

BEST  
READ

AT THE

Reflections on teaching

FOOT

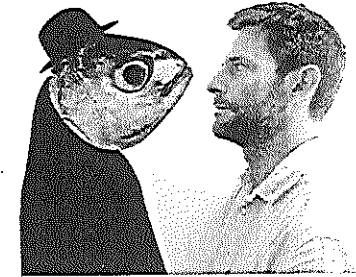
at a South African university

OF THE

EDITED BY

*Susan Levine*

VOLCANO



*Hedley Twidle*, Senior Lecturer in the Department of English Language and Literature at UCT, invites us to accompany him as he considers what it takes to launch a degree in literary studies 'amid all the noise'. The chapter offers a glimpse into the interior of university life in contemporary South Africa. Twidle's writing is suggestive, even provocative, and identifies the complex and multiple realities that converge on campus. He writes:

"The start of the academic year is a staple scene in the genre of the campus novel: the return of students, still looking sharp in their home-laundered clothes; the long lines of parental station wagons docking at residences, unloading their cargo of lamps and laptops (Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is especially good on this). After the long, quiet days of the vac, the Short Loans Centre braces itself for the onslaught, while volunteers with all of one year's experience under their belts lead freshers through Rare Books and the Knowledge Commons. "Now it is autumn again", writes Malcolm Bradbury in the first line of *The History Man*: "the people are all coming back" (Bradbury 2000: 1).

"Though of course, here in the "Global South" the beginning of the semester is by no means autumnal. It falls in early February: a month of heatwaves, beachwear and bush fires. There are fewer opportunities for melancholy reflections on the passing of time, and a greater sense of being pitched into the thick of things. At the University of Cape Town, this is heightened still further by the opening of Parliament: helicopters clatter overhead and motorcade sirens scream along the M3 to town, clearing a path from the presidential residence just downslope from Upper Campus. In 2013, the first lecture of English Literary Studies 1 coincided not only with Jacob Zuma's State of the Nation address but also Valentine's Day (not to mention the shooting of Reeva Steenkamp - but by 9 a.m. the news was only just breaking)."

In 2015 university students were confronted with major decisions regarding their role in the national student struggle for free and decolonised education. Writing just before this moment, Twidle anticipates the call to reimagine the project of university teaching, and argues for the importance of playfulness, humour and creativity in doing so. How to keep afloat in everyday life at this historical juncture is written between the lines of this wonderful reflection on teaching literary studies in South Africa.

### 3 *Thirteen ways: Teaching writing, creative and otherwise*

Hedley Twidle  
English Language And Literature

#### 0. ORIENTATION

'The 1954 Fall term had begun', writes Vladimir Nabokov in *Prin*:

Again the marble neck of a homely Venus in the vestibule of Humanities Hall received the vermilion imprint, in applied lipstick, of a mimicked kiss. Again the *Waindell Recorder* discussed the Parking Problem. Again in the margins of library books earnest freshmen inscribed such helpful glosses as 'Description of nature', or 'Irony'; and in a pretty edition of Mallarmé's poems an especially able scholiast had already underlined in violet ink the difficult word *oiseaux* and scrawled above it 'birds'. (Nabokov 1957: 137)

The start of the academic year is a staple scene in the genre of the campus novel: the return of students, still looking sharp in their home-laundered clothes; the long lines of parental station wagons docking at residences, unloading their cargo of lamps and laptops (Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is especially good on this). After the long, quiet days of the vac, the Short Loans Centre braces itself for the onslaught, while volunteers with all of one year's experience under their belts lead freshers through Rare Books and the Knowledge Commons. 'Now it is autumn again', writes Malcolm Bradbury in the first line of *The History Man*: 'the people are all coming back' (Bradbury 2000: 1).<sup>1</sup>

Though of course, here in the 'Global South' the beginning of semester is by no means autumnal. It falls in early February: a month of heatwaves, beachwear and bush fires. There are fewer opportunities for melancholy reflections on the passing of time, and a greater sense of being pitched into the thick of things. At the University of Cape Town, this is heightened still further by the opening of Parliament: helicopters clatter overhead and motorcade sirens scream along the M3 to town, clearing a path from the presidential residence just downslope from Upper Campus. In 2013, the first lecture of English Literary Studies 1 coincided not only with Jacob Zuma's State of the Nation address but also Valentine's Day (not to mention the shooting of Reeva Steenkamp – but by 9 a.m. the news was only just breaking).

How to launch a degree in literary studies, amid all the noise?

### 1. AGAINST CLICHÉ

As convenor of the big first-year undergraduate course English Literary Studies I (ELL1013F), I put it to the students that both domains – ceremonious speechifying and mass-marketed romance – were areas of linguistic deadness and predictability. ‘Mainstreaming job creation’, ‘For a very special person’ – in both party political discourse and glossy Hallmark cards, one is likely to find long chains of words that have been used together often before. During the development of printing, there was a technical name for this: the ‘stereotype’ was the term for a block that came ready-made with commonly combined words – or in French, the *cliché*.

‘It is a cliché that most clichés are true’, writes Stephen Fry in his autobiography, ‘but then like most clichés, that cliché is untrue’ (Fry 2011: 113). Such epigrams register Fry’s debt to the real master of the form, Oscar Wilde, who remarked that ‘work is the curse of the drinking classes’. Classic Wilde: just a brief inversion is able to lay bare the prejudice and violence inherent in our received ideas, in the logic of generalisation on which so much of our social understanding rests.

As students of ELL1013, (I suggested), you are on the front line of a struggle against cliché – against dead, unthinking language of every variety and all the blindness to the reality of other existences that it can so easily entail. A bit over the top, perhaps, but it seems necessary to jolt them out of the idea that literary studies is just a polite activity concerned with analysing poems for exam purposes. It is concerned with the medium of all our thinking: language – dangerous, mobile, miraculous. Among a whole range of other possibilities for framing what literary studies is and does, we went for an opposition as simple as it is complex: between language that is live (that still has some life in it) and language that is dead (that is wholly dead).

### 2. INSTRUCTIONS FOR SECOND LECTURE: BRING A LEAF, COIN AND STONE

All language, wrote Nietzsche in an essay of 1873, tends naturally towards lifelessness and dead metaphor. The world is full of riverbeds and chair legs, mousepads and Windows™ – concepts we no longer even recognise as metaphorical. But this is the inevitable result of an entry into the communal system that is language, which entails relinquishing the radical particularity of this actual leaf in my hand – the shape of which may be mucronate, or cordiform, or spatulate, or lanceolate, pinnate or bi-pinnate; which may have veins that are arcuate, palmate, dichotomous or reticulate; whose margins may be ciliate, crenate, dentate, denticulate, sinuate or entire (botanical charts are a great help here) – for the usable concept *leaf*. Nietzsche writes:

As certainly as no one leaf is exactly similar to any other, so certain is it that the idea ‘leaf’ has been formed through an arbitrary omission of these individual differences, through a forgetting of the differentiating qualities, and this idea now awakens the notion that in nature there is, besides the leaves, a something called *the leaf*. (Nietzsche 1873/2004: 119)

Every word immediately becomes a concept, he goes on, and every concept originates through our equating what is unequal – but we forget this, and believe that our everyday verbal economies correspond to the real. And so the famous line: ‘truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are’. Anticipating the insights of structural linguistics, he goes on to describe words as old, worn coins, their surfaces rubbed smooth, mattering not in themselves but only as tokens to be exchanged. (Yet even as he does so, the force and sensuous power of his own language, his own metaphors, work against the argument.)

Nietzsche’s ‘On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense’ was one of two critical essays that had a big effect on me when I was a first-year student, and which I thought back to when planning our undergraduate course with colleagues and tutors. The second was Viktor Shklovsky’s ‘Art as Technique’ (1917), which speaks of the ‘algebrization’ of modern existence: the over-automatisation of an object that ‘permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort’ (Shklovsky 1917/2004: 15). Such processes of habit and habitualisation ‘devour work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war’ (Shklovsky 1917/2004: 16). But the artwork, he suggests, is charged with disrupting this process. It should make objects unfamiliar, should draw out the length and difficulty of our mental processes, so as to make us aware of objects as they are perceived and not as they are known. Art exists, he writes, ‘to make the stone stony’ (Shklovsky 1917/2004: 16).

### 3. THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT ...

To track this process of ‘estrangement’ (in Russian: *ostranenie*, sometimes translated as ‘defamiliarisation’) we read two poems. The first was Wallace Stevens’s ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird’, which (I suggested) considers its subject in thirteen disconnected, haiku-like stanzas – from different angles and dimensions of experience, almost like a Cubist painting:

I  
Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II  
I was of three minds,  
Like a tree  
In which there are three blackbirds.

Showing examples of Cubism alongside such a poem is effective, of course, since students of the twenty-first century have visual literacy skills that are immensely advanced: the challenge is to get them to 'translate' such analytic techniques from the visual to the textual. Which is not always easy: 'One can accept a Picasso woman with two noses,' John Ashbery remarks in *The Paris Review*, 'but an equivalent attempt in poetry baffles the same audience' (Stitt 1983).

Without mentioning structuralism or De Saussure or using the word 'signifier', I also tried to broach the idea that 'blackbird' could in one sense be seen as an entirely arbitrary choice, easily replaceable with another word in this verbal algorithm. An ex-colleague of mine (now at Wits University) had been compulsively working up variations of the poem on his Facebook wall, and I shared one of them:

I  
Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of J.M. Coetzee.

II  
I was of three minds,  
Like a tree  
In which there are three J.M. Coetzees.

[...]

VIII  
I know noble accents  
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;  
But I know, too,  
That J.M. Coetzee is involved  
In what I know.

The second poem we read in these opening sessions was Craig Raine's 'A Martian Sends a Postcard Home' (1979), in which an extraterrestrial reports on modern human society in ways that make it seem by turns odd, disturbing, marvellous. It begins:

Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings  
and some are treasured for their markings -

In an age when the screen has become the most common way of apprehending text (one of my students confessed the other day to reading the whole of *Frankenstein* on her phone), it sometimes takes a while for the lecture audience to realise that 'Caxtons' are books:<sup>2</sup>

they cause the eyes to melt or the body to shriek without pain.  
I have never seen one fly, but sometimes they perch on the hand.

'Rain is when the earth is television', says another line, the poet punning with himself. And there are other in-jokes and tripwires to the poem (having 'cracked' the riddle, some students need to be reminded that this is a self-contradictory language event, not literally a postcard written by an alien).<sup>3</sup> If the Martian can't grasp the concept 'reading' in the first lines, then how is it that by the last stanza she can produce such a startling image of human couples in sleep?

At night, when all the colours die, they hide in pairs  
and read about themselves - in colour, with their eyelids shut.

These materials - both critical and creative - were then worked into an undergraduate poetry competition. First prize was all set works for the next semester. Students were asked to select an ordinary object, and then to write a poem about it in thirteen short stanzas - but not to disclose the riddle too quickly. We have had poems, some of them excellent (see Appendix below), about geckos, ten-rand notes, air conditioners, salt, waitresses, even thirteen ways of looking at Van Gogh's ear:

III  
Did this ear transgress,  
Or was it pierced  
For our iniquities?

IV  
Some said it sought  
Summer slumber -  
Shy, snail-like ear.

My favourite was an immensely sinister poem about a clown, which ends as follows:

XI  
She sashayed along William Nicol,  
In tight jeans,  
Once, a fear pierced her,  
In that she mistook  
The shadow of her customer,  
For the shadow of a clown.

XII  
The children are crying.  
The clown must be juggling.

## XIII

Bodies lay on the ground.  
 It was dark  
 And it was going to get darker.  
 The clown sat  
 On his grimy throne.

## 4. STRUCTURE AND IMPROVISATION

What I hope to show in this impressionistic reflection on four years at UCT is that teaching writing is a fluid and evolving thing: a practice that weaves continually between practical and theoretical, critical and creative, seriousness and lightness, private and public, work and play. For play, according to Donald Barthelme, 'is one of the great possibilities of art'. The absence of play in a work of art is 'the result of a lack of seriousness' (Vladislavić 2011: 33).

In literary studies, we are lucky in being able to bring teaching so much in line with our own interests, and vice versa. I don't know if this is as possible in, say, chemistry or mathematics, where (I am guessing) a more general, content-based approach is required. In dealing with South African and contemporary writing in my own work, I am able to explore texts in 'real time' with students. In the past, I tended to over-plan courses: to rehash parts of my PhD and teach out of what I was 'expert' at. Now, I often assign books that I have not yet read, so that I can discover them together with students.

This brings up the relation between structure and improvisation in small-group teaching. Many in the humanities will admit that much of what we do here is improvisatory; but then what (as in jazz) ensures a valid, valuable improvisation, rather than a baseless and rambling one? How does one be agile and responsive, allowing the discussion to go where it will, without making it too open-ended? How can one create a context that (as William Kentridge has said of his seriously playful art practice) maximises the possibility for happy accidents?

## 5. THREE STRIKES (AND OUT)

A true teacher, I feel, would never teach the same course twice, would tear up all lecture notes (or delete all PowerPoint slides) at the end of each year. This is a hard thing to honour, but I have at least made a vow never to teach a seminar or set work more than three times. The first year, there are teething problems. In the second year, one normally hits the sweet spot – something which the evaluation forms bear out. In the third year, a bit of staleness is already beginning to seep in, and the students can sense this.

## 6. TEACHING WRITING

Can writing be 'taught'? There is a whole literature on this question, particularly in the United States, where a course in composition comes as standard in most liberal arts degrees. We have tried to move some way towards this: making explicit some of the codes and conventions for writing at university (these remain frustratingly *implicit* for many students, a kind of unspoken gentlemen's agreement that results in part from some South African universities having been modelled on Oxbridge). Yet the challenge is to do this without surrendering to the dullness of ready-made templates for the 'thesis statement', the 'five-paragraph essay' or all the other mechanistic ways that the American system conceives of the university 'paper'.

We have tried also to imagine extra writing workshops that go beyond just remedial sessions or the idea of a 'writing clinic'. In fact, redefining the matter of student writing as a practice, a discipline and a long-term intellectual project – rather than a problem (or a medical emergency) – is central to the way we are trying to model undergraduate tutorial teaching.

And what about exploring academic writing in wider, more dynamic and creative ways? Seminars and workshops on arts journalism, cultural reporting and criticism have become a major part of my postgraduate teaching. The presence of creative writers, mature students and academic candidates in the same space produces an interesting dynamic. The 'creatives' must be less nostalgic, more rigorous and self-reflective; the 'academics' have to articulate their ideas in a more public way, with less knowingness or recourse to jargon, until (ideally) the whole distinction falls away and we can simply talk about *writing*.

## 7. DON'T SAY PROBLEMATISE

What is a review? What is an essay? And what is a review essay? We discussed these questions during a seminar in which participants were asked to experiment with a range of critical registers – from peer-reviewed journal articles to more public, journalistic modes – and then find their own place on the spectrum. The idea was to explore more varied and perhaps more lucrative modes of writing about literature than the research 'paper' or end-of-term 'assignment' – both rather insipid terms for the kind of pieces that honours and master's students are required to produce.

In the seminar, we drew up a list of words that were to be banned from the more public review essay: 'discourse'; 'intervention'; 'problematise' (instant fail); 'inscribe' (or worse: 'reinscribe'); 'grand narrative' (should have been retired years ago); 'agency' (not very common when I was a student, but now spreading like wildfire); 'interrogate' (why are academics always wanting to 'interrogate' texts, as if they had been subject to extraordinary rendition?).

So did this mean that such terms were then compulsory in the 'research paper' component of the course, asked one of the wits from creative writing? This last phrase is one that I want to interrogate and problematise to the highest degree – it seems to imply that scholarly or academic writing cannot or should not be creative. So what does creativity consist of in scholarship? How can one avoid academic clichés, if you will, whether of diction, tone, subject or structure – those heterodox vocabularies of the 1970s that are by now thoroughly orthodox? How do you stave off that sinking feeling when you can already anticipate, three lines in, all the conceptual moves that an 'accredited' article is going to make?

The point is not to take cheap shots at academia – certainly not in a country where anti-intellectualism is so rife. Rather, the idea is to challenge young literary scholars to make their work matter: to make it readable, engaged with the wider social body, critical (in the widest sense of that word), unignorable – and so less likely to be axed by administrators who are more inclined to support the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) at the expense of the NAAL disciplines (narrative, analysis, interpretation, literacy).

Such weighty interventions aside, the extracurricular (or 'bonus disc') part of the course explored that wonderful category of texts where the act of literary criticism produces another work in its own right – examples of what David Shields calls 'the critical intelligence in the imaginative position' (Shields 2011: 146). This is a spectrum of engagements with loved/hated artistic predecessors that range from the gloriously immature (Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage*, in which he writes about failing to write about D.H. Lawrence) and frankly bizarre (Nicholson Baker's obsessive-compulsive account of his relation to the work of John Updike, *U and I*) to the wryly serious (Janet Malcolm's wonderful *Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey*) and the very serious indeed (W.G. Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction*, a meditation on the Allied bombing of Nazi Germany, and its literary repercussions).

Very different in tone and approach, each of these shares a sense of literature as something lived by and through: a quality that can be difficult to smuggle into what counts as part of a 'research output'. But one should try nonetheless, for as Dyer asks (after disgustedly burning a Longman Critical Reader given to him by someone who hears that he is 'working on Lawrence'): 'How can you know anything about literature if all you've done is read books?' (Dyer 1998: 101).

## 8. FROM ENGLISH LITERATURE TO LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

What is this thing called 'literature', and how does it work? What does it mean to read the classics from where we are – Shakespeare and nineteenth-century novels transplanted to southern Africa like those street signs DICKENS, COLERIDGE and KIPLING set down incongruously in the suburbs of Woodstock, Observatory and Salt River? Are we dealing with 'English literature' or 'literature in English'?

What is the purpose of it all anyway, when others in the university are working on solar panels or vaccines for drug-resistant TB? What will be in the exam?

These are questions that all of us teaching in the big undergraduate courses must field and grapple with each year. We have to think hard about how to broach the core ideas of literary studies over thirteen weeks. How can we do this in a way that is engaging and critically astute, but also so that it will not exclude any members of the student body? It is all very well to talk about how the literary work might 'estrangle' what we think we know, and make the familiar unfamiliar. But how can Shklovsky's ideas of productive artistic difficulty be explored in a way that does not estrange members of the student body – many of whom, at least in first year, do not have English as a first language? In a panel on 'Teaching World Literature from the Cape' (as part of the 'Africa, Reading, Humanities' series in our department), I argued for three things.

## 9. READING BACKWARDS

First, we should reverse the chronology of our first-year survey course. Instead of starting with Shakespeare and Austen, we should begin with language and subject matter closest to the experience of our students: Zadie Smith's twenty-first-century campus novel, *On Beauty*, or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's modern African classic, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Then, over the year, we can move back in time, 'English' receding and becoming stranger week by week, until eventually we arrive at the mixed-up, mongrelised language of Chaucer as spoken on a small archipelago off Scandinavia before the great vowel shift. Or even before that: the epic poem *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon riddles, which (as some students will realise) sometimes have more in common with Afrikaans than modern English.

Our medium, this thing called English, is so naturalised as the world language of commerce and governance and grant applications that we need to give a sense of it as something with and formed by history: as 'a dialect with a navy' (to use the proverbial answer to the question, 'What is a language?') that has always absorbed loanwords wherever it goes: *trek, fundi, donga*. A sociolinguistic inflection can do much to make our curriculum more interesting, more engaged and more welcoming to a wider group of students. It also opens the department up to the beauty of southern Africa's many Englishes; to the many intellectual shapes that can be derived from the act of translation; and to the profound insight of twentieth-century linguistics: that we are language animals, and that the study of our grammars should be descriptive, not prescriptive.

Reading backwards from the cusp of the present also dispenses in some ways with the problem of origins: the question of a beginning for English literature becomes not an arbitrary point selected by curriculum planners, but something that is left up to individual students and how far they are willing to voyage back in time.

## 10. WORLD LANGUAGE, WORLD LITERATURE

Second, we should move away from the Cape Town–London axis that has dominated this rather Anglophile department in the past. We should be confident to set classic, difficult books (trying to sync our syllabus to the preferences of our students, as if to their iPhones, is not a good idea) – but these should be the *right* classic, difficult books. There should be texts in translation from around the world: Tolstoy and Garcia Márquez, not just Dickens and George Eliot. There should be texts in translation from the two other official languages of our city: isiXhosa and Afrikaans.

‘World literature’ is a tricky phrase: like ‘world music’, it can all too easily imply a sort of glib, multicultural tasting menu. But, to give the concept a different inflection: we need to set texts that do not trade on a certain cultural cache that some of our students have and some don’t. That is, we need those rare classics that ‘build a world’ from first principles, where less previous understanding is necessary. These might include the bizarre modern fairy tales of Kafka or Gogol, or the philosophical allegories of Camus – all works in translation, which removes a certain series of linguistic and cultural barriers. These are complex works written in simple prose, prose that is in a sense washed clean of a certain kind of Englishness by the fact of translation, so allowing our students to approach them more equally.

(A strange argument for someone in an English Department to make – but then again, I wish it were called something different.)

## 11. THE ADVENTURES OF A READER

Third, there should be an element of lightness and adventure in our undertakings. Often, I believe, we academics feel compelled to perform our impeccable politics to an audience of students who are actually listening for, and needing, something very different. Something more concerned with pleasure, close reading, slowness and surprise. Many undergraduate students, I can tell, are intrigued by what we do in literary studies. Unquantifiable, non-instrumental, asking questions about the medium rather than the message – it represents an unusual space in the academy driven increasingly by ranking tables and ‘impact’ metrics.

In hoary debates about ‘African’ versus ‘metropolitan’ literature in the curriculum, I always think back to an essay by Jorge Luis Borges in which he discusses the Argentine writer and tradition. He manages, at the same time, to evade any naive cultural nationalism and also to circumvent an obsessive return to ‘the Western canon’, whether admiring or oppositional. Having remarked that there are no camels in the Koran, because for Mohammed camels were part of reality and did not need to be singled out for special mention (whereas ‘the first thing a forger, a tourist, or an Arab nationalist would do is bring on the camels, whole caravans of camels on every page’), he then goes on to explore the other side of the coin. He argues, with tongue in cheek, that South American writers actually have a *greater*

right to Western literature than do the inhabitants of the West: ‘We can take on all the European subjects, take them on without superstition, and with an irreverence that can have, and already has had, fortunate consequences’ (Borges 2000: 211). The English don’t know their own history, one of Salman Rushdie’s characters remarks, because so much of it happened overseas (Rushdie 2011: 353). From our vantage points in the South we can see the European canon as it plays out across the Atlantic and Indian oceans: not just its content but also its consequences.

## 12. DOUBLE ACT

In the last two years, I have been involved in bridging programmes outside the university, programmes that allow learners and community activists to retake their matric exams, and to have a better chance of entering tertiary education. I tend to go through set works, short stories and poems with first-additional-language students from Khayelitsha and Philippi. This has revealed much about the interface between an ailing state education system and a ‘world-class’ university. The gap between verbal and written skills among the South African youth; the energy and talent that is not being honoured in existing systems of assessment; the ideas that school students have about UCT and its institutional culture; the sense of disorientation and lovelessness they feel when they get there – these are (as the Rhodes Must Fall protests of 2015 have emphasised) powerful realities.

As such, beyond the various mentoring schemes and extra workshops for ‘at risk’ students, I feel that a crucial element in shifting the demographic of our third-year and postgraduate classes is a more subtle thing. It is a question of intellectual culture and address, of voice – who is speaking to whom, and how. I think of the difficult double act that needs to happen in our seminars: on the one hand, an impulse to challenge, needle and extend confident students; but at the same time, crucially, an imperative to create a sense of safety and trust in which nobody feels estranged.

This is no easy thing to do: it resides even in small things like tone of voice, body language, mode of address.<sup>4</sup> It also requires a move away from mystified notions of the university, the cult of the academic as guru with his or her chosen acolytes. It needs a certain kind of intellectual openness, even naivety – an admission that most mother-tongue English-speaking South Africans remain powerfully ignorant about their own country’s linguistic diversity and the creativity that is happening all around them all the time. A map pulled off Wikipedia that I often use in lectures shows South Africa according to areas of first-language speakerdom: English is barely visible – a few dots around the Cape Peninsula, Durban, Pietermaritzburg and Gauteng. I sometimes have the sense of South African English as a thin, business-minded strata sitting on top of everything: a bland, technocratic crust of a language, only able to admit or recognise a tiny percentage of the upwelling mantle of linguistic energy on which it rests.



### 13. UNCREATIVE WRITING

After three years of launching English Literary Studies 1 with the same spiel, I was getting bored. The injunction to 'make it new' was feeling old; railing against clichés was beginning to feel like a cliché. This is also the challenge of teaching literature as a career: how to maintain one's own creativity across the years, when the course rolls around again and the lecture hall fills up with a different cohort – how to avoid the sensation that you are running on the spot.

If writing is about breaking convention, making strange and making new, it is also about working with formulae: setting limits and making do within received patterns. To students who were disconcerted by this volte-face halfway through the lecture series, I again quoted Wilde: 'A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.' Having gone through the formulae for sonnets (ABABCDCDEFEGG), palindromes (ABCDEFGFEDCBA), haiku (5/7/5) and the blues (I IV, I IV, V7 IV I), we then began pushing this idea to its extreme, using patently artificial and absurdly strict constraints in the manner of the Workshop for Potential Literature (OuLiPo) and the Situationists. 'Constraints are welcomed as a kind of resistance against which the imagination grinds and sparks', writes Ivan Vladislavić in *The Loss Library*, registering his debt to various forms of conceptual writing: 'Difficulty often produces a daring imaginative response' (Vladislavić 2011: 32).

For my postgraduate writing class, a typical weekly assignment offered the following choices:

- 1 Read Vladislavić, 'Gross', in *The Loss Library*. Research OuLiPo online. Choose a 'contrainte' and then apply it to the first page of your favourite set work or (maybe better) to number (2) below.
- 2 Go into UCT library and find the book whose shelf mark most closely corresponds to your ID number. Work up a writing piece from this 'found' text, maybe using the operators (1) or (4).
- 3 Spend the week eavesdropping on people's conversations. Then generate a work purely from language that you have heard spoken, rearranging and collaging phrases as you see fit.
- 4 Read the famous 'film running backwards' excerpt from Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5*. Now run the same algorithm on a different (real) experience.
- 5 Combine any or all of the above operators/vectors/constraints in the way that you wish. Explain your process clearly.

NB: If you break or bend the rules at all, you must be honest and record this in a footnote.

Be as strict as possible.

The first pages of Nabokov's *Lolita* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* came back to me in many forms:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine vinaigrettes. His fan rested on solid personal acne. As a young manatee of eighteen, he had brought hookahs to his vinaigrette by throwing Amalinze the Catalan.

This was the product of N+7, in which you replace every noun with the noun seven entries after it in a dictionary.<sup>5</sup> We also invented our own constraint, which we called 'Inhabiting the Shell'. This involves mapping every word as a part of speech, then replacing it (as far as possible) with a different word, but one that is the same part of speech. One class member refined this still further, trying for the same number of syllables to preserve the rhythm. Sense often fell away (it proved a very difficult exercise), but this did allow us to hear Zadie Smith (we guessed it was her) in a purely syntactic, jabberwocky-like way, as if we were privy to some secret, non-semantic quality of the prose. Another class member who tried the exercise with Judith Butler came to an interesting conclusion: in much critical theory, you can replace each concept with its exact opposite, and there is little alteration to the overall effect.

In terms of option (2), I noted that while my ID number (which begins with 800) put me safely in the realms of Literature, Rhetoric and Criticism,<sup>6</sup> many of my students had been propelled into Italic Literatures (870), Hellenic Literatures (880) or Literatures in Other Languages (890), where African Literature is consigned to the subset 896. Several had vaulted discipline into History (900s), with some even making it as far as China and Adjacent Areas (951).

As for option (4), getting students to write things backwards proved an especially effective exercise because it made them consider and modify verbs – those parts of speech where so many secrets of writing cluster. We had a mother kissing a chicken wing better, expertly braiding its fibres back together with her teeth and tongue, then setting it down whole on a side plate. We had Julius Malema re-entering Parliament, quietening everyone down and politely retracting his words: the president was well within his rights to *keep* the money. Following Honourable Malema's example, fellow Economic Freedom Fighters politely retracted their middle fingers.

I began imagining future course outlines in my head (a common pastime), perhaps one titled 'Uncreative Writing', in which any form of self-expression or originality is totally forbidden, and plagiarism compulsory. Perhaps the opening module could be themed around 'Wasting Time on the Internet':

We spend our lives in front of screens, generally wasting time: toggling between social media and cat videos, chatting and shopping. What if these acts – clicking, texting, status-updating and random surfing – were used as the basis for compelling and affecting works of literature? Could

we reconstruct our autobiography using only Facebook? Could we write the great South African novel by plundering our Twitter feed? Could we reimagine the internet as the greatest poem ever written? Using laptops and a Wi-Fi connection as our only materials, this class will focus on the alchemical recuperation of aimless surfing into substantial works of literature. Participants will be required to stare at the screen for three hours, only interacting through chat rooms, bots, social media and listservs. To bolster our project, we'll explore the long history of the recuperation of boredom and time-wasting through critical texts about affect theory, situationism and everyday life by thinkers such as John Cage, Michel de Certeau, Guy Debord, Mary Kelly, Betty Friedan, Erving Goffman, Stuart Hall, Siegfried Kracauer, Georges Perec, Henri Lefebvre, Trinh Minh-ha, Sianne Ngai, Raymond Williams and others. Distraction, multitasking and aimless drifting will be mandatory.<sup>7</sup>

Some of the entries in the undergraduate poetry competition this year beat me to it. The instruction was to use 'found text': entrants were not permitted to invent any new stretches of linguistic code; they 'simply' had to rearrange what was already in existence and then specify what domain of language they had worked within.

One of the winning entries took its cues from the (infamous) Facebook page called 'UCT Confessions' (which allows students to post anonymously), and went under the brilliant title of:

*To the girl today on Jammie Plaza at 3.15pm who  
walked up Jammie stairs and then back down*

I know I am opening the door to insults  
I know you're dating someone  
But can I come shower with you today?

[...]

Let's have ice cream and a joint sometime?  
Please care to inbox me  
Sincerely

Another finalist drew his words from an academic article on animal biology: an example of what a contributor to the *Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing* calls 'finding language asleep in science' (Morley 2012: 168). The range of terms for describing the shape, margin and venation of a leaf is just one example of the immense lexical riches available to student writers who exit the sometimes narrow canon of critical theory and immerse themselves in the technical vocabularies of other disciplines. In his piece 'Serious Play: Creative Writing and

Science', David Morley quotes Miroslav Holub (poet, immunologist, researcher into the common cold virus) quoting George Steiner: 'I remain unrepentant in my hunch that intellectual energies, imaginative boldness and sheer fun are currently more abundant in the sciences than they are in the humanities' (Morley 2012: 168).<sup>8</sup>

The first-place entry, however, turned a playful exercise into something unforgettably serious. Its text is drawn from testimony to the Farlam Commission, an enquiry into the events of 16 August 2012, when thirty-four striking miners were shot and killed by police at a platinum mine near Marikana. There are thirty-four lines in the main body of the poem, one for each of the workers killed that day; their names run down the right-hand side of the page as a parallel text. The lines on the left, each standing for the fallen, are taken from the cross-examination of Mr Mtshamba, a rock drill operator at Lonmin mines who was a striker on the koppie and witnessed the murders of fellow miners that he knew:

Have you had nightmares about this event?

Yes, especially for me  
because for me it was the first time to see that  
with naked eyes.

## CONSOLIDATION

Now it is the end of another year and teaching is over. Having been linked together in a strange experiment for thirteen weeks, students, tutors and staff all suddenly move apart. Students are revising; tutors are writing up; staff are marking. Having been exposed (one hopes) to language events of all forms, registers and tone colours from across twelve centuries, and having been asked to navigate vast galaxies of text online, the first-years will soon assemble in the panoptical 1970s Sports Centre with leaking roofs and bird droppings on the desks, and then go through the extravagantly old-fashioned procedure of writing a two-hour examination, in two examination books, by hand.

Afterwards, I spend a whole day marking and moderating almost one thousand scripts together with the graduate tutors. We sit in a room with the bundles of answer books scattered everywhere and nobody leaves until it is done. An intense experience, but not without its lighter moments. As we go through the scripts, the most intriguing sentences are written on a blackboard, and then ...

Wait. To avoid the possibility of legal action, let me switch to the hypothetical. Imagine a situation in which we note down the most intriguing sentences scattered through the exam booklets. Imagine (at this economy of scale) the immense creativity that resides in pretending to know when you don't, in complex workarounds because you have forgotten a character's name in Zadie

Smith's *On Beauty*, or because it momentarily escapes you precisely what Albert Camus's *The Plague* is an allegory for. Now imagine that one of us harvests all this text, assembled over several years, all exactly as found, and then arranges it into a found poem:<sup>9</sup>

During a phone call to the house of his enemy,  
He speaks to the son of his enemy,  
Even though he is fully conscious of its futility.

He is a 57-year-old white American,  
He is a fanatic poetry lover,  
He is a school dropout who actively thinks he is a gangster,  
He is aware of the tensions that arise when certain things are intermingled,  
He is in love with a girl called Victoria,  
His name is Jeremy.

During a phone call to the house of his enemy,  
He speaks to the son of his enemy,  
About the rates, the plague, and the telegrams,  
About the eleven official languages decorating the South African flag,  
About the metaphysical problem that is life,  
About the Nazis invading France, Algeria especially,  
(although this is not as bad as it was years ago, it still happens)  
About the Robin Hood-like Haitian fugitives,  
And the difficulties of entrapment, death, and so forth.

If we analyze the text with a microscope,  
We will see that during the phone call to the house of his enemy,  
Jeremy realizes he has made a terrible mistake.

If we analyze the text with a macroscope,  
We will see that during the phone call to the house of his enemy,  
He realizes that the sequence of life is meaningless and that  
The only choice is death or death -  
This needn't be a problem.

During a phone call to the house of his enemy,  
He has a falling out with Mike, Victoria's sister,  
About a group of suburban children at the record store,  
And other negro-related aspects of the text.

It seems that something has been lost in translation,  
But I can confidently assert that  
The rats indicate Algerians during the occupation of France,  
The rats represent the Jews,  
The rats cannot communicate with humans and therefore

The rats represent the Nazi occupation of French Algeria,  
Everything ends where it began, and vice versa.  
All children can be symbolic of all children,  
And they know that to define something is to do the opposite of what is meant,  
There is a fancy French term for this effect - it escapes me,  
But perhaps in France formality of speech is not an issue,  
Careful analysis is the only antidote to this confusion -  
Let us begin.

## APPENDIX

The poems in full

*Thirteen Ways of Looking at Van Gogh's Ear*

Heather Kirkby

I

A shelled pea,  
An enthusiastic outpouring of adoration:  
A famous ear.

II

An ear that the sea  
White-washed into through a clasped conch shell.

III

Did this ear transgress,  
Or was it pierced  
For our iniquities?

IV

Some said it sought  
Summer slumber -  
Shy, snail-like ear.

V

This is the season of cauliflower ears  
Bound in bandage.

VI

The hammer and anvil,  
Blacksmith's ear.  
Deafening hammer and anvil,  
Forged fire ear.

VII

Rippling, wrapped in brown paper,  
An ear:  
"For you."

VIII

Ashamed of what it had heard,  
The ear-ache  
Of whole-faced jeering,  
Deaf to the left of the world.  
So that the wind is no longer madding.

IX

There is no such thing as a bearded ear.

X

Even impasto  
Could not make up for  
A missing ear.

XI

"Here is a rag of my existence,  
A prayer flag blown out to the wind,  
A mournful ear  
That is a sign of rapture."

XII

The crickets have stopped singing,  
The ear must be gone.

XIII

A revolver  
In an ear of wheat  
That we find at harvest  
And it undulates  
In the late afternoon.

## 13-2-1

*Nkanyezi Hlatshwayo*

Matted and free flowing  
crocheted wool  
hung loosely, at-ease,  
from a patient chin.

Rule-lined and pressed  
processed-factory-cotton  
- Scalped.  
Conquered remains,  
of a buzzing-restless-impatient blade.

Borrowed psychedelia:  
A bright theme and variations on light,  
of a bygone, by-going era  
- yet, to be gone by again - in another time,  
in another place  
By another race of sunburnt hearts.  
(For they so loved the world ...)

Traditions of traditions:  
traditional renditions  
of young men in blazers and dress-ties.

In 1969, thousands of Xhosa initiates  
under the garb and comforting cover  
of homogenous heavy blankets  
made their way to "the mountain",  
the lighting way-up is truly incredible sometimes  
- on clearer crisper days,  
as they made their way up,  
like any other year.

The Summer of Love found thousands marching  
in uniform drips-and-drabs  
wearing the coats Nature gave them  
under the cover of stars  
It rained a bit - stopped - rained some more  
An exceptional year - 1969.

Pluralists preachers pulpiter in unison  
their faith  
(in) their knowledge of all that matters.  
(Voices pretending to know everything)

Soloist-advocates  
wax on to the gathered  
their knowledge  
of nothing but love and the lack thereof.  
(Voices pretending to know nothing)

The ever-ready  
greeting grins  
of those loathsome-lovable  
proprietors of sin. (To be disrobed:  
rung-out and clean-pressed. On tuesday evenings  
and sunday afternoon limbo, and other long dark  
tea-times and come-downs of the soul.)  
The omnipresence  
of saluting shiny buttons  
and doubly-sewn weighty badges.  
(In every on-going field of war and on every street corner  
big brothers, anywhere and everywhere,  
To be watched by us.)

At Thirty:  
four parents  
three more rungs on the ladder  
two salaries  
two more mouths to feed  
a four-door  
a lawn  
a dog  
one tennis-shoe-in-a-tumble-dryer heartbeat  
one pair of open eyes at 3AM  
one very constricting neck-tie  
ten reasons to buy a new '82 Pontiac and have an affair with an air-hostess.

At Thirty:  
one moderately-priced "sports car"  
one world illuminating idea  
one dog  
one plate  
one pillow  
one toothbrush  
fourteen oversized and drafty dress-shirts with virgin top-buttons  
any number of meaningless numbers in a phonebook.

These self-defined and self-defining threads  
-thirteen to one -  
comfort and encase  
us all

*Thirteen Ways of Looking at Salt**Lara-May Evans*

I

Lazily,  
Loosen sleep from eyelids  
Eat it  
It melts on the tongue like flakes of salty snow.

II

Playground, 1997  
Pushed around, pants pulled down  
Infinite tears and infinite snot  
Smothered – breathless – by warm, wet salt.

III

Stand before an ocean,  
Beat the waves with tiny fists.  
It beats back:  
Spat out and spluttering,  
Stinging eyes and salt-scratched knees.

IV

The puppy whistles in his sleep  
His breath is milk and salt

V

Driving with grandmother-and-talc  
Cowlick and carsick days  
She calls the other drivers Sods  
I think a sod's a sort of fish

VI

Rough flakes of stone  
Fall soft and dissolve  
You are not stone at all

VII

Brave hand to velvet-muzzle  
Hot breath  
Tongue to sweat-softened palm

VIII

Cannibal Dream:  
From a jar, eat small cubes of briny flesh.  
The label reads, "Pickled New Zealanders"  
Wake up uneasy

IX

Shrieking seagulls  
Turned to pterodactyls  
By vinegar and salt

X

Sucking the soft blades  
Of the artichoke  
Lick the salt off shiny fingers  
Your wet mouth allures and appals me

XI

Cormorant with tangled string – distorted feet

XII

And salt so ancient  
Sits the same in the sea  
As it sits in me,  
Sits the same  
On the tongues of Lot, and god  
And me.

XIII

*See how it runs*

*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Clown**Emma Reinecke*

I

Among twenty grey streets  
The only sound  
Was the laughter of the clown.

II

I was of three faces,  
Like a circus  
In which there are three clowns.

III

The clown's cigarette smoke whirled in the autumn winds  
It was a small part of the pollution.

## IV

A politician and a prostitute  
Are one.  
A politician and a prostitute and a clown  
Are one.

## V

I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of the pie  
Or the beauty of the pie soaring through the air,  
The pie smashing into the clown's face  
Or just before.

## VI

The scent of McDonalds filled the children  
With barbaric hunger.  
The poster of the clown  
Grinning, faded into the wall,  
The mood  
Etched on the faces  
Of each underpaid, overworked employee.

## VII

O thin workers of Manor Farm  
Why do you imagine golden men?  
Do you not see how the clown  
Sits in the suits  
Of the men about you?

## VIII

I know circus tricks and sleights of hand,  
Business deals and campaign promises,  
I know mellifluous words and sweet, bewitching promises  
And I know too that the clown is involved  
In what I know

## IX

When the clown vanished from the news  
It marked the end  
Of one of many freedoms

## X

At the sight of clowns  
Driving in their tiny clown car  
The stomach of the man  
Overflowed with mirth

## XI

She sashayed along William Nicol,  
In tight jeans,  
Once, a fear pierced her,  
In that she mistook  
The shadow of her customer,  
For the shadow of a clown.

## XII

The children are crying.  
The clown must be juggling.

## XII

Bodies lay on the ground.  
It was dark  
And it was going to get darker.  
The clown sat  
On his grimy throne.

What the judges said:

Third place (tied): **Emma Reinecke**

'The best poetry, in my mind, expertly juggles the abstract and the particular, which is what this weird and wonderful poem does. There is something visually and semantically satisfying about the final image of the clown sitting on his grimy throne. Throughout, Reinecke captures the menace and beauty of clowns, with a dash of humour (intended or not) to make it all work. She gets what Stevens was trying to do with perspective, but she makes it her own, as well.'

Third place (tied): **Lara-May Evans**

'The end of this poem by Evans really succeeds; the final two stanzas are brilliant and evocative, especially this notion that salt sat on the tongues of Lot, of god, and of the poet.'

Second place: **Nkanyezi Hlatshwayo**

'Sometimes a little cryptic but the sections that work – Xhosa initiates and the Summer of Love – are remarkable.'

First place: **Heather Kirkby**

'The imagery in this poem seems to undulate in the way that Van Gogh's paintings do.'

*I did not have anything in my hands (A found poem)*

Have you had nightmares about this event?

Yes, especially for me  
because for me it was the first time to see that  
with naked eyes.

We returned back to the mountain.  
People were just walking freely –  
then everything started to be  
confused.

there was a lot of dust going up there  
people were falling there.

We also started running away turning backwards.

He raised his hands. As he was raising his hands he was shot at.  
After the shot was fired  
he then bent down again,  
again  
he raised his hands  
kept on saying  
'let us surrender gentlemen, let's surrender.'  
again a shot was fired.

The workers do not want to be at loggerheads or fight –  
our hope was that we would be told to go back to work  
and that things would be made better.

the place was filthy  
people were being hit and kicked  
we did not know whether they were injured or had died.

They were talking  
as though they were competing.  
One was saying 'I shot him from this side'  
one was saying 'I shot him from this side'.

The people who were supposed to have been arrested  
were having a normal life, having a good time  
and we are being arrested  
for killing the people who were with us there.  
We did not kill them.

Nothing has been changed  
in the vicinity of the koppie.

Have you had nightmares about this event?

*Julius Tokoti Mancotywa*

*Molefi Osiel Ntsoele*  
*Modisaotsile Van Wyk Sagalala*  
*Cebisile Yawa*

*Makhosandile Mkhonjwa*  
*Bongani Ngongophele*  
*Mongezeleli Ntenetya*  
*Henry Mvuyisi Pato*

*Bonginkosi Yona*  
*Bongani Mdze*  
*Ntandazo Nokamba*

*John Kutlwano Lendingoane*  
*Stelega Merrick Gadlela*  
*Telang Vitalis Moha*  
*Mafolisi Mabiya*  
*Janeveke Raphael Liau*  
*Fezile David Saphendu*  
*Andries Motlopula Ntsenyeho*

*Anele Mdizeni*

*Mzukisi Sompeta*  
*Mphangeli Tukuza*  
*Babalo Mtshazi*

*Mgcineni Noki*  
*Thobile Mpumza*  
*Thabiso Johannes Thelejane*

*Nkosiyabo Xalabile*  
*Thobisile Zibambele*  
*Thabiso Mosebetsane*  
*Patric Akhona Jijase*

*Khanare Elias Monesa*  
*Mpunzeni Ngxande*  
*Michael Ngweyi*  
*Thebinkosi Gwelani*  
*Jackson Lethupa*

*The names of the thirty-four*

Note: The poem above is taken from transcripts of the Farlam Commission of Inquiry into the happenings at a platinum mine near Marikana on 16 August 2012. The words of the poem, and its title, are taken from testimony and cross-examination of Mr Mtshamba, a rock drill operator at Lonmin mines. He was a striker on the koppie and witnessed the murders of fellow miners that he knew. He gave testimony on 18 August 2014 (transcript available at <http://www.marikanacomm.org.za/transcripts/day275-140818Marikana.pdf>).

The poem was configured by Julia Chaskalson.

*To the girl today on Jammie Plaza at 3.15pm who  
walked up Jammie stairs and then back down*

*Suzanna Howard*

*Lines taken from the Facebook page 'UCT Ikey's Crushes'*

I know I am opening the door to insults  
I know you're dating someone  
But can I come shower with you today?

That nose ring is such a turn on  
I know I may come across as being too horny but all I want is your attention,  
if only I can get your name

I will find out even if it takes me till the end of my degree.

How I wish to have a taste of those lips of yours,  
Your blond curls of grace  
One day I will have the guts to tell you to your face,  
for now just believe me OK?

You've got to be the prettiest girl ever,  
I wish I could just wrap my hands around your beautiful face  
But for now that seems impossible

Every time I see you, you seem to be angry  
Or is it your usual facial expression?  
Please smile more often,  
Smile and lead me deep.

All I wanna do is walk up and ask if you'd like to be curious with me  
But more disturbing is this strange desire,  
I want some of your biscuit.  
I hope you like swimming and swans.



I will let you flourish and I will be great for you.  
 If I somehow get a chance with you, I promise God to stop being a player  
 Please please contact me I want you again, and again, and nobody else.

The odd thing is  
 I'm absolutely hammered while I'm writing this.  
 I want to do something brave ...  
 The things I'd eat off you.

Let's have ice cream and a joint sometime?  
 Please care to inbox me  
 Sincerely

### Acknowledgements

Many thanks to members of my writing classes over the last few years: ELL2007 (Life-writing in South Africa), ELL3009 (Contemporary Non-fiction) and ELL4063 (The Essay). Thanks to the undergraduate poets who have allowed their work to be reproduced, and also to Rosa Lyster for 'First Years Found Poem'.

### Notes

1. I have benefited here from Aida Edemariam's deft article 'Who's Afraid of the Campus Novel?' (*The Guardian*, 2 October 2004).
2. Also: when students wrote essays on the poem, almost all of them stated that Thomas Caxton was an early printer and then referenced Wikipedia to back this up. Now why reference a 'fact' that is (to my mind) in the public domain? An anxiety about plagiarism, perhaps, which makes one reference everything compulsively? No doubt this is part of it, but there is also a sign here of how the texture of knowledge – and what it means to know things – has changed in the Google era. Facts are referenced; often, other people's interpretations and analysis are not.
3. And 'Martianism', the faux-serious school of poetry that this work gave rise to, is (a tutor pointed out to me) an anagram of the name of Raine's pal Martin Amis, whose literary journalism is collected under the title *The War against Cliché*.
4. In a panel discussion on 'How to Transform the Higher Education Sector' in South Africa, held at UCT on 21 October 2014, Professor Jonathan Jansen called for an awareness of the inbuilt prejudices that disguise themselves in the language of 'sophistication': an insidious set of rules that rewards 'particular forms of English language fluency, political acquiescence, social agreeability'. Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng recalled the culture shock of arriving at Wits as a student and being unfamiliar with the social grammar of this historically white, English-speaking institution: 'It took me six months to say anything in class, because you just don't know. You raise your hand – people don't raise their hand; they wait for a pause and they come in! So, it's a simple thing but it's very powerful, you know. For you, that's not done, and you take a whole year to learn when that pause happens'. Video available at <http://www.uct.ac.za/dailynews/?id=8864>.
5. In this case, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (8th edition, 1992).

6. I was delighted to find that Italo Calvino's collected essays, *The Literature Machine* (trans. Patrick Creagh, 1987), (800 CALV), was one of my options, containing as it does the classic 'Why Read the Classics?': 'And school should enable you to know, either well or badly, a certain number of classics among which – or in reference to which – you can then choose your classics.'
7. This entire course outline is lifted from Kenneth Goldsmith's module on 'Uncreative Writing' at the University of Pennsylvania – in which self-expression is forbidden and plagiarism compulsory: <https://www.english.upenn.edu/Courses/Undergraduate/2015/Spring/ENGL111.301>. I have altered it enough (I hope) to evade Turnitin, our automatic plagiarism checker: a surprisingly onerous and 'creative' exercise.
8. Steiner goes on: 'Courteous inquiries by colleagues in the sciences render more embarrassing the casuistic jargon, the pretentious triviality which now dominate so much of literary theory and humanistic studies' (cited in Morley 2012: 165).
9. Rosa Lyster, 'First Years Found Poem'. First published online: <http://the-toast.net/2014/03/21/three-poems-rosa-lyster/>

### References

- Achebe C (2013) *Things fall apart*. London: Penguin
- Adichie CN (2009) *Half of a yellow sun*. London: Fourth Estate
- Amis M (2002) *The war against cliché: Essays and reviews 1971–2000*. London: Vintage
- Baker N (2011) *U and I: A true story*. London: Granta
- Borges JL (2000) *Labyrinths*. London: Penguin
- Bradbury M (2000) *The history man*. London: Picador
- DeLillo D (2012) *White noise*. London: Picador
- Dyer G (1998) *Out of sheer rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence*. London: Abacus
- Fry S (2011) *Moab is my washpot*. London: Random House
- Malcolm J (2002) *Reading Chekhov: A critical journey*. New York: Random House
- Morley D (2012) Serious play: Creative writing and science. In D Morley and P Neilsen (eds), *The Cambridge companion to creative writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Nabokov V (1957) *Pnin*. Melbourne: Heinemann
- Nietzsche F (1873/2004) On truth and lies in an extra-moral sense. In J Rivkin and M Ryan (eds) *Literary theory: An anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing
- Raine D (1979) *A Martian sends a postcard home*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press
- Rushdie S (2011) *The satanic verses*. London: Random House
- Sebald WG (2004) *On the natural history of destruction: With essays on Alfred Andersch, Jean Amery and Peter Weiss* (trans. A Bell). London: Penguin
- Shields D (2011) *Reality hunger: A manifesto*. London: Penguin
- Shklovsky V (1917/2004) Art as technique. In J Rivkin and M Ryan (eds) *Literary theory: An anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing

Smith Z (2006) *On beauty*. London: Penguin

Stitt PA (1983) John Ashbery: The art of poetry no. 33. *The Paris Review* 90. Accessed <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery>

Vladislavić I (2011) *The loss library and other unfinished stories*. Cape Town: Umuzi

Vonnegut K (2000) *Slaughterhouse 5*. London: Vintage



**Anwar Suleman Mall** is a retired Professor in the Division of General Surgery at UCT, and a leading researcher on the biochemistry and physiology of mucus. He is also a self-made literary scholar with a deep passion for literature and the philosophy of science. His love of literature has led him to read widely in the medical humanities, and he has been a wonderful support for those of us wishing to find ways to bring the field of medicine and the arts into closer conversation.

Resonant with the work of writer-physician Abraham Verghese, Mall unearths his past as a way to situate his pedagogical approach to education. He writes:

'My conceptual development had been delayed for a significant time. I grew up in the apartheid era and attended an under-resourced school for Indians in the village of Greytown in KwaZulu-Natal. Rote learning was the only method of learning I knew, reinforced by the memorising of long Arabic verses from the Qur'an at a very young age in a traditional religious environment. Upon matriculation I entered the University of Durban-Westville, formerly the University College of Indians, one of many tertiary institutions established by the apartheid government in line with its separate-development policy. My schooling had not prepared me for higher education. I had no conceptual framework and saw no links between my voluminous first-year subjects - physics, chemistry, botany and zoology - never mind the links and continuities between topics within a single discipline.'

Mall's lasting intervention in higher education is his attempt to make legible the 'looping effects' of personal histories and how they shore up the possibilities for alternative futures. His tenacity in overcoming apartheid's legacy, and his open hurt about the injuries suffered, offer a compelling model for using autobiographical disclosure as a pedagogical tool for transforming institutional routines, protocols and pedagogies that block the sharing of mutual suffering between teachers and students. Mall is exceptional for identifying intergenerational trauma as a source of power for breaking down barriers between student and teacher. I would say that Mall's passion for literature helps fuel his desire to include emotion in the context of teaching science.