

Ars Poetica, Romanticism and English education: Poetic inheritances in the senior secondary English curriculum in New South Wales, Australia

DON CARTER

University of Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT: Poetry, as a textual form for critical study and composition, continues to occupy a significant place in Australian senior secondary English syllabus documents and classrooms (cf. Carter, 2012). Indeed, within the senior secondary English syllabus in New South Wales (NSW), poetry remains one of the core mandatory types of texts for study by the majority of students seeking matriculation, thus signalling its enduring position in the conceptualisation and identity of subject English in this Australian curricular context. But poetry is not only a constituent of the NSW formal curriculum in terms of content: poetry – specifically the “epistemic assumptions” (Reid, 2002, p. 21) inscribed in poetry from the Romantic period of English literature – has been encoded in the “disciplinary norms” (p. 21) of the subject itself. This paper examines those poetic inheritances at work in the curricular design, intent and substance of the English Extension 2 course, which forms part of the suite of senior secondary English courses offered in NSW – the English Stage 6 Syllabus (Board of Studies NSW, 1999). The paper reorients our attention as educators to the legacy of Romantic ars poetica to English in the 21st century classroom and proposes ways in which this legacy can be actively reclaimed at the service of holistic, student-centred learning and achievement.

KEYWORDS: Poetry, Romanticism, creativity, imagination, curriculum, individual experience, self-expression, language.

A normative “English” curriculum derived largely from the institutionalisation of a Romantic ideology, and specifically from an on-going process of appropriating Wordsworthian assumptions (Reid, 2002, p. 15)

INTRODUCTION

Poetry, as a textual form for critical study and composition, continues to occupy a significant place in Australian senior secondary English syllabus documents and classrooms (cf. Carter, 2012). Indeed, within the senior secondary English syllabus in New South Wales (NSW), poetry remains one of the core mandatory types of texts for study by the majority of students seeking matriculation, thus signalling its enduring position in the conceptualisation and identity of subject English in this state.¹ But poetry is not only a constituent of the NSW formal curriculum in terms of content: poetry – specifically the “epistemic assumptions” (Reid, 2002, p. 21) inscribed in poetry from the Romantic period of English literature – has been encoded in the “disciplinary norms” (p. 21) of the subject itself.

A body of research and scholarship has established the extent to which versions of subject English evident in pre-active curriculum documents have been and continue to be informed by the “institutionalisation of a Romantic ideology”, manifested in part in

¹ New South Wales is the largest of the 6 states and 2 territories in Australia.

the *ars poetica* of the Romantic period (cf. Carter, 2012; Halpin, 2007, 2006; Mathieson, 1975; Reid, 2004, 2002, 1996; Richardson, 2004; Shayer, 1972; Willinsky, 1990, 1987). My purpose here is to shed light on those poetic inheritances at work in the curricular design, intent and substance of the English Extension 2 course, which forms part of the suite of senior secondary English courses offered in NSW – the *English Stage 6 Syllabus* (Board of Studies NSW, 1999)². In particular, my interest is in illuminating the distinctively Wordsworthian pre-occupations that are manifested in the English Extension 2 course, namely:

- the centrality of individual experience;
- child-centred approaches to learning;
- the transformative power of the creative imagination;
- the role of the teacher as mentor;
- a recognition of students’ language and self-expression as the foundation for learning; and
- the ideal of achieving self-directed learning and reflective practice.

My aim is to reorient our attention to the legacy of Romantic poetry in English in the 21st century classroom – a legacy “profoundly important for education and something largely neglected by current educational research” (Egan, 1994, p. 17).

ROMANTIC *ARS POETICA* AND ENGLISH EDUCATION

Wordsworth’s poetry, along with that of his contemporaries, has of course been the subject of extensive research and scholarship. Similarly, the “continuities that link English curriculum discourses and practices” with “previous discourses and practices” (Reid, 2003, p. 100) of the Romantic movement are equally well-documented in the research literature (cf. Halpin, 2007, 2006; Hunter, 1997, 1995, 1994, 1988, 1987; Mathieson, 1975; Reid, 2004, 2003, 2002, 1996; Richardson, 2004; Shayer, 1972; Stillinger & Lynch, 2006; Willinsky, 1990, 1987). Reid, for instance, contends that

the rise of English studies lies in the means by which an ideology under the sign of “Wordsworth” became powerfully influential through a linkage between the nationalistic and imperialistic cultural programme ... and the apparatus of teacher education. That is how precepts about the importance of a *child-centred* pedagogy, placing a high value on *self-expression*, *experiential learning*, *creative imagination*, *moral growth* and so forth, were fused with ideals of Englishness. [emphasis added] (Reid, 2002, p. 19)

These “precepts” form the core of Wordsworth’s poetics and, while it is not possible here to explore in fine detail the corpus of his work, it is worth briefly highlighting these precepts in three of his well-known poems: *The Prelude*, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” and “Tintern Abbey”.

Composed in the years 1788-1799 and published posthumously in 1850, three months after his death, the epic narrative poem in 14 books, *The Prelude; or Growth of a Poet’s Mind*, figures as one of the most potent artistic testimonies to Wordsworth’s

² The English Stage 6 Syllabus can be accessed at: <http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au>

philosophy, vision and poetics. Here the poet articulates his literal, metaphorical and ultimately spiritual journey, mapping his own development as a boy through childhood into adulthood. At the heart of this journey is the poet's quest for meaning and the longed-for synthesis of all things: childhood and adulthood; past and present; time and eternity; the human and the natural; the imagination and memory. *The Prelude* is especially illuminating for its recurrent attention to the principle of integration and wholeness. The Romantic manifesto of "purifying.../The elements of feeling and of thought" through the subjective process of synthesising interior and sensual experience brings the individual into a state of undivided oneness with the "Wisdom and Spirit of the universe":

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
 Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought
 That givest to forms and images a breath
 And everlasting motion, not in vain
 By day or star-light thus from my first dawn
 Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me
 The passions that build up our human soul;
 Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,
 But with high objects, with enduring things--
 With life and nature--purifying thus
 The elements of feeling and of thought,
 And sanctifying, by such discipline,
 Both pain and fear, until we recognise
 A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.
 (Book One, L 428-441)

Throughout *The Prelude*, the poet's insights and pursuit of meaning are dependent on interpreting his individual experience through the prismatic and transfiguring process of imaginative engagement – with his recollected past and childhood, with his restless present, with the "Spirit" of the world around him, and with his vision of unity with all living things:

Thus did my days pass on, and now at length,
 From Nature and her overflowing soul,
 I had received so much, that all my thoughts
 Were steeped in feeling; I was only then
 Contented, when with bliss ineffable
 I felt the sentiment of Being spread
 O'er all that moves and all that seemeth still;
 O'er all that, lost beyond the reach of thought
 And human knowledge, to the human eye
 Invisible, yet liveth to the heart ... (Book Two, L 415-424)

As Roe reminds us, "the events of Romanticism took place in the inner sphere of thoughts and feelings, and the Romantic writing was correspondingly introspective and focused on the self" (2005, p. 2). Although his writing was "introspective and focused on the self", Wordsworth's poetic project was not a narrowly elitist, indulgently solipsistic pass-time. His belief in the centrality of individual experience was a democratised belief in the value of all human experience for all individuals, however apparently mundane, the everyday and the ordinary. He was deeply committed to egalitarian ideals, and his poetics sought to test the degree to which the

“real language of men [*sic*]”, hitherto regarded as unfit for the elevated matter of poetry, could be harnessed to realise his vision of a unified and harmonious world (Kneale, 2005, p. 1).

Wordsworth’s high regard for the natural enthusiasm of the child in a natural environment is consistently evident in his poetry. In *The Prelude*, for instance, he poses a rhetorical question about the most appropriate path to knowledge and growth, and clearly extols the value of all the forms of learning that accrue from play, spontaneity, non-adult directed or structured experience and from “what seem our most unfruitful hours”:

When will they be taught
That in the unreasoning progress of the world
A wiser Spirit is at work for us,
A better eye than theirs, most prodigal
Of blessings, and most studious of our good,
Even in what seem our most unfruitful hours? (Book 5, L 383-388)

Wordsworth here is addressing those who “have the art/To manage books, and things, and make them work” (L 373-374) – that is, those who instruct children, perhaps in the Sunday school or in (as Wordsworth perceived it), the inhibitory, regimented schoolrooms of day instruction classes. His insistence on finding wisdom and truth in the ordinary is, for Wordsworth, synonymous with authentic learning, in contrast to the learning which takes place in formal “Education”, which he declares has little to do “with real feeling and just sense”:

When I began to enquire,
To watch and question those I met, and speak
Without reserve to them, the lonely roads
Were open schools in which I daily read
With most delight the passions of mankind,
Whether by words, looks, sighs, or tears, revealed;
There saw into the depth of human souls,
Souls that appear to have no depth at all
To careless eyes. And – now convinced at heart
How little those formalities, to which
With overweening trust alone we give
The name of Education, have to do
With real feeling and just sense ... (Book 13, L 161-171)

We can detect here the origins of the Progressive education movement which embraced the philosophy of experiential learning, the development of the individual through the use of his/her own language and the value placed on “feeling” and holistic education.

Importantly, it was this “vision” of the potential for all individuals to experience the extraordinary in the ordinary and to apprehend meaning and purpose in their lives that flowed so forcefully into the Romantics’ mission for universal education: “the influential advocacy of mass education in Britain and then in the colonies was itself in large measure the outcome of the Romantic movement in cultural affairs” (Reid, 2002, p. 21). What’s more, this essentially democratic vision has been and continues to be appropriated in education theory and curriculum – specifically through the

Progressive education movement led by Dewey and others in the decades following the Romantic period; the development of English curriculum at the turn of the 20th century through the influence of the London Institute of Education (cf. Reid, 2002, 2004); the wide-ranging impact of the Newbolt Report; and the emergence of the still-pervasive Growth model in the 1960s and 1970s (cf. Carter, 2012).

Arguably, the lyric apotheosis of these “precepts” of “self-expression, experiential learning (and) creative imagination” in the self-realisation of the individual are nowhere more powerfully encapsulated than in the poem written in Wordsworth’s later years: “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798”, often referred to simply as “Tintern Abbey”. This poem can be read as the poet’s anthem to the Romantic vision of the centrality of individual experience, the power of the human imagination, self-expression through language, and encompassing these, the enduring quest for meaning, coherence and the “undivided self”.

The individual’s integrated “place” in this world offers experiences of beauty and insight, with the human mind as the storehouse and memory as the keeper of such pleasures and enriching experiences. At the close of this poem, Wordsworth’s blessing for his sister – a central figure in the span of his entire life – is expressed in terms of the natural world’s ancient, inevitable processes:

Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee: and, in after years,
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all the lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all the sweet sounds and harmonies ... (L 135-143)

The poet’s memory assumes an elevated status; it is the human faculty that is able to “store” and, along with the imagination, “retrieve” and bring to life the experiences of the past, with the Romantic “mind” glorified as the supreme “mansion for all the lovely forms”. Wordsworth compares his reverence for nature with a “far deeper zeal/Of holier love” (L 155-156) and, in doing so, signals the importance of meditative reflection on individual experience as life-giving, life-affirming and life-enriching.

This poem captures, in its substance and its lyric process, the quest for meaning and consequent “nourishment” through applying the imagination to experience, past and present, through retrieving and re-animating memory and through a complex synthesis of thought, feeling and reflection – “precepts” that constitute part of the Romantic *ars poetica* legacy to English education.

Of this legacy Halpin believes that:

the fact that such notions (“precepts”) are nowadays mostly assumed...does not of course mean that...their Romantic pedigrees are fully or slightly appreciated. I suspect that few educators are able to recall, for example, that William Wordsworth was an

early and fierce critic of teaching methods that eschewed imaginative engagement in favour of transmitting facts...What is also less appreciated is the depth of both Coleridge's and Wordsworth's commitment to the cause of popular education, which each saw as being as much about providing intellectual enlightenment for the "lower orders" as offering them instruction in how to read and write. (2007, p. 2)

The most fully realised exemplar of the Romantic legacy in English education in NSW is the English Extension 2 course, which carries the distinction as the "capstone" experience in English in NSW.

ENGLISH EXTENSION 2 AND THE LEGACY OF ROMANTIC *ARS POETICA*

English Extension 2 offers students the opportunity to engage in authentic critical and creative endeavours in a sustained way over time. In the philosophical, theoretical and practical dimensions of this course, significant "epistemic assumptions" (Reid, 2002, p. 21) traceable to the *ars poetica* of the Romantic period find expression.

English Extension 2 is the culminating course in the suite of senior school English courses in NSW, introduced as part of a series of significant reforms to the NSW Higher School Certificate by Professor Barry McGaw in the 1990s. The course has 3 interdependent components:

- a Major Work submitted for external assessment at the conclusion of the course³;
- a Major Work Journal, comprising "*documentation of the investigative process and the process of composition*" (Board of Studies NSW, 1999, p. 130)
- a Reflection Statement (1000-1500 words), presenting the student's "reflection upon the *process and the completed product*" (Board of Studies NSW, 1999, p. 131). (My italics)

In contrast to the other Stage 6 English courses, students begin this course in Year 12 and, for three school terms (approximately 30 weeks), the sole focus is the creation of the Major Work, the associated Major Work Journal and Reflection Statement. Like the other Stage 6 courses, English Extension 2 is based on a set of objectives, outcomes and content which delineate what a student should know and be able to do on completion of the course.

The English Extension 2 course requires students to initiate and direct their learning independently to produce a major piece of work that has been informed by "on-going, systematic and rigorous investigation into their chosen area" (Board of Studies NSW, 1999, p. 92). The concept of sustained, self-managed, research and inquiry-based learning, building on the particular interests, strengths and desires of the *individual student* within a post-compulsory, externally-examined context is a landmark innovation and is without precedent in the history of senior secondary English in NSW.

³ The Major Work is examined externally and is marked out of 40. The accompanying Reflection Statement is marked out of 10. The total possible mark for English Extension 2 is 50.

By encouraging students to take genuine responsibility for and “manage their own learning” (Board of Studies NSW, 1999, p. 5), the course addresses one of the core features of the study of English, as it is articulated in the Rationale of the Stage 6 Syllabus:

The study of English enables students to make sense of, and to enrich, their lives in personal, social and professional situations and to deal effectively with change. Students develop a strong sense of themselves as autonomous, reflective and creative learners. (Board of Studies NSW, 1999, p. 6)

Through self-generated, purposeful “making and doing”, students exercise choice and discernment in the selection, shaping, crafting, production and presentation of artefacts. The course presumes, *a priori*, student ownership of the *process and the product*.

COURSE OBJECTIVES, OUTCOMES AND CONTENT

The Extension 2 course has at its core particular principles embedded within specific outcomes that build on the learning in HSC English (Advanced) and English (Extension 1) courses; outcomes 11, 12, 12A and 13 (Advanced course); and outcomes 1 and 2 (Extension 1 course). The table below highlights these continuities and the elements of Romantic discourses that underpin them.

HSC (Advanced) Outcomes	HSC English (Extension 1) Outcomes
11. A student draws upon the imagination to transform experience and ideas into texts demonstrating control of language.	1. A student develops and presents an extended composition that demonstrates <i>depth, insight, originality and skills in independent investigation</i> .
12. A student reflects on own processes of responding and composing.	2. A student reflects on and documents own process of composition.
12A. A student explains and evaluates different ways of responding to and composing texts.	
13. A student reflects on own processes of learning.	

(Board of Studies NSW, 1999, pp. 55-56, 91)

Table 1. English Advanced and Extension 1 outcomes extended in English Extension 2⁴

These outcomes act as the “bedrock” of the Extension 2 course and clearly require students’ higher-order capacities to: “draw upon the imagination to transform experience and ideas”; undertake sustained individual research; demonstrate originality and insight; and reflect on and “document (their) own processes of composition”. These outcomes are explicated in more detail in the objectives and content of the course.

⁴ Italics indicate aspects of the outcomes that cohere with and reflect Romantic precepts.

Objectives	Outcomes	HSC English Extension Course 2 Content
Students will develop skills in <i>extensive independent investigation</i> .	1. A student develops and presents an extended composition that demonstrates <i>depth, insight, originality and skills in independent investigation</i> .	1. Students learn to develop and use skills in extensive independent investigation by: 1.1 <i>autonomous, thorough and extensive investigation</i> in a specialised field 1.2 <i>monitoring, reflecting on and documenting their interpretation</i> , analysis and composition in a journal 2.3 presenting aspects of investigation to specific audiences, in a range of modes.
Students will develop skills in <i>sustained composition</i> .	2. A student <i>reflects on and documents own process of composition</i> .	2. Students learn to <i>reflect on and document their processes of composition</i> by: 2.1 developing texts <i>drawn from personal, affective, cognitive and other experiences, understanding and ideas</i> 2.2 <i>monitoring, reflecting on and documenting their process of inquiry</i> in a journal 2.3 presenting aspects of composition to specific audiences, in a range of modes.

(Board of Studies NSW, 1999, p. 93)

Table 2. English Extension 2 objectives, outcomes and content

Immediately apparent is the fact that the Extension 2 course is based on two objectives and outcomes – compared with thirteen outcomes in the HSC English (Advanced) course and four in the English (Extension 1) course, both of which are pre-requisites for the Extension 2 course. This is a clear indication that the intent of the Extension 2 course is to integrate and build on the knowledge, skills and understandings developed in the other two courses. That is, by the time the student reaches the Extension 2 course, s/he has demonstrated a range of capacities, including a capacity for higher-order thinking, extended writing and independent investigation and research.

Indeed, the high-order substance of the outcomes reflects Halliday's personal, heuristic, imaginative and representational functions of language. There is an explicit concentration on: self-expression (personal); exploration of the inner and external worlds (heuristic); the creation a "world of one's own" (imaginative); and the predominantly adult use of language to inform, explain and persuade (representational) (1978, p. 20).

The expansive nature of the two outcomes can also be interpreted as emancipatory. Within the broad parameters of the prescribed content, there is considerable scope for students' to pursue their individual interests. The course can be seen, therefore, as both an innovation in English curriculum where "new learning awareness, energy and fresh ideas" (Carter, 2009, p. 160) can thrive and, at the same time, as indebted to the ancestral voices of its predecessors.

“AN ORGANIC WHOLE”: THE MAJOR WORK AS “SUSTAINED COMPOSITION”

Creating is a self-originating and self-organizing process, parallel to the growth of a plant, that begins with a seedlike idea in the poet’s imagination, grows by assimilating both the poet’s feelings and the materials of sensory experience, and evolves into an organic whole in which the parts are integrally related to each other and to the whole. (Stillinger & Lynch, 2006, p. 9)

In order to create a Major Work, the student has the opportunity to choose an “area of personal interest” that is shaped and developed over time into a sustained and coherent whole. This process typically involves the student identifying an area of interest and/or idea that stems from their study of the other English courses, which then constitutes the basis of the Major Work. The medium of production and form can be one or more of the following, as set out in the syllabus as follows:

Medium	Form	Word Length/Duration
Print medium	• short story/ies	6,000-8,000 words
	• poem(s)	5,000 words
	• critical responses	5,000-6,000 words
	• scripts (radio, film, television, drama)	20-30 minutes
Sound medium	• speeches	15-20 minutes
	• radio drama	10-15 minutes
	• performance poetry	8-10 minutes
Visual medium	• video/DVD	6-8 minutes
	• film	4-5 minutes
	• multimedia	20 minutes’ viewing

(Board of Studies NSW, 1999, pp. 132-137)

Table 3. English Extension 2 Major Work options

Although the syllabus distinguishes here between types of texts for the Major Work, students are at liberty to create hybrid forms and genres, depending on the purpose and nature of their project. Ideally, the mode of representation grows organically from the substance of the ideas being conveyed. Similarly, although the syllabus directs students to produce a Major Work that is “imaginative, analytical, interpretive or any combination of these” (Board of Studies NSW, 1999, p. 86), the objectives, outcomes and content of the course in fact assume the confluence of these modes in the creation of a sustained composition and associated Major Work Journal and Reflection Statement. The student *must* integrate these domains in order to meet the demands of the course. That is, in order to complete the Major Work, the Major Work Journal and the Reflection Statement, students must adopt an essentially integrative approach in which the imaginative, analytical, interpretive and affective domains are all “activated” – where the student speculates on ideas and concepts and thinks in imaginative and innovative ways to create the Major Work.

Synchronously, in the Major Work Journal, the student records the ebb and flow of ideas, considers and dismisses ideas, and reflects on the unfolding process of creating

their product. Even where a student chooses to undertake a critical response for the Major Work, an integration of the imaginative and analytical are necessary to experiment with ideas, hypothesise and make decisions about forms of representation. Furthermore, the on-going development of the Major Work and concurrent development of the Journal, and then the Reflection Statement, must involve the integration of the imaginative, interpretive and analytical; the sustained composition is synonymous with “an organism [is] that is not something made, it is something *being* made or growing” (Peckham, 1970, p. 10).

While the idea of sustained composition is not new in the history of English education, the concept of a sustained composition comprising the entirety of a single course spanning a full year of schooling is unique in the story of senior English curriculum in NSW, with the assessment practices evident in other English courses requiring relatively constrained written responses, mostly in the form of analytical essays. If we pause for a moment to consider the contextual factors shaping 21st-century students’ (and others’) lives, the notion of “sustained” engagement with and immersion in a single project cuts against the grain of the increasingly fragmented, unreflected-over, “door-stop” modes of communication typified by the “tweeting”, “texting” and “Facebooking” activities prevalent in the current day. Digital technologies as platforms for human interaction and learning can be enormously beneficial and generative. The immediacy, fluidity and evanescence of these contemporary forms of engagement tend, however, to forcefully militate against the opportunities for sustained “flow experiences” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) in which creative absorption, intellectual enlightenment, affective fulfilment, deep learning, and heightened self-awareness become attainable.

In this sense, the concept of the sustained composition is strongly reflective of the developments in literary theory during the Romantic period, which elevated the “poet/author/individual” as the source of all meaning (cf. Abrams, 1971; Stillinger & Lynch, 2006) During the early 19th Century, identification of the “traditional source” for literature shifted from the external world of objects, to the “inner world” of the author. This “legitimation” of the psychology of the author, led by Wordsworth, “referred to the mind, emotions, and imagination of the poet for the origin, content, and defining attributes of a poem” (Stillinger & Lynch, 2006, p. 9).

Wordsworth in particular signalled a change in the “source” of a poem from “outer nature” to the “inner world” of the author, based on that author’s emotions, or the author’s ability to “transform” the external world through the use of language (Stillinger & Lynch, 2006, p. 9). In an analogous way, the *Stage 6 English Syllabus* positions the student as the “source” – the “maker of meaning” (Kress, 2003, p. 21) – as “artist”, “maker” and “creator” through active and self-directed composing and responding.

The Major Work, therefore, develops from the student’s reflections recorded in the Major Work Journal. The Major Work Journal grows from the student’s development of the Major Work, with both developing gradually over time, perhaps even fitfully, spasmodically and fretfully, revealing the creative process to be imperfect, recursive and reflective, indicative of the Romantic concept of organicism: “[a]nything that continues to grow, or change qualitatively, is not perfect, can, perhaps, never be

perfect. Perfection ceases to be a positive value. Imperfection becomes a positive value” (Peckham, 1970, p. 10).

REFLECTING ON THE PROCESS: THE MAJOR WORK JOURNAL

Writing that is reflexive challenges the writer to turn back on her own previous ideation, to turn it over, take it apart. (Grumet, 1990, p. 191)

Students are required to maintain a Major Work Journal – a type of “process journal” that “that demonstrates the processes of inquiry, interprets, analyses and reflects on the knowledge and understanding gained, and explains the stages of the composition of the Major Work” (Board of Studies NSW, 1999, p. 86). The “spirit of Wordsworth” (Reid, 2002, p. 25) is palpable here, two centuries on. For it was Wordsworth who defined poetry in his famous Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from *emotion recollected in tranquillity*” [emphasis added] (Eliot, 1938, p. 132). The creative process and the self-reflexivity that it demands can be considered as a form of “mediation”, where the passion and emotion of experience are refined and honed by temporal distance and by the individual’s capacity to reflect on this experience. Furthermore, this process constitutes a mechanism through which the poet (or in this case, the Extension 2 student) is able to organise and make sense of experience:

[t]hrough reflection, in other words, the poet learns to impose continuity on discontinuous sense data. Such readings of Wordsworth find in the movement from a spontaneous overflow of feeling to the recollection of these feelings in tranquillity a model of development, as enculturation, of the individual, society and the nation state. (McGrath, 2009, p. 565)

The simultaneous development of the Major Work and the Journal, as well as the Reflection Statement, are typically driven by “powerful feelings” which may act as the initial impetus for composition and are in turn filtered, tempered and refined by “temporal and psychological distance” (McGrath, 2009, p. 9). This process, contingent as it is on the passage of time, empowers the student to maintain control over such experiences and constitutes a “civilizing process that subordinates immediate sensation to reflective judgment” (p. 565).

REFLECTING ON THE PROCESS AND THE FINAL PRODUCT: THE REFLECTION STATEMENT

(English is) about making profound connections within a sea of limitless variety...between the pupil’s experience and the subject matter of the curriculum...and, ultimately, between the limited human faculties of the understanding and the unimaginable infinity of the physical universe. (Halpin, 2006, p. 333)

The third component of the course is the Reflection Statement (1000-1500 words) which

is composed at the end of the composition process and is a reflection upon the process and the completed product...(the Reflection Statement)...summarises the intent of the work and relationship it has with the extensive independent investigation...(explains) the relationships of concept, structure, technical and language features and conventions...(explains) the development of concepts during the process of composition making the links clear between independent investigation and the development of the finished product. (Board of Studies NSW, 1999, p. 131)

This task requires students to think analytically and evaluatively, to assume the “spectator role”, and to subsequently compose their reflection as a formal piece of writing for submission, to accompany the Major Work.

The key point here is that the Reflection Statement, the Major Work Journal and the Major Work evolve in concert, with each part constituting an integrated whole. In this sense, these three interrelated, interdependent course requirements embody the principle that in this course, “[r]elationships, not entities, are the object of contemplation and study” (Peckham, 1970, p. 10). And crucially, by legitimising curriculum space and sustained time for students to develop their Major Work, to assume the mantle of the expert (cf. Hughes, 2008), to reflect on their investigation and their processes of learning, and to make judgements about the quality of the research and “final product”, English Extension 2 in many respects symbolises a “liberation” from the traditional institutionalised constraints of micro-structured and teacher-managed learning, and epitomises the spirit and intent of progressive education.

In an era that is too often defined by the indices of consumerism and fragmentation, and an increasing obsession with educational testing, quantifying and measuring, English Extension 2 is one of the rare spaces remaining in the formal curriculum for students to experience authentic, sustained immersion in the creative realm, where this realm is characterised by continuity with the everyday and the visceral and is firmly anchored in the actual “world” of the student, including that lived beyond school.

In its design and content, the course instantiates not only the emblematic Romantic precepts of the centrality of individual experience, self-expression through language and the creative imagination as the ultimate source of meaning; it exemplifies more recent but Romantically-derived scholarship, research and theory on the nature and significance of *human creativity* and the optimal conditions required for its realisation.

STUDENT CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATION IN ENGLISH EXTENSION 2

Because English Extension 2 is not constrained by “snapshot” written assessment tasks, students are liberated from potentially enervating and disheartening examinations, which have characterised English curriculum for decades. Whereas the lamentation that “the examination stranglehold on the teaching of English in schools is complete, and its life throttled” (Thompson, 1972, p. 229) has been commonplace in English curriculum (cf. Dixon, 1967, p. 93; Hartog, 1907), the Extension 2 course unshackles students, enabling them to use their imaginative and analytical capacities

to explore and shape issues, concepts and ideas over time. The Romantics extolled the imagination as the “mental faculty that could actively forge new unities from the diversity of experience, reinvest the world with spirit, and reunite the visible and invisible” (Breckman, 2008, p. 21).

This identical longing for intellectual freedom is reflected in the fact that Extension 2 does not prescribe texts for study. There are no prescribed authors, genres, modules, themes for study, as has been the case in traditional “project-based” learning in English. This is a significant departure from the traditional, senior-secondary, English curriculum paradigm, because it places the student’s choice, desire, imagination and motivation “at the centre”; allows the student to be in “control”, providing for an “expansiveness” in choice of theme/concept and form of expression. Rather than passive recipients of the “received wisdom” of previously constructed texts, students focus on “textual creation”, where “the creator of the ‘new’ text is as much working *with* a text as creating a new one” (Sawyer, 2008, p. 59). Importantly, the English Extension 2 course allows us, as educators, to “normalise” creativity – that is, to encourage students to appreciate that the “everyday” can provide innumerable opportunities for the creative initiative – that the seemingly routine can be the springboard upon which something “grand and lustrous” (Greene, 2007, p. 562) can be launched, and that creativity can be “naturalised” as a legitimate and highly-valued part of all learning.

NATURALISING CREATIVITY AND THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION

(Romanticism)...placed a new value on the inner life of the individual, and articulated a new appreciation of the complex interplay among reason, emotion, and fantasy that constitutes this inner life. (Breckman, 2008, p. 38)

While English Extension 2 manifests the Romantic belief in centrality of the creative, imaginative life, it equally reflects more recent theorising on the nature “creativity” and the “creative imagination” in human existence from a 20th- and 21st-century perspective. Like the Romantics, contemporary theorists argue that creativity is an inherently “natural” and healthy state for human beings, rather than a privileged commodity, existing on the margins of, or beyond the mainstream of everyday life:

Being “creative” is, at least potentially, the natural and normal state of anyone healthy in a sane and stimulating community and that realising that potential is as much a matter of collaboration and “co-creation” as of splendid or miserable isolation. (Pope, 2005, p. xvi)

But such theories extend the Romantic concept of the creative imagination by exploring the extent to which it is a socially constructed and activated experience, rather than a wholly serendipitous or atypical attribute. Raymond Williams (1977), for instance, insists on the socially contingent, “democratising” and process-oriented nature of creativity, demystifying it by asserting that:

[c]reative practice is thus of many kinds. It is already, and actively, our practical consciousness. When it becomes struggle – the active struggle for new consciousness

through new relationships that is the ineradicable emphasis of the...sense of self-creation – it can take many forms. It can be the long and difficult remaking of an inherited (determined) practical consciousness; a process often described as development but in practice a struggle at the roots of the mind – not casting off an ideology, or learning phrases about it, but confronting a hegemony in the fibres of the self and in the hard practical substance of effective and continuing relationships. (p. 212)

Creativity as a protean, relational and practical experience, embedded in and native to human consciousness, is echoed and extended in the work of Armstrong, who regards aesthetic, creative life – “playing” and “dreaming” – as already implanted in the processes and practices of human consciousness and posits that, in fact, such experiences “keep us alive” (Armstrong, 2000, quoted in Pope, 2005, p. 12).

Similarly, Williams, Armstrong and others promote a concept of creativity that is defined as “*re-freshing*” – the production of something “more valuable” which involves forms of “*re-creation*”, “*re-vision*”, “*re-membering*”, and “*re-familiarisation*” (Pope, 2005, p. xvii). For creativity to be “*re-freshing*” it must be inherently disruptive of the “known” and “familiar”: “[r]ethinking creativity means challenging established borderlines of conceptual categories while redefining the spaces of artistic, scientific and political action” (Pope, 2005, p. 33).

English Extension 2 is an exemplar of an innovative model of curriculum that challenges “established borderlines” of English teaching and learning in 21st-century classrooms by “redefining” the role of creativity, imaginative endeavour, self-expression through language and the value of individual experience.

CONCLUSION

Although the parameters of this discussion have been firmly drawn around the exploration of a particular written curriculum document, the findings here prompt further questions about the present and future, not just of English education, but of education more broadly. Egan (1990), for example, directs our attention to the characteristics of Romanticism that provide scope for a “Romantic orientation towards the world” (p. 290) to infuse not only our models of English education. He argues that *all* education should engender a “sense of the imagination being freed” through the rejection of stultifying convention, narrowly instrumentalist expectations or pedagogical aridity, thus allowing students “new access to nature and reality” (p. 290). The touchstones of a “Romantic orientation towards the world” need not – indeed, should not – be confined to learning in subject English. As Winterson reminds us,

[t]he creative life is not ornament, surplus, extra, but the beating heart of who we are ...It is a necessity, not a luxury: a birth-right, not an optional extra....The creative life is central: to all life, any life, your life, our life, and the continued life of the planet. Without creativity and imaginative capacities for emotional connection...without a conviction that the inner world is as compelling as the outer world...that life has an inside as well as an outside...we cannot reclaim and lay claim to what has been lost. (2008)

But what are the implications of this perspective for the future of education? I believe that the creative life for students can be nourished through, within and across the curriculum, when each subject area encourages students to make connections between school-based learning and their own experience. There is an argument for identifying “articulations” (Halpin, 2006, p. 333) that connect the

pupil’s experience and the subject matter of the curriculum; and between the sense-making capacity of pupils and the enabling abilities of their teachers; and ultimately, between the limited human faculties of the understanding and the unimaginable infinity of the physical universe. (p. 333)

To what extent, for example, do the syllabuses of other subjects promote explicit and strong connections between school-based learning and students’ lived experience and “capital” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 35)? What opportunities exist in other subjects for the creative imagination to be engaged as a central faculty for learning, understanding, making connections, transforming thinking and making meaning? If the creative imagination is fundamental in “aiding the development of knowledge and understanding – of ourselves, of other people, and of the world – which would otherwise remain beyond our ken” (Halpin, 2006, p. 339-340), then it is our obligation as educators in all subject areas to open up the spaces for students to:

- draw on their own experience and language in learning;
- bring to bear an imaginative orientation to learning;
- make connections between their lived experience and their learning across the curriculum;
- develop their sense of personal agency through a commitment to the ideals of “individuality, freedom and growth” (Green & Cormack, 2008, p. 261); and
- explore, articulate and represent their emotions, experiences, and imaginings in a wide variety of forms, for a wide range of contexts, purposes and audiences.

Like the context for the “Romantic educational project” (Reid, 2002, p. 18), our local educational landscape is similarly characterised by competing political agendas, particularly around debates about a national curriculum, national standardised testing and reporting, and the nexus between theory and pedagogy. Shaull (1970) states it plainly in saying that

[t]here is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the “practice of freedom”, the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (cited in Mayo, 1999, p. 5)

While the case has been made for the significance of the English curriculum in “liberating the spirit” (cf. Egan, 1990, pp. 290-291), the processes of educational reform and transformation required for this kind of progressive agenda in schooling more broadly are complex and necessarily political. English curriculum, as well as curriculum more broadly, has much to gain by reclaiming and rebuilding connections with the spirit and legacy of Romantic *ars poetica* and education. Indeed, such a project is arguably a necessary condition for being hopeful and utopian about the

present, and for sustaining into the future “the mood in which we feel we are or could be greater than we know” (Halpin, 2006, p. 342).

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