

# Transformations

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### The War on English: An Answer to the Question, What is Postmodernism?

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This paper derives from our keynote address to the NSW English Teachers' Association Conference ("Licence to Thrill") in Sydney, December 2007. It is intended as an evidence-based rejoinder to widespread attacks on the alleged parlous state of secondary-school English in Australia today, where the problem seems to be that English has been taken over by "postmodernism." In this way postmodernism is seen as the general or foundational problem, and so it follows that "postmodern" English must be a problem too.

Our first task, then, is to decide what "postmodernism" means, according to its detractors. What are its alleged key features? This question occupies the initial section of the paper, which includes a series of counter arguments in response to what postmodernism is supposed to be guilty of "undermining" or "destroying." In section two we move to a discussion of particular problems associated with so-called "postmodern" English, before focusing (in section three) on the widely reported views of a strident adversary of contemporary English studies: Kevin Donnelly. Our comments here are confined to a discussion of Donnelly's most recent book, *Dumbing Down* (2007), which we take for a mature and considered expression of his approach to education. We conclude by way of pondering the question, whose interests are served by attacking postmodernism?

## 1. Postmodernism

### 1.1

Postmodernism is denounced for consisting (allegedly) of five broad features, all of which are meant to be equally damning:

- postmodernism holds there to be *no such thing as truth*
- postmodernism equals *moral relativism*
- postmodernism is *leftist*
- postmodernism is *anti-liberal*
- postmodernism holds there to be *no such thing as history*.

Under postmodernism, as historian Keith Windschuttle puts it, "the pursuit of something as objective as the truth becomes a mere pipe dream" ("Struggle"). So ingrained is this assumption – that for postmodernism there is *no such thing as truth* – that *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Miranda Devine refers to "a destructive era of postmodern truth-twisting" in one of her columns ("Riding"), without feeling obliged to explain what she means by that expression. It comes as no surprise therefore that another newspaper columnist, Giles Auty, should accuse postmodernism of disillusioning the nation's youth by teaching them to disrespect the truth:

Since the advent of postmodernism almost every worthwhile certainty and traditional

virtue has not just been called into question but has come under increasing assault – usually in our centres of further education and supposed enlightenment. When the concepts of truth, honour, objectivity, altruism, justice and religious faith are treated with contempt or scepticism by those who instruct our young, is it any great wonder that some of the young should seek refuge in oblivion or narcolepsy?  
 (“Postmodernism’s Assault”)

On the subject of postmodernism’s alleged equation with moral relativism, Clive Hamilton, former director of the self-styled “progressive” Australia Institute in Canberra, writes:

The error of post-modernism, which grew out of the broad academic Left and now dominates Western society, is that it has no metaphysical foundation for a moral critique. Without a metaphysics that is common to humanity, any moral stance must be relative and therefore be contestable and lacking in conviction. (“Churches”)

Or as current Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, writing in *The Monthly* for October 2006, sees it, postmodernism has joined with secular humanism to supplant orthodox religious faith:

The impact of independent scientific enquiry, the increasing impact of secular humanism itself, combined with the pervasive influence of modernism and postmodernism, have had the cumulative effect of undermining the influence of the mainstream Catholic and Protestant churches across the West.

Where this will lead as Christianity enters its third millennium, remains to be seen. But there are signs of Christianity seeing itself, and being seen by others, as a counterculture operating within what some have called a post-Christian world.  
 (“Faith”)

As for the claim that postmodernism is “leftist”, Hamilton says as much above. But perhaps no one has put it so raucously as Auty, for whom postmodernism “represents an attempt to usher in a new kind of left-wing totalitarianism via the unlocked back doors of democracies. Postmodernism represents the neo-Marxist conquest of Western cultures by stealth” (“Postmodernism’s Assault”). Given the sometime hysterical tenor of these charges it is clear that whatever postmodernism is said to be, it is taken for a force (albeit one as insubstantial as a cloud, but which none the less “dominates” the West) whose nature is excessive (“monstrous,” “unnatural”) and violent. Hence it goes without saying that postmodernism is *anti-liberal*, given its unbalanced views on truth and its “dominating,” “totalitarian” tendencies. Small wonder that it should also stand accused of adopting an extreme position in regards to history, the substance of which – according to Windschuttle – it turns into a contest of “political” stances and “subjective” opinions:

Academic historians have argued that the attempt to distance themselves from their own political system cannot be done. According to many, history is “inescapably political.” In tandem with this has come the notion that history cannot be objective because there are no independent vantage points from which one can look down on the past. We can only see the world through the lenses of our own culture, so what we see is inherently subjective. And if that is so, then the pursuit of something as objective as the truth becomes a mere pipe dream. And we have to give up the idea of truth as an absolute concept and substitute a relative idea of truth. Under this notion, different cultures and even different political positions each have their own truths, even if they are incompatible with the truths of other cultures. This stance generally goes under the name of postmodernism. (“Struggle”)

In order to attack postmodernism, from the left or the right, some version of the features we’ve identified has to be believed. The case against it rests, in other words, on an uncritical acceptance

of the charges, based on the assumption that postmodernism inaugurates a radical break with so-called "traditional" values and reason. These, however, are not traditional in a *timeless* sense, having their origins in the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century to which we owe the possibility of critiquing the very idea of tradition itself, along with notions of "received wisdom," "absolute truth," "traditional values," "universal morality" and all forms of authority in general. In this light, "postmodernism" marks simply the ongoing project (by other means, as it were) of such critique – or of that tradition.

Seemingly, then, the issue is not so much what postmodernism "is," but what it is used to *represent*. So how might it be represented differently from the professed features outlined above?

## 1.2

### *Postmodernism holds there to be no such thing as truth:*

Postmodernism represents a continuation (by other means) of a critical project associated with the Enlightenment, a project encapsulated in Kant's motto: "*Sapere Aude!*" – *dare to know* ("Answer" 54). It is therefore not an attack on "truth" as such, but rather on notions of *absolute* truth as determined by the church or other institutions. (Since we no longer take it to be true that a woman's place is in the home, that all swans are white or that the poor are morally inferior to the rich, why should we take it as true that all texts have "natural" or "essential" meanings?) Since the Enlightenment opens the possibility of a critical scepticism towards received, official, orthodox, traditional, absolute or objective forms of truth and authority, this alleged feature of postmodernism turns out to be nothing less than a central feature of the Enlightenment.

### *Postmodernism equals moral relativism:*

Morality is another form of absolute universal truth; therefore the Enlightenment gives us a responsibility to rethink or challenge it. This results in the substitution of secular for religious morality, but on the understanding that secular morality (or "ethics") cannot be taken as *absolute*. It too remains open to critique. (If morality is a fixed set of answers, ethics is an open set of questions. The one demands obedience, the other responsibility.) We can say, then, that the Enlightenment is on the side of philosophy versus theology, which is not to say that such an opposition is not always at the same time political. (It would be a gross insult to modern educators to expect them to accept the proposition that if they're not religious, they must be "amoral" or "relativist.") Again, an alleged feature of postmodernism turns out to be another central feature of the Enlightenment.

### *Postmodernism is leftist:*

Postmodernism is not a leftist "program," but it is a "critical" project. Since critical thought can lead to social reform, then historically conservatism has always been opposed to it. Conservatives denounce "postmodernism" as "leftist," then, because they *cannot* denounce it as "critical" (this would be unsayable). Hence the attack on postmodernism is ultimately anti-intellectual (consider the import of this for debates about education, for example) and at the same time undemocratic, insofar as democracy depends less on free trade than it does on free thought. If it is "postmodern" to ask after the conditions under which the meaning of a text might be said to occur, it is therefore also *democratic* to do so. Yet again: to the extent that the Enlightenment is a critical-intellectual project, postmodernism shares an essential feature with it.

### *Postmodernism is anti-liberal:*

We owe the notion of liberalism to the Enlightenment, particularly in terms of a tolerance for difference and a healthy scepticism towards absolute truth and unquestionable authority. Challenging the so-called "natural" order of things made it possible, for example, to recognise racist, sexist and homophobic attitudes as unjust and undemocratic, and therefore to oppose

them. So if it is “postmodern” to question the “natural” or “essential” meaning of a text, such an attitude must be seen as belonging also to a *liberal* tradition of critical inquiry. If this attitude belongs to postmodernism, too, then postmodernism cannot be separated from the Enlightenment.

*Postmodernism holds there to be no such thing as history:*

Postmodernism questions the nature of history (which follows from questioning the nature of truth), by asking for example who has the authority to *write* history and to make it into *official* history? These are professionally appropriate questions for modern historians to ask. To see them as “radical” would be to invoke a notion of *absolute* truth, which produces history as a single narrative independent of anyone’s critical relations to it. The social and political systems for which history is understood as a *single, pre-given* narrative of the truth are either religious or totalitarian. Note that both of these are opposed to critical thought. Once again, finally, in its questioning of history postmodernism can be seen as continuing the critical project – or the tradition – of the Enlightenment.

## 2. Postmodern English

It follows from this that so-called “postmodern” English is an outcome of secular, enlightened, modern critical thought. “Postmodern” English dares to know.

But this is not how its detractors represent it. Those who oppose it associate postmodern English (often in the guise of “critical literacy”) with the following pejorative features:

- postmodern English is *anti-realist*
- postmodern English equals *moral relativism*
- postmodern English says there is *no such thing as truth*
- postmodern English uses *impenetrable jargon*
- postmodern English is *ideological*
- postmodern English is *anti-canonical*.

As education journalist Luke Slattery puts it, contemporary English studies is underpinned by “an anti-realist theory of knowledge at odds with commonsense, as well as scientific and philosophical notions of truth: parents should be made aware of this, as should teachers who are not already” (“Literacy”). The mere assertion of the charge that postmodern English is “anti-realist,” then, is enough to make this seem self-evidently alarming. Likewise it is enough just to say that postmodern English promotes “moral relativism”, together with the idea that there is *no such thing as truth*, for such claims to arouse immediate concern. How else to respond to Donnelly’s thesis in *Dumbing Down*, for example, that school leavers are “ethically challenged as a result of a post-modern curriculum that teaches that values are subjective and that there is no such thing as truth as learning is a ‘socio/cultural construct’” (8)?

The claim that postmodern English is anti-realist or anti-commonsensical goes hand in glove with the accusation that its reliance on “impenetrable jargon” is an abuse of plain language. That’s why Queensland Labor Education Minister Rod Welford vowed to purge postmodernism from the English curriculum in his State – because of its “mumbo jumbo.” “It’s really not a very constructive pathway for English learning at school,” he is reported to have said. “Nothing will leave this department that I don’t understand” (cited in Slattery, “Mumbo Jumbo”)! Former Federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson took a similar view, accusing postmodernism of “spreading cryptic jargon” throughout the secondary-school sector by way of university education departments – on which postmodernism has acted like a “virus” (cited in Norrie, “Deconstructing Buffy”).

Just as its critical vocabulary is dismissed as “mumbo jumbo,” so too are the critical aims of

contemporary English studies ridiculed as grossly “ideological” or “politically correct.” This is a common charge, often coupled with postmodern English’s alleged disrespect for the canon. “I share the views of many people about the so-called postmodernism,” John Howard is reported to have said in 2006. “I just wish that independent education authority didn’t succumb on occasions to the political correctness that it appears to succumb to” (cited in Welch, “PM Blasts”). Or as Brendan Nelson is quoted as putting it a year earlier: university education faculties have become “in essence quasi-sociology departments” in which undergraduates study “*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and those sort of things,” but not Milton “and stuff like that” (cited in Norrie, “Deconstructing Buffy”). Summing up the case against postmodern English, former Prime Minister Howard was in no doubt recently that there are only two kinds of books in the world – “high-quality literature” and “rubbish.” “We need a curriculum,” he said, “that encourages an understanding of the high-quality literature and not the rubbish” (cited in Welch, “PM Blasts”).

Such are the charges against English studies in Australia today, which Donnelly develops at length in *Dumbing Down*. We now turn to a discussion of that book in response to the accusations above.

### 3. *Dumbing Down*

Donnelly’s book was officially launched by then Prime Minister John Howard at Parliament House, Canberra, in February 2007. The occasion, perhaps, recalls a form of patronage that was common in pre-Enlightenment times, given that the book in question was neither written by a celebrated author nor published by a distinguished press. So why did Howard choose to launch it – and at Parliament House? Certainly Donnelly (an executive director of a private education consultancy based in Melbourne) is well known as a media commentator on education, but that hardly accounts for the prime ministerial fanfare accompanying the book’s release. Nor could Howard be thought to have regarded the book as a model of good communication in an increasingly “illiterate” age of “facile” email and mobile phone correspondence, given – as historian Stuart Macintyre points out – that *Dumbing Down* “reveals an inability to construct a sentence” (“Polemic”). On the plentiful evidence presented by Macintyre of Donnelly’s many grammatical and other errors, indeed, *Dumbing Down* would appear to meet all the criteria of what Howard calls “rubbish” books.

But Howard was adamant that *Dumbing Down* is on the side of “high-quality literature,” even if he stopped short of calling the book an example of it:

I would commend to all of you Kevin’s work on the way in which the teaching of English has been allowed in some cases to drift into a relativist wasteland, where students are asked to deconstruct texts using politically-correct theories in contrast with the traditional view that great literature has something profound to say about the human condition.

In tackling these issues, often against the grain of self-proclaimed education “experts,” Kevin Donnelly displays both great courage and a tough-minded determination to defend the higher purposes of education, especially in carrying forward the best of the Western cultural tradition. (Howard, Transcript)

Never mind, then, that Donnelly’s sentences may be in want of some attention, what matters is that *Dumbing Down* champions the values and standards of “the Western cultural tradition.” The conceit could scarcely be more unambiguous or startling: if we do not tend to that tradition, the future will turn into a “wasteland.”

This, too, is Donnelly’s argument in *Dumbing Down*. It is also a popular argument, of course, widely disseminated throughout the media, in parliament and across the public sphere. It appears

frequently (for example) on the PLATO blogsite, the online forum of the group in Western Australia that calls itself "People Lobbying Against Teaching Outcomes" (where "outcomes" stands for "outcomes-based education" and where many of the "people" are English teachers), to which Donnelly often contributes and where he figures predominantly as the brave defender of "standards" that Howard makes him out to be. It would be a mistake to dismiss Donnelly's views as ineffectual, then, simply because his prose falls short of being "high-quality literature." Donnelly's lack of distinction as a writer is not the issue. What matters (and here we agree with Howard) is precisely that Donnelly is represented, and frequently represents himself, as a champion of the values and standards of "the Western cultural tradition" in defiance of the destructive force of "postmodernism," whose "mantra," Donnelly contends, is "that knowledge is 'socially and historically constructed'" (*Dumbing Down* 77). (The obvious inference here is that postmodernism should be scorned for not thinking that all knowledge is "absolute" and "transcendental.") For this reason *Dumbing Down* is an important text, we think, because the case it puts on behalf of those values and standards is a pastiche of popular arguments in favour of "tradition" and popular anxieties surrounding "postmodernism." While Donnelly's take on these is undeniably idiosyncratic at times, all the same his book is a remarkable assemblage of otherwise unremarkable prejudices, moral panics and ill-founded assumptions in the service of what are ultimately undemocratic interests.

Donnelly uses "postmodernism" as a collective term for whatever he sees – "feminism," "deconstruction," "multiculturalism," "critical literacy," "the cultural left," "the New Age," "Marxism" and so on – as a threat to what he calls the "liberal-humanist" or (as he puts it, wrongly) "liberal/humanist" worldview belonging to the West, based on absolute values and knowledge. Those opposing this worldview, on Donnelly's reckoning, "claim it is mono-cultural and that it reinforces a narrow, doctrinaire view of the world associated with Australia's Anglo/Celtic past" (*Dumbing Down* 184). But Donnelly thinks to have the perfect riposte:

anyone familiar with the development of Western civilisation will know that it has drawn on a host of wider cultural influences. One only needs to look at the English language to note the impact of ancient Greek and Latin as well as remnants of the languages of the Vikings and the Normans. Many classical English myths and fables are derived from Europe, Arabia and India, and literature has long since stopped being the preserve of white, middle-class elites committed to King and country. Anyone who has walked through the British Museum will also know, that while England is unique as a country and it has evolved in a distinctive way, that it has drawn upon and absorbed a host of wider cultural influences. (*Dumbing Down* 184)

The problem with this retort, however, is that it defines, in ways both ridiculous and revealing, "Western civilisation" as "Anglo/Celtic." Greeks, Latins, Vikings and Normans, it seems, are somehow *outside* influences on "Western" civilisation. What manner of Anglo-centrism is barely disguised here? Against its own intentions, then, the passage is an object lesson in the consequences of a "narrow, doctrinaire view" of the world – a case study of the very "mono-culturalism" its author claims his position does *not* represent.

A further problem for Donnelly's argument is that the tradition of "liberal-humanist" education he valorises appears to have two origins. It goes back a few hundred years (to a time he nominates as "the rise of Western civilisation") *and* it goes back several thousand years, all the way to ancient Greece. So the modern curriculum "centred on particular subjects like mathematics, history and English," he maintains, is owed to "a view of education closely associated with the rise of Western civilisation that can be traced back over some hundreds of years" (*Dumbing Down* 177). Presumably he's referring to the European Enlightenment here, which would make his general point uncontroversial. But Donnelly wants to draw a far longer bow:

Since the time of the early Greek philosophers and sophists, evolving over the

centuries and incorporating aspects of the Judeo/Christian tradition and historical movements such as the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment, a liberal/humanist view of education is concerned – to use Matthew Arnold's expression – with "getting to know, on all matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said" (Arnold, 1969, p 6). (*Dumbing Down* 177)

There is only one word – *revisionist* – to describe this approach to cultural history. The idea that the ancient Greeks were liberal humanists simply is preposterous, serving to show that by "liberal humanism" Donnelly means to invoke a notion of *timeless* values and standards that are absolute and foundational. This allows him to think of history – to construct it – as a *single* narrative, a perfect continuum (albeit while conceding some vague "evolutions") from the Greeks through to Renaissance England and on to twenty-first century Australia! On such a view the entire cultural history of the West is but a serial repetition of its origin (its "first" origin, as it were) in ancient Greece, making it inconceivable that Australia, say, or for that matter England, could develop a cultural identity of its own. The irony of the "history is continuous" thesis is that all historical differences have to be overlooked in order to believe that "civilisation" was born in ancient Greece, and that it has remained unchanged ever since. If this were so then the Enlightenment, far from having a distinctive identity, would be nothing more than another repetition of history's (original) "origin." Instead of being understood as a reaction to pre-modern, feudal authority vested in the church, the monarchy and the aristocracy, the Enlightenment could be seen only as a revisionist reaffirmation of values and standards deriving from ancient, "liberal-humanist" Greece.

Hence, we surmise: Donnelly opposes "postmodern" English because it disallows the "history is continuous" thesis, which assumes an uninterrupted lineage from Shakespeare, for instance, to us. But to argue against that line, to argue that "Shakespeare" is a text remaining open to occasional and periodic re-evaluations, is not to be committed to insisting that *Hamlet* is equivalent to a comic strip, a piece of graffiti or (to use one of Donnelly's examples) "a reality TV show" (*Dumbing Down* 158). The kinds of ludicrous interpretations misattributed to "postmodernism" exist, that is to say, *only* in their misattributions.

More problematic still for Donnelly is that history's real (or truly original) origin turns out not to be ancient Greece after all, but the Garden of Eden. We gave up trying to count how many times the neologism "Judeo/Christian" appears in *Dumbing Down*; suffice to say, though, that it appears often enough to be conspicuous. The irony here is that it's precisely in reaction to Judeo-Christian teachings, according to which human history begins (and we become historical or "fallen" beings) when Adam and Eve are flung from the Garden of Eden because Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, that Kant implores us to see that our historical future, as opposed to a mythological one, is tied to our capacity and willingness to *dare to know*. This turns history over to men and women to make of it what they decide, instead of condemning it to be endured as a punishment on the way to a "better" world. The Enlightenment *breaks* with Judeo-Christian tradition, in short, and cannot be conflated with it. So much so that to the extent in which Judeo-Christian authority continues to exert a force today, we can say that we are still waiting for the Enlightenment to happen.

Against this, Donnelly conceives of history as a never-ending story – all the better to separate "postmodernism" as perversely counter-historical. But for the postmodern "wrong" turn, the history of the West would be just one long, unbroken line of near-perfect harmony:

The reason for studying history is not simply so we are saved from repeating the same mistakes, equally as important is the recognition that, as individuals and as a society, we are involved in an unfolding narrative that began thousands of years ago and which continues to unfold into the future. Being part of that narrative promotes a sense of belonging to something more lasting and significant than the often mundane routine of one's day-to-day existence. One of the strengths of a liberal/humanist view

of education, in an era of social dysfunction, alienation and loss of meaning, is that there is a strong and life-affirming story about how Western civilisation has evolved and how, while being far from perfect, we are no longer ruled by superstition, bigotry and ignorance. (*Dumbing Down* 178)

Western civilisation isn't simply *different* from other cultures and civilisations, then; it is "better" than them. But the idea that "we" are better than "them" can't hold together even in a single paragraph for Donnelly. On the one hand we (and the pronoun here is clearly not inclusive, say, of Indigenous Australians, though let's put this aside for now) are "involved in an unfolding narrative" extending from thousands of years ago to today, when "we are no longer ruled by superstition, bigotry and ignorance," while on the other and at the same time we live in "an era of social dysfunction, alienation and loss of meaning"! Hence we wonder whether what Donnelly really meant to say is that we live in "an era of social dysfunction, alienation and loss of meaning" *because* "we are no longer ruled by" religion, a belief in the cultural supremacy of the West and obedient acceptance of "the" truth?

Donnelly's benighted advocacy of an anti-intellectual and pro-authoritarian position leaves us to surmise also that his objection to "postmodern" English has to do with its affirmation – textually, ethically, historically, politically and so forth – of difference, dating from but not determined by the Enlightenment turn towards "progressive" critique. Such affirmation may be no better represented today – no better reaffirmed – than in the ideas and methods developed under the rubric of "critical literacy," among the general aims of which is the development of students' critical skills with a view to lessening the chances of them being "ruled by superstition, bigotry and ignorance." What might be called the project of overcoming such anti-democratic forces remains unfinished, of course, as well as being both historically modern and discontinuous. For how could we ever have *enough* democracy [1]? Hence the authority of superstition today – through the church and other institutions and beliefs – is threatened by what Donnelly and other conservatives (such as Howard, Slattery, Windschuttle and the like), along with many on the left, call "postmodernism," because they *cannot* say it is threatened by the Enlightenment, modernity or a "tradition" of critical thought [2].

In this context, Donnelly's affirmation not of difference, but of Anglo-Celtic/Judeo-Christian authority, commits his critique of "postmodern" English to a form of *cultural* studies – the very thing he accuses postmodern English of being. And what makes the Anglo-Celtic/Judeo-Christian heritage so "superior," according to Donnelly, if not its allegiance to principles of fairness, tolerance and diversity – the very things, again, that he accuses "postmodernism" of promoting in the form of multiculturalism, anti-racism, egalitarianism and a critique of power relations? What so offends Dr Donnelly, we continue to surmise, is that what he calls "postmodernism" is an affirmation of difference that is also therefore on the side of democracy:

Within the culture wars, clear thinking is re-badged as critical literacy and given a left-wing slant. Students, no longer taught how to identify and deal with different persuasive devices, such as generalisations and ad hominem arguments, are instead taught to analyse texts in terms of power relationships and what is considered politically correct, especially in areas such as gender, ethnicity and class. The Tasmanian website [of that State's education department], when outlining the benefits of critical literacy, suggests:

*Critical literacy provides us with ways of thinking that uncover social inequalities and injustices. It enables us to address disadvantage and to become agents of social change.*  
Tasmanian Department of Education, 2005. (Donnelly *Dumbing Down* 147)

What exactly is supposed to be the problem here? That "postmodern" English invites students to think about literature in terms of "gender, ethnicity and class"? That it asks them to engage with literary and other kinds of texts as a way of thinking about "social inequalities and injustices"?



But since when have such questions been *postmodern*, as if to ask them were to take literary studies away from “itself”? Could it be possible to read *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, today or in the past, without seeing that social and sexual power in the world of that novel is gendered? Would it be wrong for “postmodern” students to consider ways in which gender relations today differ from the social referents of Austen’s novel, set in eighteenth-century provincial England? Would it be wrong for them to understand the context in which those relations might be seen to differ, as no less than historical through and through?

Only a revisionist approach to literary history could construct these questions as proof of a “wrong” turn associated with postmodernism. For since when has literature not dealt with issues of “gender, ethnicity and class”? Take Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” for example, a text that Donnelly himself commends. Published in 1729, this satirical political pamphlet pushes at the limits of utilitarian reason by putting a rational case for solving the problem of famine among the “over”-populated Irish poor of the time, by getting them to eat their surplus young. To contest this argument would be to do so *ethically*, asserting on behalf of a certain idea of what “society” means that reason alone won’t do. To read against the text’s affirmation of rationality, then, would be to see at the very least that the utilitarianism it advocates depends on accepting *unequal* relations of ethnicity and class as *natural*. If the superiority of English landowners to the indentured Irish poor is *not* natural, however, then it must be historical and therefore able to be changed. So any argument (no matter how seemingly reasoned) for maintaining the status quo has to be seen as serving the interests of those who have power already – the English landowners – against those who don’t, the Irish poor.

But Donnelly might want to raise an objection here, claiming that this reading operates on the basis of an unacknowledged “slippage” from textual to extra-textual concerns. He might want to say that we’ve forgotten to read “A Modest Proposal” as a work of *literature*; that we’ve forgotten to see it as a set of “persuasive devices” belonging to a work of fiction on behalf of an idea of the “purely” literary. In that case we might want to ask how we could have arrived at our reading, except by taking account of the “persuasive devices” that the text uses to promote unequal social relations as natural? Since when did reading texts “in terms of power relationships,” in other words, not mean reading them in recognition of “different persuasive devices” that may be used in an attempt to naturalise power – or to naturalise “social inequalities and injustices”? Note that Donnelly’s rhetorical trick (his persuasive device) here is to denounce something he otherwise approves of, by giving it another name. He denounces the analysis of “power relationships,” but approves the analysis of what he calls “persuasive devices.” Note too that Donnelly cannot quite get *outside* of modernity in order to condemn contemporary English studies’ focus on – precisely – “different persuasive devices,” since to do so it would be necessary to deny that English *should* be concerned with understanding those devices and instead become a quasi-religious project requiring students to believe rather than to think. For us, then, it would be perfectly legitimate (though of course Donnelly would disagree) to ask students to consider ways in which some of the persuasive devices used in “A Modest Proposal” might also be found, albeit in different forms and to varying degrees, in policy documents and other texts relating to Aboriginal people as inalienably “other.” For us it would be entirely within the scope of English studies to read “A Modest Proposal” as a text employing certain persuasive devices on behalf of a *discourse* on race and class, and it goes without saying that this would not be to preclude many other possible readings.

Hence the textual/extra-textual distinction is problematic, if not altogether false. Could it be that this is what Derrida was getting at when he wrote that “there is nothing outside of the text” (*Grammatology* 158)? There is nothing – no meanings, no inferences – outside of a *context*, in other words, since there could be no possibility of a transcendental, context-free zone within which a meaning or an inference could be said to occur. (Note it does not follow that if meanings are never independent of contexts, then context must *determine* meaning. But that’s not quite the point for now.) One consequence of this is that literature loses its stability or inviolability as a concept, which is not to be committed to saying that there is *no such thing* as literature. Literature’s

“identity,” then, is put in question, in company with the larger question of textuality in general, but again this is not to say that therefore literature has *no* identity at all [3]. The question of textuality invites in turn a consideration of many different kinds of textual forms, not all of which are necessarily “literary” or even necessarily linguistic or print-based. None of these forms, including literary texts, is transcendental, since textuality is inseparable from a network – a text – of historical, technological, political, cultural and other forces and contexts. This is not to argue – far from it – that all forms of textuality are equivalent in aesthetic, discursive, affective, institutional and other ways. It does not follow from the recognition that textual meanings and values are never transcendental that, as Donnelly wrongly asserts, postmodernism is committed to teaching “that all texts are of equal value” (*Dumbing Down* 158). So, too, the often repeated charge that English teachers today see *no* difference between an SMS message, for example, and a Shakespeare play, is a furphy used to make it seem that English teachers do not have a professional responsibility to introduce students to an understanding of the different persuasive and other devices at work across a range of contemporary textual forms. Hence the furphy is that teachers are not being “professional” when they refer to texts other than literature; they are being “ideological.” Because Jane Austen did not have a mobile phone to use or a cinema to go to, so the argument seems to be, then Australian teens in the twenty-first century have no need or right to be exposed to the formal study of the kinds of textuality made possible by technologies of the phone and cinema, whose development Austen could not have dreamt of.

A further consequence of the problematic nature of the text/ outside-text distinction is that a concept such as the literary canon cannot be understood as absolute, a-contextual or transcendental. (So much for Howard’s assertively transcendental distinction between “high-quality” and “rubbish” literature, a fuzzy division if ever there were.) But without an incontestably fixed and stable canon, the core of Donnelly’s argument is at risk of meltdown. He has no choice, then, but to defend it, even while conceding that “the” canon is subject to historical and other forms of change. What he wants us to believe does *not* change, however, is the *concept* or idea of the canon as such, without which much of Donnelly’s attack on “postmodern” English would lose its force. Unsurprisingly, since the modern concept of a canonical set of literary masterworks is associated powerfully with British critic and academic F. R. Leavis, writing from the late-1920s through to the early-1970s, Donnelly turns to Leavis for support:

One of the main advocates of the more conservative approach [to literary criticism], the English critic F. R. Leavis, admitted that the literary canon evolved over time and that students, far from being passive, should respond to literary texts in an engaging and active way:

*In my account of what a due performance of the function of criticism would have been like – for there you have my theme – the conception of criticism I invoked was the very reverse of a dogmatic one...criticism, of its essential nature, is collaborative – collaborative and creative, and that a due performance of the function requires a plurality of centres.* Leavis, 1956, p. 56 [in fact this passage appears on pp. 56-7] (Donnelly *Dumbing Down* 73-4)

The problem for Donnelly here is that, unlike the Ten Commandments, the canon is open to disagreement, intervention and change, forcing him to acknowledge that even Leavis “admitted that the literary canon evolved over time.” How could it not? In a secular, critical society, as opposed to an orthodox religious one, how could a concept like the canon *not* be subject to historical, aesthetic, cultural, political and other transforming effects? As the bedrock of English studies, then, the canon turns out to be about as solid as the air, its only “permanent” feature being that it is permanently subject to transformation. Some of the poets, for example, whom Leavis sought to induct into the canon through his first important book, *New Beginnings in English Poetry*, published in 1932, are seldom read at all today, posing the question of what a “formerly” canonical work or writer might look like. How could a text or an author be a part of “the” canon one day, and discarded the next?

So it would seem that the question of canonicity is a subject best left to cardinals and rabbis to decide, which secular literary critics would do well to leave alone. But if Donnelly's co-option of Leavis was never going to produce the desired effect of reinforcing an ideal of the canon as a *single, pre-given* set (a certain kind of narrative construction) of "high-quality" literary works, a further problem for Donnelly is that the picture he paints of Leavis as a "conservative" is not entirely straightforward either. Certainly Leavis took what would be called today a conservative view on art and literature, so that for him "great" artistic and literary works do not simply represent the moral life of the times in which they were produced – they *embody* that life. Even so, if a conservative critic is someone who looks only to the past for moral and aesthetic reassurance, Leavis went far beyond type in maintaining an active interest in the new. He may not have been always enthusiastic about new writing, but he was at least always interested in what was being written; and this, the principle of curiosity as it might be called, is something he sought to inspire in his students. He encouraged them to read Joyce's *Ulysses*, for instance, although Leavis himself cantankerously disapproved of the book. Nor can it be overlooked that Leavis insisted (as indeed Donnelly quotes him to say) that criticism emanates from "a *plurality* of centres."

But while Donnelly is keen to enlist Leavis in support (as he must think) of his argument, he appears reluctant to emulate him. Unlike Leavis, Donnelly has no stomach for the new. Instead of being curious as to what might be going on in English studies today, instead of daring to know what it might have to offer, Donnelly dismisses it out of hand. Everything for him about the contemporary study of literature is "extra"-literary and therefore improper according to an ideal of literary studies as he imagines it was taught in the past. Because English today is not supposedly what it used to be, therefore it must be condemned. Because there has been change, therefore it must be turned back. Because contemporary English studies sees the distinction between textual and "extra"-textual fields as a problem, thus opening it to a consideration of many different kinds of literary and other texts, therefore it is not English studies. Therefore it must have turned into an ideological, anti-canonical, anti-realist, morally relativist, counter-historical program run by the left, with the aim of bringing civilisation as we know it – *Western* civilisation – to an end by using obtuse jargon to indoctrinate young people into thinking there is no such thing as truth! English, in a word, has been made over into *cultural studies*, and the calamitous effects attending this transformation are not confined to Australia:

It is worth noting that Australia is not alone in the way literature has been transformed into cultural studies, where students are taught to analyse texts in terms of power relationships and as examples of how those more powerful in society are able to exert control. As noted by the US academics Patai and Corral, literature has been under attack throughout the English-speaking world:

*What theorists of all these persuasions [known collectively as "postmodernists"] have in common, whatever their individual differences, is a decisive turning away from literature as literature and an eagerness to transmogrify it into a cultural artefact (or "signifying practice") to be used in waging an always anti-establishment ideological political struggle.*  
Patai and Corral, 2005, p. 8. (Donnelly *Dumbing Down* 154)

Again, Donnelly seems to have quoted others against the best interests of his argument. For what is the call that Donnelly makes throughout *Dumbing Down* – for affirmative action on behalf of the Anglo-Celtic/Judeo-Christian literary and cultural tradition – if not a plea for literature to be seen not "as" literature, but as "a cultural artefact"? Notice too (and not for the first time) the implicit denigration of an otherwise seemingly unextraordinary aim of English studies, in this case that of teaching literature as an example "of how those more powerful in society are able to exert control." What would be the problem with this? Think again for example of Swift's "A Modest Proposal," which presents not merely a "literary" critique of Anglo ruling-class abuses perpetrated on the Celtic peasant class, but also and unashamedly an ethical and a political critique. Why should students be prevented from engaging with this text today, engaging with its "persuasive devices," other than as an example of "literature as literature"? "A Modest Proposal"

was published originally, after all, as a *political* pamphlet. How come we should be constrained to think of it now *only* as a work of literature?

Once more, then, we surmise: Donnelly wants us to think of literature (and in this he is vastly at odds with Leavis's project) as a transcendental category, a-contextually free of history, gender, class, ethnicity, politics, sexuality, desire and other "external" factors and forces. Against this, however, he tries to persuade us at the same time that (at the very least) history, culture and ethnicity are bound inextricably to a notion of *English* literature, such that English literature should not be understood in anything other than historical, cultural and ethnic terms – as Anglo-Celtic and Judeo-Christian. On the one hand, then, "the West" is a universal and disinterested category, while on the other it is partial and politicised. Which is it to be? The trick Donnelly doesn't quite pull off is to stop this question from occurring to anyone.

But that's not to say he doesn't try to cosy up to readers by playing the role of the good liberal who cares not only about "declining standards" in education, but also about declining workplace standards among modern-day educators brought about by bureaucrats obsessed with outcomes-based education (OBE). "Teachers," he writes, "instead of having the freedom to teach [under an OBE system], are overwhelmed with a bureaucratic and intrusive accountability framework where everything has to be measured and ticked off" (*Dumbing Down* 35). Elsewhere he refers to the "unjustified demands" that OBE puts on teachers, and no doubt many readers in the secondary education sector would agree and others would as well. What is there to *disagree* with, when bureaucrats are said to be responsible for getting something wrong? When it comes to criticism of the implementation of OBE, indeed, one of us is on record as criticising it strongly, albeit not for the reasons misreported in the press (see Hiatt, "Examiner Quits", and Ferrari, "Curriculum Changes"). Our objections have to do not with the pedagogy of outcomes-based education as such (on which all we have to say is that "OBE" is not in-principle synonymous with "postmodernism"), but with the mishandling of its introduction – in Western Australia at least – by government ministers and education department bureaucrats whose abuses not only of teachers' working conditions, but of their public reputation as a professional class, have met with little resistance from the WA teachers' associations or the unions.

What Donnelly's smug condemnation of "educrats" and accountability-driven education policy disguises, however, is the fact that the severe cost-cutting to which the education sector and schools (like all public services) have been subjected in recent times, is part and parcel of conservative economic philosophy – regardless of which political party is in government. Admonishing education bureaucrats is as far as Donnelly dares to go, then, in broaching the political economy of OBE or present-day teaching issues. After this, teacher unions and professional associations *per se* are to be attacked; public money to private schools defended; and under-funding of public schooling ranked behind "ideology" as an aspect contributing to a decline in education standards:

Outcomes-based education, along with the imposition of values associated with the cultural-left, have had a profound impact on how curriculum is developed and implemented across Australian schools. The influence of this new-age approach is not restricted to issues like the purpose of education and assessment and reporting, equally as important is the way individual subjects, such as English, history, politics, mathematics and science have been politicised and dumbed down. (Donnelly *Dumbing Down* 72)

Note the abandonment here of previous concerns on behalf of teachers, relating to systemic, bureaucratic problems.

In the end, then, we are left to surmise that the real issue for Donnelly is not that English has become "postmodern." The real issue for him has nothing to do with the inequalities and injustices of overworked English teachers, but rather that English studies today is not taught

exclusively as Anglo-Celtic/Judeo-Christian studies. The problem, in other words, is not that English in Australia has become “cultural studies.”

The problem is that it has become the wrong *kind* of cultural studies.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

Here we speculate: whose interests are served by the war on English, given as we’ve shown that attacks on postmodernism are without intellectual foundation and cannot be said to further the interests of Leavisism, the Enlightenment or ancient Greece? So whose interests do they serve?

– Certainly not those of teachers, who appear to us to be overworked, under-paid and publicly vilified. Not only does the war on English *not* address teachers’ salaries and working conditions, but it distracts from those issues and other, larger educational issues to do with institutional funding and the like. Such a distraction benefits the economic and other interests of conservatism, for which the straw figures of critical literacy, postmodernism, English teachers and humanities academics are a strategic convenience.

– Indeed the war on English (the attack on postmodernism) *requires* teachers to be “defective” in order to be “corrected.” The economic and other interests of conservatism (served no less at present under Rudd than they were under Howard) come together in disciplining teachers’ “wrong-headed,” “neo-Marxist,” “feminist,” “multicultural” distortions of “the” great works of literature. The war on English creates an “emergency” requiring government and bureaucratic intervention on behalf of an education system in “crisis.” But *not* because of the obvious lived crises of teachers and students in regards to overcrowded classes, diminishing administrative support, increased workloads and accountability and most classroom teachers’ inadequate pay.

– Not only for reasons given already, but the war on English does not serve the interests of students. As heirs to the Enlightenment, students of English in Australia today have a right to a contemporary critical training that reflects the latest international developments in the field. This statement would be self-evident if applied to modern-day students of chemistry, say, who are required by society and its education system to undergo contemporary training in chemistry in the context of current international knowledge and practice. But when it comes to English, the development of a critical attitude towards “absolute” truth and an ability to critically engage with and analyse truth claims in light of best international practice is not seen as a right emanating from the Enlightenment. It’s seen as an ideological distortion. (Nor can it be argued that critical literacy or literary theory should be taught only at university level and not in high schools. Who would say this about *calculus*, for example?) The Enlightenment, however, held a critical attitude to be essential to the capacity of citizens to participate responsibly and democratically in social, cultural and political contexts, through an understanding of their historical and other formations. This, the Enlightenment project, is our inheritance, as ought to be well known to everyone in Australia today – from so-called general readers to so-called newspaper editors alike.

– Such a project, which opponents of contemporary trends in secondary-school English (the editorial staff at *The Australian*, for example, where we would not be surprised to find that Donnelly has a licence to publish even his shopping lists) call “postmodernism,” serves an *idea* of democracy extending far beyond the mere expression of a political preference at the ballot box. The concept of democracy we have in mind here (see Lucy and Mickler, *War*, for further development) is linked inexorably to questions of justice, which always have to do with questions of rights, resources and power. Because the distribution of rights, resources and power remains inequitable, social authorities remain to be questioned – on behalf of an idea of democracy and justice.

– As we argue in *The War on Democracy*, the idea and the ideal of democracy can flourish only in

an environment of ongoing critical vigilance. The answer to the question, then, of whose interests the war on English serves is this: *whoever is opposed to that environment.*

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## Endnotes

1. See Lucy and Mickler, *War*, for a development of this point.
2. See Lucy and Mickler, "Postmodern Left," for a development of the argument that a certain version of the left is no less self-interestedly against "postmodernism" than the right.
3. See Lucy, *Postmodern*, for further discussion on this, especially in regards to a "tradition" of romanticism.

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