



Foreword

Who was Absalom? What was Deism? When was the Industrial Revolution? How do you tell a strong rhyme from a weak? And why should Tiresias watch a small house agent's clerk having sex? If you already know the answers, then this book is probably not for you. If you don't . . . does it really matter?

At times, it matters in quite precise ways – when, for example, you read Dryden and turn to *Absalom and Achitophel*, when you read *Tom Jones* and find that one of Tom's tutors is a Deist, when you read *The Waste Land* and try to make sense of Eliot's claim that Tiresias is "the most important personage in the poem." Editorial notes will help, but they quickly turn reading into a chore: the more you have to rely on them, the more of an academic exercise it becomes. To some extent, this is inevitable. There will always be things you need to look up, just as there will always be words that send you back to a dictionary; but reading the literature of the past does not have to be like struggling with a foreign language. A relatively narrow range of knowledge can make a huge difference to how much you understand.

This is important because it's a kind of freedom, but there are less tangible considerations that are equally important. Writers of the Romantic period may not refer specifically to the French Revolution, but it was in the air they breathed; it had a vital effect on the way they thought and felt and wrote. Victorian novelists may not refer specifically to the Industrial Revolution, but it seeps into a thousand details of the world they create. To approach literary texts without some knowledge of their background is to impoverish the experience of reading them. And this applies to more than grand movements of history. John

McAdam was a civil engineer; he was also the main reason why coach journeys in Dickens are so different from those in Fielding. The Sermon on the Mount is a collection of religious precepts; it's also a recurring presence in every strand of English culture from Milton to Monty Python. But to be aware of this you need a basis from which to start. You have to know the event, the person, the passage, before you can recognize its influence.

Not surprisingly, students often find themselves at a loss. Until the middle of the last century there was a common culture that writers in English could expect most of their readers to share. It was drawn from the King James Bible, the classics, and a schoolroom version of British history. Between them these three provided a reservoir of stories and characters, themes and phrases that could be tapped at will. They reached into almost every kind of educated discourse. But what used to be common currency has now grown less familiar. As a result, the literature of past centuries seems more obscure, its cultural landscape more alien.

The answer, of course, is to return to the Bible and the classics, to study the cultural and social background, to learn the history of the period. But life is short and the required reading is long. Hence this book, whose first three parts are designed to offer a simple map of the territory. Read them, refer to them, and you should be able to cope. The fourth part is slightly different in that the background material is more academic than cultural. There are certain things you need to know in order to talk and write effectively about literature. Since some of them are less often taught in school than they used to be, I've tried to fill the more obvious gaps.

In a book of this kind, where the scope for further reading is endless, bibliographies tend to be decorative rather than practical – too short and too soon out of date. Ten minutes at a computer will give you a better idea of what's available in any particular field; specialist bibliographies will take you on from there. The low-tech option of browsing the library shelves may seem like an embarrassingly casual alternative, but it's still a useful way to turn up something unexpected. It's also one of the pleasures of studying literature.

Note on the text

Where it seemed helpful, I've put certain names in bold to signal their importance. Those with an asterisk have a separate entry elsewhere in the same section or on the page indicated in brackets. American spellings have been used in preference to British at the request of the publisher.

A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO EXAMS

There can be several reasons for writing an essay, but the only point of taking an exam is to get as high a mark as possible. I hope this will excuse any taint of cynicism in what follows. Normally it would seem foolish to repeat advice that's been given thousands of times before, but with heroic persistence people go on making exactly the same mistakes. So here again are five basic points:

- 1 **Read the rubrics.** This sounds obvious but in the heat of the moment it's easy to dive past them straight into the questions. If the paper tells you to answer one question from each Section, and you do two from A and none from C, it's probable that one of your answers will get 0. If you're asked for three answers, do not persuade yourself that it will be better to concentrate on doing two well and ignoring the third. It won't. However poor your third answer, make sure you do it. Even a dismal attempt will almost certainly get you another 30 or 40 marks – far more than you would have collected by improving your other two answers.
- 2 **Read the questions.** They'll probably look as though they've come from a parallel universe, but don't panic. Setting exams is largely a matter of thinking up new ways to ask old questions. If you take a breath and look again, the horrifying sense of unfamiliarity will begin to fade. Undo the packaging, and you'll almost certainly find that the questions are much the same as usual. But make sure: give yourself time to read them carefully and understand them.
- 3 **Study past papers.** For the reason above, this is probably the most effective form of preparation. Get a sense of how the questions are framed and try to work out what they're after. Think of it as an exercise in literary criticism, if you like. What you're looking for are themes, patterns, recurrent lines of enquiry. Not many of us can keep a whole field of knowledge in our heads, process it at a moment's notice, and spit out a 50-minute essay that isn't rubbish. By looking intelligently at past papers, you can give yourself a chance to do some provisional groundwork. When you go into the exam, you should have at least a rough sense of what you might write about and the material you might need. Don't take this too far, though. There may be room for maneuver – finding a favorable angle of entry into the question is one of the skills of taking exams – but in the end you have to answer the question that's been asked, not the one you think should have been asked.

- 4 **Get basic details into your head.** Is it Elizabeth Bennet or Bennett? George Eliot or Elliot? The heavens won't fall if you get this sort of thing wrong, but getting it right will improve your confidence and give new heart to your examiner. For obvious reasons, exam essays tend to be light on detail, and it's not difficult to make your answer stand out. Don't try to memorize acres of text, but do make sure you can refer accurately to specific passages in support of the arguments you want to make. Sometimes a couple of words are enough to give a pleasant illusion of familiarity with the text. Instead of talking about Marlow's (Marlowe's?) concern in *Heart of Darkness* with the details of everyday reality, you might, for example, refer to his focus on "the redeeming facts of life." Any drop of water is welcome in the desert, and examiners of unseen papers tend to be easily pleased.

- 5 **Keep a sense of perspective.** Exam hysteria has its enjoyable side, but don't let it get out of hand. There's a temptation to believe that one's whole future hangs in the balance at the exam-room door. It's unlikely. Exams matter, but not that much. The odds are that you'll end up with a 2:1 or a 2:2, that in retrospect you won't care which, and that whatever determines the quality of your future life will be quite different.

It seems a pity to end on exams. They're the one aspect of a literature degree that doesn't afford much scope for pleasure. The rest of it should be fun – that's its justification.