

Dialogue and Difference

English into the Nineties

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General editor's preface

It is easy to see that we are living in a time of rapid and radical social change. It is much less easy to grasp the fact that such change will inevitably affect the nature of those disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it.

Yet this is nowhere more apparent than in the central field of what may, in general terms, be called literary studies. Here, among large numbers of students at all levels of education, the erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions that support the literary disciplines in their conventional form has proved fundamental. Modes and categories inherited from the past no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation.

New Accents is intended as a positive response to the initiative offered by such a situation. Each volume in the series will seek to encourage rather than resist the process of change; to stretch rather than reinforce the boundaries that currently define literature and its academic study.

Some important areas of interest immediately present themselves. In various parts of the world, new methods of analysis have been developed whose conclusions reveal the limitations of the Anglo-American outlook we inherit. New concepts of literary forms and modes have been proposed; new notions of the nature of literature itself and of how it communicates are current; new views of literature's role in relation to society

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flourish. *New Accents* will aim to expound and comment upon the most notable of these.

In the broad field of the study of human communication, more and more emphasis has been placed upon the nature and function of the new electronic media. *New Accents* will try to identify and discuss the challenge these offer to our traditional modes of critical response.

The same interest in communication suggests that the series should also concern itself with those wider anthropological and sociological areas of investigation which have begun to involve scrutiny of the nature of art itself and of its relation to our whole way of life. And this will ultimately require attention to be focused on some of those activities which in our society have hitherto been excluded from the prestigious realms of Culture. The disturbing realignment of values involved and the disconcerting nature of the pressures that work to bring it about both constitute areas that *New Accents* will seek to explore.

Finally, as its title suggests, one aspect of *New Accents* will be firmly located in contemporary approaches to language, and a continuing concern of the series will be to examine the extent to which relevant branches of linguistic studies can illuminate specific literary areas. The volumes with this particular interest will nevertheless presume no prior technical knowledge on the part of their readers, and will aim to rehearse the linguistics appropriate to the matter in hand, rather than to embark on general theoretical matters.

Each volume in the series will attempt an objective exposition of significant developments in its field up to the present as well as an account of its author's own views of the matter. Each will culminate in an informative bibliography as a guide to further study. And, while each will be primarily concerned with matters relevant to its own specific interests, we can hope that a kind of conversation will be heard to develop between them; one whose accents may perhaps suggest the distinctive discourse of the future.

TERENCE HAWKES

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Introduction: Looking back and beyond

This selection of essays is an attempt to open up some of the as yet unsurveyed territory of English Studies and to introduce a new, more positive tone and greater range of voices to discussions of the future of the subject. Studies of the ideology of 'English' and explorations of new theory characteristic of work in Higher Education in recent years have, for all their integrity and value, tended to run free of the specific practices of English teaching and of the implications they might have for these. Indeed in some ways, rather than offering a new discourse and a common beginning which would take account of radical changes in policy, in curricula and pedagogy as well as in critical practice, they have reinforced a separation between sectors, perspectives, and opportunities. Too often teachers have been assumed to be the agents of a hegemony constructed by government edict, examination boards, and an inherited great tradition by those whose radicalism is in the thinnest sense 'theoretical', and confined to the very conventional form of the academic lecture, or written book or article. The answer to this is neither grander theory nor philistinism, neither more books nor a guilty (or guilt-free) battering away at the chalk face, but simply a more open and more informed exchange between teachers and institutions and forms of work, between theory and teaching practice, between what might be called the

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deconstruction and the progressive reconstruction that is going on throughout English education.

To envision this kind of exchange and transformation is as much to recall a delayed and obstructed agenda as it is to write a new one. In 1977, eleven years after the publication in France of Pierre Macherey's *Pour une Théorie de la production littéraire* and a year before its appearance in English (a period which also saw the translation of major texts by Lacan and Jacques Derrida) Macherey described his work up to that date as a way of testing Althusser's thesis that education was the dominant ideological apparatus. He argued that to explain literature in terms of its deformation by ideology, its conditions of possibility and reproduction would be to dispel its traditional theological aura and enlarge its range of meaning. If literary studies themselves were to be transformed, however, it was not enough, he said, to shift its domain and add in new material in the shape of an alternative canon. It would be necessary in fact to 'completely change the system in which the categories of literary study are thought out' (Macherey 1977: 9).

Proposals such as these, and Macherey and Balibar's work along these lines, have helped inspire the challenge to (as well as the defence of) 'English' as we have witnessed it over the last decade. This work of critique and reorientation has been conducted through commentary, guides, and criticism, through journals and conferences, and through the networks supporting, for example, *Literature, Teaching and Politics*, the National and the regional Associations for the Teaching of English as well as in the seminar and classroom. The *New Accents* series itself, also launched in 1977, has played a significant role in this process of redefinition. The 'General preface' to the series has reminded us over these years that the present period is one 'of rapid and radical social change', and of how this has inevitably affected the study of language, literature, and culture. Twelve years on we are only too painfully aware that this process of radical change has been steered by the Tory cabinet and the radical right rather than by a dissenting intelligentsia. As the Tory hatchet descends upon the neck of the dominant ideological apparatus, it is evident that the late 1980s are a demoralizing time for projects of progressive transformation. But yet the signs do not all point this way. In spite of everything, teachers have

persisted in a practical critique of traditional categories and pedagogic modes in ways which draw on, as they draw out, a contrary experience of social change, moving against the grain of enforced national unity and towards cultural dispersal and difference.

The Olympian purview of Althusser and Macherey's scientific Marxism seems now neither available nor fit for these changed circumstances. There have been continuities as well as shifts over this period all the same, some of which we can only try to understand as we experience them. Macherey had spoken in 1977, for example, of how the transformation of literary studies depended not 'on a personal and independent decision', but 'upon a material and political conjuncture' and a type of decision which was 'necessarily collective' (Macherey 1977: 9). The left would probably still give ready and principled assent to this, though the raised hands would just as probably be accompanied by some furrowed brows. For increasingly the problem has been just what or who, in real terms, is meant by injunctions to 'collective' thought and action? Who or what is 'the left'? Without working assurances on these questions it is obviously difficult to envisage the character of future change, let alone the progressive transformation of literary studies.

At the end of 1987, in a much changed *Critical Quarterly*, Colin MacCabe addressed this same problem. The right's attempt to straitjacket a growing multi-ethnic society in the proposed National Curriculum, had, he felt, for all its 'muddle of fear and prejudice', produced two questions:

How far does it continue to make sense to talk of a national culture in an era which sees a growing internationalisation and localisation of cultural production? And a further theoretical question: is it possible to construct a shared culture on differences rather than identities? Once these very important questions are properly couched, it is a difficult but perfectly feasible task to construct the appropriate syllabi and curricula.

(MacCabe 1987: 8)

MacCabe's focus is a specific one, but he is posing here a key problem of our times; for how can we conceive of a structured or centred common identity in an age of deconstruction and

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unanchored *différence* which has edged such notions into the limbo of erasure and quotation marks? And how then can a new kind of unity be founded on intellectual and cultural diversity? What kind of narrative will give purpose and direction to changed subjectivities and a changing society, when – or so we are told – the ‘grand narratives’ that have hitherto structured human hopes and history have lost all credibility. James Donald takes up Colin MacCabe’s argument in the opening chapter of the present volume. His answer to its central question is ‘no’, there cannot be a shared culture founded on differences rather than identities, because ‘culture is *always* constructed on differences . . . MacCabe cannot have *both* a postmodernist free play of heterogeneity based on the denial of a normative consensus, *and* a consensual “shared” culture’ (p. 26). Donald’s own answer is one which informs the making of this present collection. What is needed, he writes, is ‘a shift of emphasis away from the normative or consensual aspects of culture – order, authority, identity – to the dialogic processes out of which these are formed, and which they precariously organize and contain’ (p. 26).

The indeterminacies of the present are not therefore so much, or only, a signal for eclectic play, as a call for flexible strategies of reorientation and restructuring. This does not mean abandoning ideals of common purpose so much as reconceiving them, and recomposing their constituents in newly responsive alliances. We cannot hope to reply in kind, that is to say, to present conservative policies which seek, as in the National Curriculum and the abolition of ILEA, to unify and control in their own interests (we might note that the right has stuck resolutely to its chosen ‘metanarrative’ for all that is said elsewhere of the impotence of such thinking); but we can, both professionally and politically, look to the formation of tactical alliances within and against the new institutional and ideological constraints this hegemony imposes. And we can attempt to introduce different tactics and networks to each other. Taken together, the arguments and reports we have assembled in this book do not amount to a grand narrative of single-minded change for ‘English’. They debate with and contest traditional and conservative ideas and practices, but they respond to the general questions raised above in their own terms, bringing to

this dialogue the differently accented experiences of school and college teaching, and the factors of gender, class, and race.

The structure of the book represents our sense of this darting dialectic. We have arranged the essays in three sections, not in order to stream high-flying theory separately from the realities of classroom practice, but to provide comprehensive evidence that teachers in all sectors of education are making use of theoretical insights in the reshaping of literary studies. Each section of essays brings together reports from schools, polytechnics, colleges, and universities which focus upon a distinct set of common interests.

The first four essays debate the present condition of 'English'. As Alison Light points out in chapter 2, 'what is so extraordinary about the 1980s is that it is the first ever period of educational decline' (p. 38). This has not happened quietly or through unbothered neglect but as the result of a series of bruising charges and mean assaults which have contrived to keep opposition divided and off balance. Ever since James Callaghan, as Labour Prime Minister, proposed a national debate on education, the interests and contributions of those in opposition to conservative trends have been sabotaged, misrepresented, or merely ignored.

Yet the essays in this first section do more than reveal opportunities missed: they suggest ways in which teachers can work collectively within and across institutions to change the agenda of educational policy. As Jenny and Phil Rice argue in chapter 4, teachers in secondary and further education are already experienced in working against the grain of the Government's efforts to promote an enterprise culture within education. And Sabrina Broadbent and Rosalind Moger in their account of LATE'S response to Kingman and other outriders of the National Curriculum similarly demonstrate the need for a collective reply to the implications of a conservative lexicon of excellence and relevance. Both essays therefore show how teachers can still recast the terms of educational debate.

The second section proves that this is more than wishful thinking. While the book as a whole reveals the influence of recent literary theory upon the aims and methods of teaching, the essays in this middle section concentrate upon those areas of

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study which have directly challenged the canon constructed by the long processes of what Roger Bromley calls 'patriarchal binary thought' (p. 152). Moreover, these accounts of the teaching of poststructuralist and feminist theory, of the still-marginalized areas of popular fiction and women's writing, and of attempts to implement anti-racist and multi-cultural perspectives, are relevant once again to more than post-school provision. Whether theory is being interpreted by postgraduates or by 14-year olds, the effect is to question not just the traditional construction of literary history but the pedagogic conventions and the curriculum which have comprised the power-knowledge relations of English as a discipline.

The final section provides case studies of specific courses illustrating the way in which both the subject and the teaching of English is being reconceived. This includes work on new kinds of texts, the introduction of more active modes of learning and writing in GCSE and A level, and the experience of teaching extra-mural courses in creative writing and access courses for mature students. All these are concerned with ways of expressing, knowing, and redefining the self, and show how criticism, autobiography, imitation, reconstruction in another medium, and exercises in the techniques of fiction can be employed to that end. In the process they bring us to question the conventional distinction between analytic and imaginative mentalities. Here, in an age of 'skills', are modes and techniques of writing traditionally associated with literature, but very rarely directly taught in 'English' courses and classes, and particularly not in higher education. The authors here do not share the same assumptions, nor should these case studies be taken to suggest that 'English' can, or ought to now move forward, unhindered and unrevised, along these lines. They do, however, introduce the prospect of more productive modes of learning, of new relations between pupils and teachers, and thus offer a new understanding of what the subject can mean.

One way to read these essays is as a series of reports on what urgently concerns teachers in their working lives, and as a practical response to present conditions. But yet it is important to scrutinize the idea of experience this implies. In one of the essays examining the value of autobiography as a problematic genre, Jim Porteous and Steve Bennison argue that 'uncovering

and investigating both the generic and social processes of this construction marks the beginning of a politically useful knowledge, a conceptualized "making strange" of what appears to be natural and universal – the self' (p. 177). English has always been the subject most closely involved with the making of subjectivities and the case studies draw special attention to this. The problem is how to recognize and value the personal experience and personal voice which help comprise and articulate subjectivity while avoiding sentimental appeals to their absolute authenticity. For that particular English accent with its assumed model of the individual has served more often to deny than to value the experience of those who do not conform to it.

The authority of experience has also been an important if contested resource in the educational history of feminist criticism. The list of contributors divides almost equally between men and women, but although we were conscious of gendered differences of idiom and position, this has not resulted in a simple opposition between masterly surveys of the theoretical horizon and a feminine closeness to personal realities. Just as theory is of use to more people than the advanced undergraduate, so the debate on experience should be heard outside courses in women's studies or multi-cultural education. Over the last two decades, feminism has both discovered and lost a unity of direction. At the same time its present fragmentation and dispersal take us beyond false unities or simple binary divisions of gendered experience and discourse. Many of the essays register this, and we have also deliberately ordered the book's contents so as to check any (common) sense of a white, male academic norm to be enlivened every now and then by the latest dispatches from the feminist or the multicultural front.

It should be clear that we are not presenting these essays as exemplary, as the 'left's' model answers to conservative thinking and policy. In general terms, however, they do represent a democratic alternative, not least in the fact that over half of them have been co-produced and in many ways strike a blow at the sentimental, but finally demoralizing image of the lone teacher in command of the class. Taken together they represent