Mythopoetics in the English Classroom

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Abstract: The language of story and poetry, mythopoetic language, is at the heart of our English discipline. It is language designed to enrich our comprehension of our inner lives, a language that helps us to see beyond the literal, beyond the world revealed to us through other disciplines like science and mathematics, history and geography. In this it shares an epistemology with the other creative arts, though our medium—the language of words—is different. Our mythopoetic discourse helps us see the world more fully. Two academics—both former secondary English teachers—discuss their different interpretations of the place of mythopoetics in an era of measurable outcomes and accountability.

Dear Steve

I’m sorry I haven’t been responding to some of your emails, but the last few weeks have been teaching hell. Today, I feel worn out after a day of marking, receiving last minute assignments and fielding enquiries from tutors and students. My head is pounding, but I wanted to tell you about something one of my English students said to me today.

He was struggling with the academic requirement to reference everything in his latest assessment piece, and he said something like the following:

I don’t get why we have to reference everything, as if every opinion we have, every idea we come up with, has to be proved. It discourages us from expressing ourselves; we’re being continually pushed to look for answers externally of ourselves. It suggests that students can’t be trusted to tell their own truths and own understandings.

I said something to him about how wonderful it is to recognise a community of minds, what a relief and a pleasure it can be to realise that others have thought as you have, and that this is not the same as ‘proving’ or ‘backing up’: rather, it’s letting go of the idea that authority rests with individuals.

After he’d left, I was conscious that this student’s words provoked me more than I’d admitted. I’ve been aware for some time of an undercurrent from some of our students, protesting about our insistence on formal referencing. ‘Why,’ they’ve asked, ‘should we reference our opinion?’ Even more commonly: ‘How do I reference something that I’ve just known about since I was a child?’ I’d wondered if this questioning of the importance of academic referencing pointed to some deeper, more radical shift: with the ubiquity of Google, Wiki and social networking, did these students just not value the stringent paradigms of research and learning in the way that their teachers did? Sometimes I’m frustrated by the lack of respect for scholarship.

And yet the suggestion that there was another way of ‘knowing’, that had been overlooked or forgotten, had unsettled me.

That night, I was reading a book by David Suzuki. In it, Suzuki argues that the varieties of spiritual belief and culture on this planet are an example of ‘evolution’s incredible, extravagant invention of ways for life to survive’. He also asserts that while it is now impossible to return to the world view that embedded us ‘so firmly in our ecosystem’,

we might return to some of our oldest questions and find their answers staring us in the face. What is the meaning of life? Answer: life. Why are we here? Answer: to be here, to be-long, to be. The world does many things … And through us it becomes conscious. If we can see (as we once saw very well) that our conversation with the planet is reciprocal and mutually creative, then we cannot help
but walk carefully in that field of meaning. (Suzuki, 1997, p. 206)

This final assertion of Suzuki’s drew my attention. If it’s assumed that the earth does indeed ‘become conscious’ through us, if the ‘conversation’ is indeed mutual, then concepts of ‘fields of meaning’ – knowledge, education – need to shift to accommodate this understanding. How then can educators reduce what they teach to what is assessable through assignments, tests and surveys? Do we need to do as my student suggested so earnestly: trust and encourage those we teach to ‘look within’?

Rachel

Dear Rachel

It feels good to be talking again about these things.

As soon as I read what you’d written about your student and ‘looking within’, I was reminded of Charles Taylor’s book Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity (1989), in which he argues that such a ‘looking within’ was unavoidable if we’re to find meaning in the modern world.

I want to have a go at summarising his argument, and then say what I think this might have to do with mythopoetics and the English classroom, our shared preoccupation at the moment as you work with your Year 12 class and as I think back over the English classes I’ve taught.

Taylor’s argument goes something like this:

Where once humans had a more animist sensibility, a notion that meaning was in the world, in things, nowadays we experience our thinking as existing outside of the material world; our thinking, then, distances us from this world. This move (which began with Descartes but which is still deeply embedded in the way we experience things) disenchant the world for us, strips it of its ontological meaning, and makes unavailable to us the sense that we are a part of some kind of matrix of realities which holds us.

Since Nietzsche, though not because of him, there has been a sense of the old certainties disappearing. Nietzsche’s own phrase was that the horizons were being ‘sponged’ away. There’s been a shift, says Taylor, in what it feels like to be human. The time of eternal orders which had ontic significance – God, state, societal hierarchies, nature – with which one was once in a kind of clear relationship has been replaced by a sense of finding or even of inventing meaning. We are inevitably a part of a modern Western consciousness, different from earlier ways of seeing things. All of us who live in

this postmodern society are driven by an unconscious belief that we must find or create a sense of coherence because the old verities have been ‘sponged’ away.

Because the old verities have been sponged away, because we’ve lost this animist sense that there is meaning in the world, we no longer have the sense of being made or held or found or seen by something ‘other’ (God, group, nature, whatever). We’re on our own. To find meaning in the modern world, we must go within.

We find the sense of life through articulating it. And moderns have become acutely aware of how much sense being there for us depends on our own powers of expression. Discovering here depends on, is interwoven with, inventing. Finding a sense to life depends on framing meaningful expressions which are adequate. (Taylor, 1989, p. 18)

Taylor’s book was significant for me as an English teacher because it helped me make sense of the frustration some of our English students feel when their attempts to ‘go within’, to discover, explore and create meaning, are diverted by learning outcomes which seem to privilege objectivity and correct referencing of external authority.

Poets like Maria Rainer Rilke speak particularly clearly about the search for meaning within.

It is not too late
to dive into your increasing depths
where life calmly gives out its own secret ...
I love the dark hours of my life
which deepen my senses;
in them, as in old letters, I find
my daily life already lived
and, like legends, distantly beyond.
(as quoted in Dowrick, 2009)

The American philosopher, Rick Furtak, puts all this very nicely: ‘We are in need of poets who can bring the world back to life so that it is once again weighted with significance.’ ‘To be a poet in a destitute time,’ said Heidegger, ‘means to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods.’ (as quoted in Dowrick, 2009, p. 138)

And this is the connection to the English classroom, I think. To come to know the world through a mythopoetic sensibility is to come to know aspects of the world to which none of the other disciplines (disciplines reflected in our school subjects) give us access: the world of the language imagination. It is ‘languaged’ in the sense that, while it is the same intuited world to which all the creative arts give us access, it is in English that our medium is words. Through our
responses to others’ words, and through our attempts to find words for our experiences and understandings, we engage with the world in a quite different way from our engagement through the sciences and maths, or through history and the humanities, or through the other creative arts.

Isn’t this what you and I love being English teachers? It’s in the English classroom, through literature, that we get a chance to explore this mythopoetic aspect of human experience.

It’s fun to be swapping ideas again. The day-to-day demands of university life can be overwhelming and leave little room for these kinds of conversations. I sometimes hanker after the old days, when an academic had time to think, when an English teacher could also be a poet or write editorials or even a novel! That’s why I need to escape off to the coast to be on my own for periods of time, so I can immerse myself in reading and writing and thinking. It’s good for the soul. I come back refreshed.

Steve

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Dear Steve,

Firstly, I want to try to define mythopoetics. We’ve been talking about what we think that it is, and what it isn’t, for months now. We’ve talked about how mythopoetics:

• contains a belief in the centrality of stories, poetry and narrative to the curriculum
• offers an alternative to a privileging of literal and rational knowledge (‘mythos’ rather than ‘logos’)
• doesn’t value the utilitarian or the easily calibrated
• is ultimately a state of being, rather than a set of values or a prescriptive process
• honours ‘negative capability’, allowing one to exist in uncertainties and inexactitude
• values mystery, the unconscious and the indefinable.

But I sometimes wonder if our conceptions of the mythopoetic are quite different. You see it as about transcendence, a Romantic idea of escaping from the banal, the repetitive ‘housework’ of daily life. It’s why you quote Rilke. It’s why going down to the coast is essential to you: you need to cast off other worries and distractions in order to move into the mythopoetic realm.

This isn’t an option for me but it’s also not what I’d choose, as an academic, a writer or a teacher. There are many external constrictions: some have to do with being a woman, a mother and an early career academic who is still uncertain of her path. Nonetheless, the separations that you make: between inner and outer lives; between soul and body; between the spiritual and the mundane are specious to me. I don’t want to separate the world ‘out there’ from the world ‘in here’.

I know I’ve been musing about the need for students to go within, but nonetheless, a mythopoetic project is more than that: it’s a matter of survival. It’s about recognising that in this historical period the only thing that will save us is a recognition of how we use words, and teaching ourselves and others to use them as beautifully, imaginatively and carefully as possible. This is essential when we are thinking about how we teach literacy, as well as mythopoetics, in the classroom.

I want to tell you another story:

Some friends that I’ve known for years through a parents’ group are preparing to go out to a fortieth birthday party. There’s hilarity and the popping of champagne corks. In the corner of the room are the daughter and son of one couple: they’re nine and seven years old. They are each bent intently over a tiny screen: one is holding her mother’s iPhone; the other is playing a much coveted Nintendo 3DS. We comment on how quiet they are, how completely absorbed. The mother leans over, in mock confidence, and says, ‘They’re part of the absent generation. Half the time they’re just somewhere else.’ ‘Better than being the Z Generation,’ someone else says, ‘I’ve heard them called that.’ Their mother nods. ‘By the time they’re adults the planet is going to be f*cked.’

‘By the time they’re adults the planet is going to be f*cked.’ This devastating idea, so casually uttered, intrudes on my thoughts as I’m in the classroom, marking papers and considering the purpose of teaching English in twenty-first century Australia.

This is why we, teachers in Australia, are no longer part of a postmodern age: climate change is really happening. It is intensifying as this current batch of students, this ‘absent, Z generation’ reach adulthood. Some of the markers of postmodernity are plurality, fragmentation, rupturing, inconclusiveness, subjectivity, and a fascination with artifice. In literature and in life these preoccupations are unaffordable indulgences in a time when the planet will almost certainly lose all its coral reefs within the next few decades, as well as all of the Arctic sea-ice.

Temperature changes of this kind [over 4 degrees] transform where people can be... Climate change will change lives and livelihoods and where you can live.
One of the things I feel, as perhaps you do, is that institutions, collectives, schools, industries and government departments are already in survival mode, but in a semi-conscious sort of way. We sense the juggernaut but our instincts are to self-protect, to rationalise, to take care of the material issues, to gird ourselves. Clive Hamilton, in his *Requiem for a species* calls ‘us’ (meaning, I think, those in the industrialised West) ‘moderns’:

We moderns have become accustomed to the idea that we can modify our environment to suit our needs and have acted accordingly for some 300 years. We are now discovering that our intoxicating belief that we can conquer all has come up against a greater force, the Earth itself. The prospect of runaway climate change challenges our technological hubris, our Enlightenment faith in reason and the whole modernist project. The Earth may soon demonstrate that, ultimately, it cannot be tamed and that the human urge to master nature has only roused the slumbering beast. (Hamilton, 2010, pp. 30–31)

Perhaps cultural conceptions and thought have been vacillating between believing and losing faith in rationalism for a few centuries now. I don’t think that old certainties began disappearing with Nietzsche, or in the time of Nietzsche. What of the uncertainties that scientists like Newton, Galileo and Copernicus brought to our ways of thinking about our place in the universe, the interrelationships between humanity, this planet and the rest of life? I think that I understand what you are saying about how humanity is obliged to find or invent its own truths, rather than finding them externally, but it won’t surprise you to hear that I don’t agree. What you are proposing sounds like a promotion of humanism and I neither believe nor want to encourage students to believe that authority and truth rests with themselves and with their fellow humans. Since Copernicus, human beings have been coming to terms with the fact that this planet is not the centre of the universe; I think one current shift in thinking and culture is that of humanity’s struggle to understand that we are not the centre of this planet.

What does this have to do with mythopoetics and what we do in an English classroom? An English classroom can take students away from an over-literalised survival mode and towards other knowledges. I’m thinking of the work of David Abram, who, inspired by phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty, writes that the intricate interchange that we call ‘language’ is ‘rooted in the non-verbal exchange always already going on between our own flesh and the flesh of the world’:

Human languages, then, are informed not only by the structures of the human body and the human community, but by the evocative shapes and patterns of the more-than-human terrain. (Abram, 2007, p. 85)

How can we teach language and literature in a way that recognises, honours and explores this ‘more-than-human terrain’? What role can it play in the imperative to turn around the human urge to master nature?

These are big ideas but in English they are relevant, which is one of the reasons I love teaching it. More next time,

Rachel

Dear Rachel,

You wrote: ‘An English classroom can take students away from an over-literalised survival mode and towards other knowledges’. I’ve been thinking about these ‘other knowledges’.

For the past couple of weeks I’ve been telling stories to my Graduate Diploma students as part of our unit ‘Promoting Positive Learning Environments’. It’s been, if you like, my own current mythopoetic project, and I’ve been wondering what ‘other knowledges’ these stories afford. Yesterday I told the students a story which I called ‘The Front Seat Explosion’, all about the day a boy in the front seat of my English class exploded in a sudden fit of frustrated rage when I misinterpreted a question he’d asked me. What effect did my telling these ‘other knowledges’ have on my students? This morning I’ve been reading some of their responses.

This week’s lecture made me feel quite sad, and potentially anxious about how I might respond to a situation like that … While I listened to the story of the front seat explosion I was both amused and completely baffled at the boy’s behaviour … The idea of standing in front of a class knowing that I simply couldn’t get through to a student, that I was letting them down because I was being myself, was worrying and intimidating … The Front Seat Explosion lecture was one of those Ah-ha! moments for me … I could imagine this poor kid sitting in the front row going ‘I always understood English. Why doesn’t it make sense anymore?’ … It was quite a revelation (and a shock!) to consider the fact that there may be students who react negatively to my style, and that I might have to deal with my own explosion of frustration! … For the first time I wanted to do something on my own and not because I was forced by others.

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This is what the mythopoetic does, isn’t it? When we engage with it, we pause and feel and think. It can shock or beguile or undermine or elate. There is an affect and it has an effect. The power of the mythopoetic resides in the way language sets up reverberations within its communities of readers, subversive reverberations which unsettle the literal and help us see more (Macdonald, 1981). The reverberations are ways into these ‘other knowledges’.

There’s a chapter from the book on mythopoetics that we’ve been reading (Leonard and Willis, 2008) where the authors speculate on the power of the mythopoetic. The authors of the chapter (Holland and Garman) suggest that there are four aspects to the power of a story like the one I told the students. The mythopoetic has reflexive power in that, by revealing deeper dimensions of experience, it works against routine and superficial thinking. It has moral power in that it speaks about ‘the rightness of good conduct and the consequence of evil action’. It has controlling power through ‘implicit clues in the language’ which direct the attention of the reader or listener. It has evocative power through dream-like reverberations and what Paulo Freire called its ‘dangerous words’ which ‘have about them rich clusters of allusive connotation’ (Holland and Garman 2008).

I see evidence of each of these four in the students’ responses that I’ve been reading this morning. The stories ‘make you want to think’ (reflexive power): they speak to the rightness of good conduct when a student worries about letting a student down (moral power); they direct the attention so that a student can ‘imagine this poor kid sitting in the front row worrying (controlling power); and they stir the senses and provoke intentions to act, ‘for the first time I wanted to do something on my own’ (evocative power).

As I think about the effect of these stories on my Graduate Diploma students, or as I think about what happens in our English classrooms when our students are gripped by a poem or by a novel, it seems to me that there’s a fifth element to add to Holland and Garman’s four. I’d want to call it relational power, or cultural power. Through their engagement with these stories, my students are being inducted into a culture, into the community of teachers. This has been one of the roles that stories have always played, in all communities in all ages, if mythologists like Joseph Campbell (1949) are to be believed.

Steve

Dear Steve

I want to talk about Mary Doll, a writer that we’ve both read and studied in relation to the mythopoetics of curriculum. She writes about fearlessness and capacity in curriculum and asserts: ‘Capacity is no friend of standards or accountabilities, opinion polls, common sense, facts, competition, and the like; those are the hobgoblins of small minds’. (Leonard and Willis, 2008, p. 223) I’ve wanted to wrestle and dance with these hobgoblins ever since I read this. I react strongly to the idea that so much of the essence of a teacher’s life can be dismissed as the province of ‘small minds’. I don’t want to live in an education environment or a world that is devoid of standards, accountabilities, facts or common sense, in particular.

I think what I really react to is the idea that these fine qualities – fearlessness, capaciousness – cannot exist within people who dance with small-minded hobgoblins. I think that it’s essential that students, teachers – people – do both. I am not looking to eliminate timetables, rubrics, syllabi and curricula. These things are designed to support deep thinking and learning and they need to be designed so that they do.

I feel that behind Mary Doll’s assertion is an idealistic notion of a rarified life that is removed from boring details: tax returns, dental appointments, wiping the bums of small children, looking after senile fathers. This is an elitist, masculinist idea and a pervasive one in Western literature and philosophy.

I’m often drawn to the image that Drusilla Modjeska centralises in her book, Stravinsky’s Lunch (Modjeska, 1999), about the great composer who demanded that his children be absolutely quiet while he was creating an opus, and that his lunch be brought to him on a tray. Whether or not this is strictly true, the picture it casts up is compelling and dreadful. Did Stravinsky know who had purchased the tomatoes in his salad that morning, who had grown them and what they had cost? Did he know that the reason he had no bread was that there was a strike because the bakers were protesting about the quality of flour? Did he know that his servant washed up his dishes while breastfeeding the baby and attending to the schooling of her three other children? How was his music affected by not knowing or caring about these things?

One of the things that I worry about with the new National Curriculum is the separation of ‘language, literacy and literature’. I think this can lead to a deepening of already existing class divisions. It could be a way of separating the high art of Stravinsky from the
blood and flesh of daily survival. Let me explain:

Sometimes – even in our teaching faculty – ‘teaching English’ is couched as ‘teaching literacy’. There is not a single understanding of what ‘literacy’ is and how to teach it any more than there’s agreement on what ‘English’ is, but one thing is certain: ‘literacy’ is useful and powerful. It has social and political currency. Whether literacy is seen in the traditional framework as a matter of phonics, grammar and comprehension skills or in the more contemporary sense as a social skill, encapsulating being competent in a number of critical understandings, being literate is about getting on and making your way successfully in the world.

I think I’ve already talked about how I see ‘teaching survival’ and getting on in English as something quite distinct from helping students get a job; we need to give students an awareness of the world beyond themselves as well as a sense of how deeply they are immersed in it. We have to guide them through a shift in thinking that takes them beyond Enlightenment rationalism and modernity.

However, I think that this other, deeper sense of literacy is still mostly the province of the rich and privileged in Australia. The idea that literature refines you as a person – the personal development model of English – persists mostly as an idea and an objective at the grammar schools. There’s no need for the greater mass of workers, the hobgoblins, to pursue this kind of knowledge. It’s not necessary to get a job: it may in fact actively prevent it.

Steve, we agree on this much: part of mythopoetics is about letting go, going mad, allowing space for what doesn’t make sense. We need to relinquish the idea that all parts of an English curriculum need to have a ‘use’. We can do this at the same time that we honour the structures that keep us going and that help our students work out how to make their ways in the world. Rachel

Dear Rachel,

I think we agree on more than you imagine. We seem to agree, for example, that the English classroom is the natural home for the mythopoetic. It’s where metaphor and allusion and the felt-reverberations of evocative language are best explored. It’s the place where a mythopoetic sensibility might be nurtured, where tentative articulations of the mysteries of human existence might be made, where words might be sought to express some of the complexities of living in a world where the old certainties have been sponged away. It’s a place where a different, non-linear, metaphorical kind of thinking might find its home.

But I worry that, in these days of Naplan, accountability, measurable learning outcomes and achievement bands, something is happening to the language which we are now using in English syllabi. At the recent IFTE conference in Auckland, I attended a session called ‘Landmarks in the evolution of English curriculum in Victoria 1968–2010’. In it, Marion Meiers talked about how the 1970s was an exciting time to be an English teacher, and how, in one curriculum document, one of the claims made about our subject was that it existed ‘to enrich the comprehension of one’s inner life’.

That’s not the language you would find in the National Curriculum, or in rubrics or outcomes. It seems to me that a kind of pseudo-scientific language has quietly infiltrated the English discipline. It’s a language which objectifies, distances and quantifies. It excludes the mythopoetic. We ask students to prove their points, to provide evidence, to be objective and even (horror of horrors) to write in the passive voice.

I stumbled across a typical example of this the other day, a handout given to some senior English students describing an oral presentation to be made on a writer of the student’s choice.

(I’m not being critical of the teacher, by the way. I think that language like this is a consequence of the way our curriculum documents have been increasingly written in a language that marginalises what should be at the heart of our discipline).

Creative Writing Oral Presentation

SET TASK

Select a writer you admire and examples of his or her writing. Prepare an oral presentation.

• Share the selected writings with the class
• Provide relevant biographical and background information on the writer
• Discuss the key themes/issues
• Discuss the writing techniques
• Look at genre features
• Use textual evidence to support your arguments

You should present a convincing argument about and/or critique of your chosen piece of writing. Formulating a question you aim to answer over the course of your presentation can help to focus your discussion to ensure an analytical approach is sustained. In developing your presentation, consider (but do not restrict yourself to) questions such as:

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Rachel
• Is your chosen piece of writing representative of trends and movements in contemporary writing?
• Does your chosen piece of writing break new ground or develop a genre?
• What is the author’s purpose? What ideas is the author concerned with?
• What creative techniques does the author use? Does the writing explore and question social norms and standards?
• Why is the writing relevant and interesting? How might one explain its enduring appeal?

I felt very uncomfortable as I read the language used in this task description. If the mythopoetic project is to ‘guide the reader to a vivid understanding through expression’ (Holland and Garman, 2008), or to ensure ‘that our conversation with the planet is reciprocal and mutually creative’ (Suzuki, 1997), or to ‘find the sense of life through articulating it’ (Taylor, 1989), then this Year 12 task is not a mythopoetic exercise.

Instead, it’s an exercise in treating a text, its author and its context as if they were objects to be objectively examined, just as in a science experiment. The student is directed to present specimens (selected writings), to explain the environmental conditions that produced the specimens (relevant biographical and background information), to identify key features (discuss key themes/issues), to examine the specimen’s structure (discuss writing techniques), to classify (look at genre features) and to provide an evidence-based analysis (use textual evidence to support your arguments). Students are reminded to ensure an analytical approach is sustained, and encouraged to think about how this specimen belongs to a species (a representative of trends and movements) or belongs to a species as yet undiscovered (breaking new ground or developing a genre). Even the invitation to discuss matters of ‘interest’ and ‘relevance’ is framed in a general objective sense, with reference to its enduring appeal, designed to exclude the student/reader’s own felt response.

If Taylor is right when he says that there’s been a shift in what it feels like to be human, that the time of eternal orders with which one was once in a kind of clear relationship has been replaced by a sense of finding or even inventing meaning, then where is that sense to be found here? Where is it to be found in our new National Curriculum? In which of our present school subjects can it be found? Where can your student – the English student wondering about how intuitive knowledge was being excluded from academic study – engage with a community of scholars who would help her develop, deepen and extend her thoughts?

It is not the teacher’s fault. The language of our English curricula (of which the new National Curriculum is just the latest iteration) dictate that our subject, English, be shaped by this pseudo-scientific paradigm, that our classrooms be characterised by such soul-sapping dissections of the imaginative products of our writers.

You once read to me something that Edward Sapir said: ‘We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.’ (Sapir, 1929, p. 69)

I’m worried about the effect of the language habits of our official community.

Steve

Dear Steve,

I think you’re using the word ‘science’ in a very specific and circumscribed way. I’m not sure the word ‘science’ relates neatly to the way that we want to describe the language in the English National Curriculum and the way that you want to talk about a pervasive ideology that seems to work against mythopoetics. It seems to me that you’re using the word science to describe rigidity, a lack of imagination and a focus on ‘proving’ a singular ‘truth’. You’re not alone in describing ‘science’ this way and you helped me to recall a field of study that I’ve loved and a range of twentieth-century utopian and dystopian novels that see ‘science’ similarly. Yevgeny Zamyatin’s We came to mind but also Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World.

As you know, I did a thesis on the Australian novel Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow (Eldershaw 1947) and I think you would also find some ideas in there that are simpatico. Some of the story is set on the ‘Tenth Commune’ in an Australia of the twenty-fourth century. The focus is on the relationship between a father, Knafr, who is a novelist, and his son, Ren. At the novel’s conclusion, Knarf says to Ren: ‘Don’t you see that the very thing you have to break through is the idea that the whole of life can be tabulated and docketed and served in a machine, that efficiency is the idea that the whole of life can be tabulated and docketed and served in a machine, that efficiency is all that matters?’ (p. 454). Ren experiences ‘a fantastic nostalgia for something beyond what he knew’ (p. 441) and talks to his father of ‘breaking through the wall’.

Steve
the invisible barriers that block free and imaginative thought.

In *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, the word 'science’ is used extremely broadly. It is associated with any totalising power or ideology: at various points in the book the word is a signifier for violence, power, elitism, rigidity, a lack of individualism and an allegiance to an exclusively rational view of the world. In other words, ‘science’ in this book is seen as a grand narrative in the sense of Lyotard’s critique: it denies the validity of all other explanations, laying sole claim to the truth.

Are these the kind of associations, though, that you want to make when thinking about the ‘language of science’ and a ‘pervasive rationalism’? I don’t. This idea of ‘science’ as a grand narrative and a dangerous authority seems to me to be a mid-twentieth century reaction to the Enlightenment view that reason is a firm foundation when deciding between truth and falsehood. It came out of the industrial revolution but it is a pre-Internet, pre-information technology notion of what ‘science’ is and isn’t. I think this is important because I think that an understanding of the ways in which the scientific discipline has broken though narrow understandings of language, truth, objectivity and authority will also help us out of the binaries that we often fall into when describing mythopoetics and how it might work in English pedagogy and curriculum. It is not that we need to eliminate a study of rationales, rubrics, analyses and outcomes: it’s that we need a more expansive understanding of them, so that they don’t eclipse the poetic.

You dislike the language – the *discourse*, really – of the National Curriculum, but I wonder why you feel that these directives shut off rather than guide exploration, rumination, experimentation: the mythopoetic. Does evaluating and comparing voice as a literary device, for instance, and looking at the different emotional responses that are evoked, prescribe what must be done or simply offer a framework to 'expand into a new domain'? Why has the Year 12 exercise that you give as an example precluded the possibility of the students giving their own response? After all, they’ve been asked to pick a text that they admire. Luckily, literary texts are not *specimens*, if we choose not to treat them that way.

Rachel

Dear Rachel,

Did I ever tell you about how, at my last school, some of the kids used to say to each other that in my class you didn’t do English, you did Shann-glish? I know that for some of the students, it was a relief that things were different in my class. But, for others, it was a real problem.

I remember one senior English class where one of my students – let’s call him Vikram – said to me one day in a class discussion: ‘I just don’t get what you’re asking us to do in here. It just doesn’t seem like normal English.’

‘Normal English?’

‘You know, all that analysing and stuff. The author’s purpose. The text’s meaning and how the structure supports the meaning. The way the language works. I hated all that stuff at first, but I’ve got the hang of it now, I’ve been getting great marks in English in the last few years. But it’s like all that’s out the window now. I don’t get what you’re wanting us to do, how you’re asking us to think.’

Vikram wasn’t alone; most of the students in the class had their eyes firmly set on a high university entrance score. They knew how to support their arguments from the text. They knew the structure of the five-paragraph essay. They knew how to trawl the web for a workable point-of-view on any text. However, they’d lost touch, I reckoned, with what they thought they’d lost touch, I reckoned, with what they thought themselves.

‘You’re feeling undermined,’ I suggested. ‘Like all those hard-fought skills and understandings are being discounted.’

‘That’s it,’ he said. ‘And for what?’

Others joined in. Differences of opinion surfaced. Some were finding the new approach refreshing, stimulating; others were angry.

That night Vikram went online to our class Ning and wrote a post called ‘Playing the game’.

School is all about how you play the game these days. It’s all about doing what you can to get an A, regardless of what you’re learning. Honestly, I don’t care about what I learn. In most cases, I’m in classes I will do well in. I don’t care that I’m not learning anything, because I can see the big picture. I do well in school, I go to uni (and probably do a degree in law, which funnily enough, actually has NOTHING TO DO with my high school subjects for the most part) … But I digress. The point is, I’m cool with not learning anything significant, because if I learn how to ace the HSC, that’s enough of an education for me … I do what I can to do well in the HSC. And I think some others in the class (although they may not know it) think the same.
his enthusiasms and insights), the culmination of his term-long immersion came when he imagined himself into the shoes of Heloise, and, from her walled and isolated abbey, wrote this poem:

To Abelard, my lord

My love I write to you at last,
Although I thought these passions passed.
Like a phoenix from the cinder,
Love returns again to hinder
This process of forgetfulness,
And draws me from my dark recess.
This letter comes from painful tears,
Forgotten in these silent years.
Unsettled by your words and woes,
That stirred me from my sweet repose.
Sadness flows and blots the page
As I write from holy cage.
I cannot rest within these walls,
These rugged rocks and hallowed halls.
Pensive in my own bastille,
Locked away with holy seal.
My mind does stray to thoughts of old
As passions come and then unfold.
They told us love should come through trust,
But what is love if without lust?
Infatuation takes command,
With trepidation hand in hand.
Look past these consecrated vows
And find the place where passion grows.
You have proven your affection,
And love has seen its resurrection.
Now memory takes authority,
When emotions claim priority.
We can hope to fight desire,
But we will never quench Love’s fire.

I asked Vikram to read his blog in class the next day, and we had a vigorous discussion around the issues it raised.

One boy, Brad, sat quietly for most of the lesson, but was clearly listening. He understood Vikram’s point-of-view, he told me later; he, too, wanted a high score in English. But he also loved reading, and had been looking forward to this Texts-Culture-Values unit, where each student had to choose to read and study a pre-twentieth century ‘classic’ and an appropriation.

Brad chose to read the story of Heloise and Abelard (Radice, 1974), the two medieval lovers who, years after their premature and cruel separation, began to write to each other again from the walled confines of their respective cloistered lives. For his appropriation he chose the film *The eternal sunshine of the spotless mind* (Gondry, 2004).

Brad was utterly captivated by both stories and by the theme (in both the letters and the film) of suppressed painful memories. He railed (in class and in his writing) against the cruelty of a heartless world, he read to the class excerpts from the former lovers’ letters to each other, and wrote blog entries about how the two texts were stimulating his thinking about painful memories:

We are part of a world bombarded by fast imagery. We’re constantly searching for the next hot new thing so we can watch its 15 minutes of fame. We constantly move from one thing to another, never really stopping to evaluate what is around us. Yet memory persists. Hard as we try, we cannot make ourselves forget.

Can something really be that bad that we would seek out something to remove it permanently from our minds? We could drink to forget, but that affects your whole body health as well, and is a dangerous activity. We could hope to get hit in the head, or have an accident which causes us to forget. But that cannot guarantee what is forgotten. We know so little about our brains that it would be such a dangerous experiment to fiddle with things, especially deep seeded [sic] things like memories. What would be the implications of removing this? To what is it also connected?

For a whole term, Brad lived imaginatively between the worlds of Heloise and Abelard, the world created by the film, and his own twenty first century existence. For him (and for us, who had been infected by his enthusiasms and insights), the culmination of his term-long immersion came when he imagined himself into the shoes of Heloise, and, from her walled and isolated abbey, wrote this poem:

To Abelard, my lord

My love I write to you at last,
Although I thought these passions passed.
Like a phoenix from the cinder,
Love returns again to hinder
This process of forgetfulness,
And draws me from my dark recess.
This letter comes from painful tears,
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When emotions claim priority.
We can hope to fight desire,
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I read many things into this poem. On one level it is a testament to the way the old story captivated Brad and allowed him to vent his adolescent fury at the way an unfeeling world seeks to trample on a natural thirst for living life to the full; it was also an opportunity for him to suggest the ultimate futility of the nay-sayers. But I also read into it something about the irrepressible
mythopoetic urge to seek meaning, to shake off the limiting and straightening view that English is about analysis, evidence and feigned certainty, about getting the marks, rather than about mystery and a seeking after deeper truths.

At the end of the Extension English unit, Brad had this to say:

I have finished the learning for year 11, but the most important thing I learned was that I need to go to university at some point so that I can REALLY sink my teeth into this stuff. Throughout the last term, I have been constantly feeling the pull of English Extension. I wanted to plunge into the great, placid lake of stories and knowledge and dive as far down as I could go, just to see where it took me. But then I had to rise. Other subjects dragged me from glorious depths and forced me to focus on the mundane, the ordinary, the practical. All the time, I wanted nothing more than to return to the waters and dive. University will be my ticket down, and one day I will pass into depths beyond those that are taught, because the learning is never finished, even when there is no more to be taught.

References


