

## Editorial

It is Sixth Form options evening, 2015. The Deputy Head gives his customary address to parents and pupils, before dispersing the audience to subject talks at which, he says, not altogether tongue-in-cheek, Heads of Department are going to try to 'sell' them their 'wares'. I contemplate my wares and briefly consider shutting up shop. Swallowing these doubts, I give selling English my best shot. I talk as enthusiastically as I can about the transferable skills that universities look so favourably upon. I namedrop lucrative careers that might come of a degree in English Literature – careers which have nothing to do with English Literature. I even find myself calling English a 'blue chip' subject. The gods of the marketplace beam with satisfaction. Some of the parents look half-sold, but the pupils in the room do not. I know in my heart that the reason they have come is simply because they have quite enjoyed reading and talking about literature during Year 11 and lower down the school. I catch what I think is a betrayed look on the face of an intelligent boy I teach, who, I suspect, doesn't yet give a jot about which firm he'll end up working for or what skills they want him to have. Who could blame him? I was the same at 16. It feels like a nugatory evening's work.

But what was my alternative? To tell Mr and Mrs Barton that I hoped to turn young Tom into a rarefied aesthete? 'He may lack lucre in years to come, but at least he'll have a beautiful soul'. No. In a niggling sort of way this episode started me thinking seriously about the uses of English, about whether it is useful to speak of English's 'uses', and, if so, how we are to articulate them to ourselves and to our students. Shortly afterwards I serendipitously struck upon John Williams's 1965 novel *Stoner* – undoubtedly one of the great paeans to English teaching in twentieth-century fiction. In the post-war years William Stoner's students, we are told, 'were intensely serious and contemptuous of triviality. Innocent of fashion or custom, they came to their studies as Stoner dreamed that a student might – as if those studies were life itself and not specific means to specific ends'.<sup>1</sup> In that, I felt, lay the hypothetical argument I was searching for: that studying English – perhaps this applies to any subject, but particularly to English – oughtn't to be seen as a means to an end, as a preparation for a professional life to come, but as part of life, something worth doing in and for itself, something that you can thus truly learn from

and carry with you ('contemptuous of triviality' is, moreover, a just rebuke to the philistine view – prevalent enough – that English Literature deals in aesthetic trivia). That is the kind of attitude universities and employers really want, I would say. And I loved the uplifting description of the protagonist's death at the end of the novel, where Williams interrogates the 'use' of English by stressing the intrinsic value of Stoner's neglected monograph: 'It hardly mattered to him that the book was forgotten and that it served no use; the question of its worth at any time seemed almost trivial' (p. 288). But I would also want to rescue the idea of English's 'use' from that strictly utilitarian sense. That's partly why I devote attention to Herbert's use of 'use' (as a verb, in connection with why he chooses to write verse) in 'The Quidditie' in my contribution to this issue. And maybe that was at the back of my mind when I registered my interest in taking on the editorship of *The Use of English*. It's a title that resonates.

General issues of *The Use of English*, of which this is one, comprise a combination of articles that address the English curriculum, pedagogical approaches to the subject, and academic stimulus which challenges teachers to re-think their teaching. Robert Eaglestone's powerful article addresses the name and nature of English pedagogy, grappling with a question which goes right to the heart of the subject's identity: that is, what is it we want to teach English students to become? His answer, 'literary critics', is less straightforward than it sounds, rooted as it is, as Eaglestone ably demonstrates, in a rich yet vexed tradition. John Tomsett, who makes the case for teaching the fundamentals of literary analysis to our very youngest pupils, would undoubtedly concur with Eaglestone's call to cultivate criticism in the classroom. He makes the valuable point that, useful as it can be, modelling PEA ought not to, and needn't, come at the expense of allowing pupils to develop a distinctive discursive style (something Tomsett himself has done to great effect). Clare Butterworth gives an account of a winning A level coursework pairing, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, one which led her to explore other postcolonial writers in her teaching, particularly the work of the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. One feels grateful for Butterworth's insight – among others – into how literature essays can acquire contextual focus without morphing into history essays. Katherine Mair, who has taken on editorial responsibility for the reviews pages of this and future issues of *The Use of English*, considers lesser-spotted 'foreign' literatures of a different variety – those belonging to the medieval past. Through some incisive close reading of William Paris's hagiography *Life of Christina of Bolsena*, Mair contends that political critique offsets the piety usually associated with the genre.

Virginia Woolf's diaries, Ruth Ling eloquently argues, were a ligament-loosening, pleasure-filled practice ground wherein the lyric impulse evident in her novels began to take shape. Robin Purves offers a reconsideration of Thomas Wyatt's famous sonnet 'They fle from me', brilliantly bringing to account the snatch of reported speech, thus locating the real 'inwardness' (Greenblatt) of the poem in the interpretative aporia between dream and no dream. Peter Cash's numerous contributions to the English Association's *Bookmarks* series (<https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/englishassociation/publications/bookmarks/bookmarks>) are of great service to students and teachers: his Bookmark on the stolen rowing-boat episode from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is reprinted here. My reflections on teaching religious poetry as part of the IB Literature course make the point that the subject matter is not necessarily removed from the experience students who have no religion, and that, as Eliot said of Herbert's poetry, it can 'touch the feeling, and enlarge the understanding' of such an audience. Finally, Jonathan Edwards explores how Dylan Thomas 'hits us over the head with his brilliance' in 'Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night'. He is far too modest to say so, but what Edwards has to say about the villanelle form and about relationships between sons and fathers in the work of Thomas, Heaney and Paterson casts an interesting light on several of the poems in his Costa award-winning first collection *My Family and Other Superheroes*. In the 'Reviews' section, Juliet Gordon explores two recent New Historicist approaches to Shakespeare, Carl P. Griffiths considers Doug Lemov on the challenges of reading, and Stephen Galloway what Bowen, Harrison and Meally have done to promote engagement with modern and contemporary poetry.

Many thanks to all who have contributed to this excellent issue.

**Thomas Day**

### References

1. Williams, J. (2003) *Stoner* (London: Vintage), p. 258