

# PROLOGUE: CHANGE AND CHALLENGE TODAY

English Studies is continuing to experience fundamental changes. Many of these were apparent as tendencies and have become clearer. A few are only just coming over the horizon. Some are common to many subjects; some peculiar to English. These preliminary remarks are an attempt to sketch these changes while also pointing to changes in the current edition. For convenience, issues are gathered under separate heads and each is framed in terms of a central challenge. But all these issues are interconnected and are picked up in the body of the book.

## CROSSING BORDERS, ESTABLISHING BOUNDARIES

The overall trend is still clearly towards a multicultural and cross-disciplinary construction of the subject. This is manifest in attention to previously marginal or excluded genres such as life-writing (auto/biography), travel writing, and utopian and science fiction; and above all in an increasingly broader and deeper engagement with post-colonial and women's writing, literatures in English (plural) and, latterly, gay writing. Within British Studies, Irish and Scottish writing continue to have particular appeals, as do Hispanic and Native American writing in American Studies. Often such interests are pushed back historically; so it is now becoming more common to study, say, seventeenth-century women writers or eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave narratives, and not only modern and contemporary instances. Sometimes study is supported by visual, audio-visual and other documentary material; and film increasingly features as an object and process in its own right, not just as illustration or enhancement of a verbal text.

There are counter-trends, however. Some practitioners of English insist upon a distinctly 'literary' emphasis, and upon a return to or consolidation of narrower, often national 'canons' and critical traditions. The concentration on literature meaning basically printed poems, novels and plays also remains constitutive for many. Partly this is a result of the independent development of Cultural, Communication, and Film and Media Studies, and a corresponding attempt to define English more exclusively, less inclusively. Partly this is a national or regional response to the perceived threat (rather than promise) of globalisation. To some extent, all this is a continuation of the 'canon' debates and 'culture wars' of the 1980s and 1990s. But it goes further and deeper in that it is not only the selection of texts but the framing of the curriculum and the methods and aims of study that are at stake.

- ◆ *The challenge, then, is how far the borders of the subject need to be further crossed, extended and re-drawn – or even re-trenched; also whether we need an entirely new ‘map’ or metaphor – ‘net’, ‘web’, ‘field’, ‘journey’, ‘trajectory’, etc. (See Part One.)*

## TEXTS IN CONTEXTS: LITERATURE IN HISTORY

It is becoming increasingly common to see texts continuously with their contexts, and to grasp literature *in* history, not just above or to one side of it. Conversely, it is becoming increasingly uncommon to see literature as *only* ‘the words on the page’, the ‘text in itself’. However, con-text (literally ‘with-text’) has to be conceived in flexible and plural ways. For contexts include not only the writer’s personal circumstances and the historical events and current world-views that helped shape and inform the initial moment of composition, but also all the subsequent moments and modes of re-production and reception. Crucially, and for each of us with great immediacy, this includes the moments in which we read and study the text now – in our own times and to some extent on our own terms. Moreover, con-texts (‘with texts’) include all the other texts around – also ‘then’ and ‘now’ – from the sources and influences drawn upon, through the genres in which the text is placed, to any other text with which it subsequently becomes accidentally associated or deliberately linked. Context is thus continuous with intertextuality.

All this leaves us with problems as well as possibilities. Where does ‘text’ stop (or start) and ‘context’ begin (or end)? And, ‘intertextually’ speaking, how do we handle the fact that one text leads to another and another and another . . .? Meanwhile, if literature is *in and among* history and *a part of* it, how can we also see literature as in some sense *apart from* history and *alongside* or even *beyond* it? For clearly there are important distinctions as well as connections to be made between words and the (rest of the) world, between all that *is* text and all that is *not*. So we need to grasp both, simultaneously or by turns – that is, if we are to have a relatively determinate *object* of study together with a relatively dynamic sense of the *subject* of study.

- ◆ *The challenge, then, is to combine ‘close’ reading with ‘far’ reading: looking at and through the text so as to see literature as both a part of and apart from history. Practically, it means identifying and drawing together a range of contextual (including intertextual) materials while still in some way keeping an eye trained on the specific words of the text in hand – and while recognising that there are more texts and hands than one. (See 1.8, 2.2–3, and ‘Text, context and intertextuality’ in Part Three.)*

## SEEING THROUGH THEORY

For a few people the moment of ‘Theory’ – i.e. highly abstract, stand-alone Theory with a capital T – has passed. For a few others it never arrived. But for most people in and around the subject the choice of texts and range of approaches have been profoundly influenced by the theorising of the past twenty or thirty years. In fact, it would be difficult to find a current syllabus at universities and colleges that did not in some way, perhaps centrally, engage critically with such issues as: the category Literature and the nature of ‘literary’ language; the concept of the author (‘dead’, alive or otherwise); reading as an opaque and contentious activity; shifting relations