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English Pasts, English Futures

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> ... the way in which education is organised can be seen to express, consciously and unconsciously, the wider organisation of a society, so that what has been thought of as a simple distribution is in fact an active shaping to social ends. (Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution,* 1965)

English pasts

What follows here offers a personal response to some general features of the landscape for 'Futures for English', outlining some wide-ranging thoughts on issues that chapters in the rest of the book then focus on in more specific detail. The discussion centres mainly on the implications for English futures of the fragmented and to some degree contested nature of 'English', something that always seems to mean that we impress inverted commas on the word whenever it is employed in this kind of context.

The academic subject of English is and always has been permeable and elusive of definition. First, there is no clear or consistent sense of what the object of study is, whether it be studied in schools, colleges or universities, in Anglophone or in non-Anglophone contexts. It is similarly unclear what descriptive methods are to be applied to its study, making it thus not entirely methodologically disciplined. Second, if not a clear subject in terms of many conventional academic disciplines, it is distinctively subject to external influences and numerous different partnerships; in fact, as a subject on the school curriculum it is subject like no other to political regulation and control.

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Futures and pasts are always interconnected, and I begin first with some reflections on English in a school curriculum, its history in UK schools illustrating the kinds of political forces at work, which in many contexts also affect higher education—the main focus for this book. The history of English in UK schools is only one perspective and example but it offers a mirror to disputes, resistances and regulations, most involving different definitions of the subject or 'discipline' and what it should be or do, suggesting an active shaping to different social ends that is almost impossible to conceive of in the case of subjects such as mathematics and chemistry. Of course, the word discipline itself can slip in the meanings constructed for it to that of an almost military code and easily become equated with standards of behaviour in schools which many politicians feel can be controlled by a more regimented curriculum for English with decontextualised grammar drills and proper, standard English preferred to the more flexible pedagogies associated with the study of a variety of texts and styles of English. A parallel concern on the part of (mainly) right-wing politicians for school students of English literature to know about their 'English' cultural heritage has often resulted in a similarly narrow literary curriculum designed to reinforce a reduced and regulated version of national identity and produced in response to times marked by increasing social, cultural and linguistic diversity. Political control commonly results in a monologic narrowing of the curriculum; but political involvement is almost always more likely where a lack of definitional clarity concerning the subject of study obtains.

Internationally, political involvement in the non-Anglophone school English curriculum also exists but often has more marked economic values with the study of English language prioritised and with generally more agreement about the ends of creating speakers of English as an international lingua franca. In many such contexts English language study outweighs English literature or literatures in English or any broader study of texts, its socio-economic value commonly taking precedence over the wider values fostered by a more inclusive version of English.

Though generally less subject to external political control, the study of English in higher education is often more fragmented, or at least more variegated. Some departments of English focus exclusively on the study of literature, while others pursue partnerships with, for example, creative writing, media studies, performance studies and cinema. Others still claim that English language (which is how English is popularly defined internationally) is the core of the subject and is the lens

through which the subject or discipline should be viewed and studied, not least because a linguistic and rhetorical study of a variety of texts brings with it more social scientific methods of replicable empirical research, which in turn lends it to more rigorous interdisciplinary integration and offers greater 'relevance'.

The 21st century has, in fact, seen—in both Anglophone and non-Anglophone contexts—a renewed concern with the uses and functions of the study of English and, underpinned by funding imperatives, government imposed requirements for an audited relevance and impact have now become naturalised in all subject areas. In this context language skills and a functional social literacy can mean a clear relevance to communication in society and to employability—skills, of course, which, if not taught with due attention to a development of critical language awareness, risk an uncritical accommodation to the institutional structures and socio-economic order of society. On the other hand, there is a widely held opposing view that English studies is at its best when it is not directly concerned with relevance (simply because the development of critical and creative engagement with a range of texts and values is relevant in itself to the individual student and thereby more indirectly to society as a whole).

It would seem then that part of the uniqueness of English is that it is characterised by what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) calls centripetal and centrifugal tendencies. Centripetal forces push towards unitary systems and political and cultural centralisation; centrifugal forces are anti-canonical and push against centripetal forces and towards variety and diversity. One or other of these tendencies has been present in the history of English studies but in higher education centrifugal forces continue to be celebrated within the profession of English teachers, as noted above in the range of different curricular foci for an English Studies degree. Diversity also plays a considerable part in the place of English internationally. Outside the profession, however, centripetal tendencies are present in a push towards standardisation (and equivocally a maintenance of 'standards') in terms of stubbornly narrow definitions of English literature and a description of the English language regulated by native speakers, by written norms and by the imperatives of the most powerful forces in publication, largely centralised in the USA and UK. The future is likely to see similar tensions and oppositions between centrifugal and centripetal forces. These different versions and tendencies also, of course, affect the internal face of the subject and the debates and tensions that affect the professional construction and constitution of the subject. Questions such as: is 'English' literature or language or

both? Can they be integrated? What are its relationships with other curricular subjects? Where do all the recent developments in courses in creative writing fit? Can we only really speak properly in terms of literatures in English and of Englishes in the plural? What exactly is a text in the context of English and how do students best pedagogically engage with texts, spoken and written, productively and receptively? What are the values to be promoted in the study of English? Are the values associated with creative writing the same or are they inflected differently?

The previous paragraphs show some of the difficulties of definition, the subtle disclosures of words and meanings, and the near impossibility of neutrality that should in fact make for celebration of the complexity of English, whether it be a subject, or discipline, or not. They constitute an indirect argument for the value and values of English studies and for the importance of nuance and complexity. Such discussion also underlines how English futures are inevitably determined by the paradox that the subject of English is not subject to any one single disciplinary practice but rather by a number of sub-disciplines each with its own ideological, methodological and ethical history and its own vision for the future. Questions such as those at the end of the previous paragraph are vital and will doubtless continue to be so. But they can all the same risk a diversity that leads to disunity and leave the subject open to the charge that English Studies can mean whatever anyone wants it to mean. These and similar questions may thus be seen as a sign of celebration of the diverse life of the species or as a recipe for ever increasing fragmentation.

In the light of all this, the following is then an inevitably personal view of possible futures. It comes in the form of what sound like prescriptions, but the aim is to suggest that reconciliation between opposing tendencies and forces is possible, without weakly conceding all territory to external political interference, without creating too much of an homogenous middle ground that dissipates productive tension and without unduly risking fragmentation.

English futures

Some tentative proposals and some accompanying questions:

Practice and context

- CENTRIPETAL AND CENTRIFUGAL. As English as a subject continues to move between centrifugal and centripetal tendencies in respect of description in language, canonicity in literature and the

development of global Englishes, it is vital that more centrifugal tendencies should be fostered; development will be limited without the notion of Englishes in language, English as a lingua franca and literatures in English. This is important because it reflects the more inclusive, globalised nature of English.

- COMPLEXITY, CRITICALITY AND CONTEXT. The teaching of English in schools, colleges and higher education is similarly characterised by this variety and diversity and such diversity should still be centred on ways to foster students' capacity for critical engagement with texts and for the appreciation of nuance and complexity in texts in a variety of contexts, including their historical contexts. Context concerns here not only features of an external environment in which a text is composed and interpreted but also the internal linguistic environment of the text itself with further layers of complexity added in the interplay between both such environments. This is especially important, because too exclusive a focus on external context can leave students unable to analyse a text linguistically and too exclusive an emphasis on the linguistic-stylistic context can result in too text-immanent a study, leaving students without a sense of historical context and of how the linguistic texture of a text is a part of its historical and cultural context.
- CREATIVE WRITING AND CURRICULUM. Where does creative writing fit? Developments in creative writing have a transformative potential for the subject but should embrace a wider variety of text types and genres, including spoken texts. In this respect the development of life writing is a very promising and less restrictive development. However, to continue the pervasive practice of confining the development of creative writing to poetry, prose and drama may serve to limit students' engagement with different text types and rhetorics, may affect their full development as writers and is not consonant with developments in creativity studies—which embrace a more holistic and nuanced view of creativity across a range of spoken and written discourses—nor is it consonant with changes in the landscape of English language and communication studies. Creative writing means creative writing in a range of fictional **and** non-fictional genres.
- DISCONTINUITIES AND CURRICULUM. Can discontinuities between school and university be lessened? Real discontinuities commonly exist between secondary school and university English. University English departments are not as informed as they should be about the teaching of English in schools (including both

pedagogy and curriculum content) and insufficient thought is given to how developments in school leaving examinations in English can grow organically into university English studies. More needs to be invested in resolving these discontinuities and potential tensions. Similarly, curriculum development world-wide needs to be more sensitive to the fact that students of English in both Anglophone and non-Anglophone contexts have affiliations to different social, ethnic and national groups and are increasingly commonly multilingual speakers.

Relevance and values

- METHODOLOGIES. Even given the importance of the cultivation of critical interpretation, research methodologies in English studies that do not go beyond hermeneutic processes are limited. They fail in particular to recognise that the growth of mixed quantitative and qualitative methods are shifting the ground in the arts and humanities towards the social sciences and that this shift is not unconnected with changing conceptions of relevance and social and economic impact. Fuller engagement with the vast array of literary and linguistic electronic databases and corpora will help develop curricula more in this direction. English studies is richer and can address even more complex problems and with more critical intent when it operates more fully in an interdisciplinary environment as 'applied English', drawing on insights beyond its own natural constituency.
- IMPACT. In the UK especially but increasingly world-wide, there are government-driven requirements for research to become more responsive to the world outside the academy, for engagement with the world of work, for research to demonstrate that it has cultural, social and economic impact. There are considerable opportunities for English here to demonstrate its impact on the cultural economy (publishing, theatre, the public arts), on how language study can help organisations engage more effectively with the public, deal with the media, deal with the language of the internet, handle meetings more efficiently, be more inclusive and socially responsible in language use.
- AESTHETIC AND SOCIAL VALUES. Can these values be reconciled? It can be inhibiting to focus too narrowly in the study of English on literary-aesthetic texts and values. Aesthetic values are important but there are, for example, social, political, communal and community values too, of which an English studies curriculum can be constitutive, and which courses involving work placements and an outward

facing focus can foster. An outward facing focus and a more inclusive view of texts for study and their socio-cultural applications is not inconsistent with the development of a critical stance nor with creativity in appreciation and in practice.

Texts and futures

- NEW TEXTUALITIES. What exactly is a text? A fuller and richer conception of texts and textuality in theory, practice and classroom pedagogy is needed to take English forward. There is a distinct challenge to English and its formation as a subject by an overreliance on written, 'literary' text as central to the subject and a failure to deal adequately with spoken, mixed-mode, non-fictional, multimodal and media texts. For example, futures in textuality are more likely to continue to involve further development of electronic media where communication can be simultaneous, multiply distributed, multichannel, asynchronous, temporally displaced and fragmented and supported by gesture and moving image.
- SEEING THROUGH TEXTS. As has been argued throughout here, a vision of futures for English should be centred on the study of complete spoken and written texts. Of course, some texts are most productively studied as extracts but in general the analysis, discussion, interpretation and writing/production of complete texts allows for an integration of literary and language studies, drawing on the strengths of literary studies in critically analysing texts in cultural and historical contexts and on the growing strengths of English language studies in critically analysing the linguistic and rhetorical texture of many varied texts and text types. Creative writing has a key role to play here for students as practitioners in linking a fuller more internalised understanding of the linguistic composition of texts with a fuller understanding of how the parts are actively made to create the resonances of whole texts. In an ever more globalised world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest texts reveal and conceal more than ever and learning to see through (in both senses of the phrase) the language of a variety of types of texts is a key 21st century competence. And such a focus allows for the fuller study of media and multimodal texts. I would also argue that the learning of English (including in many different contexts where English is learned as an additional language) can be significantly enhanced by a textual focus, whether that text be a single line at less advanced levels or a complete novel or complex political speech or multimodal advertisement or long narrative poem.

There continue to be risks to English futures in that its many diverse parts risk greater fragmentation, at least as an institutionalised 'subject' in higher education. There are also risks that call for greater integration and unity lead to a homogeneity that removes all energy and potential for growth. I would argue, however, that fuller exploration of an integrated focus on texts and contexts—a modern rhetoric, as it were—along the lines suggested in these prescriptions counters the risks of fragmentation, while maintaining a distinctive character for English studies.

The proposals and suggestions here are inevitably partial and overly formulaic. It remains for the rest of this book to take further and in more detail these and many other suggestions, into further description, discussion and dialogue.

References

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