ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIA

Editorial

by Wayne Sawyer

English teachers are creatures of multiple identity and as a quick read of almost any relevant journal will reveal (e.g. English in Australia 134), the subject itself suffers from a crisis of identity that is, I think, unique in the curriculum. Although, perhaps ‘crisis’ is not the right word – perhaps English does, and should, celebrate its diversity of identity. As David Homer wrote in the last edition of this journal on the issue of specialisation, ‘Teaching Writing is good fun, but not as much fun as teaching English … English teachers are the all-rounders of the game’ (p. 13). But sometimes the multiple identities come into conflict. In few places is this more obvious than on the question of the canon and popular culture. While the situation is changing, even changing quickly, it remains nevertheless true that the majority of English teachers are from a generation who were trained in the classics and who often need convincing about the appropriateness of popular culture. They often bemoan the lack of classical knowledge among newly graduated teachers. On the other hand, academia has embraced – in places – broader definitions of ‘text’, the appropriateness of studying popular culture and the cultural relativity of notions like ‘the canon’ or even ‘literature’. Many academics lament the seeming inability of teachers to critique these notions and/or embrace broader textual experiences.

But all of this is quite old hat – why re-run it in 2002-3? Well, two reasons. The first is that these arguments about canonicity are now perhaps just geriatric enough to countenance revision. Is it time to re-visit the value of the canon? To raise perhaps new questions about the value of canonicity in a world of relative values – to make problematic not only the canon itself but its ‘rejection’? Is there a new canon arising, throwing into question not the principle of canonicity, but simply specific texts? Is Harold Bloom becoming academically mainstream or do we need to re-accept Terry Eagleton’s 1983 dictum that ‘literature does not exist in the sense that insects do, and … the value-judgements by which it is constituted are historically variable’ (p. 16) as simple reality?

My second reason for wanting to re-run this issue is really a sub-set of the first. Australian Syllabuses have universally embraced either some study of popular culture and/or some version of critical literacy which seeks to problematise the inherent value(s) of text(s). Again, this is not new news, but what is happening increasingly is that the media are catching up with the Syllabuses and, if NSW is any indication the cry is almost universally one of horror.

I was recently criticised for an article in the Sydney Morning Herald, in which I stated that criticism of the new Higher School Certificate English Syllabus was based on ignorance. Supporters of traditional literature study were insulted and at least one journalist cried ‘unfair’. But I do not back away from that statement – the fact is that the public media pronouncements about the NSW HSC in English show a profound ignorance about that Syllabus and ultimately reflect a nostalgia for ‘the way we used to do it’. This does not mean there is no intelligent criticism of these new Syllabuses to be made. There is – I myself have some misgivings about the ways in which Syllabuses are being examined, for example – but we are not hearing it. We are hearing media bleatings that do not reflect the arguments that teachers of English might make about current trends in their subject. This edition of the journal is an attempt to run in a small way some intelligent dialogue on these issues.

Patrick Dias values versions of canonicity because canonical texts ‘provide common referential ground for conversations about profound and significant human experiences. And … conversations about how those experiences are shaped by and held in language. And ultimately, conversations about how and why our accounts may differ’. Dias’s is an important argument about, among other things, the role of the canon in establishing a foundation for cultural understanding and exchange (‘conversation’). This is the point most stressed by Ross Clark who argues that ‘a canon is the starting point of so many continuing discourses … To be devoid of a poetic canon is to not know who everyone else is playing with’. Philippa Kelly charts counter-hegemonic ways of viewing that most central cultural text, King Lear, as performance – and opens another area of debate – that of the pedagogy around the canonical text. One of the more positive influences of the National Curriculum in the UK has been the explosion of a modern, often critical, pedagogy around the compulsory traditional texts that has given the works themselves a new audience. Here Sandra Duggan tells the story of a chain of classroom events that took her from Ridley Scott's Alien to Tolstoy and a pedagogy of appropriation which led to significant re-readings of a range of texts.

Ross Clark centres his discussion of the canon specifically on poetry, and poetry is the other key focus of this edition. John Malone takes what may be viewed as a set of Romantic assumptions about the act of poetic creation in his article which takes a respectful, even reverential, attitude to its subject. Ted Reilly’s dissection of a
poem of his own de-mystifies this same process somewhat by relating a narrative of creation that teachers might find useful to share with student writers.

Among a number of articles based on empirical research, Sean Hawthorne discusses a series of interviews with a range of English teachers on the issue of reluctant writers. Dennis Robinson and Jacqueline Manuel analyse a survey of adolescent reading choices, while Wayne Martino and Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli reveal a series of adolescents' narratives that themselves could become material for classroom use. Lynette Lounsbury gives an up-date on the use of hyper-text fiction and the Internet.

In my last editorial, I declared an intention of continuing Brenton Doecke's practice of encouraging classroom teachers to contribute to the journal under the same refereed conditions as university academics. I am very pleased that this edition contains contributions from seven secondary teachers of English and look for this trend to continue. In a related vein, Mark Howie has returned to a Head Teacher position after a year at the University of Western Sydney. Until Mark has a new email address to announce in the journal and/or on the AATE website, I will accept contributions on his behalf to English in Australia 137 – the newly revived AATE Guide to Texts.

English in Australia 136 is to be on the topic of English curriculum history and English in Australia 138 is to be on the topic of 'imagination and the personal voice'. As always, contributions are called for and these need not be on the central topic of the particular edition. I expect that English in Australia 139 will contain addresses and papers from IFTE 2003.

References
