourselves made more civilised, by our immersion in literature. That belief assumes a coherent, if developing, identity. My position is rather different. With other poststructuralists, I argue that when we engage with texts we can take up a number of subject positions, even contradictory ones, almost simultaneously. When we experience the various (sometimes mutually incompatible) pleasures of feeling and knowing, aesthetically and cognitively, we also know ourselves to be capable of a great variety of responses. That is, as we respond to texts’ invitations, we create ourselves as multifarious beings with that range of capacities for thinking and feeling, aesthetic and cognitive response. And when we’re engaged with texts in this way, we also exercise agency: we collaborate in producing ourselves as aesthetic subjects who take and make our pleasure. We need not be simply the drugged dupes of texts’ ideologies, nor are we passive dopes. Instead, we carry out pleasurably intelligent work through participating in the play of associations, the reconstructing of significant form, and so on.

This work of producing selves isn’t carried out simply in the space between one text and one reader. Texts and readers are created in and through the social. Therefore our responses – including our pleasures – will make sense within our culture, even when we react against its assumptions and norms. The point to stress here is that the act of giving ourselves over to a text and giving ourselves up to its pleasures isn’t to be understood in crass terms as simply, utterly capitulating to an ideology that can enslave us. Certainly we’re always subject to cultural, social and material forces, and many of these are conveyed through texts. But when we give ourselves to an aesthetic text, we don’t become automatons. As we’ve just seen, the dynamics of our alignments and resistances are often subtle and shifting. And we still retain our capacity to evaluate those texts. In fact, there’s no adequate route to evaluation except through testing on our pulses the pleasures that a text offers.

7. Reconceiving critical literacy
I began my talk by putting the case that while critical literacy is valuable, it’s had difficulty with the aesthetic elements of texts and the pleasures they offer. I’ve argued that our responses to such texts are manifold, and complex, and productive. The implication of all this is that, as a profession, we need to reconceive critical literacy by developing a theory and practice of teaching textuality that does justice to the particular characteristics of aesthetic texts. In part this will mean revaluing the emotional and experiential elements – the pleasures – of these kinds of texts.

As we’ve seen, a fundamental characteristic of how aesthetic texts work is that the meaning is carried as much through the experience the text offers and the emotion it generates as through the more intellectual elements. This experience can’t simply be ignored, or objectified intellectually and thus defused critically. We need to understand what it is that gets us emotionally involved, how it is that this involvement creates a subject position for us, and why we might experience that position as attractive, before we can begin to weigh up what its advantages and dangers are.

But critical literacy is at heart a practice based on rationality. It argues that texts use various strategies to naturalise their ideology, and if we’re not to become subject to these texts we must denaturalise them, show how they’re socially and politically constructed. And once we understand this, the force of reason will defuse the ideological power.

No doubt this can and does happen, but not always, and particularly not with aesthetic texts. It’s easy to see why. If ideology isn’t just carried by intellectual means, but by experiential and emotional ones, then a rational critique is likely to interfere with the experiential conduit, but it may well be unable to get at the experiential ones. Sometimes head and heart can be radically dissociated, as we know from history and much of our own personal experience. At other times, our thinking can be so entangled with our feelings that we can’t reason ourselves into or out of a view if we don’t attend to the emotions that infuse it.

If, when you read Donne’s ‘Valediction,’ you feel a strong emotional engagement, perhaps even feel that this is the kind of relationship you would like to be in, then rationalist critique of the poem in terms of gender power relations isn’t going to be very effective. As I’ve argued already, you can go to a romantic comedy at the movies, know that the ideology it presents is incompatible with all your best feminist principles, but still be caught up in desire to see how the couple will get together.

Or – do you remember your response to Dead Poets’ Society? I took my Year 10 class to the movie when it was first released – and found myself weeping with a stormy mixture of emotions: I was overwhelmed with sentimental sadness and exultation, with rage at the
film’s manipulative tactics and the dangerously romanticised depiction of an English teacher, and anger at myself for being so susceptible. (The students were awed, I think, to see me emerge with a sodden shirtfront.) Any of us may rationally reject a text’s ideology, but emotionally we live it out while we’re caught up in the narrative.

This brings us to what critical literacy needs. Since critical literacy has a social justice agenda – to uncover and speak out against discrimination, to expose the ways in which certain texts catch us up in dubious patterns of thought and practice – then it ought to be a passionate practice. Such social justice outcomes are only likely to be achieved if teachers and students feel deeply that they matter, if we and our students are engaged emotionally as well as intellectually. The objectifying, distancing moves may be necessary, but if that’s all there is to critical literacy and there’s not a corresponding emotional understanding of why it matters if black people are depicted as overgrown children or women are presented as passive, then it becomes a set of meaningless exercises.

Pleasure and productive play in learning

In many secondary English classrooms there’s a deep ambivalence about play. These days the aim of English education is often seen as the promotion of critical rationality, control over texts and the mastery that comes from being a literate self. In such cases play will need to be rationalised as a form of problem-solving, if it’s not to be dismissed as frivolous indolence and self-indulgence. (Maybe it was poetry’s play with words and forms and meanings that led Allan Luke to cut it from his curriculum.)

But it is possible to make aesthetically and critically productive use of play in ways that promote a range of pleasures around texts. Teachers can model their pleasurable engagement with a range of texts. They can work with pleasure, and not just critically against it, exploring how texts invite us to take pleasure, enjoying those invitations, and knowing something of what those pleasures consist of. They can encourage students to engage with texts – playfully, imaginatively. Even when teachers are nudging their students towards critique, this can be done productively and not too solemnly: students could be asked to explore the possibilities of irony or satire, or to substitute less conventional metaphors in a text in order to denaturalise its assumptions. (What new meanings could be offered if the metaphors in ‘Valediction’ were updated?) Teachers can invite students to shift the discourse or the point of view or focalisation of a narrative text. Together they can indulge in the generative work of word-play. There are countless possibilities for approaches that keep the text and its meanings in play. And they’re legitimately part of the work of a critical literacy classroom.

Unfortunately I haven’t time to discuss creative writing this afternoon – though no discussion of the productive pleasures of the aesthetic would be complete without it. (And I’m not thinking just of those invitations to rewrite aspects of the text so dear to critical literacy teaching, that often predetermine the stance the writer is to take: rewrite this episode from the point of view of a marginalised character; insert a scene that sets a silence to speak.) Here let me just restate my claim that reading too is productive, and generative: it involves our thinking, imagining minds in creating a version of the text for ourselves – and in so doing producing pleasure, and selves who take pleasure knowingly.

So in closing, I come to a provocative invitation, one that I hope will open up further discussion at this conference and beyond: let us know anew, appreciatively and critically, the pleasures of aesthetic texts. If we can do this, critical literacy will have a richer sense of textuality: it will be able to deal with all kinds of texts, acknowledging the distinctive ways in which they work. It will acknowledge that our reading of texts involves us deeply in all sorts of ways, and indeed that it’s a major factor in what we are and how we live our lives. The aesthetic is one among many ways of knowing that human beings have, but it’s a significant one because it acknowledges the breadth, diversity and even contradictoriness of human experience, as well as the impulse to make sense of it – a sense that holds in balance the particulars of people, events and perceptions with any more general understandings. So I leave you with my version, my vision of what an enlarged critical literacy could be: one that works critically and creatively and passionately with the aesthetic and its rich contribution to our sense of human possibilities.

References

Professional Standards: Maintaining a Critical Stance

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A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses … a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.

Karl Marx (nd), Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production, Volume 1, p.77

Abstract
The following article asks whether professional standards can provide a framework for practitioner inquiry and the renewal of the English teaching profession in Australia. This is in contradistinction to managerial pressures to impose standards for regulatory purposes. The article draws on research conducted for PRIME (Portfolio Research in Mathematics and English), a collaborative project involving members of the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English, the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association and the Mathematics Association of Victoria. PRIME was designed to explore the professional learning which English and Mathematics teachers experienced as they prepared portfolios within a standards framework. This article focuses on the experiences of one English teacher who participated in the project.

1. Resisting the fetish of standards
To begin by citing Marx’s Capital may be a foolhardy gesture, given that two fairly prominent aspirants to the position of Prime Minister of this country appear to think there is political mileage in attacking teachers who are supposedly old lefties. Surely I am giving myself away as an unreconstructed baby boomer, someone who came to political consciousness during the Vietnam War, who vowed to maintain his rage when Gough Whitlam was dumped from office, and who has since corrupted the minds of countless students who have sat in his