

The Study of English

G. A. WILKES *

I entered the University as an undergraduate in 1945, joined the staff in 1950, and retired at the end of 1996. As in that time I served under six different vice-chancellors, no one will be able to identify the one in the anecdote following. The occasion was a lunch for a librarian visiting from the United States, when the conversation turned on the acid content of the paper in modern books, which would eventually cause them to disintegrate. A technique had been developed in the United States for dealing with this problem, by flooding the bookstacks with a special gas. The only shortcoming was that the gas was lethal. This prompted some jollity in the lunchtime conversation about librarians who might be prepared to die for their collections, in the manner of a captain going down with his ship. The vice-chancellor said he supposed that even the Faculty of Arts might be prepared to die for its principles, if only it knew what they were.

I was not upset at this comment, as it suggested that the Faculty had been getting under the vice-chancellor's skin. On the other hand it reminded me that Departments were currently being asked to produce 'mission statements', in imitation of a corporate practice of a decade or so earlier. While there was no provision for these mission statements ever to leave the building in which they were written, they were presumably there to be produced on request. As I was at the time Head of Department—this was before that position had come to demand supernatural powers—I went back to my room and wrote out on a sheet of paper what I understood the study of English literature to entail.

While this document has no doubt since been subsumed into something more bland and dutiful, I recall its main propositions

* *G. A. Wilkes is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Sydney.*

quite well. My essential claim was for literature as one of the humanities, specifically as a record and exploration of human experience which is more sensitive than any other record and more probing than any other exploration. I did not invoke 'human' in any mystical sense, but simply as distinguishing human experience from the experience of (say) dogs or birds or insects. I saw this record as more sensitive and probing than any other because, unlike the record of (say) geological change, it is typically the expression of the human mind or imagination. If this should be disputed by such other humane studies as philosophy or fine arts, I am happy to share the high ground with them. To say that literature typically assumes an imaginative form is also to say that it is typically cast in an artistic form. It therefore requires a special expertise for its interpretation.

I saw the role of the teacher as being to provide access to it. The study of literature is necessarily text-based, its method is analytic, and it is stimulated by the intensiveness of group discussion. I envisaged these activities as proceeding in a collegial structure (as distinct from the organisation appropriate to a government department or to one of the armed services) which would be dedicated to critical enquiry. University teaching might resemble other teaching at the earlier stages when it is concerned with instruction in the elements of a subject, but it goes beyond such precedents in its concern to expose the unexamined assumptions which underlie any point of view, to explain and clarify while at the same time bringing out the full difficulty of the subject.

This is the conception of teaching based on scholarly method, and the function of an academic is not simply to impart the subject, but to advance it. I entered a caveat on the issue of research which applied to the statement as a whole: that whatever noble objectives we might entertain, their achievement depends on the resources available. To offer a 'mission statement' on any other basis is to adopt a position of fatuous servility.

These propositions had been habitual to me for as long as I can recall, and I do not believe they can be unknown to vice-chancellors. Although the notion of critical enquiry may assume prominence in my mind because I entered the University in the

1940s, when John Anderson was influential, the tradition is centuries old. It did not seem under threat until the 1990s, when questionnaires issued to students on the effectiveness of teaching became focused on information imparted, information assimilated, and examination requirements which made clear how much information was required and in what form. This was symptomatic of the changes which had taken place in between.

When I entered the University in 1945, 'continuous assessment' had not been invented—it would have seemed an extension of high school teaching, or like the installation of a production line—so that the system was more relaxed, but in some ways more rigorous. With all examinations deferred until November–December, there was more scope in the course of the year to read away from the syllabus, take part in University societies, or to fall in love, and then put on a spurt in third term. It was more rigorous in that anyone aspiring to honours in English took a course in Anglo-Saxon in first year (Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Primer*), and undertook further study of Anglo-Saxon (Wyatt's *Anglo-Saxon Reader*) in English II, before specialising in Language or Literature in third year. At that time a Credit was the highest award possible in Arts I, and the award of Credit, Distinction or High Distinction in second or third year was for an additional course, not for performance in the Pass course alone.

English I was in a way a survey course, in that it included poetry, prose and drama in an historical perspective, but it was equally the idiosyncratic creation of Ian Maxwell, who lectured on the traditional ballads, Robert Burns, Chrétien de Troyes and Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, and Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. The language component of English I consisted of phonetics, a tale by Chaucer, and a study of English usage.

'Period' study was undertaken in second and third year. English II and English III were taught together, and the courses were in a cycle presenting the eighteenth century, the nineteenth and the twentieth. As there were only two years for the study of these three elements, the Distinction courses covered the periods missed, in my case the sixteenth century and the eighteenth. Shakespeare was represented in each year.

English IV was dedicated to the seventeenth century, in lecture and seminar courses on poetry, drama and prose, and a 'scholarship' course in bibliography and palaeography. The thesis topic could be chosen in any field. A seminar in American literature was included, reflecting the initiative of A. J. A. Waldock, and this would have been the first American literature course at any Australian university. With Waldock present at most seminars, they very often became discussions of critical assumptions and critical method.

From today's standpoint, the main feature of this syllabus was its exceptional inclusiveness. The study of the literature of the nineteenth century, for example, involved reading Landor and Swinburne, Carlyle and Ruskin, Gaskell and Trollope. This meant that one could encounter a number of women authors (Dorothy Osborne comes to mind in another context) before it became fashionable to do so, and as authors were nominated rather than texts, one would have read *Daniel Deronda* before it became semi-canonical and *Vanity Fair* before its relegation. There was nothing intimidating about the range offered, when one could choose one's emphasis within it. I was surprised a few years later to find students looking at a course with six novels in it and worrying about how many to read for the exam.

The staff of the Department at this time was quite small. Maxwell went to the chair at Melbourne at the end of 1945, and was replaced by F. W. W. Rhodes. His tenure was unfortunately brief, as he died suddenly at the end of 1949. The Literature staff otherwise consisted of Waldock, R. G. Howarth, H. J. Oliver, Wesley Milgate and Thelma Herring. All the Language work rested with A. G. Mitchell, until the appointment of G. H. Russell in 1950. There were two Teaching Fellowships in the Department, in Literature and Language respectively. I was appointed to one of them in 1950, while the other was occupied by Louise McLoskey: she was succeeded in 1951 by B. K. Martin.

The Department underwent a considerable expansion in the years immediately following, with the implementation of the Murray Report. Wesley Milgate succeeded Waldock in the Challis Chair in 1951, and there was a progression of new appointees:

Gustav Cross, Derick Marsh, Ron Dunlop, Bill Maidment, Geoffrey Little, Tony French, Peter Davison, Andrew Riemer, Jim Tulip, Peter Edwards, John Burrows. The Language side was augmented by Leslie Rogers, Arthur Delbridge, John Gunn and John Bernard. It was possible now to separate English II and English III, and Milgate varied the course pattern by introducing the seventeenth century into English II, in what was then a challenging but highly successful move. He retained the 'inclusive' model, which demonstrated its flexibility by accommodating so many changes from year to year within itself. Milgate introduced 'criticism' courses appropriate to each period of study, and generally confirmed the character of Sydney as a strongly pluralist Department.

The 1950s and 1960s will always be associated in my mind with lecturing to the assembled English I or English II in the Wallace Theatre, in what was sometimes an exercise in crowd control. The lectures were repeated in the evening, at first to classes largely made up of primary teachers completing a degree part-time, and later to classes predominantly of day students with a timetable clash. The Wallace lectures were recalled some time later by a student of the time, Susan Ryan, who remarked on them as an example of how effective an educational instrument the lecture to a large class may be. As she was by this time the Minister for Education in the Hawke government, the economy of it might also have seemed appealing.

The renovation of postgraduate studies also belongs so this time. The Honours MA was a well established and highly regarded degree. The Pass MA was in a different situation. Besides submitting a thesis, candidates had to sit for two papers, one of a general character, and the other on three authors selected for special study. No preparation was offered for these. With Milgate's encouragement I introduced the first classes for MA candidates (the *Arts Handbook* records this in 1961, but it would have started earlier), and Faculty approval was later given for an Honours MA by coursework as well. These structures have since become commonplace.

The major diversification for which Milgate was responsible

was in provision for the study of Australian literature. From the 1940s the Commonwealth Literary Fund had sponsored an annual set of ten lectures in Australian literature at each Australian university (there were then six of them), for a fee of £100. In 1945 the Australian literature lectures were given by Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw in English I. In other years I recall them being given by F. W. Robinson, H. M. Green, Vance Palmer and F. T. Macartney. Australian writers were often chosen as research topics for English IV and MA theses, but no systematic study was provided. This was secured in 1960 with the Senate's approval of a foundation Chair of Australian Literature. Milgate had the carriage of this proposal in the University. Those working in the Australian field now will find it hard to appreciate the time when the credentials of the subject had to be painfully established: Milgate's role deserves more recognition. Australian literature was envisaged as organically part of the English Department, and the terms of appointment of the first incumbent (and of the second) specified that besides being responsible for the field of the chair, 'he will be expected to participate in the teaching and supervision of research in other fields of English Literature in consultation with the Challis Professor'. (Was there a lingering doubt that a Professor of Australian Literature might not have enough to occupy him full-time?) This provision was to be important in the events that followed.

Milgate retired in 1961, and Mitchell became Deputy Vice-Chancellor. George Russell succeeded Mitchell in the McCaughey Chair in 1962, and I was appointed to the Chair of Australian Literature. In 1963–4 came what one of its adherents has called 'the Goldberg invasion'.¹ This is a military metaphor. The term 'crusade' might be more apt, as it was an attempt at an antipodean realisation of the ideas of F. R. Leavis. These had not yet been fully elaborated by Leavis himself, in such terms as 'the Third Realm'. Leavis was at this time identified rather with his 'reevaluation' of English writers (partly in a counter-movement to the Cambridge English syllabus, and to the influence of such works as Lord David Cecil's *Early Victorian Novelists*), with the cult of D. H. Lawrence, and with the reconstitution of the critic

as a social conscience. The pluralism of the Sydney Department, where Leavis was regarded as one critic among a number, was suddenly subjected to a new set of imperatives. One student describes the effect:

I have very clear memories of what it was like, as a young female student at Sydney University, to fail to toe the party line and not read as Leavis did.

I was in my third year in English, planning to study literature honors in my fourth year, when the late Professor S. L. Goldberg was appointed Professor of English. What I remember still is the occasion on which he told us that we should not pursue an English honors course in literature under him. We had been trained wrongly, he said; we could not possibly succeed in the honors year.²

Members of staff also began to ponder their own futures. Anyone walking into the Department which Milgate had built up—five of the Literature staff of that time would advance to chairs in the subject, and six more became Associate Professors—might think that all his birthdays had come at once. My estimate of how many of them met the new criteria has varied between one and a half and two. The effect on the Language staff was less direct, except in the perception that they represented a waste of resources. Any account of this period is unavoidably partisan, and I do not pursue it, except to observe that the ideological drive was accompanied by much mismanagement at the personal level. The resolution which the Faculty eventually arrived at, to approve courses alternative to those offered by Goldberg, under my supervision, left him entirely free to profess the subject as he chose. As he had from the outset defined the issue as one of ‘sovereignty’, the loss of that led to his abandonment of the project.

The imprint left by ‘the troubles’ is difficult to ascertain.³ The Department was made conscious of its pluralism—*Balcony The Sydney Review* had been launched in 1965 to assert it—instead of assuming that all English Departments were conducted in its open-minded way. The Leavisite programme would have been among the first ‘feel good’ courses in the University, in that students could gain immediate credentials by adopting the approved stance and the approved vocabulary, and become part

of an élite. This ran counter to the philosophy that nothing can be taken for granted, and that students are always to be encouraged to think again—in a process which in turn may have allowed Andersonians to feel good. The technique of ‘close reading’, of attending to ‘the words on the page’, had been a key Leavisite method for helping to distinguish writers from non-writers. (Students were trained to be making value-judgements all the time, if they wanted to get the marks.) While the element of indoctrination was discarded, the emphasis on ‘close reading’ was retained as a means of ascertaining exactly what was being said, at the same time as the ‘inclusive’ model was necessarily contracted.

In 1966 I was invited to the Challis Chair of English Literature, perhaps in some expectation that I would engage in rebuilding. My colleagues were now Leslie Rogers in the McCaughey Chair, and Leonie Kramer in the Chair of Australian Literature. The field of the McCaughey Chair was English Language, and Early English Literature (to 1500). The field of the Challis Chair was the five centuries of English literature since 1500, including American literature. How to discharge this responsibility? The problem was that even after the Wyndham changes, most students entering the University were comfortable in only the last hundred years of this period, or perhaps only the last fifty years. Yet so many of the more rewarding literary works lay on the other side of the barrier, in the four centuries preceding.

While some trust could be placed in English I as a base year, this was necessarily still a preparatory course. The challenge came in the senior years. The structure eventually devised to meet it consisted of study in terms of core and options, in a planned sequence. The core secured the texts judged necessary to the education of an undergraduate majoring in English literature; the options extended the core or provided diversions from it. The student had one third of the course prescribed, and two thirds open to choice. A system of third year honours options was developed, providing units of advanced study in areas of particular staff interest, and these often led to publication by staff and to topics of research, in English IV and later, for students.

The 'texts judged necessary for the education of a student majoring in English literature' varied from year to year, according to the collective Departmental judgement. I have never thought in terms of a 'canon' of writers, to be pursued as some kind of holy grail, as a canon always fluctuates, as one of a number of cultural formations. It can sometimes be determined by what is in print, and at what price. The 'Shakespeare' we study in the 1990s is in any case a different construct from the Shakespeare of the 1960s (without ceasing to be Shakespeare). In some years I devised postgraduate courses as 'alternative traditions' to whatever was currently in favour, with such texts as *Shirley*, *North and South*, *Esther Waters* and *The Story of an African Farm*, most of which have since been awarded a guernsey (or a twinset). The 'core' authors were typically the more demanding ones, requiring (and rewarding) special treatment. When in a review of course structure in 1992, students responded to a questionnaire on the core and option format, 82% declared themselves in favour of it. (Their opinion was not heeded.)

The *Arts Handbook* for 1988 provides a snapshot of the Department as it had evolved. The date is chosen at random: a net cast a year or two earlier might have drawn in Terry Sturm, Adrian Colman, Ron Dunlop, Peter Shrubbs and David Malouf, and a year or two later David Kelly, Deirdre Coleman and Kate Lilley. (The 1988 staff list included thirteen tutorships, all of which subsequently disappeared.) An approximate division of staff according to their fields of interest would show Renaissance studies represented by Michael Wilding, Andrew Riemer, Tony Miller, Jim Tulip, Axel Kruse and John Roche. The eighteenth century was represented by Chris Bentley, Bob Williams, Giulia Giuffr  and David Brooks, and the Romantic period by Geoffrey Little, Will Christie and Judy Barbour. There was a strong specialisation in the nineteenth century, with Margaret Harris, Jenny Gribble, Rob Jackson, Simon Petch, Catherine Runcie, Michael Orange and Penny Gay. All these were also at home in the twentieth century, with Don Anderson, Bruce Gardiner, Pam Law and Barry Spurr. As most members of staff had a secondary field of interest as well, Brian Kiernan and Adrian Mitchell could

move from Australian literature to American literature and eighteenth-century studies, Geoffrey Little could offer a course in modern poetry or the modern novel, Jim Tulip could teach in American literature or join Barry Spurr in a course in religious poetry, Michael Orange and Rob Jackson lectured on Shakespeare, Penny Gay and Axel Kruse developed courses in theatre studies. It would be difficult to assign a particular field to Bill Maidment—unless it should be critical theory—as he supervised PhDs over the whole spectrum of the Department’s activities.

There was therefore no monolith for the theory wars or the gender wars to assault. A Department which already had options on ‘The Place of Women’ and ‘The Female Wits’ had no difficulty in accommodating Afro-American Women’s Writing and ‘Sapphos in Poetry’; courses such as Biography and Autobiography and Modes of the Gothic showed areas considered apart from the mainstream to be already represented. The cultural studies approach had been anticipated in units on The Pre-Raphaelite Circle and The Bloomsbury Group, if not in the kind of period study undertaken in English IV. Critical theory had been a Departmental preoccupation from the time of Waldock and Milgate, so that the torch was readily passed from Northrop Frye to Bakhtin and Barthes. Courses in literature and film, and literature and the law, made an appearance.

Yet by the 1990s, in Sydney and elsewhere, the study of English had undergone a paradigm shift. The term ‘paradigm shift’ can be applied to the unobtrusive displacement of one set of preoccupations by another, for no particular reason that can be discerned. The seeming irrationality of the process—as with the move from terms to semesters, or the acceptance of the principle of unfunded salary increases—may help to account for its inevitability. This shift had taken place not only in the configuration of the subject, but in the academic community itself. Many academics now shrank from association with any element of compulsion in the syllabus. The requirements of sequence or pre-requisite could be seen as unduly restrictive. The notion of ‘core’ and ‘options’ could encounter opposition, on the ground that the designation of a ‘core’ privileges whatever is placed

within it and marginalises what is not. The issue of what might constitute the education of the undergraduate receded, perhaps from the need to guard one's own turf. Does it matter that a student may read no Shakespeare after English I, or may omit any further study of poetry?

At the end of 1996 an issue of the *Campus Review Weekly* was devoted to advising intending students where they might enrol in the coming year. The contributor of the article on Departments of English remarked that it was now considered of little moment whether one studied *King Lear* or *King Kong*. This could be read as a tribute to the emancipation of the subject, or as a signal that it had lost its way. I would prefer to see a structure which allowed students to study both *King Lear* and *King Kong*. But structure is needed. Simply to provide a smorgasbord of courses, and to wait for the students to tell us what to teach, is to invite the fate of the books printed on acid paper. I would hold to the premises of my after-lunch response to the vice-chancellor, reformulating them to apply to the changing circumstances.

In a post-structuralist, postmodernist and deconstructionist world, to see literature as a record of human experience is to be accused of investing in some transcendental concept of the human, and also in a theory of the self as able to be embodied in some form of individual utterance. For all such expressions, we are now told, must be shaped by class, gender and historical circumstance, and the language in which they are cast is itself a pre-existing system, encoding values and assumptions which the user of it cannot escape. Although we seem to have gathered enough knowledge of the external world to travel to the moon and back, theoretically we are surrounded by interpretation.

This raises again the issue of the relationship of literature to the real world, which goes back to Plato and Aristotle. The older terminology of mimesis, imitation and representation is unhelpful, except in so far as a study of it shows that no theorist has ever claimed an exact equivalence of literature and life. A more useful term, proposed from those currently on offer by my colleague David Brooks, would be 'figuration'. Literature in its various modes offers not transcripts of reality but figurations of it, in

which the 'life forms' encountered in *Star Trek* (which have no actual existence) may still deal in some way with human problems. Roland Barthes, in his Inaugural Lecture of 1977, referred to the effort of literature to represent the real, although the real is not representable, explaining that 'a pluri-dimensional order (the real) cannot be made to coincide with a unidimensional order (language)'. But he went on to say that 'it is precisely this topological impossibility that literature rejects and to which it never submits', and that the history of literature can be seen as a series of 'verbal *expedients* men have used to reduce, tame, deny ... the fundamental inadequation of language and the real'. From the 'incessant commotion' of this refusal to give up, literature is born.⁴ If there were not some connection between books and actual experience, literature would long ago have disappeared. The connections between the two need to be defined more exactly.

There is no difficulty in acknowledging that no interpretation of a text can fail to be ideological. There is even an ideological difference between those who speak of 'perceiving' or 'grasping' the meaning of a text and those who speak of 'constructing' its meaning. To seek meaning at all is partly to construct it, but the difference in attitude and intention is still significant. My attitude is that the corpus of writing we call literature is a figuration of experience that in its range and depth far exceeds my own, and my effort is to gain access to it. The appropriate attitude is one of humility. To proceed otherwise is to risk reading text after text and encountering only oneself. Texts treated in such a way must remain in large measure unread.

This is not to uphold some 'final' reading as the goal of interpretation. It is wearisome to be belaboured with arguments that a literary text has no fixed meaning, when it has been axiomatic since the Romantics that what a poem suggests is more important than what it says, and when Yeats told an inquirer 'If an author interprets a poem of his own he limits its suggestibility'.⁵ But Umberto Eco has lately remarked 'I accept the statement that a text can have many senses. I refuse the statement that a text can have every sense'.⁶ (Otherwise a text would be reduced to the status of play-dough.) How are some interpretations to be ruled

out? One test Eco proposes is to decide which aspects 'can become relevant or pertinent for a coherent interpretation of it, and which remain marginal and unable to support a coherent reading'.⁷ The terms 'relevant', 'pertinent', 'coherent' and 'marginal' point to some structure (even to some content?) inherent in the text that exerts some effect on its meaning. It is not helpful to regard a text as a 'site' where meanings may frolic. A text is not like a glacier or chasm, a site produced by geological change: it is an artefact, in a deliberately crafted—often artistic—form.

This emphasis distinguishes literary criticism from cultural studies. The study of a text as a cultural formation has always been part of its study (I made a venture in this direction in *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn*), and cultural studies have usefully extended the notion of a 'text' to include a Madonna video or the layout of a supermarket. This approach is especially suited to 'collective' phenomena, inviting interdisciplinary study: it would be fascinating to analyse the 'text' of the funeral of the Princess of Wales. Its limitations, especially with literary works, is that texts tend to be studied for what they illustrate or represent rather than for what they are. What they illustrate or represent is what they are, varying with the frames of reference we bring to them. Cultural studies is reluctant to allow any 'inherent' features in a text:

One of the fundamental theses of work in cultural studies [is] that no object, no text, no cultural practice has an intrinsic or necessary meaning or value or function; and that meaning, value, and function are always the effect of specific (and changing, changeable) social relations and mechanisms of signification.⁸

(It will be noted that this enunciates an absolute principle in the process of disallowing absolute principles.) While the meaning, value and function of the layout of a supermarket may be interpreted in terms of 'social relations' and other 'mechanisms of signification', the layout is still the result of human agency, in whatever diluted form. The special concern of the literary critic is with texts which are not so diluted, in which individuality is at a premium, or in which the individual may give heightened

expression to the collective. The literary-critical approach is to bring out the singularity, even the uniqueness, of such a text, rather than to identify the pattern it may illustrate. This effort is in part delusory, but no more delusory than regarding the text as an event in social relations or language (or whatever) and nothing else. The 'method of signification' which the literary critic applies is in any case as valid as any other, according to the cultural studies ethos.

The liberating possibilities offered by modern critical theories are sometimes diminished by the exclusivity they claim, and by the depressing earnestness with which they are elaborated. Reports of the death of the author have been greatly exaggerated. It is not disrespectful to see Barthes and Derrida in the intellectual tradition of French dandyism, defined in the nineteenth century by Barbey d'Aureville, and represented in England by Oscar Wilde. The role of the dandy was to be elegant and provocative. When Oscar Wilde remarked that 'the only real people are the people who never existed', he meant to be outrageous, and perceptive. But he would not have expected anyone to develop his argument into a system. 'There is no doubt', Terry Eagleton has lately observed, 'that Jacques Derrida has experiences, believes himself to be an individual, and thinks his apartment is real; it's just that he has raised some awkward questions about the meanings of such beliefs.'⁹ When in seeking to disengage the text from any fixed significance, Barthes used the metaphor of the death of the author, it was as if to say 'Let us assume that the text rose up through the floor-boards, or was washed up on the shore in a bottle, and see where that approach may lead'. He was not devising a regimen for PhD students.

The stimulus of these intellectual forays has been dampened as they have crossed the Channel or the Atlantic. This is particularly the case when one of the newly liberated texts is fitted into some 'discourse' or other, and fettered with another set of assumptions. A discourse, as translated out of linguistics, is not something which occurs in nature: it is a human construction, assembled from the perceived characteristics of romanticism, colonialism, orientalism, or whatever the field may be. Concerned

to detect governing ideologies, its construction is inevitably informed by ideology itself. It is an unacknowledged tenet of the discourse of colonialism, for example, that wherever there is an inequality of power, virtue must lie with those who have less, and evil with those who have more. Every post-colonial reading of *The Tempest* which I have encountered is shaped by this assumption, which the text rebuts: the subtlety of Shakespeare's play is reduced to an untenable formula.¹⁰

Reflecting on the passing of 'the torch' of theory from one exponent to another, I wonder if 'torch' is the right word? Rather than 'sceptre' perhaps, or 'chalice'? The names Anderson, Leavis, Frye, Barthes, Bakhtin each conjure up an authority figure in the academy, and each is associated in my mind with disciples and acolytes. The Andersonians at least were endlessly questioning: I continued to encounter them in later years, on this committee or that, returning the discussion to first principles and seeking to define its terms, with the result that everyone else made the decisions. Leavis offered a dissenting mode in the formula 'Yes, but—', which meant that given the assured status of *Sons and Lovers*, you could fearlessly debate particularities of the behaviour of Miriam or the role of Clara Dawes. I next became accustomed to reading student essays in which pronouncements by Barthes or Foucault would be cited, and then applied to some text, in the manner of a parson expounding a passage from holy writ. I also became alert to the subtext of an examiner's report on a PhD thesis, or the thrust of a question at a promotion committee, which was the requirement that the candidate subscribe to a theoretical standpoint, or risk being judged deficient. The term 'commitment', in reference to some set of values, became part of academic vocabulary, when earlier it would have been the attribute of a seminarian: in a university the only 'commitment' is to intellectual independence. It is fortunate that the various kinds of apparatus brought to the study of literature always prove less durable than literature itself, and are discarded in due course, like transformational grammar. The sceptical analysis which the scholarly method demands should be a protection against them even while they flourish. Otherwise the pursuit of what is

plausible overtakes the pursuit of 'what is the case', while the text in the database may send a message to the computer screen 'access denied'.

Providing access to literature is the responsibility which recurs, whether in distinguishing what is evidence from what is not, overcoming the barriers set by the unfamiliar, or balancing choice and prescription in course design. It restores the pedagogical emphasis. A text like *Paradise Lost* is immediately accessible to few students now entering a Department of English: its language is alien, its narrative method unfamiliar, its concerns are at first remote. To prescribe it for study is to extend the reading frontier: those who then decide to advance no further will be making an informed decision. I do not know how many undergraduates acted on my advice that the best approach to *Paradise Lost* was to read it through at a sitting, fortified at intervals with coffee, tea or Bonox. But in the years in which I lectured on it, I was gratified that they voluntarily organised a serial reading of the whole text. I now rather regret not having taken part. Perhaps it was my diffidence at always being offered the role of God.

Notes

- 1 Terry Collits, *The Australian*, 12 December 1996, p.10.
- 2 Terry Threadgold, *The Age*, 10 October 1995, p.18.
- 3 There was an accretion to the mythology of the time in Leigh Dale, *The English Men: Professing Literature in Australian Universities*, 1997, which presumes an animus existing between Waldock and Leavis in the 1940s. When *Paradise Lost and its Critics* received an adverse but uncomprehending review in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 1 November 1947, letters of protest were received from two such diverse Miltonists as F. R. Leavis and C. S. Lewis. The claim in *The English Men* (pp.124–5), that Waldock was so affronted at being defended by Leavis that he promptly attacked the revaluation of *Hard Times* in the next issue of *Southerly* (No. 1, 1948), is absurd. Waldock mentioned to me that he had received a personal letter from Leavis on the matter, and this was part of the correspondence acknowledged by Leavis in *The Common Pursuit*, 1952 (repr. 1963), p.32n. This would have been the correspondence of scholars and gentlemen. Waldock's rejoinder (as he would have called it) to Leavis on *Hard Times* is in the same mode as his rejoinder to Edmund Wilson on *The Turn of the Screw* (*Southerly*,

No. 2, 1940). (*Southerly* was almost the only forum in Australia at the time for such a publication.) Waldock relished critical debate, and often sent notes to his colleagues (whose rooms were in the same corridor) responding to some point made in a seminar the day or the week before. The troubles of the 1960s cannot be taken back twenty years earlier.

- 4 *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag, 1983, p.465.
- 5 *Letters*, ed. Allan Wade, 1980, p.840.
- 6 Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, 1992, p.141.
- 7 Eco, p.146.
- 8 John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, 1995, p.144.
- 9 'The Decay of Lying' in *Intentions*, 1891 (repr. 1913), p.12. The remark belongs to 'Vivian', in a conversation with 'Cyril'.
- 10 *Guardian Weekly*, 8 November 1992.
- 11 As I argue in 'The *Tempest* and the Discourse of Colonialism', *Sydney Studies in English* 21 (1995-6): 42-55.