

Embracing the other within: Dialogical ethics, resistance and professional advocacy in English teaching

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ABSTRACT: The neo-conservative subjectification of English teachers (as “language technicians” and “preachers of culture”) is being resisted in Australia (for example, Doecke, Howie and Sawyer, 2006a). In this climate of contestation, the (re) conceptualisation of English as a critical space promoting social justice cannot be ethical or just if it effaces other ideas and ways of being. For “resistance” then ends up being indistinguishable from the totalizing force it opposes. As an experienced teacher and professional representative of others, I explore how I have (re) read and (re) written my teaching self and practice in response to public criticisms of my support for critical literacy by Donnelly (2007), a prominent neo-conservative educational commentator. Drawing on the work of Kostogriz and Doecke (2007; cf. Bakhtin, 1981, Levinas, 1998), I argue that the ethical experience of encountering the Other can generate new understandings of the teacher self. I go on to affirm the importance of an open and unfinalizable understanding of the teacher subject as a generative response to the conservative re-centring of the teaching subject.

KEYWORDS: Advocacy by English teachers, critical literacy, dialogical ethics, English education, neo-conservatism and education, teacher identity.

INTRODUCTION

The professional self that I or others might speak and write of as Mark Howie is brought into being in a complex network of dialogic relationships and the attendant discourses in and through which these operate (Doecke, Homer, Nixon, 2003; cf. Bakhtin, 1981). Every working day I come face to face with one hundred or more students. As President of the English Teachers’ Association of NSW (ETA) and President of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE), I am in a less direct but – at least from my perspective - no less compelling relationship with over 8 000 fellow teachers. My advocacy work^a and duties as a professional representative require me to move between the educational domain and other spheres of public life, including the academy, the media and government. As I do so, I am charged by those who have elected me, as well as by my understandings of myself as an *English* teacher, with the responsibility of promoting an eclectic but principled vision for English that at once acknowledges the subject’s past, addresses contemporary socio-cultural and political imperatives and looks to the future in

^a In Australia in recent years, different national teaching standards frameworks, including those developed by English teachers for English teachers, identify professional “commitment” and “advocacy” as elements of professional accomplishment (AATE & ALEA, 2002; cf. Teaching Australia, 2007). In relation to advocacy by English teachers, STELLA defines advocacy as a willingness to “articulate educational ideas and take action to develop support for policy and curriculum change in the school and wider community”.

meeting the needs of Australian students in all their diversity.^b As a consequence, I am necessarily connected – whether directly or indirectly – to those who inhabit these other worlds and, more significantly, required to engage with and respond to the ways in which they envisage English and its future. The understandings of English and English teaching I might possess remain located in, but necessarily exceed, the classroom negotiations that I establish and maintain on a daily basis between my students and the curriculum frameworks and official policies which function to classify the subject and frame (Bernstein, 1975) my practice. Indeed, the possibilities I see and create in my classroom, including the ways in which I understand my students and the curriculum I am required (or allowed) to implement, are also understood dialogically: they are informed by my various professional experiences beyond the classroom but, at the same time, also inform these activities. A key example, and the focus of this paper, is writing about – and consequently (re) reading – my own practice.

In what follows I will explore some of the ways in which contested engagements in the textual space of public commentary about my professional self and my teaching practice afford me new understandings of English, particularly as these relate to certain consequences for understanding teacher identity stemming from the central place critical literacy now has in the project of addressing issues of social justice in secondary English classrooms^c. In so doing, I identify the teaching self as a site of contestation upon which the future prospects of English significantly depend – such is the investment being made in the representation of the “skilful” English teacher in educational debates about English in Australia. Teacher identity, I argue, is central to the very possibility of conceptualising English as a site of resistance to dominant subject positions and the promotion of alternative ways of knowing, learning and being through its (traditional) concern with the study of literature. I will go on to affirm the importance of an open, unfinalizable and dialogically ethical (Kostogriz and Doecke, 2007) understanding of the *teacher subject* as a form of resistance to the conservative re-centring of the *teaching subject* currently in play in Australia.

THE (ENGLISH TEACHING) SELF AND OTHER

Writing about my work in its various guises connects me to the past, the present and the future of subject English in this country and beyond, as well as to those who would seek to give voice to, influence or control these things. In entering the public sphere through writing, I am my text (cf. Derrida, 1997, pp. 158 – 160). I write my (English teaching) self into being not through making manifest a “natural presence” (Derrida, p. 159), but dialogically through the language of contemporary English teaching in Australia and the discursive relations that this entails (cf. Green, 1990). My writing is inevitably informed by and, in turn, informs my reading of this larger and complex heteroglossic text. In “storying the self” as a means of “making sense of [my] conditions of working and being” (Goodson, 2005, p. 182), my professional self

^b Such a vision is captured in AATE’s (n.d.) *Statements of Belief*, which I played a significant role in writing. One use of the statements has been to provide association representatives with a shared “language” for their advocacy work.

^c Following Morgan (1997), critical literacy is understood here as a differentiated reading practice, making available different reading positions to students (that is, reading “with”, “across” and “against” the text) as the discursive shaping of meaning and interpretation is explored.

becomes an ongoing narrative project (Howie, 2006a; 2006b; 2002) within the historical, “determined textual system” (Derrida, p. 160) that is contemporary English teaching. My published public commentary on matters relating to English teaching is therefore formed in and contributes to the textual space of competing readings and (re) writings of the history of English in Australia, if not internationally. As a (teaching) subject, I enact the past, present and future of *the* subject (English) through this sort of professional activity.

Bakhtin’s (1984) emphasis on the “multivoicedness” of all discourse suggests that in my public utterances about English will be heard the voices of those who have and yet might comment upon such matters as the “proper” constitution of the subject. In my professional endeavours, I am required to engage with and respond to (for example, Doecke, Howie & Sawyer, 2006b) what might be called the “loud, recognized reigning voices of the epoch” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 90). Being a professional representative of English teachers at state and national levels has elevated me into a signifier of what can be said to constitute a skilful English teacher, making me the public “face” of what is acceptable or unacceptable in contemporary English teaching (for example, Devine, 2007)^d. As someone charged with the professional responsibility to publicly make the case for an expansive vision of English teaching, I cannot avoid entering the rough and tumble of the public arena, typically as a voice of resistance to those who are seeking to re-centre English within a more restrictive and restricted understanding of the subject – one which sees it as dealing exclusively with the necessary but not sufficient “Basic Skills” and “Cultural Heritage” curriculum models.

My teaching “self”, and the ways in which this might be represented, can accordingly be understood as a textual “space” in which dominant subject positions are being contested. This suggests that to the extent that teacher identity is part of the “boundary maintenance” of the subject (Bernstein, 1975; 2000; cf. Peim, 2003), the (re)imagining of English and its critical project of addressing issues of social justice (cf. Doecke and Kostogriz, 2007; Kress, 2006) cannot – and should not – be located solely in English classrooms, curriculum frameworks and policy documents. The significant social and political investments in English which are generated from beyond these “spaces” make it impossible to believe otherwise. Neo-conservative critics of contemporary English teaching in Australia have certainly realised that the struggle to (re)centre subject English requires the discrediting of representations of the English teacher subject which do not support their anachronistic and restrictive views, and therefore their particular cultural and political project (cf. Lucy and Mickler, 2006, pp. 11-28)^e. To deny the possibility of more diverse ways of

^d Miranda Devine is prominent conservative opinion writer for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. In a column on English teaching and the influence of critical literacy, she cited a unit of work I had published in *mETaphor* (Howie, 2005) the journal of English Teachers’ Association (NSW), on reading *The importance of being Earnest* through the critical lens of Queer Theory, as evidence of how the association’s representatives are more interested in “left-wing political activism” and “ideological posturing” than teaching literature. Her naming of me as the President of the Association invests the Levinasian “face” with a symbolic quality that leads me to recontextualise his thinking on ethics from the realm of the physical encounter with the Other to that of the textual realm of public media commentary about English teaching.

^e Such a tactic might be located more generally within the wider political culture of Australia under the Howard government (1996-2007) and the manner in which its neo-conservative agenda was pursued by it and its media supporters. Howard’s decade long-rule has been described by critics as being

professional “being” within the subject works to silence, or at least marginalise, public expression of how alternative conceptualisations of the subject can and do work in the nation’s English classrooms.

The truth of this last statement was recently brought home to me over the space of a fortnight. One Saturday morning I opened the arts supplement of Australia’s only national newspaper and was surprised to find myself represented in a piece on the moral power of literature (Donnelly, 2008) as favouring the teaching of electronic texts at the expense of literature. (The irony here is laughable. Publication of this article came just days after I had delivered an address to the 200 individuals from around Australia selected to attend the inaugural Australian Government Summer School for Teachers of English. My topic was “Teaching Shakespeare in the mainstream classroom”.) Just over a week later, I received in the mail a newly published book on English teaching in Australia (Snyder, 2008), which has been written for that general audience which politicians like to call the “mums and dads” of Australia. Within its pages, I read a significantly more positive depiction of my (teaching) self: “For Howie ... teaching is far more complex and principled than simply taking on the ideas of the latest theory. His eclectic approach includes understandings from cultural heritage, personal growth and critical literacy models of English” (p. 83).

My writing about my practice is a connecting thread between these two “colonisations” (Goodson, 2005) of my professional self. Snyder’s representation of my teaching is written in response to criticisms made by Donnelly^f (2007; 2006), a prominent conservative educational commentator, of an opinion piece I wrote for the AATE website (since reproduced in Doecke, Howie & Sawyer, 2006a) describing a series of lessons in which I taught Marvell’s “To his coy mistress” to a Year 10 class. Such an exchange provides some sense of how English teaching in Australia has become a particular site of struggle and controversy in recent times (cf. Doecke, Howie, Sawyer, 2006b). The professional autonomy enjoyed by Australian teachers of English has been strongly questioned by prominent media commentators and politicians (cf. Cambourne, 2006; Gannon and Sawyer, 2007; Sawyer, 2006)^g. Such has been the prominence and ubiquity of “crisis” commentary in recent years that The Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Education (2007) report *Quality of school education* notes: “[English] has been subject to considerable criticism, much of it...based on “culture wars” beliefs, and betraying an ignorance of the needs and interests of contemporary students” (p. 90)^h. If, as Gale

characterised by a determination to stifle public debate and dissent on issues relating to culture, identity, values and the direction of the nation (Hamilton & Maddison, 2007).

^f A former English teacher, Dr. Kevin Donnelly is now an educational consultant and prominent educational columnist for *The Australian*, the only national broadsheet. Donnelly enjoys close ties with the Liberal party, the major conservative political party in Australia. Donnelly has worked as Chief of Staff to a former federal Liberal minister. His most recent book was launched at Parliament House by the parliamentary leader of the Liberal party and then Prime Minister, John Howard.

^g Morgan (1997) suggests that Australian teachers of English have historically enjoyed a high degree of autonomy in terms of curriculum development and implementation, pedagogy and assessment.

^h In 2007, The Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee conducted an inquiry into the current level of academic standards of school education. Within the terms of the inquiry, this included particular reference to the extent to which schools provide students with the core knowledge and skills they need to participate in further education and training, and as members of the community.

(2006) has recently argued, teachers are now seen as the “problem” when it comes to the future of schooling in Australia, there is ample evidence to suggest that English teachers are viewed by some as the most problematic of all.

As has also been seen in the US (cf. Apple, 2006) and the UK (cf. Griffith, 1992; Peim, 2003) in recent times, a dominant strain of neo-conservative media and political criticism of contemporary English teaching in Australia has typically sought to pit certain historic conceptualisations of the subject against others. The primacy of a “traditional” curriculum, as manifest in the teaching of so-called “basic skills” and the “cultural heritage”, has been promoted over a grab-bag of supposedly corrupting and corrupted innovations, including critical literacy, post-modernism and cultural studies. Donnelly (2007) has perhaps been the most vocal of such critics in Australia. The sorts of criticisms of contemporary English teaching in Australia he makes are spelt out in the introduction to a recent book, *Dumbing down*:

Imagine a politically-correct curriculum where students are taught to feel guilty about the achievements of Western civilization....Imagine English examinations and literacy tests where students are not penalised for faulty spelling, punctuation and grammar....English courses where great literature is on the same footing as *Australian Idol*, SMS messages and movie posters....Welcome to the parlous state of Australian education (pp. 5-6).

These are strong charges. In response to suggestions of betrayal, ignorance and the abrogation of professional responsibility, I have felt compelled to step back from my professional self in order to (re)evaluate my responsibilities to those around me. More particularly, I have been left asking how I might best respond to the way that my public utterances about English and English teaching, my public representations of my work, have been evaluated and responded to by others.

In order to explore what Goodson (2005) describes as the mediation which inevitably takes place between the [personal] “voice” and wider cultural imperatives when we tell our stories, or have them captured by others (p. 215), I will endeavour here to establish a non-essentialist, dialogic relationship (cf. Bakhtin, 1984) with my own public utterances. In order to do this, I must inevitably attain a sense of distance from and inner-reservation about my writing and, therefore, myself.

If I tell (orally or in writing) an event that I have just lived, in so far as I am telling (orally or in writing) this event, I find myself already outside of the time-space in which the event occurred. To identify oneself absolutely with oneself, to identify one’s “I” with the “I” that I tell is as impossible as to lift oneself up by one’s hair ... (Bakhtin, quoted in Burke, 1998, p. 55).

Following the recent work of educators who have begun to advocate dialogical ethics as a way of teaching English to and for a community of difference (Kostogriz and Doecke, 2007; Kostogriz, 2006), the response to Donnelly I provide here draws on the thinking of Bakhtin and Levinas. While acknowledging significant difference between Bakhtin and Levinas, proponents of dialogical ethics argue the two are united in the idea that ethics is not imposed from the outside. Instead, it is part of the “dialogical nature of the life itself” (Kostogriz, p. 7) and is present in any encounter with difference. Dialogical ethics allows me to understand the call for action – the advocacy move – in response to criticism from Donnelly to be a “demand that comes

from the Other”, where the Other is someone who puts me into question and makes me responsible (Kostogriz, p. 7; cf. Levinas, 2000). Resistance, therefore, cannot be effacement or domination if it is to be *ethical*. In working towards the goal of an unfinalizable model of English, resisting a restricted and restricting version of the subject, my challenge is to interrupt the cultural and linguistic “violence” evident in Donnelly’s neo-conservative educational discourse, while still recognizing the ways that the questioning gaze of the Other has the power to expand my understanding, and therefore the possibilities for transformation, of my professional self (cf. Kostogriz, pp. 8-9). In short, I must “resist” the closure of my own beliefs and practice, and therefore the finalization of my teaching self, by allowing the “accusations” of Donnelly to put me into question.

In keeping with the acknowledged influence of Levinas on Derrida’s thinking (Critchley, 1999, pp. 9-13; cf. Caputo, 1997), the deconstructive impulse at work here should be recognised as aspiring to move beyond “culture wars” rhetoric. Instead, I wish to move towards what one interpreter of Derrida (Caputo, 1997) calls a “responsible affirmation of the other” and a delimiting of the “narcissism of the self” – the latter being something the federal Senate Committee (see above) detected when considering commentary about English teaching in Australia, as is made evident in the stated belief that “debate” is being pursued by some without due regard to the needs of students. The key move here, in responding to Donnelly, is to ensure that my “resistant” conceptualisation of English and the English teacher does not simply allow the usurper to become the usurped (cf. Lucy, 1997, p. 244), reinforcing an already existing and unjust structure of domination and suppression in public exchange between those with differing positions on the proper constitution of the subject.

(RE) READING AND (RE) WRITING HOWIE

Referring to a piece I wrote on teaching of the theme of *carpe diem* and Andrew Marvell’s “To his coy mistress” to Year 10 students (reproduced in Howie, 2006a), Donnelly (2007) challenges my professional expertise by reprising criticisms which he originally made in the conservative journal *Quadrant* in 2006. According to Donnelly, I have “misread” the poem (p. 164), propagating a “distorted” and “ridiculous” interpretation under the warrant of “political correctness” (pp. 163-164). However, claims about misreading and distortion boomerang on Donnelly when my original and complete text is compared to what he intimates I wrote. Donnelly’s selective editing of my original copy strips it of significant contextual information that puts a very different set of emphases on my text.

Before quoting from my piece, Donnelly provides the following lead in:

[Howie] criticises it (i.e. Marvell’s poem) for presenting “a view of the world that is once partial and chauvinistic”. In explaining how he teaches the poem to Year 10 students, Howie asserts that countries in the industrialised, Western world have not done enough to support poorer countries in Africa (p. 164).

He then goes on to quote from my piece:

My group of fifteen year olds found the seize the day theme to be particularly relevant to them at their stage of life. However, what became quickly obvious

to them as they were concurrently following preparations for the Live8 concerts on television and the web, was that not everyone is free to seize the day. That such things as our gender, age, nationality, economic circumstances, and even where we live determine our possibilities in life.

This, however, is what follows in the original and what Donnelly dismissively reduces to “political correctness”:

Having first read Marvell's poem for pleasure and understanding, the students came to see the necessity of reading it critically. In short, they felt compelled to consider how the poem reflects a view of the world that is at once partial and chauvinistic. They understood that the call to seize the day is not one to which all of humanity may subscribe, contrary to the claims of some that the poem presents a universal and timeless truth.

My work as a teacher in assisting students to arrive at these different understandings of the poem was not about ideology or political correctness. What I was doing was encouraging the students to move from the poem to considering the factors that shape who they are and what they may yet become.

I was also encouraging them to imaginatively and empathetically connect with the experiences of others outside of their classroom, in order to give them a deeper understanding of the human experience in an increasingly globalised world. This critical literacy does not amount to a “dumbing down” of the curriculum. It is a necessary and logical extension of the traditional concerns of English (p. 13).

Donnelly’s “culture wars” rhetoric, his damning of me with the handy, catch-all but ultimately vacuous criticism of “political correctness”, allows him to dismiss out of hand the now commonly accepted and hardly radical idea that the meaning of a literary text cannot be constrained by its own circumstances of production, as a reader’s context will frame the way in which that reader approaches the very act of reading and accordingly inform his or her interpretation (MacLachlan and Reid, 1994; McCormick, 1994; Pope, 2002). As a consequence of his rigid, if not anachronistic certainty about what it means to read and what English should be about, Donnelly silences the ways in which my text centres around a personal struggle to find continuity and coherence in English (cf. Howie, 2006a) – something Snyder (2008, pp.82-84) more readily recognises. Donnelly does not engage with my attempt to reconcile what have been seen as historically significant but not necessarily congruent “models” of the subject (cf. Peel, 2000): personal growth, cultural heritage and critical literacy. He does not allow that I am seeking to strike a balance between different conceptualisations of reading in English, particularly the affective and the critical (cf. Misson and Morgan, 2006). Moreover, the agency my students exhibit in their own reading; the manner in which they thoughtfully bring their knowledge of the world around them, as well as their out-of-school cultural practices, into the classroom; is not acknowledged by Donnelly. Instead, Donnelly represents my students as the victims of my supposed anti-Western guilt.

Donnelly also refuses to give me credit for actually taking seriously, and wanting to consider in depth with my students, an idea Donnelly himself fervently espouses: that great literature provides invaluable insight into the human condition (see *Dumbing down*, p. 165). Consequently, my teaching of various poems (including “To his coy

mistress”) from different times and cultures as part of the broader study of the very traditional theme of *carpe diem* is not remarked upon.

Donnelly asserts himself and his world view over my students. He pays no regard to them as the Levinasian third party. He cannot imagine them to be independent thinkers and learners, who very readily – without being led by me – draw connections between what is being studied in class and the wider world as they experience it. Constructivism is a cardinal sin in Donnelly’s educational world (for example, *Dumbing down*, pp. 52-60). For this reason, he denies my students their full humanity: within his “I think”ⁱ, which is geared towards discrediting pedagogical practices he opposes, the students are controlled by *Howie’s* “I think”.

Rather than seriously engaging with my experiences and those of my students, Donnelly is clearly more concerned with perpetuating the “culture wars” by representing me as someone who is unfit to professionally represent English teachers^a. This sort of attack transcends educational debate about how English should or should not be taught, and has clear and ongoing political and cultural reverberations - an obvious pointer to this being the fact that *Dumbing Down* was launched at Parliament House by the then Prime Minister and leader of Australia’s largest conservative political party, John Howard. In the Levinasian sense, Donnelly combatively turns away from the ethical imperatives of his textually mediated encounter with my professional or public self (*Howie*), subjugating the narrativised me within his conceptualisation of English and (un)skilful English teaching.

In addressing Donnelly’s criticisms to this point, I have been careful to limit my discussion to describing their (un)ethical consequences. I have been very conscious of not setting out to make any claims to insight into the *truth* of Donnelly’s motivations. Levinas (1991) emphasises that the Other cannot ever be truly comprehended, as to make such a claim would be to reduce the Other to “sameness”, to strip him or her of their individuality towards the ends of control and dominance (p. 45). I remain conscious, therefore, of the fact that the Other must remain ineffably inscrutable, as to claim to understand the Other is, in short, to betray the primacy of the face to face (or, in the mediated textual encounter, typeface to typeface) relationship^j.

However, at this point in my response I might draw on Levinas’s (1998) distinction between the “saying” and the “said”, in order to further explore Donnelly’s response before I turn my attention back to my own piece. The distinction Levinas makes between the “saying” and the “said” can be explained as the difference between the expressive or ethical function of language and its ontological function (Atterton & Calarco, 2005, p. 55). For Levinas, dialogue consists of a series of utterances, each of

ⁱ Atterton and Calarco (2005) note that in responding to the idealist philosophy of Kant, Levinas argues that the notion of the “I think” leads to the violence of the domination and exploitation of others: “By being placed under a concept, the Other falls within my powers, and is thus exposed to violence and disrespect” (p.10).

^j Here I consider the implications of Levinasian ethics for a different sort of encounter – one which goes beyond the realm of the physical – and think about the “face” in another sense. Just as Donnelly represents me as the public “face” of what is unacceptable about contemporary English teaching in Australia, so others, including myself, have made him the public “face” of the neo-conservative educational backlash: “we use [‘Donnelly’] to designate a cluster of neo-conservative views about education and schooling being propagated by mainstream media in Australia” (Doecke, Howie & Sawyer, 2006b, p.1).

which consists of two distinct and mutually irreducible phenomena: an expressive (and ethical) act of meaning on the part of a speaker (“saying”) and a theme which is expressed and understood (“said”) (cf. Hutchens, 2006, p. 5). In evaluating the actions of the Other, we can therefore focus our “reading” of those actions on the rhetorical shaping, as well as the social and cultural reverberations and consequences of the “said”, in order to reveal the ethical “saying” which is at work in the text (Critchely, p. 31). This can be done without compromising that dimension of incomprehensible separateness the Other possesses if we employ what Critchley defines as a clôtural reading: “double reading extended to include the analysis of closure and the question of ethics...[it] is history read from the standpoint of the victims of that history” (p. 30).

With this in mind, Donnelly’s capture and appropriation of me and my students might be understood in a number of ways. Reading Donnelly’s response with reference to Apple’s (2006) critique of neo-conservative and neo-liberal educational policies can allow it to be identified as a typical example of neo-conservative educational discourse. That is to say, a familiar response to fears of moral decay and cultural and social disintegration, which sets out to expunge “difference” and restore cultural order and stability through cultural literacy education (cf. Hirsch, 1987). (In this case, Donnelly seeks to establish a transcendental, ideal form of English, which consists of the unproblematic study of the timeless truths of certain incontrovertible “great” works of literature, as well as drilling in basic skills.) Following Levinas, Butler (2004) allows a different response to Donnelly’s writing, through which we can see a particular form of normative power at work, regulating what can appear and what can be heard in public and laying claim to what is and is not recognisably human. Drawing on Levinas’ conceptualisation of the primacy of the ethical encounter with the Other in order to critique the open hostility to “difference” exhibited post-9/11 by media commentators on the right of US politics, Butler argues that the “symbolic identification of the face with the inhuman, foreclose[s] our apprehension of the human in the scene...something that has already emerged into the realm of appearance needs to be disputed as recognisably human...” (p. 147). Naming me as an office bearer of a professional English teaching association allows Donnelly to put a symbolic “face” to the enterprise of contemporary English teaching in Australia, which he believes to be in a parlous state. Representing me as inept then self-servingly negates any responsibility on his part to acknowledge my humanity, or to engage with me and my thinking in a responsible manner. It allows him to dominate and control me, to subsume me within his language and argument.

Conversely, Bauman’s (2000) thinking on “liquid modernity” makes it possible to suggest that Donnelly and I have more in common and are closer together than might otherwise be believed. When my text and Donnelly’s response are read in conjunction, it becomes evident that we are both attempting, in different ways, to come to terms with what Bauman identifies as a distinguishing characteristic of the fluid nature of late-modernity: “The absence of guaranteed meanings – of absolute truths, of preordained norms of conduct, of pre-dawn borderlines between right and wrong, no longer needing attention, of guaranteed rules of successful action ...” (pp. 212-213). Both of us can be understood to be seeking forms of reference, “patterns of acceptable behaviour” or a “cohesive and consistent strategy” (Bauman, 2006, p. 1), that will allow us to make sense of the project of English teaching in what Bauman calls “liquid” times, when the old social forms have lost their solidity and can no longer be relied upon. The key differences between us lie, of course, in our individual

orientations to the past and the future of English, as well as the Others we have encountered in our pursuit of this project.

Reading Donnelly's response to my original text with reference to Apple, Butler and Bauman allows understanding of the fact that his pre-formed subscription to the totalizing system of a particular ideology (that is, neo-conservatism) and related educational practice (for example, cultural literacy) requires him to turn away from the ethical demands of the face-to-face relationship. His "concepts" precede and determine how he encounters the textual expression of my consciousness. This leads Donnelly, in responding to me, to fall into unproductive, vituperative rhetoric because he does not believe, as Levinas would have it, ethics to be a "first philosophy". Kostgriz explains this idea in the following way:

The Other ... is the origin of our experience for we enter the world, as Bakhtin (1981) put it, that has been already populated with the words of others. Because the words precede us we can only respond to what has been already said by appropriating these words and through this developing our understanding of self and the Other (p. 8).

This last point is crucial. The "said" of his criticisms indicate that, within the dialogue that has taken place between us, Donnelly demonstrates no interest in (better) understanding himself and no interest in understanding me. (Both his sense of himself and his understanding of me are closed and complete.) In seeking to assert the correctness of his pre-formed and fixed view of the world and himself, and therefore his authority to propound that view by asserting his presence over my own, Donnelly denies the humanity evident in my endeavours to make sense of my subject, its history and future, and my efforts to respond ethically to the complex needs and interests of the students before me. Highly characteristic of Donnelly's writing is what Bauman (1993) describes as a strain of intolerance that is a defining element of the present age: "the sectarian fury of neotribal self-assertion, the resurgence of violence as the principal instrument of order-building, the feverish search for home truths hoped to fill the void of the agora" (p. 238).

And yet, can I say that I am innocent of these very same charges? In responding to Donnelly in the manner I have here, I am required to ask this as he calls me into question. He is present in my language, and in my words I see his "gaze". (I am even more urgently compelled to meet it under the influence of Bauman's challenge to whatever possible motivation I might have for the advocacy I undertake.)

Certainly, there is also a strain of Bauman's "neotribal self-assertion" in my writing. My piece was originally conceived as a defence of critical literacy, which was at the time under attack – and has remained so – from various media commentators and politicians, with Donnelly being amongst the most vocal of these (cf. Freesmith, 2006). I must also concede that this framing of my piece as a defence also leads, rhetorically speaking, to obvious disingenuousness on my part. It is patently untenable for me to assert that my work was not about "ideology or political correctness". In the first instance, it must be accepted that, informed as it is by particular literary theories, the reading and interpretation of literature in English classrooms is inherently and inevitably ideological (cf. Belsey, 1989; Eagleton, 1983). Secondly, in the knowing allusions in my piece to Donnelly's favoured slogans, "political correctness" and "dumbing down", which have since been included in the title of his latest book, there is a barely disguised intertextuality at work – at least for keen observers of "debates"

about English teaching in Australia. My writing about my practice, if not the unit of work on *carpe diem* itself, is clearly informed by Donnelly's thinking and writing. In my piece I attempt to reframe (Lakoff, 2004) Donnelly's use of a phrase such as "political correctness" within the broader history of English as a subject and, not least, as a deliberate act of professional advocacy for an eclectic model of English that resists the neo-conservative agenda. (This is made even more obvious in the recontextualisation of the original piece in Howie, 2006a).

So, I concede that these are acts of bad faith on my part. These are instances in which I placed my need to establish the rhetorical persona of being reasonable and moderate, in a piece of writing that was intended for broad public consumption as a counter to media and political claims that English teachers are relativistic and extremist, ahead of making my argument on the basis of what I believe to be the more complex *realities* of English and English teaching. I can see now that I had traded in my autonomy – or committed an act of violence against myself in Levinasian terms – by acceding to and therefore reinforcing the dominance of an Other. By being concerned primarily with strategizing in the "said", I was compromised ethically in the "saying". I allowed myself to become ensnared in contestation on terms that were being set by Donnelly, passively accepting the ground rules he established as to what is acceptable and not acceptable to say. I did so in order that I might represent myself (on *his* terms and not my own) as someone recognisably "human" and qualified to speak (cf. Butler). In retrospect, what is even more galling about this is the way that it led me to not accept my responsibility to significant third parties: my students and those theorists of critical literacy who, as I have written about elsewhere, have been a significant influence on my work (Howie, 2002).

By generalising about the experiences of my students, I do not even begin to do justice to the complexities of their individual experiences of the dynamics of the teaching and learning taking place in my classroom. I fail to acknowledge their generosity and the trust they place in me by bringing their outside experiences and a questioning spirit into my classroom, ably "co-writing" the curriculum we enact together. They become faceless and nameless ciphers, props to my rhetorical positioning of my teaching self for public consumption as the acceptable "face" of contemporary English teaching.

Similarly, my reassuring representation of critical literacy as "a necessary and logical extension of the traditional concerns of English" is, I would maintain, a defensible position (cf. Howie, 2006a) but being "said" as it was in my original piece, it still amounts to a rhetorical "glossing over" of complex and fraught issues. In what some might see as a shoe-horning of critical literacy to fit the familiar liberal humanist discourse of history as progress, it might well be said that I have denied the profound challenge to dominant, historical understandings of the world and English as a subject presented by critical literacy because of its post-structuralist underpinnings (cf. Morgan, 2007; 1997). If this is so, it follows that I have not done justice to the complexity of thought and depth of learning which has informed this understanding of the subject, and the struggles of those educators who have sought to propagate it. I have responded, it must therefore be admitted, to the words of these Others, and therefore to them, in a very selective and limited sense. They have been subsumed by own pragmatic needs, my "I think", no matter how or necessary or valid I might have believed this to be at the time, and beyond my obedience to the rhetorical requirements and limitations of a chosen form of writing. In summary, the "failure" of

my original piece might be understood as a failure of imagination *and* an ethical failure. I was unable to imagine how I might respond to Donnelly in a way that resists and exceeds the limitations imposed by the genre and rhetorical demands of argumentation. I was also not open enough to the experiences of my students and intellectual influences to find a way to make them more present in my piece, to allow their “consciousnesses” to exist alongside my own dialogically (cf. Bakhtin, 1984).

CONCLUSION

Dialogical ethics holds that “self is dependent for its existence on the Other who provides a source of new meanings and a new semiotic basis for becoming, or enabling new selves to come” (Kostogriz, p. 10). Responding to Donnelly, as I have done here, is a logical continuation of the storying of my professional self: a necessary, open-ended and ongoing response to changes in my conditions of working and being, as I continue the process of “person building” or “self-definition” (Goodson, 2005, p. 85) in and through the dialogic relations I have with others. In short, this response is both a form of critical enquiry into my own work as an English teacher and a representative for other English teachers and a professional responsibility, if I am to understand myself as an accomplished teacher of English according to the standards developed by the professional body I now head (AATE & ALEA, 2002).

In writing this paper I have acted knowing that the Levinasian understanding of ethics affords me a form of (critical) response that goes beyond defensiveness or opposition. The idea and the ideal served here is *justice*, which Levinas understands as the relation to the Other. The Levinasian Other is manifest as a “disturbance” (Levinas, 2000, p. 89), which calls me to apology; to justify myself and my freedom (of praxis), not to prove that such freedom exists but to render it just. As Derrida has emphasised in explaining the influence of Levinas on his own thinking, in relating to the other *as the other* – not as someone I can presume to know from the “inside”, as if we are one – I must retain a distance, or dissociation (see Caputo, 1997, pp. 14-15). In other words, I have had to resist any temptation to assert myself over Donnelly or to presume to “know” him. Here, I have not sought to claim to speak for Donnelly, subsuming his thoughts and language within my own. I have attempted to avoid simply trumpeting the correctness of my thinking above his. Instead, I have tried to find ways to be hospitable, resisting the egotistical impulse to win a curriculum debate. As I have critiqued Donnelly’s “power”, highlighting the arbitrary elements and violence of his reading of English and *Howie*, I have inevitably had to seek out and pass judgement on the same forces at work in my writing. As Levinas would have it, notions such as “conscience” and “justice” mean this is only to be welcomed.

The call by proponents of dialogical ethics for teachers to “extend the ethic of responsibility by learning first to embrace the Other within [ourselves]” (Kostogriz and Doecke, p.22), in order that we might become responsible for those we encounter, has left me very conscious of how necessary – if difficult – it is to conceive a generous, open-ended response that escapes the sort of monologic discourse that inevitably emanates from a combative reading and writing position. To adopt the latter position can only “finalize and deaden” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.59), or work against

the unfinalizability and indeterminacy of consciousness, and the possibility of new understandings and new ways of being in the world.

For this reason, there is a broader social good arising from the politics of representing English and English teachers as they have been explored here. Derrida argues that it is a hospitable (Levinasian) orientation to the Other that constitutes democracy (Caputo, 1997, pp. 41-44; cf. Lucy, 1995). Moreover, according to Derrida, such a welcoming of the Other is the cultural inheritance of the Enlightenment, and best promoted through the will to question and freedom of interpretation (Caputo, 1997; cf. Lucy and Mickler, 2006). In responding to Donnelly in a dialogic and ethical manner, I might modestly, within the limits of my professional and personal powers and the social relations in and through which I work, claim to be contributing to the ongoing, non-finalizable project that is democracy:

... we must always welcome [others] and let them *remain* other than us. We must do so, always. For there could never come a time when there were no more strangers left to welcome, no more differences to acknowledge and affirm, which is why Derrida always speaks of democracy as democracy *to come* (Lucy and Mickler, p. 37).

Such professional work as writing this piece can also be located in the project of democracy to the extent that issues of representation, or who is said to be entitled to “speak” on social and cultural issues (such as English education) and what is said to count as valid knowledge, relate to the possibility of advancing, and not limiting, diverse ideas, interests and ways of being in the world (cf. Lucy and Mickler, p. 5). I am not alone in arguing that such a possibility is central to the historic project of English (for example, Green, 2006; Kress, 2006). Advocacy by English teachers is therefore more than a professional responsibility: it is a democratic necessity because, as Bakhtin and Levinas remind us, one more response is *always* required. The catch is, of course, that a response to the (Othered) self is just as much required as it is to the Other. What dialogical ethics adds to our understanding of critical literacy as a mode of resistance is that a finalized understanding of the English teaching “self” is to be resisted by individual English teachers seeking to resist a restricted and restricting understanding of their work and their professional identity. Refusing the limiting of ways of being an English teacher is essential to the public struggle to prevent the neo-conservative closure of the subject.

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