Critical Literacies: English Studies Beyond the Canon

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Summary

In this essay, Higgins argues for a rethinking of English studies away from canon-bound definitions and around the notion of the acquisition of critical literacy, a notion which is defined in terms of the persuasive properties of language. Two brief examples of critical literacy in practice are then examined: a scene from Shakespeare's *Othello*, and a *Cape Times* editorial.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel argumenteer Higgins vir 'n herbetragting van "English studies", buite die beperkings van kanon-gebonde definisies en rondom die idee van die verwerwing van kritiese geletterdheid – 'n idee wat gedefinieer word in terme van die oorredingskenmerke van taal. Twee kort voorbeelde van kritiese geletterdheid in die praktyk word dan ondersoek: 'n toneel uit Shakespeare se *Othello* en 'n hoofartikel in die *Cape Times*.

We all know by now some of the major tensions in the complex formation and heritage of literary studies.[1] Initiated in their paradigmatic form of "Practical Criticism" in post-war Cambridge as part of an attempt to contain the disruptive social energies of a period in which the example of revolution was all too visible, the new study of English literature held in tension two opposing impulses. First, the restorative elitism of a conservative modernism. This concerned itself to identify the high moments of a cultural history, and then to identify with them in the production of a "minority civilisation" of literary critics and great artists. Together these would be responsible for the preservation of the "essential values" in the face of the threat of "levelling down" presented by the new mass culture. Second, and in complex opposition to this, the training in the basic skills of an extended literacy with which to read, and potentially to take a critical distance from, the discursive pressures of advertising, sociological jargon – a tendency articulated in the present as the awareness of and distancing from the constitutive or "interpellating" force of race, class, and gender. If, then, in this initial defining period of Richards, Eliot and Leavis, Literature was seen as the alternative to the new mass media of newspaper, film, and radio broadcasting (". . .we have not yet fathomed the more sinister potentialities of the cinema and the loudspeaker. . ." (Richards [1924] 1967: 25–6)), then one way we can describe the shift in attitudes towards Literature since the advent of Theory is in the fact of seeing Literature itself as just as dangerous, just as coercive, just as formative as the mass media themselves.

This familiar story of English studies in Britain receives a different inflection when told in or about South Africa. For transplanted to South Africa, they seemed to offer a distinctively British liberal humanism with which to combat – or evade – the reality of apartheid. Combat, in the sense

of offering an ameliorist ideology of social improvement through self-improvement, through mediating dialogue with others; evade, in the sense that this focus on individual relations neglected the larger social, political and economic articulations of racial segregation. Now, in the eyes of some, they may simply seem reactionary – a part of a project of colonial estrangement.

And yet, English studies always did have something of a Utopian appeal as a discourse of social interpretation and understanding, as a critical literacy. It is this idea of literary studies as a training in the skills of critical literacy that I should like to address in this essay.

In his recent T.B. Davie Memorial Lecture at UCT, Edward Said (1991) calls for the self-conscious and critical analysis of ideas and modes of thought which have become so habitual as to appear natural. Such searching analysis has to include, of necessity, the very idea of academic freedom itself: "[E]ach community of academics, intellectuals and students must wrestle with the problem of what academic freedom in that society at that time actually is and should be" (Said 1991: 69). My concern here is not directly with academic freedom. It is rather with the question of literary studies: with what they are in South Africa, and what perhaps they should or could be. Nonetheless, my starting-point in Said's Academic Freedom lecture is not purely fortuitous. For I shall be arguing that though the connections between literary studies and academic freedom remain implicit in Said's lecture, they are important enough to be worth trying to bring out in full. In so doing, we shall find that an important and unresolved tension exists in Said's work between two ways of defining literary studies. The first is their definition as that sacred object, the canon; and the second, as the practice of literary studies, understood as the practice of what I shall call critical literacy.

The question of what literary studies *should be* depends very much on the description of what they are. Significant tensions exist, in South Africa as elsewhere, between two ways of looking at literary studies – between the idea of them as an assured object of knowledge, the canon, and against this, the more difficult definition of them as a practice, as the practice of a critical literacy. First, then, the problem of the definition of literary studies.

What is the discipline of English? What is English literature? The answer to the second seems to cover the answer to the first. For one way of defining (English) literary studies seems to be through a definition of its object. If English literature is understood as the canonical body of texts from Chaucer to the Present Day (as it is understood in Cambridge), or from Anglo-Saxon to the early twentieth century (Oxford), then the discipline of English is the study of those texts. Any questioning of this object, the established canon of English literature, is likely to make us feel either anxious and uncertain or exhilarated and polemical because, for most English teachers, the canon is the ground of the discipline, the ground on which we stand. Take it away, or threaten to take it away, and the ground can seem to disappear from beneath your feet.

In South Africa, most of the debates concerning the future of literary studies have been conducted in the terms offered by this description, in terms of the canon. Progressive literary critics have fought hard and long for the

extension of the canon to include local works – works which sometimes challenge the apparently obvious notions of literary value built into the idea of a canon.[2] This extension is a necessary step in the history of literary studies in South Africa, as it has been, for different though related reasons, in other parts of the world. But is this extension of the canon the only step, the only possible critical move to make? I think not; and while it is clearly important that literary departments in South Africa teach African and South African writing as well as what Said refers to as the canon of Dead White Males, I wish to put forward another mode of transformation, one which relies on a different description of literary criticism. This description focuses less on the question of the canon and its contents and more on the forms of attention and analysis peculiar to English studies.

What if we sought to define the discipline of English not in our habitual manner, by saying that literary studies are the study of canonical texts? What if we sought instead to define literary studies by its methods, by its practices, by its techniques? What if we sought to define it through the particular skills in reading and analysis that it trains its students in? What if we sought to understand it, in other words, as a *discipline*, and in its specific difference from other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences?

If we were to do so, then a central element of the definition would have to be the peculiar status that literary studies assigns to language. In the natural sciences, but also in subjects like history, law, psychology, geography and so on, language is usually understood only as instrument. As instrument it is simply the medium of communication, necessary for the exchange of knowledge between informant and informed, between tutor and student and back again. As this medium of instruction, language itself is never the object of attention. In literary studies it is. For literary studies, language is grasped not only as an instrument of communication, but as an object of attention and analysis in its own right. Literary studies is above all a hermeneutic or interpretive discipline, a discipline which scrutinises our unthinking notions of communication, and problematises any too simple idea of language as instrument.

Because we are, in George Steiner's phrase, "language animals",[3] because language seems so natural to us that we have usually forgotten we ever had to learn it in the first place, we are usually willing to regard language unproblematically as an instrument, as a medium of communication, and to see communication as a simple exchange of information through dialogue, and to think of that dialogue as taking place between equal partners. Literary studies poses a challenge to each and every one of these assumptions. When language is understood only as instrument, its capacity to refer to the world is likely to be understood as an ability to reflect reality, and that reflection judged in terms of scientific exactitude, in terms of scientific objectivity. It is in relation to these questions that contemporary theoretical debates around structuralism and poststructuralism repeat and extend the concerns of the emergence of literary studies as a discipline in the Britain of the nineteen-twenties.

It was precisely against this emergent orthodoxy – perhaps most rigorously articulated by the British school of analytic philosophy, in the work of

Bertrand Russell and the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) – that literary studies began in the nineteen-twenties, with key theorists like I.A. Richards, William Empson and F.R. Leavis, to argue for a very different view of language, one that emphasised its expressive and constitutive characteristics and against reductive views of language as merely reflective. Indeed, the work of the literary critics oddly anticipates and has some common ground with Wittgenstein's later philosophy, itself so critical of his own earlier work and formation.

Richards's starting point was, for instance, the appalled recognition that contemporary mass society was in danger of losing the distinction between factual and nonfactual language-use. A significant part of Richards's programme of literary criticism was to remind citizens of the basic differences between the two, and to train them in discriminating – and therefore guarding against – the force of rhetoric, particularly in the new mass cultural forms of advertising and the cinema. At the same time, nonfactual uses of language could be beneficial, and lead to a healthier state of psychological balance in the individual through the critical analysis of great works of literature which had managed to achieve a unified subjectivity. Though Richards was soon to lose interest in literature as such and to move on to work in communications theory and the promotion of Basic English, his influence on the development of Leavis and the *Scrutiny* school cannot be overestimated.[4] The Cambridge English school shared with Richards an interest in and concern for the constitutive powers of human language.

For the later Wittgenstein language did not simply reflect the world, more or less correctly, for a disembodied and hence neutral observer.[5] Rather language constituted the very terms of that reflection of the world for the observer. For critical theorists, language is not the transparent window on the world of an empiricist philosophy, language constitutes the very frame of that view. Language gives the necessary (though not sufficient) conditions for seeing the world, and seeing is understood as the active interpretation of the world, rather than its passive reception. The primary task of criticism is to remind us that even the most habitual seeing is always a matter of representation – a question of the ways in which existing descriptions attempt to position us in relation to understanding the world.

It was just this element of interpretation which was absent from the *Tractatus* and which Wittgenstein, in his later work, was concerned to restore. In a sense, we can read that later work as an attempt to thoroughly deconstruct the implications of the idea in the *Tractatus* that language could be a picture or reflection of the world, and to undo the simple scientistic opposition between truth and falsity present in its statement that any "picture agrees with reality or fails to agree; it is correct or incorrect, true or false" (Wittgenstein [1921] 1961: 10). For what is absent from this formulation is just that element of embodied (socially, politically, historically) subjectivity which makes interpretation the key to expressive or constitutive theories of language. The critical theorist would have to rewrite this as "a picture always claims to agree with reality, to be correct and true; but we must never forget that a picture is always a re-presentation of reality and be sceptical of its

claims, recognising it as an interested and active interpretation of reality". Language is the medium of our knowledge of the world and not the world itself. It is never the event itself, but the analysis and interpretation of the event.

Contemporary theory is generally agreed on the importance of this fact of mediation, but two very different emphases have been made. Each of these corresponds to a different understanding of what is meant by the constitutive properties of language. For cultural pessimists from Adorno, through Althusser and Foucault, language appears to be entirely constitutive of human subjectivity, prompting Barthes's notorious remark, in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, that language itself is fascist.[6]

Against this view, we can place the work of Raymond Williams in Britain and of Edward Said in the U.S.A. Both have been scrupulous in assigning to language a fully dialectical function, as the system which both enables and tends to determine the possibility and the production of human thought and subjectivity. For Williams as for Said, the self is never simply an effect of language, as it appears to be in the work of a Derrida or Althusser. Language does not simply determine self-consciousness; it also enables it. For Said (and this is the bone of contention between Said and avowedly poststructuralist thinkers such as Homi Bhabha):

> the individual consciousness [is] placed at a sensitive nodal point, and it is this consciousness at that critical point which [I] attempt to explore in the form of what I call *criticism*. On the one hand, the individual mind registers and is very much aware of the collective whole, context or situation in which it finds itself. On the other hand, precisely because of this awareness – a worldly, self-situating, a sensitive response to the dominant culture – that the individual consciousness is not naturally and easily a mere child of the culture, but a historical and social actor in it. And because of that perspective, which introduces circumstance and distinction where there had only been conformity and belonging, there is distance, or what we might also call criticism.
>
> (Said 1983: 15)

It is precisely this possibility of critical consciousness – seeing the individual as not just a product of culture but as an agent in it – that underlies Said's passionate defence of academic freedom. For Said "the meaning of academic freedom cannot simply be reduced to venerating the unexamined authority of a national identity and its culture...The problem with the inculcation of cultural, national or ethnic identity is that it takes insufficient note of how these identities are constructions, not God-given or natural artifacts. If the academy is to be a place for the realization not of the nation but of the intellect...then the intellect must not be coercively held in thrall to the authority of the national identity" (Said 1991: 75).

In this struggle for critical consciousness, critical literacy has a crucial role to play in foregrounding the expressive and constitutive properties of language. Critical literacy puts into question any naive notion of dialogue as an exchange between equals. It argues for the constant awareness of the role in dialogue of agon or contest and sees all dialogue as, at the very least, an invitation to share a point of view, and more usually than not, as rhetorical

coercion, as persuasion, as an invitation couched in such a way that it is virtually impossible to refuse.

Critical literacy is the commitment of grasping these agonist aspects of language in communication. If we understand literacy as such as the acquisition of the basic instrumental skills of language, the ability to read and to write, then critical literacy is the development of the analytical skills which enable one to take a critical distance from what is written, from what there is to read, from the representations of the world which forms of discourse make available to us, and seek to place us in. While literacy enables us to read and understand a text or discourse, critical literacy is a second-order operation which enables us to see how that writing wishes to be understood, how it seeks to position and place us as its readers. In this sense, Said's great trilogy of work – *Orientalism* (1978), *The Question of Palestine* (1979), and *Covering Islam* (1981) – are exemplary instances of a critical literacy whose main lesson is, as Said puts it, that knowledge of the social world "is *always* no better than the interpretations on which it is based" (Said 1981: 160).

In similar fashion, Williams's *The Country and the City* (1975) seeks to explore the social and political relations at work in the selective appropriation and representation of reality in the poems and novels which figure out the history of town and country life. A central element in Williams's thought had always been the rejection of any simplistic Marxist model of cultural or literary analysis, and particularly any version of analysis which relied on any too simple an understanding of the base and superstructure model. As early as *Culture and Society* (1958), Williams had rejected with scorn the Marxist criticism of the thirties and forties in which literary production is seen as the reflection of activities in the economic base. "The emphasis of the book" explained Williams "is certainly not on literary texts as records, but as representations of history – including what I am still realist enough to call misrepresentations" (Williams 1979: 304). For Williams, there were two stages to the argument concerning the Country House poems:

> the first is that the very process of restoring produced literature to its conditions of production reveals that conventions have social roots, that they are not simply formal devices of writing. The second is that historical identification of a convention is not a mere neutral registration, which is incompatible with judging it. . .the crucial evaluative function is the judgement of conventions themselves, from a deliberate and declared position of interest. . .. You have to be able to go beyond an understanding that the poems are not records of country house experience, to the realization that these conventions produced actions and relationships, as well as poems, and as such they stand to be judged. . .. Certain conventions do less than others. If there is still place for evaluation in literature, then that is what has to be valued. This is not the same as saying, although one also says, that the poems are not like history. For a convention could resemble no actual history at all, yet be positively productive by its representation of possible situations. . .. Each convention must be assessed by what it is rooted in and what it does: an assessment that is related to a much more general historical judgement that is also an affiliation – not history as all that has happened, but as where oneself is in it.
>
> (Williams 1979: 306–7)

What is at stake, in other words, is the question of literary writing as representation rather than reflection. Representation implies that consciously persuasive positioning of writer and reader which it is the task of the critical reader to identify. The task of the reader is to understand that positioning, its mechanisms, its rhetoric, its persuasive power. Thus Williams writes against those who accept the Country House poems for what they claim to be or wish to be, and who, in so doing, fail in a sense to read.[7] Another, is to suggest that Williams grasps the dynamics of the constitutivity of language in an important way – one which refuses language as expression and language as system in favour of language as socially determined and determining. *The Country and the City* is, in this sense, an exemplary instance of that critical literacy which refuses to see literary texts in the monadic way associated with literary studies, or in the reflective way associated with what Williams saw as the Marxist versions of literary history.[8]

To see literary studies in this way as a discipline in critical literacy returns us to the original meanings of the very word literature. For as Raymond Williams pointed out, literature first comes into English in the fourteenth century from the Latin *littera*, a letter of the alphabet. *Litterature* was then in effect a condition of reading, of being able to read and having read, a sense much closer to contemporary literacy. Indeed, as Williams argues, the emergence of literacy as a separate word in the nineteenth century corresponds to a shift in the meaning of literature away from its sense as reading ability to the idea of literature as canon, as the apparently objective category of printed works of a certain quality, and then with a usual further restriction to fictive and imaginative writing only (Williams 1977: 46–7).

In Said's terms, the potentate might well prefer to define literary studies as a canon (for here knowledge is just another form of property, to be controlled and policed, of course to be extended where possible, but above all to be defended against the claims of others). But what of the traveller? The traveller might return to the definition of literary studies as a body of skills rather than texts, and be ready to put to work the varied skills of critical literacy on all the forms of writing and representation which seek to tie him or her to a particular interpretation of the world. Critical literacy fosters and enables the growth of that critical self-reflexive consciousness which Professor Said's work both urges and embodies. In this sense critical literacy is essential to the development of a participatory democracy just as it is to academic freedom.

What might this mean in practice? How might we teach critical literacy to our students, how might we teach them to become such travellers? I take two passages – the first from *Othello* and the second a *Cape Times* editorial – in order to show – in the first instance – just how easily the basic skills of critical literacy can be put to work on both canonical and non-canonical texts.

Let us examine a passage from Shakespeare's play *Othello*, for *Othello* is amongst other things a play which deals with the persuasive powers of language, highlights its constitutive as opposed to its reflective powers.

Cassio: Welcome, Iago; we must to the watch.
Iago:Not this hour, lieutenant; 'tis not yet ten o'the clock. Our general cast us thus early for the love of his Desdemona; who let us not therefore blame: he hath not yet made wanton the night with her; and she is sport for Jove.
Cassio: She's a most exquisite lady.
Iago: And, I'll warrant her, full of game.
Cassio: Indeed, she's a most fresh and delicate creature.
Iago: What an eye she has! methinks it sounds a parley of provocation.
Cassio: An inviting eye, and yet methinks right modest.
Iago: And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?
Cassio: She is indeed perfection.
Iago: Well, happiness to their sheets! Come, lieutenant, I have a stoup of wine; and here without are a brace of Cyprus gallants that would fain have a measure to the health of black Othello.
Cassio: Not tonight, good Iago; I have very poor and unhappy brains for drinking: I could well wish courtesy would invent some other custom of entertainment.
Iago: O, they are our friends; but one cup; I'll drink for you.
Cassio: I have drunk one cup tonight, and that was craftily qualified too, and, behold, what innovation it makes here: I am unfortunate in the infirmity, and dare not task my weakness with any more.
Iago: What, man! 'tis a night of revels: the gallants desire it.
Cassio: Where are they?
Iago: Here at the door; I pray you, call them in.
Cassio: I'll do't; but it dislikes me. [Exit]

"I'll do't; but it dislikes me" – this dislocation of the self away from the usual first person to the third person perfectly matches Cassio's overpowering by Iago through the dynamics of dialogue. In a sense, it can be read as pointing to that disturbing point raised by Benveniste in his extraordinary series of essays on pronouns. Against the instrumental view of language, in which language would be a tool wielded by the autonomous ego, Benveniste argues that language is rather to be understood as constitutive of the ego, its autonomy an illusion generated by the entry into the system of pronouns which in fact always places the self (Benveniste 1966). The pressures of that kind of placing are well illustrated by this exchange between Iago and Cassio – which one might use to argue against the too easy sense of dialogue in Benveniste's representation of language.[9] At least in this instance dialogue is coercion. Let us see exactly how this works.

Cassio's first response – "She's a most exquisite lady" is a conscious attempt to turn aside the bawdy web of associations of Iago's initial remarks. "Exquisite" – with its emphasis of refinement, exactly counters Iago's remarks, seeking to secure a position for Desdemona in an aesthetic and respectful discourse, a courtly one, contrary to Iago's placing of her in an obscene one. Iago, however, refuses this and insists again: "And, I'll warrant her, full of game." Here the conjunctive "and" is actually used to refuse Cassio's placing of her. In similar fashion, Cassio himself refuses to recognise or ratify Iago's discourse and with "indeed", again strives to place Desdemona securely in his terms: "she's a most fresh and delicate creature", with "fresh" and "delicate" referring both to her virginity and purity and the

inappropriateness of Iago's bawdy language. Against this, Iago's ejaculation "What an eye she has!" and a second urging of her availability: "methinks it sounds a parley of provocation."

At this point, something crucial happens. Cassio capitulates, and accepts Iago's description: "An inviting eye", and even though he corrects himself – "and yet methinks right modest". His "methinks" has ironically become an echo of Iago's "methinks", marking Iago's influence even in a moment of resistance. Iago realises this, and pushes his claims: "And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?". Cassio's reply to this is, for the first time, not a direct repudiation, but an ambivalent and equivocal response: "She is indeed perfection." The "indeed" at this point has become a token of substantial agreement and confirmation of Iago's view, and not the indicator of disagreement: her "perfection" has been, at some level, rewritten in Iago's terms. It comes as no surprise, in the remainder of the scene, to find Cassio capitulating completely to Iago: "I'll do it; but it dislikes me."

I choose the scene for its extremely subtle attention to the dynamics of persuasion – something of central concern to the play as a whole. But for our purposes, this kind of idea of persuasion – an idea rooted in the idea of language as constitutive rather than simply instrumental, always a matter of "methinking" – is central also to non-canonical and indeed non-literary works. Dialogue here is not, as Benveniste might have it, between equal and consenting partners; but is rather a contest or agon between conflicting representations of reality – a conflict which, in this play, reaches its extreme and climax in the paranoid "knowledge" of the world which is jealousy.

Shakespeare's play sets out to dramatise the agon of interpretation. Newspaper reports and editorials do their best to conceal it. I choose as an example of a common coercivity at work a newspaper editorial in which we can see what I call the "rhetoric of objectivity".[10]

I refer to the editorial in the *Cape Times* of April 29, 1987. But first, let us briefly examine some remarks made by Prof. André du Toit, of UCT's Political Studies Department, on December 1, 1987:

> It is the Conor Cruise O'Brien incident, the stoppage of traffic on De Waal Drive due to student demonstrations, the refusals to let Helen Suzman or Chief Buthelezi speak on campus, the images of students in violent confrontation with the security forces or toy-toying in protest which continue to be decisive. And these popular feelings are then harnessed to such liberal values as the need to protect academic freedom and freedom of speech.

What I want to point to is a doubtless unwitting deployment of the "rhetoric of objectivity" here. Du Toit talks about "decisive images", and I want to focus on that word "image" – the likeness of something. How can it be "decisive"? In Du Toit's use, it is as if the image is the reality – as it were, a photograph of reality, reality at second hand, but still objective. But, as literary readers, we know that an "image" is not reality, but artifice; is a construct, a fiction, a device, is persuasive artifice. I want to examine just one aspect of Du Toit's own description here (I have examined others elsewhere): "the images of students in violent confrontation with the security forces".[11]

First off, we might notice the work done quite naturally by that phrase – "security forces", how the violence of "forces", the violence of what is after all the repressive arm of the state, is dispersed, or is obscured, by the adjective "security" – this, of course, is not Du Toit's rhetoric, but the rhetoric of the state, but it serves here as a pointer to our main concern: the ways in which descriptive language always represents, and does not simply reflect, reality. It might be better to say: our attention will be on the ways in which so-called descriptive language re-presents reality to us, prescribes a view of reality for us; and seeks to make us share it as if it were our own. "The images of students in violent confrontation with the security forces" – what are the meanings of this image (and it is always best to ask the plural question; to ask for a singular meaning will always halt our interpretation too quickly, too easily)? Some of its meaning can be gathered from what happens if we reverse the grammar of agency in the phrase, and make it "the images of the security forces in violent confrontation with students" – or better, to seek to show as it were in negative the force of that positive image "the image of the police in violent confrontation with the (and then we need an adjective to match the force of "security") students. What becomes immediately apparent with this is the real though here obscured meaning of "to confront". Of course, it always needs two sides to have a confrontation, especially perhaps a violent one, but what happens in the reality constructed – represented, not reflected – by this phrase is that the students alone become the agents of violence. So that what is at work here is an instance of the rhetoric of objectivity – an instance of the ways in which language is perhaps unable to reflect reality in an objective way, or without a major attempt, major care needed, in order to do so (Flaubert's struggle with language, with *idées reçues*, is perhaps evidence of just this kind of awareness, just this kind of struggle).

In fact, Du Toit's phrasing here repeats (and it is an important part of *idées reçues* that they live through repetition) the basic structure of the original *Cape Times* editorial, which we shall now examine. In order to do so, in order to read this editorial critically, let us take three terms from the language of visual representation – and we shall be thinking particularly of photography here – invoked by Du Toit's "decisive images". These are "frame", "focus" and "margin", and they operate to constitute the rhetoric of objectivity. The discourse of journalism in fact resembles the discourse of photography in that each frames its images of reality in a certain way, focuses on certain things, and as the price of that focus, marginalises other things. To focus on something always means the decision to marginalise something else; the clarity of the central image is obtained at the expense of a certain fuzziness elsewhere in the picture.

The frame of the editorial is that which places the reader in an initial posture of interpretation, is that which positions the reader. We only look inside the frame, and the frame also determines the structure of what we see within it. Here, the basic frame is that the editorial speaks for everyone – "It is in everybody's interest that calm should be restored as quickly as possible". In doing so, it is, or rather would be, objective. But we have to ask, is such

an objective position achieved here, or if it isn't how might it be achieved? What we must first understand is that to say "It is in everybody's interest" is to make a rhetorical move: to seek to persuade the readers to occupy and accept the interest put forward by the writer as their own. Of course, we know rather that the newspaper attempts to form public opinion in the guise of reflecting public opinion; newspapers represent reality, rather than reflect it.

To make this rhetoric stick, the first sentence of the editorial performs another rhetorical gesture – it appears to represent from an objective position by equally assigning blame and responsibility. The first sentence reads:

> Events at UCT are placing a great burden of responsibility upon the police, the vice-chancellor, Dr Stuart Saunders, and the responsible student leadership.

On the surface, an equal distribution of responsibility, a tripartite division between the police, the vice-chancellor and the students. But as soon as we say that – as soon as we make that paraphrase – we see that something is missing from our paraphrase and that is precisely the use of paraphrase in interpretation – to locate the excess that needs to be interpreted, that calls out for interpretation once we notice it. For we see that less "semantic time" is spent on the police than any of the other, supposedly equally co-responsible, agents. In fact we might say that even in reading the sentence aloud we can see how the police – the first in the list of three agents – are almost forgotten by the time we get to the end of the sentence. There is certainly less to remember them by: the vice-chancellor is after all given his full name and title, Dr Stuart Saunders, whereas the officer in charge of the police detachments that day is not given; and the students are named not as the students, but as "the responsible student leadership". Where then does the "great burden of responsibility" lie? Surely on those responsible. Why not then on the "responsible student leadership"? Again, why is no mention made of the leadership of the police? Even in this first sentence, I think we can safely say that although on the surface, responsibility is shared out equally between the three parties, a careful reading or analysis reveals that the police are given less responsibility than the other two; and that it is the students who are made most responsible, who are held to be most responsible for the confrontation of that day. In other words, the focus of the account becomes student violence.

That this focus marginalises something is very clear from the article as a whole. What it marginalises – and does so from the very first sentence – is the issue of police violence. The strains of this marginalisation are evident throughout. Let us examine just two examples of this, two examples where the rhetoric of objectivity can be seen to be under some considerable strain; but can be seen as such only if a certain resistant form of reading is put into operation, only if the reader takes a critical distance from the representation by exposing its mechanisms and operations. The first is the second paragraph, which I quote as a whole:

> Unhappily, there is one relatively small group of students who have other interests at stake, it appears, and are bent upon confrontation with the university

> authorities and, indeed, with the police, who are ready at hand, in recent days, and ready to be provoked.

What the critical reader might notice at first is the awkwardness of the admission that not everybody shares the same interests, as asserted in the first paragraph. "Unhappily", then, because there is always the possibility of conflict between people with opposing interests. The editorial is willing to admit that "there is one relatively small group of students" – here everything is done to diminish their importance, not just a group of students or even a small group of students but one and one only and a relatively small group at that! who "have other interests". And there is the rub – these students have interests outside the frame of reference adopted by the article, have, in other words, marginal interests, though they have a central role in disruption. These are "bent upon confrontation" not only with the university authorities, but also with "the police, who are ready at hand, in recent days, and ready to be provoked". These last phrases are the really awkward ones, as the writer seeks to push the agency of confrontation (which Du Toit repeats, remember) all on the side of the students, and to marginalise the role of the police in such confrontation (which interestingly changes senses from argumentative confrontation to physical confrontation as the students "face" the authorities and then "face" the police). The police who are "ready at hand" – or rather, as the writer redefines it, "ready to be provoked". That casual assignment to them of the passive position conflicts rather awkwardly with "ready at hand" and is to be read as trying to overwrite the "ready to hand", which all too easily might suggest the kind of provocative police presence which the writing seems to avoid attributing.

The critical reader has to ask, is not to be present in force at a demonstration to confront that demonstration? Can the grammar of agency so casually and simply be attributed to one side in a confrontation (we shall leave aside the evidence which later emerged concerning the activities of police *agents provocateurs* in UCT demonstrations)? The article would seek to suggest that it can; but it finds it increasingly difficult to do so. Representation is the hard work of transforming the raw material of reality into commodified images whose meanings you seek to control, but which constantly threaten to overcome that determination. Take, for our final example, the fifth paragraph.

> The police whipping of students with sjamboks is degrading, just as the order to open fire with shotguns on Monday afternoon seems wholly indefensible. And can it be true that police with dogs and whips invaded the Jagger Library on that day and attacked students at their work? The police have no business coming to the university and disrupting its affairs with tear gas, birdshot and sjamboks – unless their action is truly warranted to protect the public safety and unless the university authorities, being unable to cope, have called them to the campus. What are the facts? Who called the police?

To call the police whipping of students with sjamboks "degrading" is a way of not describing the physical injuries inflicted on students by the police. To call the order to open fire with shotguns "indefensible" also marginalises the

physical risks of injury by focusing on the moral question. To write that this order "seems" indefensible of course suggests that it is defensible – and it comes as no surprise that just such a hypothetical defence is later offered: "unless the university authorities, being unable to cope. . .called them to the campus". Indeed, the writing of this passage does everything it can to marginalise police violence – to the extent of placing actual events in question marks, using what might be called "sceptical interrogatives": "And can it be true that police with dogs and whips invaded the Jagger Library on that day. . .?" The answer which the question presupposes is of course no, it can't be true. . . .

We see here that the description of events, whatever appeals to the rhetoric of objectivity are ritually made, always involves their representation. This representation is always of necessity an interpretation of that referred to reality, the event. The reality referred to here – let us say, just one moment of the massive reality of police and state violence in South Africa in 1986 and 1987 – is perhaps too disturbing for it to be reflected, in the white press, as anything other than as a question which with a shudder one would prefer to turn away from.

In conclusion, let us recapitulate. Arguments against the canon, in South Africa, have in fact been located within the framework of the canon. Many progressive critics have really been arguing for an expansion of the canon, an extension of coverage to include what has hitherto been excluded – indigenous writing and oral performance, and some of the texts of popular culture. I want to suggest, in addition to this, that we change the object of our own critical focus away from the definition of literary studies through their object, the canon, however conceived, and turn our attention to what specifies literary students as a discipline – the acquisition of a critical literacy which can be extended beyond the canon to all available forms of representation.

I believe that the future of English studies in South Africa may well lie in the recognition that I have argued for here: that the varied skills of critical literacy may well form the Utopian centre of existing literary studies in departments of English. One thing is for sure, and that is that the creation of a democratic society will in any event rely a great deal for its success on the massive extension of basic literacy as well as on the advanced forms of critical literacy I have discussed here.

Notes

1. Two excellent accounts are to be found in Mulhern 1979 and Baldick 1983.
2. See for example the many debates around South African poetry. For two notably contrasting positions, see Stephen Watson's (1990) "Shock of the Old: What's become of Black Poetry" and Jeremy Cronin's (1985) "The law that says/ Constricts the breath line (. . .)": South African English Language Poetry written by Africans in the 1970s.
3. See Steiner's (1975: 66–109) still interesting summary, "The Language Animal". By far the best introduction to the question in general is Charles Taylor's (1985) "Language and Human Nature".

4. Leavis's early works acknowledge that debt in full. See in particular the pamphlet "Mass Civilization and Minority Culture" in *For Continuity* pp. 13–45. Leavis's first book, *New Bearings in English Poetry* also pays significant homage to Richards.
5. By far the best and most thorough introduction to Wittgenstein's work is to be found in two studies by the French philosopher, Jacques Bouveresse. See his *Wittgenstein: La rime et la raison* (Paris: Minuit, 1973) and *Le mythe de l'intériorité* (Paris: Minuit, 1976).
6. See Barthes (1978: 14) "Language is...quite simply: fascist, for fascism is not being prevented from speaking, but in being obliged to speak" (my translation).
7. For further discussion of this, see my forthcoming essay "Turning Readers into Spectators: Pope's 'Ode on Solitude' and the Frame of Representation".
8. I say with what Williams saw as Marxist versions because in this sense there are some of the elements of this view available in Caudwell's work. For Caudwell,

> ...many philosophers approach language in a strangely patronising way-...They find it "imperfect", deviating from the ideal language, and illogical – rather as a biologist might study species and reproach them for their departure from some ideal animal. Such philosophers think consciousness is contemplation – a limpid image of reality. In the same way they think language exists to be a passive photograph of the universe. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is entirely based on this assumption. This is the error of philistines who imagine that a painting must be exactly the scene it portrays. They do not see that it is a silly task to make an exact copy of something we already have, and that the relation of language and thought to reality is not a passive reflection but an active and tendencious reaction, and that it is this activity and tendenciousness which enables a mere reaction to become conscious and know. The mirror reflects accurately: it does not know. Each particle of the Universe reflects the rest of the Universe, but knowledge is only given to human beings as a result of an active and social relation to the rest of reality. Knowledge is an economic relation.... This historical function of language explains why existing languages are so far from the "perfect" language postulated by Wittgenstein. Such a perfect language would be perfectly useless. It would be a picture of the world, standing in the same relation to external reality as a mirror-image to the thing mirrored. But then it would be an inferior thing to the thing imaged, and would be a useless construct. It would have no hidden power over the world or the subject. It is precisely because language expresses feeling, is a judging as well as a picturing of parts of reality, that it is valuable. Language expresses not merely what reality is (what reality is stares man in the face) it expresses also what can be done with reality – its inner hidden laws, and what man wants to do with it – his own unconscious necessities. Language is a tool to express what reality is in relation to man – not abstract man but concrete human beings. (Caudwell 1937: 195–96)

9. Benveniste suggests "that discourse is language put into action, and necessarily between partners" (1966: 258: my translation). There is a fundamental blindless to the coercive functions of language, perhaps implicit in Benveniste's benign "scientific" model of language.
10. The first version of this was given as a lecture to English I students at UCT a few days after the editorial appeared. A later version was presented at the NATE conference "Against the Canon" in September 1991 and appeared in the proceedings of the conference edited by Brenda Pratt.

11. For further discussion of this passage in the context of the O'Brien affair, see my essay "The Warrior-Scholar versus the Children of Mao: Conor Cruise O'Brien in South Africa" (1990).

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