1 Writers and readers: context and creativity

'English should be kept up.' *(John Keats)*

Who writes and why? Who reads and why? Would the world be any the poorer without novels, poetry or drama? Why do books matter? Why do they matter so much that the German poet Heinrich Heine was able to write, in 1820:

> Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen.
> *Wherever they burn books, eventually they will burn people too.*

In different contexts Heine's words have had different resonances. Historically, they looked back to the Inquisition and the fear that unorthodox ideas might undermine the authority of those in power, whether in Church or State. Prophetically they looked forward to the 20th century: to the burning of books by the Nazis, followed within a decade by the burning of millions of bodies. Symbolically they paid tribute to the power of books and to the ideas they could contain. When Marlowe's Dr Faustus realised his time was up and he was about to be tossed by the devils into the flames of Hell, his final despairing scream, 'I'll burn my books!' was a recognition of the power those books had had to determine the disastrous course of his life.

It's very easy to take for granted that students know why it's worth studying Literature. The trouble is, they take it for granted because we take it for granted. Do they (do we?) recognise the distinction between teaching 'Literature' and teaching 'Literary Studies'? It's simple to smile at Roland Barthes' axiom that 'literature is what gets taught' without thinking about its implications. Like it or not, we both transmit an idea of a cultural heritage and help to define it in the minds of our students by the books we choose for them to read. One of the assumptions underlying all the discussions in this book of individual texts, and of Literature teaching as a whole, is that looking at texts in different contexts is a constantly challenging exercise. If we – in teaching an author, a book or a single poem – do not find new things in the text and new ways of looking at the text then our teaching will be simply second-hand repetition of what was once fresh. When that happens, it is much harder to help our students gain an idea of how much the text has to offer. Students who are taught with a sense of the excitement of the subject will soon come to recognise the truth of Italo Calvino's definitions of a classic:

- A classic is a book which with each re-reading offers as much of a sense of discovery as the first reading.
- A classic is a book which even when we read it for the first time gives the sense of re-reading something we have read before.
- A classic is a book which has never exhausted all it has to say to its readers.[1]

Calvino is a distinguished novelist, and one way we can introduce the question 'Why study Literature?' is to focus on what writers themselves have to say about writing. This is an important strategy, for at a time when creativity is once more valued as a central focus of literary study it is right to attend again to the act of writing, and not only to the act of reading. This change of focus has been remarkably quick and very recent. Within Higher Education it has been identified as happening during the first decade of the present century. The 2007 QAA *Benchmark Statement for English* (a revision of the original 2000 document describing the characteristics of English as taught in Higher Education) has this to say in its Foreword:

> The striking increase in the number of programmes involving elements of creative, imaginative and transformative writing requires acknowledgement. The subject benchmark statement in 2000 made minor references to this domain, but … this draft revision seeks to recognise and build on the vigour of the reconfigured subject.[2]

During this same period, revised A level Subject Criteria published by QCA have recognised a similar shift and now require students to 'articulate creative, informed and relevant responses to literary texts' (AO1: *GCE AS and A level subject criteria for English Literature*, QCA, September 2006). The word 'creative' had been notably missing from the original Curriculum 2000 Subject Criteria. This amendment has enabled nearly all the Awarding Bodies (the Exam Boards) in their latest specifications to include optional or even mandatory exercises in creative or re-creative writing as part of coursework: Literature students therefore will now be assessed as writers as well as readers. This is a fundamental shift, and its consequences will take a while to register.

Writers on writing

So what do writers themselves say about what they do, and why? Philip Larkin first:

> Poetry, like all art, is inextricably bound up with giving pleasure, and if a poet loses his pleasure-seeking audience, he has lost the only audience worth having, for which the dutiful mob that signs on every September is no substitute.[3]

This sounds a useful warning note – how can we, through our teaching, turn the 'dutiful mob' into a 'pleasure-seeking audience'? Should this be our job? I have already suggested that we have a responsibility to help students learn to enjoy the act and the art of reading – just as they should enjoy learning to become an IT specialist, an historian or a biologist. Learning to identify with the subject, in fact. Beyond that, however, Literature deals with challenging ideas as well as simply enjoyable experiences. The novelist Pat Barker puts it like this:

> Fiction should be about moral dilemmas that are so bloody difficult that the author doesn't know the answer. What I hate in fiction is when the author knows better than the characters what they should do.[4]

This can be as true of drama as of fiction – and of poetry: Miller's *All My Sons*, or Friel's *Translations*; Yeats' 'Easter 1916', Auden's 'September 1st 1939', Plath's 'Daddy', Heaney's 'Casualty' – all of these confront such dilemmas and can place the reader who responds to the play or poem in a moral dilemma too. 'Whose side am I on?' is a question students of whatever age find themselves asking all the time. One of the most difficult and sensitive parts of being a teacher of Literature is to help students accept that it is all right to be confused: how does Shakespeare enable us to admire Othello and be appalled by him at the same time?

Here is Susan Sontag:

> I think of the writer of novels and stories and plays as a moral agent … A fiction writer whose adherence is to literature is, necessarily, someone who thinks about moral problems: about what is just and unjust, what is better or worse, what is repulsive and admirable, what is lamentable and what inspires joy and approbation.[5]

It can come as a surprise, in a post-structuralist era when so much discussion of literature focuses on its existence as part of a cultural process, to hear a writer speak so passionately about the moral dimension of her work. Here, by way of context, is a contrary view to Sontag's: it comes from an essay entitled 'The cultural politics of English Teaching' by the educationist Nick Peim.

> In deconstructing our familiar habits of thought, post-structuralism reveals more clearly the operations of institutionalised power in the curriculum, in the classroom, and in the ideas and practices of English teaching and teachers. The social dimension of education cannot be kept separate from our dealings with individuals. English cannot be thought of as the free space of open creativity that we may have wanted it to be … Post-structuralist theory opens new vistas, giving a new handle on the subject's relations with the realm of the social. If the textual field becomes dynamic and unbounded – and if

> literature must be seen as only a small portion of that field – textually focused work in English may range into entirely new territories. These areas may include a significant emphasis on the everyday world of textual encounters: media texts, popular fictions and non-fiction texts of all varieties.[6]

World and Time will certainly engage with some of these ideas: indeed, 'textually focused work' lies by definition at the heart of literary studies. It is surely, though, a false antithesis to imply that English teachers have kept the social dimension of education separate from their dealings with individuals. No one who has studied English would attempt to deny that language and literature exist within a social context; and in later chapters of this book I shall illustrate ways in which a variety of non-literary media texts of different kinds can provide fruitful and challenging contexts for a close reading of literary texts, canonical and otherwise. And in a fundamental respect all literature is a social activity: first, it involves one person (an author) talking to others (his or her readers); second, though the reader's first encounter with a text is likely to be a solitary one, all subsequent discussion of the book, whether in the context of an English lesson or elsewhere, is socially located and conditioned. I accept that. But I also relate to what Sontag has to say about the way writers work:

> Serious fiction writers think about moral problems practically. They tell stories. They narrate. They evoke our common humanity in narratives with which we can identify, even though the lives lived may be remote from our own. They stimulate our imagination. The stories they tell enlarge and complicate – and, therefore, improve – our sympathies. They educate our capacity for moral judgement.[7]

Susan Sontag writes as one of the most respected and admired American critics and novelists of her generation (she died in 2007), and her argument that writers, storytellers, are in an ethical sense educators – 'they educate our capacity for moral judgement' – puts a considerable onus on anyone teaching literature to students of any age, from sixteen to eighty-six. One of the most remarkable features of the literary scene in the past decade has been the growth of reading groups, made up equally of those who want to get more out of reading than they can do by reading on their own, those whose enjoyment of literature was stimulated by the teaching they received at school or university and those who know they missed out on such stimulation and want to find it now. Members of book groups today are those we taught yesterday or will teach tomorrow: they are people who, to borrow Larkin's phrase from 'Church Going', have discovered 'a hunger in themselves to be more serious'. Without wishing to sound pious, I am sure that helping students to discover such a hunger through the study of literature is part of the job of teaching Literature.

Such a position as I have just outlined sounds as if I am arguing that teachers and students should be more concerned with *what* texts have to say than with *how* they say them. But the way writers use words and the way readers read them or listen to them is equally a part of the study of literature: it is what makes each text distinctive; and learning how to explore both the uniqueness of texts and their relationships with each other is what Literature teachers teach. The novelist Hilary Mantel (see Chapter 9, pages 175–183) has this to say about the texture of texts:

> Fiction isn't made by scraping the bones of topicality for the last shreds and sinews, to be processed into mechanically recovered prose. Like journalism, it deals in ideas as well as facts, but also in metaphors, symbols and myths. It multiplies ambiguity. It's about the particular, which suggests the general: about inner meaning, seen with the inner eye, always glimpsed, always vanishing, always more or less baffling, and scuffled onto the page hesitantly, furtively, transgressively, by night and with the wrong hand.[8]

It would not be a bad way of beginning a Literature course to compare Mantel's ideas about what fiction is, and how novelists write, with 'The Thought Fox' by Ted Hughes, that defining poem about what poetry is and how poets write. Of course, to compare one text with another is a basic critical procedure, and it is useful to demonstrate to students the value of contextual and intertextual study as early as possible.

Contextual and intertextual study

How do writers talk to each other, and to us? Several of the texts discussed in Chapters 7 to 11 of this book make direct or indirect reference to other texts – and as soon as the connection is made by the reader, that person's understanding of the original text is enlarged.

A good illustration of this to discuss with students is Thomas Hardy's choice of title for one of his most famous poems, 'The Darkling Thrush'. Originally he called it 'By the Century's Deathbed', but his change of title introduced a striking word ('darkling') not present in the poem itself. In doing so he alerted readers to a famous stanza in Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale':

> Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
> I have been half in love with easeful Death …

'Darkling' here means in the dark (Keats' speaker has just mentioned that he is lying in 'embalmed darkness') and the speaker in Hardy's poem too is both literally and metaphorically in the dark, since it is evening and the world seems on the verge

of a new dark age: Hardy is looking forward with scant optimism to the dawn of the 20th century. The thrush likewise is *in* the dark, but *out of* the darkness he sings his message of 'some blessed hope' which the speaker cannot grasp – just as the nightingale in Keats' poem sings 'in full-throated ease'.

Thus, by a change of title, Hardy has considerably extended the scope of the poem. The poet compares himself with Keats' speaker, who longed to escape 'the weariness, the fever and the fret' of life, and links the two birds who have the power, through their singing, to suggest the possibility of a different, better world to come. But the word 'darkling' is so distinctive – its meaning 'in the dark' rather than 'growing dark' described by both the OED and Webster's American Dictionary as 'poetic' – that its use in Hardy's title must set off other echoes. Indeed, a few minutes' Internet search will enable students to discover that Matthew Arnold, in 'Dover Beach' – his famous poem about the loss of faith in the modern world (Hardy's world too) – refers to the 'darkling plain':

> The world, which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams,
> So various, so beautiful and so new
> Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.

In that first line, setting up the prospect of a future that turns out to be a bitter disillusionment, Arnold directly echoes and inverts the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: 'The world lay all before them'. And it is actually Milton who anticipates both Keats and Hardy in linking the word 'darkling' with a bird, when in Book III of *Paradise Lost* he notes how the 'wakeful bird / Sings darkling' (ll.38–9). But behind Milton stands, inevitably, Shakespeare. In *King Lear*, the Fool reminds Lear that:

> The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long
> That it had its head bit off by its young.
> So, out went the candle, and we were left darkling. (I.iv.214–6)

One of the most valuable uses of the Internet is its function as a giant concordance of literature in English. This is a resource that was simply unavailable to students a generation ago. Indeed, the sheer availability of information today has been in part responsible for the growing focus on context in literary study. As this brief pursuit of the word 'darkling' has shown, such information is no longer the preserve of scholars who have time and access to trawl through libraries in search

of such connections. Students do not need to rely on notes in textbooks, telling them what connections to make: they can discover them for themselves. In doing so they discover how one text illuminates, and is illuminated by, other texts. Not surprising, perhaps, that a recent addition to the English papers sat by students at Oxford was entitled 'Text, Context, Intertext'.

'The community of literature'

Students, then, can quickly learn how writers as well as readers make such connections all the time:

> A writer is first of all a reader. It is from reading that I derive the standards by which I measure my own work and according to which I fall lamentably short. It is from reading, even before writing, that I become part of a community – the community of literature – which includes more dead than living writers.[9]

This is Susan Sontag again, and her idea of literature as a community provides another good starting point for a discussion of what Literature as a subject is, and what it has to offer. As students and as teachers, as readers, we can become part of that community. Before her, W.H. Auden had expressed the idea slightly differently when he said that 'Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead', adding, 'Without communion with the dead, a fully human life is impossible.'[10] This claim is one which the wayward English teacher, Hector, in Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys* has passed on to his students. When Irwin, the young History teacher recently arrived to take over the teaching of the Oxbridge candidates from Hector, asks the boys what goes on in his lessons, the replies he gets are puzzling:

> BOYS: Ask him, sir. We don't know sir.
> AKTHAR: It's just the knowledge, sir.
> TIMMS: The pursuit of it for its own sake, sir.
> POSNER: Not useful, sir. Not like your lessons.
> AKTHAR: Breaking bread with the dead, sir. That's what we do.
> IRWIN: What it used to be called is 'wider reading'.
> LOCKWOOD: Oh no, sir. It can be narrower reading. Mr Hector says if we know one book off by heart, it doesn't matter if it's really crap. The Prayer Book, sir. The Mikado, the Pigeon Fancier's Gazette … so long as it's words, sir. Words and worlds.[11]

Irwin, the utilitarian, fails to spot the Auden quotation in Akthar's reply, or to register the sacramental significance of 'breaking bread' (later in the play, the Headmaster says that Hector has 'an old-fashioned faith in the redemptive power of words'). He also fails to respond to the intertextual idea that, through literature,

the present can share with, and learn from, the past. He simply labels this 'wider reading'. It is the student, Lockwood, who corrects him, by calling it 'narrower reading': the closest possible engagement with a book (knowing it 'off by heart') centred on its 'words, sir. Words and worlds.'

Hector's own teaching of poetry combines words and worlds, close reading and context, in a way which provides a useful case study, for teachers, of the dangers of jumping to the wrong contextual conclusions. Discussing Hardy's poem 'Drummer Hodge', he makes much of the fact that the soldier is given a name:

> The important thing is that he has a name … thrown into a common grave though he may be, he is still Hodge the drummer. Lost boy though he is on the other side of the world, he still has a name.[12]

What Hector misses is the fact that, for Hardy, 'Hodge' (the very word a conflation of hedge-hog) was an unacceptable 'nickname that affects to portray a class … the farm-labouring community'. In an essay published in 1883, 'The Dorsetshire Labourer', Hardy had attacked in withering terms the way Londoners labelled the agricultural workers they never met in real life:

> This supposed real but highly conventional Hodge is a degraded being of uncouth manner and aspect, stolid understanding and snail-like movement.[13]

So Hector is both right and wrong to stress that Hardy's drummer has a name: at the same moment he is apparently given by the poet a unique identity he is simultaneously de-individualised by being given a derisive generic nickname. Read in the context, therefore, of Hardy's own comments about the name Hodge, Hector's explanation seems a misreading of the poem.

'The intention of the text'

This is one of the problems that teaching literature in context poses. Was Hector wrong to draw the conclusion he did? Was he at fault for not apparently knowing how Hardy himself viewed the name 'Hodge'? Surely no one critic or reader can be expected to know every possible historical or biographical detail that might be relevant? And if not, does our interpretation of a text then depend simply on which contexts we happen to know, or choose or ignore, with each interpretation being equally valid? Surely this would imply that any text can mean anything, depending in which context it is read?

Umberto Eco, the Italian novelist and critic, roundly rejects this idea of an interpretative free-for-all. In his book *On Literature* he notes:

> There is a dangerous critical heresy, typical of our time, according to which we can do anything we like with a work of literature, reading into it whatever our most uncontrolled impulses dictate to us. This is not true. Literary works encourage freedom of interpretation, because they offer us a discourse that has many layers of reading and place before us the ambiguities of language and of real life. But in order to play this game, which allows every generation to read literary works in a different way, we must be moved by a profound respect for the intention of the text.[14]

Eco's argument is that there are some things in texts that can never be disputed while others are open to interpretation or revision. Lady Macbeth may or may not have had children but Hamlet never married Ophelia. Some things, it can be said, are 'true' within the context of the text in which they exist. Other things may or may not be true: Lady Russell, in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, may or may not have had Anne Elliot's best interests at heart when persuading her not to marry Frederick Wentworth. It is true, however, that she is willing at the end of the book to admit she had been wrong to do so. Does this make her more realistic, more human and therefore true to life as a character? The question of truth in a text is something that students need to confront quite early on, especially so that they recognise the limitations (in terms of textual analysis) of saying that something is 'true to life'. If truth in a text is reduced to a single truth, so that it means one thing and one thing only, then context would only be relevant or admissible if it served to reinforce that single meaning.

These are questions and issues that I discuss in Chapters 7 to 11 of this book. In teaching Shakespeare, for instance, I ask whether a student is justified in describing Othello as a 'black, Muslim mercenary' either in the context of 16th or of 21st century understanding of these terms. I ask whether it is true that the Holocaust has made *The Merchant of Venice* a more difficult play for us than it was for an earlier Elizabethan audience. It is important for students to gain an historical perspective and, at the same time, to see how far their own times can provide a context for discussion of texts old and new. So current or recent events – the Asian Tsunami, the execution of Saddam Hussein, to name but two – can frame discussions of texts ranging from the Bible to *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*. An illustrated magazine article about Kate Winslet may provide a helpful context for re-reading Jane Austen, but an alleged discovery about the setting of a poem by T.S. Eliot may turn out to offer a false context.

I am concerned (always, I hope) with the contexts in which words themselves are used. So there are some detailed investigations – again, helped by Internet access – of the shifting meaning of words: 'watch' in Shakespeare, 'handsome' in Jane Austen. Genre, too, is always an important context, so there are several discussions of the sonnet in different guises and by different writers, and of

non-fictional as well as fictional prose. Chapter 9 includes discussion of very recent fiction, by both famous and unknown writers; Chapter 10 looks specifically at essays, blogs and travel writing. In what sort of contexts can we place a book about which nothing (or very little) has so far been said? Can film adaptations of novels act as an illuminating context for the discussion of the novels themselves, or do they merely diminish the original texts? Historical and cultural genres, too, are essential contexts, so there are extended discussions in Chapters 7 and 11 of poems in the context of the Romantic period and of ways of teaching the literature of the Great War, and the Great War in British Literature. Questions of cultural identity – contested ideas of Englishness, for instance – provide a context for discussing William Blake, Rupert Brooke, E.M. Forster and Julian Barnes.

Ways of seeing

A book which has influenced me since the beginning of my teaching career is John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), and three times in *World and Time* I specifically use the detailed study of paintings or sculptures as a context for the discussion of literary texts: I discuss Wordsworth's sonnet 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge' in the context of Stanley Spencer's painting of the Thames, *Swan Upping*. I also use war memorials as a context for analysing ways in which writers memorialise the Great War. As a context for studying a novel by Dickens I take as a starting point one of the key illustrations in the original edition of *A Tale of Two Cities*. I hope Berger would approve of my methods. I have also drawn heavily on his arguments in discussing the idea of the male gaze as a central idea in literature as well as in other media: my discussion of ways of seeing and ways of reading range from Jane Austen to Zadie Smith, with a particular focus on two contemporary novels, Hilary Mantel's *A Change of Climate* and Joe Treasure's *The Male Gaze*.

Recent developments in assessment at advanced level have put a much greater emphasis on comparative study, and I have already drawn attention above to the value of reading one text in the context of another. This is again the focus in Chapter 5, when I discuss the possibilities of context in unseen examinations of the sort increasingly used for university admission, the Advanced Extension Award (AEA) and the English Literature Admissions Test (ELAT) for instance. Throughout all these discussions I try to argue for the importance of seeing close reading and context as complementary, not contradictory, approaches to the teaching of Literature and literary studies, and my test of the validity of a context is always (I hope) the same: does it help me – and will it help my students – to see the text in a clearer light, a different light or a distorting light?

But, in the end, how can you tell? One example from my experience as an examiner as well as a teacher may give at least a clue and will demonstrate the

increasing ingenuity and sophistication of students and their teachers today. In a 2002 Literature examination students were asked to discuss Herrick's poem 'Upon Julia's Clothes':

> When as in silks my Julia goes,
> Then, then, methinks, how sweetly flows
> The liquefaction of her clothes!
>
> Next, when I cast mine eyes and see
> That brave vibration each way free,
> – O how that glittering taketh me!

Some examiners were disconcerted to read answers which strayed well beyond the conventional analysis of the language and imagery. Should a script that drew a comparison between 'the liquefaction of her clothes' and the then infamous Monica Lewinsky's dress be rewarded or penalised? Candidates who took this comparison one stage further and linked the poem with the title of Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* (only just published at that time and also alerting the reader, through its title, directly to the same dress) baffled still further examiners who had not yet had time to read the book. And when other candidates anatomised the language by drawing on scathing feminist critiques of Herrick or skilfully invoking the concept of the male gaze to explode any idea of the poem's 'charm', it was clear that the assessment of critical appreciation could never be quite the same again. 'After such knowledge, what forgiveness?' Yet these students, and their teachers, had shown how contextual close reading could shine a revealing new light on a well-known text. It is this, I suggest, which makes teaching literature in context so important and so worthwhile.