THE KEN WATSON ANNUAL ADDRESS

"The Significance of English in Contemporary Education: It's Time to Reclaim the Territory".

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A Personal Historical Context

I was delighted when Mark Howie and my long standing friend and colleague, Wayne Sawyer, invited me to deliver the second inaugural Ken Watson Oration today. Mark is always prepared to take up the cudgels to defend quality English curriculum and teaching against misinformed critics. Wayne has for so many years exercised leadership in research and scholarship in our field, within State, National and International contexts. It is also great to be in the company of another friend and colleague, Sue Gazis, who in recent years especially has made such a significant contribution to the English teaching profession, particularly through ETA and AATE. For nearly 40 years I have been a member of the NSW ETA, having been a Vice-President in the mid 1970s to the early 1980s: I am so very proud to be a Life Member of the ETA. Over the years I have addressed many ETA, AATE and IFTE Conferences. It is deeply satisfying to see so many English teachers once again prepared to develop their professional knowledge by attending the Annual ETA Conference.

I cannot tell you what a privilege it is for me to be invited to honour Ken Watson in this way. It is also daunting. Because Ken's own inaugural Oration last year, which I did not hear but did read, was just about the best thing I have read in our field of English teaching and scholarship for years. I have known, and have had deep respect and great affection for, Ken over a period of about 40 years. I learned so much from Ken. It is impossible to summarise his achievement in, and contribution to, our English teaching profession. His knowledge of literature, above all of children's and adolescent literature, has been phenomenal. He and Maurice Saxby were pioneers in championing the value and credibility of such literature and its teaching within classrooms – not only within the NSW and Australian contexts, but also internationally.

Ken had no time for populist humbug drearily alleging ever declining standards in English teaching and learning. But he also had no time for boring, dreary, unimaginative, drone-like teaching of English being imposed upon students. He agreed with his brilliant colleague and friend, Graham Little, who wrote at the very outset of the 1972 English Syllabus for Years 7-10, that “This syllabus assumes that English for twelve to sixteen year olds should be an active pursuit: a matter of pupils developing competence by engaging in an abundance of purposeful language-activities, enjoyable because they are appropriate to needs, interests and capacities.” (1972 Syllabus in English: Year 7 – 10 p2) Ken was passionate about disseminating his own knowledge of and love for English teaching to his NSW, Australian, and International colleagues. He played a key role in bringing to NSW and Australia the insights following the Dartmouth Conference of 1966 in New Hampshire, USA – a pivotal event in the history of our profession.

He has maintained this passion and energy right up to the present day. Today, I would like to pick up some of those themes and passions in this the second Annual Ken Watson Address.

Let me start on a personal note, and indulge in some historical reflection. I commenced full-time teaching in 1966 as a young idealistic Marist Brother teacher of English after the quite remarkable experience of undertaking an English Honours degree at the height of the brief but tumultuous rein of the late Professor Sam Goldberg - where I used to sit in seminars and feel somewhat overawed by the phenomenal intelligence of a number of those nearly twenty young students in our final Honours Year.
Soon afterwards, as the youngest Brother on the Staff of St. Joseph’s College Hunters Hill, I was inspired by rubbing intellectual and professional shoulders at monthly ETA Executive meetings with absolutely marvellous scholar-teachers of English: such as Ken Watson himself, Phyllis Kittson, Jack Britton, Graham Little, Arthur Ashworth, Marj Aldred, Ernie Tucker, Bob Walshe, Robyn Magennis, Jack Thomson, Gilbert Case, Graham Boardman, Dennis Robinson, and my then twin ‘youngster’ on the Executive, Roslyn Arnold. As the youngest member of the elected Executive of the NSW English Teachers’ Association back in 1966, I sat in awe of these and the other great leaders in our English teaching profession who gathered for our regular meetings in the home of Joyce and John Moore in Chandos Street Ashfield. Those monthly meetings constituted for me the finest professional development course in English that I could have ever experienced.

And through these wonderful, passionate, creative, and intelligent teachers and the ETA and the Australian Association of Teachers of English I met, became friends with, and learned so much from Australian icons in secondary English such as Garth Boomer, Warwick Goodenough, Margaret Gill, Bill Corcoran, David Mallick, Jill Maling, Ian Reid, Brian Cambourne, David Homer, Marion Meiers, John Hay, and Bruce Bennett. And, through camaraderie and collegiality with such great men and women of English in this country, I came to know, be friends with, and learn so much from such international icons in our field as John Dixon, Leslie Stratta, James Moffet, Margaret Meek Spence, Robert Protherough, Judith Atkinson, Douglas and Dorothy Barnes, Jimmy Britton, Joe Belanger, Syd Butler, Paddy Creber, Harold and Connie Rosen, Tony Adams, Geoff Fox, Andrew Wilkinson, Donald Graves. And two who became very close personal friends of mine: the distinguished and internationally renowned researcher, scholar and teacher within and across the vast field of English Language and its role in Education, Professor Ian Pringle; and the late Mike Hayhoe who was one of the finest English teachers, researchers, scholars and human beings I have ever known. And I could go on and on. Ken Watson was highly instrumental in our getting to know these remarkable people and their writings.

But as I survey the contemporary scene, it seems to me as if that enormous corpus of knowledge and wisdom might never have existed. That the phenomenal renaissance in English research, scholarship, teaching and learning - sparked, in many ways by the remarkable ‘Dartmouth Conference’ held in Dartmouth College in the American State of New Hampshire in 1966, and the subsequent brilliant and prolific research, scholarship, publications, and charismatic influences of these giants of the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s which inspired a generation of teachers of English in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and to a lesser extent in the USA - has been vapourised. Apart from some notable exceptions, it’s as if much of our corporate English language, literature and literacy research and scholarship memory has been lost. To somebody like myself who commenced teaching English in the 1960s, it is inconceivable that four decades later we should still be fighting the battles confronting ignorance, prejudice and naivety that those of us back in the 1960s, and then into the 1970s and the 1980s thought had been won.

Let me take one example from history. It amazes me that the sophisticated argument, the conclusions and the implications of the seminal 600 page 1975 Bullock Report on the teaching of literacy in England, entitled A Language for Life: Report of the Committee of Inquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science under the Chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock F. B. A., Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1975) commissioned in 1972 by that well known softy feely left wing radical Margaret Thatcher (I jest of course!) when she was Secretary of State for Education in the Conservative Party UK Government, could seem to virtually disappear from the corporate memory of the authors of contemporary reports such as the National Inquiry on Reading. It just beggars belief.

The terms of reference given by Mrs Thatcher 34 years ago will sound very familiar to all of you here today!

To consider in relation to schools:

a) all aspects of teaching the use of English, including reading, writing and speech;
b) how present practice might be improved and the role of that initial and in-service training might play;
c) to what extent arrangements for monitoring the general level or attainment in these skills can be introduced or improved;

and to make recommendations. (p. xxxi)

Let’s listen to what the Bullock Report had to say three and a half decades ago.

......... we have been opposed from the outset to the idea that reading and the use of English can be improved in any simple way. The solution does not lie in a few neat administrative strokes, nor in the adoption of one set of teaching methods to the exclusion of another. Improvement will come about only from a thorough understanding of the many complexities, and from action on a broad front. (p. 513).
I cannot pass up the opportunity to read out to you the opening three paragraphs of Chapter 6 “The Reading Process”.

6.1 Controversy about the teaching of reading has a long history, and throughout it there has been the assumption, or at least the hope, that a panacea can be found that will make everything right. This was reflected in much of the correspondence we received. There was an expectation that we would identify the one method in whose adoption lay the complete solution. Let us, therefore, express our conclusion at the outset in plain terms: there is no one method, medium, approach, device, or philosophy that holds the key to the process of learning to read. We believe that the knowledge does exist to improve the teaching of reading, but that it does not lie in the triumphant discovery, or re-discovery of a particular formula. Simple endorsement of one or another nostrum are no service to the teaching of reading. A glance at the past reveals the truth of this.

The main arguments about how reading should be taught have been repeated over and over again as the decades pass, but the problems remain.

6.2 A study of the way these arguments have been advanced, contested, revamped, discredited and rediscovered is a useful corrective to the idea that any one of them has a monopoly of truth. In the last four centuries there has been a succession of them, making claims for word methods, sentence methods, experience methods, phonic methods, and so on. It is interesting to note that they were usually introduced with the description ‘new’ or ‘natural’ or ‘logical’. Today’s discovery was often yesterday’s discard, unrecognised as such, or rehabilitated by some new presentation. This does not mean that there has been no advance, that nothing really new has emerged across the years. There have, of course, been many innovations of one kind or another, notably in materials. But the major arguments are substantially the same as they have always been, and to endorse one at the expense of the others is no more helpful today than it has proved in the past.

6.3 ……In our view a large part of the controversy arises from the expression of unnecessarily extreme opinions, often more extreme than the real beliefs or practices of those who advance them. In addition, the contentious statements are often based on inadequate information. For example, we receive many letters whose writers seem convinced that the majority of infant teachers had abandoned the teaching of phonics; they argued that a return to the practice would raise standards dramatically. But the results of our survey showed that their supposition was far from correct. ………

We believe that an improvement in the teaching of reading will not come from the acceptance of simplistic statements about phonics or any other single aspect of reading, but from a comprehensive study of all the factors at work and the influence that can be exerted upon them. (p 78)

What wisdom. What commonsense. What splendid application of research and scholarship. What a pity that these fields have been ploughed and re-ploughed and re-ploughed over and over again in the three decades since!!!

In his brilliantly incisive book Voltaire’s Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West, John Ralston Saul asserts that our “whole age has turned and continues to turn upon language” (Saul, 1993: 9).

Saul identifies the power of language that constitutes the most potent force against the influence and strength of money, armies, bureaucratism, authoritarianism, and ideology – and for exposing and penetrating the veneer of apparently respectable rationality beneath which have festered so many of the absurdities, obscenities, slaughterings, and socio-economic orthodoxies of the latter half of this millennium.

Language – not money or force – provides legitimacy. So long as military, political, religious or financial systems do not control language, the public’s imagination can move about freely with its own ideas. Uncontrolled words are consistently more dangerous to established authority than armed forces. Even coercive laws of censorship are rarely effective for more than short periods in limited areas.

(Saul, 1993: 8).

It is the imaginative, discursive, informed, and critical use of and sensitivity to language that is at the very heart of any English teaching worthy of the name.
It is through language that we develop our thoughts, shape our experience, explore our customs, structure our community, construct our laws, articulate our values and give expression to our hopes and ideals.

(Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990: ix)

A few years ago, an old English teaching mate of mine said to me “Brocky the focus on the teaching of literacy in our schools is all very well and good. But the teaching of literacy may be harming the teaching of English in our schools.” I have become increasingly worried in recent years about the extent to which the literacy and the English curriculum agendas have been seen to be synonymous. They are not. The love, study, experiencing of the English curriculum in all its richness across all its diversity of texts – including poetry, novels, short stories, biographies and autobiographies, drama, film, students’ own creative writing and so on - and across all of the modes of reading, writing, listening, speaking - viewing and representing, is different from what is commonly considered to be functional literacy. While it is important to acknowledge the overlapping territories of English as a KLA and literacy across the curriculum, it is as equally important to acknowledge the differences.

Perhaps we today don’t have to go quite as far as the remarkable George Sampson who was a member of the 1921 UK Newbolt Committee and author of the seminal work English for the English in the same year - when he declared that: “English is the one school subject in which we have to fight, not for a clear gain of knowledge, but for a precarious margin of advantage over the powerful forces of evil” (Sampson, 1921: 14). But we know where George was coming from and we know the territory well!

But let’s be honest. The teaching of English has not always been crash hot. Nor can this be consigned merely to the past tense. Apart from sheer ignorance by some teachers about English scholarship and pedagogy, allied to the dreadful effects wrought upon students when teachers with no qualifications in English have been told to teach the subject – one of the most damaging effects upon the teaching of English in all its richness and diversity has been the consequences of the uncritical imposition of the Genre / Systemic Linguistics / Functional Grammar regime upon school education: especially in primary schools.

A child’s literacy education must not be screwed up by any rigid imposition of the grid references from any particular ideological map. As in all our decisions to help our students learn and develop, we need a judicious blending of enlightened commitment, wise enthusiasm, healthy scepticism, assured conservation of what is of ongoing value and validity from the past, firm resistance to snake-oil, quick-fix miracle remedies touted in the present, and firm rejection of wildly exaggerated prognostications about the future. And this is exactly what good teachers of English do day after day, often with little public recognition.

I have always tried to take a balanced view on matters of Education. It is so easy for people to be seduced by the black or white extremism resulting from what the Scandinavian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard called “the either/or fallacy”. Indeed, this fallacy sits alongside those other fallacies that keep recurring in our profession, such as: relying upon opinion and prejudice rather than both qualitative and quantitative evidence-based research and scholarship; wheel reinvention and the re-badging of old wisdoms in new glossy glitzy packages masquerading as some form of ‘ground breaking’, ‘international best practice’ ‘paradigm shifting’ innovation; and the fawning adoration of gurus by their uncritical acolytes. Incidentally, Michael Fullan once observed that a principal reason why some people get seduced by some gurus is that they are unable to spell “charlatan”.

As English teachers, researchers, scholars, policy makers and so on we have to be on our critical alert to identify and contest theory when it becomes dogma; admiration when it becomes worship; bridges that become barricades; concepts that become articles of faith; followers who become acolytes; approaches which become religions; and dissent which becomes heresy - irrespective of the various intellectual or professional cultures from which they may come.

We need to identify and resist those who a British colleague of mine describes as ‘intellectual terrorists”; those who fiercely adhere to their own narrow remedies and who refuse to consider the claims of other theoretical and pedagogical approaches - irrespective of the variegated nature of the learners and the diversity of learning contexts.
Another recurring irritant is a fixation on form at the expense of substance, and functionalism at the expense of the imagination. I call this the "golden calf" syndrome. In the Book of Exodus, the people got fed up with waiting for Moses to return from his meeting with Yahweh. They wanted to worship something tangible, countable, simple - and of their own making. So they melted their own gold possessions and crafted the golden calf to fall down before and worship. To my frustration, how often have I seen this happen - the rejection of the numinous, the subtle, the complex, the multifaceted dimensions of experience, the spiritual, the products of hard, slogging work of drafting and redrafting: in favour of the quick fix, the lowest common denominator, the slick, the slack, the tick-a-box, the formulaic. Splendid teachers of English know and inhabit this territory so well.

Because of my commitment to a balanced view to things, I fear that sometimes the pendulum hanging between those two interdependent and necessary factors of teaching and learning - and its assessment and testing - might swing too much away from teaching and learning. What is necessary, is not always sufficient!

Over 20 years ago, one of my closest friends the late Mike Hayhoe, a colleague of mine when I was the Visiting Fellow in the Faculty of Education at the University of East Anglia in the UK, handed me a poem given to him by an elderly teacher in Halifax, Nova Scotia. It is called "The Lesson", based on the famous "Beatitudes" speech in the Gospels.

Then Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and gathering them around him he taught them saying

blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
blessed are the meek
blessed are they that mourn
blessed are the merciful
blessed are they who thirst for justice
blessed are all the concerned
blessed are you when persecuted
blessed are you when you suffer
be glad and rejoice for your reward is great in heaven
try to remember what I’m telling you

Then Simon Peter said - Will this count?
And Andrew said - Will we have a test on it?
And James said - When do we have to know it for?
And Phillip said - How many words?
And Bartholemew said - Will I have to stand up in front of the others?
And John said - The other disciples didn’t have to learn this
And Matthew said - How many marks do we get for it?
And Judas said - What is it worth?
And the other disciples likewise.

Then one of the Pharisees who was present asked to see Jesus’ lesson plan and inquired of Jesus his terminal objectives in the cognitive domain

And Jesus wept.

One of my hobby horses is an insistence that as educators we go well beyond what is ‘necessary’. For example, I object to the phrase, “teachers need to address the needs of students”. Not because this is not necessary, but, to defer to Aristotle, ‘it is necessary but not sufficient’. We need to address the needs, interests, capacities, talents, and values of our students.
Similarly, I don’t support expressions like “teachers need pedagogical skills to be effective teachers”. They need a lot more than this. They need deep knowledge and understanding of the intellectual substance of what they are teaching. They need to be imaginative and creative in helping their students engage with learning. They need to enjoy working with young people and to be able to empathise with them. They need to embody the very values that we as public educators profess, and other qualities as well. And, of course, they need high quality pedagogical skills.

Shakespeare superbly captures this essential truth about necessity in the great speech in King Lear, Act II Scene IV, where Lear haggles with his two wicked daughters, Goneril and Regan. Now homeless, throneless, and desperate, Lear begs that one of them might allow him to live in either of their castles with his full retinue of servants. Then a Dutch auction proceeds with each of the sisters forcing Lear to lower his expectations of the number of servants he would be allowed to bring. Eventually, Goneril asks Lear why would he now need 25 servants. Or even 15 servants.

In a magnificent speech commencing with “O reason not the need” Lear rails against the enforced lowering of human aspiration to mere necessity.

O reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is as cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady:
If only to go warm were gorgeous,
Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
Which scarcely keeps thee warm……..
(King Lear, Act 2, Scene 4, lines 263-269)

If we were to wear clothes only to keep warm, then hessian would do. If we ate merely to stay alive, then bread water and a few vegies is all that would be needed. If we need housing just to shelter us from the wind and the rain, then the most simple hovel with a roof over it is all that we would need. Our human aspirations - with all their material, spiritual, intellectual, ethical, physical and emotional domains – cannot be restricted merely to meeting the subsistent necessities of basic survival.

The trouble with being satisfied with students’ "needs" is that this can quickly become being satisfied with merely lowest common denominator expectations. Becoming satisfied with, and becoming accountable for, only basic skills. Nothing more. Excellent teachers of English, for example, practise what they preach. One of my favourite maxims comes from Chaucer’s description of the “poure persoun” - the humble and dutiful country priest whom we meet in The Canterbury Tales: “first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte”. To teach English effectively, we need to be exemplary users of the language: to read widely and critically; to write with flair, imagination, accuracy, and lucidity; to speak with clarity, verve and wit; to listen and view with acumen and discrimination.

As teachers of English we must exorcise ourselves from the curse of privileging form over meaning; of preferring shape over substance; of confusing the sum of atomised parts with the organic wholeness of experience.

Excellent English teachers know that in engaging with and responding to the potentially exciting range of types of texts – imaginative, everyday, poetic functional, discursive, classical, rhetorical, visual, multi-media, autobiographical, and so on – they never allow themselves nor, even worse, allow their students to become, “cabin’d, cribb’d and confin’d” as Shakespeare put it in Macbeth, by formulaic straightjacketing of narrowly defined “text types”.

Splendid English teachers understand the key roles played by purpose, sense of audience, reflexivity over earlier drafting, and what used to be called ‘point of view’, when both generating and critiquing meaning expressed through language.

Exemplary teachers of English are multi-skilled and eclectic in their theoretical knowledge and practical strategies. Any skilful and experienced teacher of English knows, for example, that the decision in California some years ago to ban any approach to teaching reading other than that of the phonics method, is nonsense. Of course teachers of
English literacy should be able to teach phonemic-phonetic relationships. Of course teachers of English should be able to use whole language approaches to learning. Of course teachers of English should be able to use their knowledge of grammar – or, rather, grammars - and the multiple functions of language. Of course they should be able to use their knowledge about the psychology of the reading process. Of course teachers of English should be able to use their knowledge of reader-response and other literary theory. Of course teachers of English should be able to draw upon their knowledge of a wide range of literary, factual, and media texts.

Exemplary teachers of English apply their knowledge and strategically utilise methodologies according to how they judge them to be appropriate to the needs, interests and capacities of their students and according to the classroom contexts within which they are teaching.

Nearly a century ago the great American educator John Dewey urged teachers never to “mistake the map for the territory”. How often, for example, has the marvellous ‘territory’ of children’s and adolescent literature been stultified by formulaic teaching practices bent merely on ‘mapping’ bits and compiling lists.

How many kids, for example, have been turned off literature by appalling ways in which it has been sometimes taught. With teachers hell-bent on insisting that their students feverishly quarry out metaphors, similes, personification, onomatopoeia and so on. Or dissecting the text to illustrate some features of a bland checklist of characteristics based somebody’s literary or linguistic theory.

How often has the beauty or complexity or simplicity or emotion of literature been smashed and minced by ridiculous straight-jacketing by some teachers determined to reduce everything to atomised bits. How often has the brutish pursuit of little boxes of plot, character, theme and so on ruined the experience of reading of novels. Or, worse. How many novels have been slaughtered by a teacher demanding a summary of every single chapter in a 40 chapter novel. How many plays have been massacred by teachers who seem to forget that the text is there to be enacted. To be explored within a whole range of possible dramatic presentations?

The charismatic, brilliant and once a President – indeed a giant - of the ETA, Graham Little was the inspiration behind the NSW 1972 English syllabus for junior secondary schools which embodied the freshness, vigour, depth and breadth of the post-Dartmouth risorgimento of the subject English. The late Professor Sam Goldberg, Challis Professor of English at the University of Sydney and also a charismatic, brilliant but much more controversial figure, was the driving force behind the revitalised approach to the teaching and learning of literature within the Years 11 and 12 English syllabus.

Both Graham and Sam shared similar views about the central importance of engaging students with literature and seeking to elicit within students their honest, informed and personal response to the text. They both reacted against the straight-jacketing and rather stultifying application of the originally admirable if insufficient Cultural Heritage model of English, as it had become formulised in the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations by the mid 1960s.

Goldberg laid siege within his University of Sydney English Department, as well as within the broader education community, to what he saw to be the prevailing emphasis in the Leaving Certificate examinations in English upon acquiring mere knowledge about literature and literary genres. He sought to change this emphasis toward one of stressing students’ direct engagement with the text and of wrestling with the values enacted in the literature. Perhaps the most succinct articulation of the approach to literature defined over four decades ago in the inaugural HSC English syllabus was the following.

The student’s response should in the first place be honest based upon his (sic) own experience of the work and not a mere repetition of supposedly ‘acceptable’ views about it. Equally, it must be more than a mere assertion of opinion, and therefore it should be constantly justified by reference to, and analysis of, the work itself. Intelligent criticism requires close attention to what is said in the poem: students should not substitute for an account of the text itself a mere description of their own feelings (Board of Senior School Studies, 1965: 78)

Over 40 years later these goals should remain central to our aspirations as English teachers.

Throughout most of the latter half of the 20th Century – and, at certain times and within certain contexts, before then – the issues associated with the relationship between the writer, the text and the reader have occupied the focus of
English teachers, scholars, and curriculum framers. The title of perhaps the best, and in many ways the oldest, book addressing these issues *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* written in 1948 by that remarkable woman Louisa Rosenblatt captures the general issues. For Rosenblatt, the ‘reader’ is the person reading what she calls the ‘text’. For Rosenblatt the ‘poem’ is the resulting meaning that the reader acquires from the interaction between herself / himself the reader with the words on the page.

In the literary debates before and after Rosenblatt, there has been a spectrum which has had at one end the utter empiricist assertion that the meaning that the reader ought to take away from an engagement from a text is obvious, uncontested and entirely outside the realm of context. At the other end of the spectrum have been those who adopted an almost extreme position of relativism – such as was expressed by Stanley Fish in his earlier (but not later) writings and many post-structuralists: whereby the meaning of the text was completely constructed by the reader, independently of the text itself.

I remember as a young honours student preparing a thesis on the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins encountering one such literary critic who asserted categorically that the marvellous poem “The Windhover” was not a poem about a bird at all – but about a south Mediterranean shark!

The brilliant contemporary Italian intellectual and author Umberto Eco provides a powerful and telling defence for the balanced position I am attempting to articulate, in his splendid book *On Literature*, first published in Italian in 2002 and then translated into English in 2005.

Reading works of literature forces on us an exercise of fidelity and respect, albeit within a certain freedom of interpretation. There is a dangerous critical heresy, typical of our time, according to which we can do anything we like with a work of literature, reading into it whatever our most uncontrolled impulses dictate to us. This is not true. Literary works encourage freedom of interpretation, because they offer us a discourse that has many layers of reading and place before us the ambiguities of language and of real life. But in order to play this game, which allows every generation to read literary works in a different way, we must be (END OF PAGE 4) moved by a profound respect for what I have called elsewhere the intention of the text.

On one hand the world seems to be a “closed” book, allowing of only one reading. If, for example, there is a law governing planetary gravitation, then it is either the right one or the wrong one. Compared with that, the universe of a book seems to us to be an open universe. But let us try to approach a narrative work with common sense and compare the assumptions we can make about it with those we can make about the world.

As far as the world is concerned, we find that the laws of universal gravitation are those established by Newton, or that it is true that Napoleon died on Saint Helena on 5 May 1821. And yet, if we keep an open mind, we will always be prepared to revise our convictions the day science formulates the great laws of the cosmos differently, or a historian discovers unpublished documents proving that Napoleon died on a Bonapartist ship as he attempted to escape. On the other hand, as far as the world of books is concerned, propositions like “Sherlock Holmes was a bachelor”. “Little Red Riding-Hood is eaten by the wolf and then freed by the woodcutter”, or “Anna Karenina commits suicide” will remain true for eternity, and no one will ever be able to refute them. There are people who deny that Jesus was the son of God, others who doubt His historical existence, others who claim He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and still others who believe that the Messiah is yet to come, and however we might think about such questions, we treat these opinions with respect. But there is little respect for those who claim that Hamlet married Ophelia, or that Superman is not Clark Kent. (p. 5)

What I myself have learned is that the meanings of texts – or, to put it in Rosenblatt's terms, the ‘poems’ - that I have cherished ever since my days at university have changed over time as my experience of life has developed and changed. I have waged no violence upon the texts. Nor have I rejected as immature those meanings which I arrived at when reading those texts at an earlier age. It is, rather, that I the ‘reader’ have changed. The changed ‘who’ that I have become – or grown into – has meant that the ‘poem’ that has been created by my older, changed self has acquired an equivalent richness and / or complexity of meaning.
Let me give a few examples. I first read Hopkins’ ‘Terrible Sonnets’ as a 20 year old University of Sydney student and member of a Catholic Religious Order. As a Marist Brother the dominant meaning I took from the poems was driven by my awareness that Hopkins was grappling with a range of spiritual, theological and intellectual stresses. For me, and for others like me, it was Hopkins suffering the intellectual pain of what the mystic St John of the Cross described as “the dark night of the soul”.

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,  
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.  
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?  
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?  
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief  
Woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and sing –  
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked ‘No lingering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief’.  

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall  
Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed. Hold them cheap  
May who ne’er hung there. Nor does long our small  
Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! Creep,  
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all  
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

However, not long after I was diagnosed with MND and the neurologist gave me the death sentence in 1996 which meant that I would be dead sometime between 1999 and 2001, this Hopkins poem absolutely roared into my consciousness. All of a sudden the mountains of my mind and the cliffs over which I was frightfully hanging assumed an awful reality.

Instantly I acquired a far deeper and more terrifying understanding of how impossible it would be for another human being, other than my wife Jackie, to have any idea of what it was being like for me hanging there.

But, unlike Hopkins at the end of the poem, that night I found no comfort whatever in the assertion that death ends life and each day dies with sleep. Indeed, when I woke up next morning a large slab of my then dark hair had turned grey overnight! Hopkins’ poem has reverberated within me ever since. But now with a different flavour. I am still alive. I am still working. I am still loving and being loved. With the fantastic support of others and equipment, I am in a curious way more calm now than I was then back in 1996 when I still retained virtually all of my physical capacities.

I am aware that others afflicted with this hopeless, incurable, terminal disease have taken their own lives – sometimes with the assistance of others. I have never, and will never, pass judgment on those people. But when the demon of despair has slithered towards my own head I have drawn immense strength from the first stanza of another of Hopkins’ Terrible Sonnets, “Carrion Comfort”.

NOT, I’ll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;  
Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man  
In me ór, most weary, cry I can no more. I can;  
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.  
But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me  
Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan  
With darksome devouring eyes my bruisèd bones? and fan,  
O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?

Even at the very bottom of his despair Hopkins feels he can do something. Even if it is as tiny, minimalist, wafer thin as not choosing not to be. He won’t untwist the last strands of his life – bruised and battered as he feels by his ambivalent hero, his God.
But my most immediate reaction as I walked down the stairs from that neurologist’s room down to the carpark was powerfully mediated by other literary texts that had meant so much to me in my youth. But which now acquired a meaning inside me that was being transformed by my experience of trying to make meaning of what I had just been hit with.

I mind-numbingly walked alone down the stairs and thought how the hell was I going to break this cruelly premature death sentence news to my young wife and our two very young daughters - Sophia, then 5, and Amelia, then 1. As I wrestled with my thoughts and feelings, two sets of lines written by Shakespeare fought against each other for supremacy in my brain.

On the one hand there were some lines from *Macbeth* the first of the Shakespearian tragedies that I ever lectured on during my 11 years at the University of New England, where I was a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English. Knowing now that his fate had now been unalterably determined, Macbeth roars out that “Life is a tale told by an idiot / Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”.

After all here I was - a perfectly healthy, happy, fulfilled human being, in the prime of life, with hardly a care in the world before I walked into that neurologist’s office, after nearly three wonderful decades within the education profession. I had played just about every kind of sport imaginable. I had been heavily involved in playing grade and representative cricket for over 30 years – and for many of these years I had also coached young cricketers. I had played the piano since I was 7 years of age.

Had I been a smoker, I could have understood had I been diagnosed with lung cancer. Had I been a heavy drinker, it would have made sense had I been diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver. Had I been one to indulge myself in drug taking, needle sharing or promiscuous unprotected sex, I could have understood it had I been diagnosed with Hepatitis C or HIV/AIDS. But absolutely none of these things was, or is, or ever has occurred in my life.

On the other hand, reverberating through my brain was a competing set of lines – also written by Shakespeare - upon which I based much of the very last lecture I gave on the Shakespearian tragedies towards the end of my academic career at UNE in mid 1990: *King Lear*. Feeling absolutely abandoned by his daughters, with his power entirely smashed through his own actions and those of his enemies, a near delirious King Lear roars around the stage buffeted by a raging tempest, demanding to know how he can possibly cope with the devastation into which his life has now fallen. He gets this answer from his constant companion, his court jester known as ‘Fool’. The Fool says to his master, King Lear:

He that has and a little tiny wit,
With heigh-ho, the wind and the rain,
Must make content with his fortunes fit,
Though the rain it raineth every day.

*(King Lear, Act III, Scene II)*

That is to say, you just have to do your best to cope with catastrophe as best you can – endurance is all.

So, in the words of a much later poet, Robert Frost, once I had been diagnosed with MND and told I would not survive beyond the end of 2001 at best or 1999 at worst - there were for me two paths diverging in the woods. One, taken from *Macbeth*, leading towards despair and giving up; the other, taken from *King Lear*, towards striving to make content somehow fit with this disaster. I had to choose one. Which I did. Consistent with the advice of King Lear’s Fool. And, in Frost’s words, “that has made all the difference”.

Thus, for me these literary texts had acquired, and have continued to maintain, a far deeper, more personal, and more immediately relevant meaning and significance for me than they had ever had in all of the years leading up to this seminal and terrifying experience.

In the years since 1996, Jackie our girls and I have tried to live as normal a family life as possible while at the same time trying to cram in experiences that might otherwise been spread out over a long period of time. This latter goal has seen us travel quite a lot overseas: extensively in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Europe; once only to Canada and the United States. These experiences have produced significant re-writings of the ‘poems’ of literary texts that I had previously read in an earlier time during which I had always enjoyed perfect health and fitness.
For example, having spent over 15 years living the monastic life, it was quite an extraordinary experience for me many years later to sit in my wheelchair inside the beautiful ruins of Tintern Abbey in eastern Wales and to start singing Gregorian chants that I myself had chanted and which those monks over hundreds of years had also chanted. The great 19th Century poet Wordsworth had also been inspired by this place.

In my autobiography *A Passion for Life* I drew upon that experience and Wordsworth’s famous poem “Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour. July 13, 1798.” to explore my own thoughts, feelings, beliefs and doubts in the religious and the spiritual spheres. So, once again, I had found myself returning to poetry I had first read over 40 years ago as an utterly devout, full of certitude, publicly vowed member of the Catholic Church.

“And I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime of something far more
Deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.”

Over 40 years ago I looked upon these lines as demonstrating some kind of almost pagan pantheism. Today, my sense of spirituality comfortably encompasses Wordsworth’s lines as giving voice to a kind of beyond – this world presence with which I have some empathy.

Just a couple of months ago Jackie, Sophie Millie and I were deeply moved as we followed in the footsteps of those hundreds of thousands of soldiers obliterated on the killing fields of the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and the three battles for Ypres in Belgium. In particular, we made a pilgrimage to as many of the most famous of the Australian battlefield sites that we could: notably, Fromelles, Villers-Brettoneux, Pozieres, Thiepval, Mouquet Farm. Indeed, I found myself in tears as I wheelchaired my way around the Tyne Cot Cemetery at Passchendaele. In addition to the thousands of graves of British, Australian, South African and Canadian soldiers, around the huge wall of the monument were listed the names of 33,000 of their comrades whose bodies were never found.

And then later I was overwhelmed at the list of 55,000 names of British and Dominion soldiers who died around Ypres and whose names are recorded on the Menin Gate (in addition to the approximately 190,000 others from those countries who are buried in cemeteries elsewhere).

Even today, it remains almost incomprehensible that such a high proportion of the then Australian male population aged between 16 and 35 (and even older) had their lives destroyed on the other side of the Earth.

As I reflected over what might have been for these young men had they been able to live out their lives in early 20th Century Australia, I immediately recalled the poignancy and relevance of those famous lines from Gray’s “Elegy in a Country Churchyard” in which Gray speculates on the lives unknown to the general public that may have been lived by these now-dead individuals:

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood,
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell, guiltless of his country’s blood.

As I have indicated already, I have Motor Neurone Disease which is an incurable, inevitably fatal disease. It progressively paralyses your arms, legs, swallowing and speaking muscles and eventually, if you live that long, you end up with a mind and a consciousness inside a body capable only of eye-blinking - before the breathing muscles give way, and you die.

At any one time there are about 1,400 people afflicted with MND in Australia: every day one Australian dies of MND and one more is diagnosed with this wretched affliction. For a disease first identified in the scientific literature by the
great French neurologist Jean Charcot in 1869, it is a scientific / medical research disgrace that in 2006 nobody still understands the cause and nobody has yet discovered a cure for MND.

You may be astonished to realise that MND kills 4 to 5 times more Australians each year than AIDS does. The average period of survival of people with MND from diagnosis to death is only 3 to 4 years. At one extreme end of the survival spectrum are people like Pro Hart who lived for only 3 months after being afflicted. Others, most famously Professor Stephen Hawking, survive for much longer. Given at worst 3 years and at best 5 years to live in 1996, I am a very rare long term survivor.

I still find it hard to believe, and even harder to accept, that ten years ago all I had was a weak right forearm which in no way prevented my playing golf, running around with the kids, swimming a kilometre a couple of days a week in the pool, and playing the piano as I had done for about 47 years. Now I can only move two fingers. My neck muscles continue to collapse. But I can still speak. And, I think I can still think OK.

I thought that the most appropriate way to conclude my speech today, would be to quote from a contemporary Australian poet – my daughter Millie, who is now 11! Nearly four years ago when she was 7, Millie saw me pretty much down in the dumps as I was trying to come to terms with having to live the rest of my life in a wheelchair, she told me that she had written a little poem cycle that might cheer me up. The three little poems had been written for another context. She called her work “Never Give Up – A Poem Cycle”. The Motor Neurone Disease Association of Australia was so impressed with what Millie had written that they decided to inscribe “Never Give Up” on the blue plastic arm band that is sold throughout Australia to help raise funds to find a cure. I think that in many ways her words can also be adapted and applied in the context of the challenges we continue to face as teachers, scholars, and lovers of English Language and Literature.

NEVER GIVE UP

A POEM CYCLE

“Never give up”
If you give up on something
You might not get it
But if you try you might get it
Before you die.

“I’ll always love you”
But if I don’t I’ll be above you
I am in heaven
And you are now below
When you come up
You and I will follow.

“My dream is to fly”
My dream is to catch a butterfly
My dream is to live happily ever after
But sometimes things come up
And they might stay.

By Millie Brock
Age 7
January, 2003