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A QUESTION OF METHOD: READING WAR POETRY AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL

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Abstract

In the several years of leading a practice class on poetry at undergraduate level, I have noticed that, more often than not, students doubt their ability to understand and relate to a poem, even more than they do in regard to any other type of literary text. It goes beyond the natural reserve of someone who has not had sufficient practice in the field of critical analysis and the resulting reaction is equivalent to disqualifying oneself from the race before it has even started. The following pages are dedicated to one of the strategies which helped overcome this obstacle and which promotes close reading in a manner that the students may find engaging. It was employed in the discussion of war poetry with second-year students enrolled in the BA English Program at the Faculty of Letters, “Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati, Romania. Four texts were selected: *Grodek*, by Georg Trakl (in English by Michael Hamburger), *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, by Wilfred Owen, *Leaving for the Front*, by Alfred Lichtenstein (translated by Patrick Bridgwater) and *Gala*, by Guillaume Apollinaire (in Oliver Bernard’s translation). These texts, as well as a short, relevant biographical note for each of the poets were the only aids employed in an exercise that constantly managed to result in constructive exchanges of ideas and a deeper understanding of how critical analysis can be employed without becoming tedious or overly stressful.

Keywords: teaching; poetry; war; philology; higher education;

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the many years of conducting a practice class on poetry, one initial reaction from my students appeared almost constantly. It can be placed somewhere between weariness and apprehension, while being often expressed by means of something which can best be described as a groan. While the number of students voicing these feelings may differ, the frequency of the scene in question requires that they be taken into account when planning any class of this kind.

Behind the groan, there lies a series of reasons and aspects, such as: seeing poetry as something encrypted or something they have to dissect and which, therefore, has nothing to do with the pleasure of reading, on the one hand, and/or it requires a higher level of instruction than they feel they possess or more effort than they are willing to invest in reading and processing it, on the other hand; regarding



poetry as something remote from daily reality; having a limited perception of the genre as including only sentimental or lyrical forms and associating the latter with emotions or traits of character that make one feel vulnerable when discussed publicly, etc.

To a certain extent, this can be included under the umbrella of students' reaction to literary texts in general. Marius Nica (2011) remarks: "in the last ten years I have noticed a significant decline in students' interest in reading and also in learning literature. When discussing with literature teachers we all identified one specific problem: that students were less and less active as they became interested more in listening a lecture than taking part in a free discussion." (215) However, this seems to be even more the case with poetry, or "one of the most undesirable literary discourses that students come across in schools" as Nica describes it in the same article. The question is how to change that.

The most effective answer should probably start from a thorough analysis of the entire curriculum, from the early years and to the highest level of study, and it should continue with applications and "corrective action" at the level of teacher training programs, as well as philology ones. However, since it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss education policy, the example of various authors who tried to find answers appropriate for the context in which they activate and, most importantly, for the participants to their classes shall be followed instead. Some of their ideas will be referenced in this paper, in keeping with its main objective, that of presenting a practical example which has met with a considerable degree of success along the years.

2. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

For the past fifteen years I have been teaching a practice class on poetry to second-year students enrolled in the BA English Program at the Faculty of Letters, "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati, Romania. The number of participants has varied greatly from one group to the next, not only from one year to another, ranging between as few as six and as many as twenty-five.

The questions that Tanya Agathocleous and Ann Dean (2003) ask in the opening of their book entitled *Teaching Literature. A Companion*, may well be the starting point of any lesson: "What do you want your students to learn? What do you want them to do in your class? What do they do instead? How do you respond?" (1) Therefore, they shall also be used as guidelines for the description of this class. To answer the first question, I wanted my students to learn about poetry as something alive, not as something to be left on a pedestal or between the dusty pages of a book that no one opens any more.

As such, they were exposed to the diversity and the playfulness of the genre, both at the textual level and the cultural one. The course explored the uses of poetry in myth and legend, in rituals, its combination to other arts, especially music and painting, some of its so-called culture-specific forms that have come to transgress such frontiers and some of poetry's uses in contexts that, at first glance, have nothing to do with the world of literature: political protest, social activism, and war.

Thus, another aim of the course was to underline the fact that literature in general, and poetry in particular, in the realms of this class, has a strong, although not always obvious or straightforward relation with the manifestations, desires, struggles of the 'real' world. Furthermore, although the course was organized on the areas enumerated above, the attempt was to emphasize connections, syncretism and interdisciplinarity, but with poetry at the core. Throughout, one of the main convictions behind this approach can be related to Wormser and Cappella's (2000) observation: "What does it mean to teach poetry? First of all, it means being comfortable with poetry." (334)

Which leads to the second question, i.e. "What do you want your students to do in your class?". The shortest answer would be: to communicate – with the teacher and among themselves, to become and remain involved, interested in the activities throughout, to read closely and to develop their critical skills, to use and improve their English and to have fun, to play. Which means that the focus was on the interactive methods, since, to quote Nica, the solution to students' apathy in literary matters is not "about changing students' focus or about 'summoning' them in libraries, but about displaying literature as being funny and attractive, easy to understand and easy to comment upon." (2011: 215)

The last two questions are more practice-oriented, therefore they will be considered in the next sections of the paper, which focus on a specific technique employed during these classes and which will also try to add to the answers already given to the first two.

3. WAR POETRY

War poetry is not a subject that the students have many chances to discuss and discover before attending the above-described practice class. And this is not necessarily a reflection of the current perspective on education. Some earlier generations' encounter with the genre was mostly under the form of patriotic, nationalistic verse, promoting heroic and exemplary figures of self-sacrifice for the good of the nation. The result was a rather one-sided perspective on this type of writing. As far as English literary studies at undergraduate level are concerned, the main texts from the curriculum which may be integrated in this category – without considering the epics – belong to the early medieval age and they are *The Battle of Maldon* and *The Battle of Brunanburh*. There, the main interest seems to be in contrasting exemplary with dishonourable behaviour on the battlefield and celebrating a crushing victory, respectively.

Under these circumstances, some of the texts by the First World War soldier-poets, with their often conflicting views and unanswered questions can come as a welcome departure from the model or as a possible basis for a contrastive study. And, although not in the curriculum, other texts than the two mentioned above can be used for the same purpose, e.g. Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*. The analysis can cover not only the textual level, but the cultural one as well, since "once at the front, the reality of war was perceived by most of those actively involved to be totally different [...] from what could have been expected from previous wars, especially after the introduction of tanks and gas warfare." (Puissant 2009: 2)

Therefore, one of the possible approaches to the selected texts would be an interdisciplinary one, connecting literature with history. For example, Jessie Pope's *The Call*, published in 1915, was sometimes used as an introduction to the poems of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, which led to a discussion about differences between texts produced by non-combatants and those by soldier-poets, as well as considering the use of literature for propaganda purposes. One aspect the teacher should keep under observation and address, if necessary, is the tendency to reduce the issue to a series of binary oppositions: home vs. front, male vs. female, pro-war vs. anti-war, etc. For instance, Kendall (2013) points out that: "the soldier-poets who were capable of seeing and writing are often credited with having been 'anti-war', and their works are routinely recruited for propaganda by campaigners opposed to later conflicts. In accounts of the War and the art that it inspired, futility has defeated glory as the appropriate response, and Wilfred Owen has become the antidote to Rupert Brooke (who, it is often argued, would have come round to the right way of thinking if he had lived long enough). This risks damaging the achievements of the soldier-poets, because it neglects the extent to which their writings struggle with contradictory reactions to the War. [...] Most soldier-poets – like most soldiers – believed the War to be necessary, but wanted the costs acknowledged and the truths told". (21-22)

One of the possible ways to counteract this tendency would be offering counter-examples. However, time constraints may dictate that they be addressed only briefly, which may reduce their impact. Another avenue to be explored when approaching the topic of First World War poetry is connected to literary history and it concerns its chronological and artistic placement between the Victorian age and modernism. Which, in terms of genre, means that "the huge amount of poetry that evolved out of this situation of horror can be situated in a central position between the decline of realistic and pastoral modes of writing at the beginning of the twentieth century and the rise of Modernism quickly gaining ground after the end of the First World War." (Puissant 2009: 4) Therefore, in terms of didactic aims, the selected texts can be used to activate the knowledge the students may already possess of poetic forms, while introducing new modes of expression and exposing them to the diversity and richness that comes with all the "isms" that go under the large heading of modernist art. Moreover, with certain texts, the connection between literature, music and painting can also be brought into focus, providing an almost syncretic experience.

With reference to experience, the teacher should also expect a certain degree of reticence on the part of the students, due to the nature of the topic. Even more than in other cases, this type of poetry promises to reference or elicit emotions that they may not wish to face. However, if the lesson is scheduled later in the semester, they will have had a chance to better understand the purposes of the course, they will have gained greater confidence in themselves and in the teacher, which will reduce the level of these emotions considerably. There is, usually, a distinguishable difference between their

response when the topic is announced in the beginning of the semester and their attitude when its turn comes. As for the students' reactions during the discussion, they are quite diverse and sometimes contradictory. For example, one of the appeal of the poems is their direct relation to actual events and "this experiential component is doubled for we read not only the recalled experience the poetry expresses but also the creator's response to such experience." (Silkin 1998: x) However, as mentioned above, this may also cause some of them to feel triggered and retreat, which, among other things, is counterproductive to critical analysis and close-reading. The nature of the exercise which constitutes the object of this study and the fact that, within it, students work in groups helped with this situation and with maintaining the focus on the given task.

4. THE EXERCISE

The following exercise was designed so as to help overcome the reluctance students sometimes display when faced with the task of reading in the classroom, especially when the latter is correlated with literary analysis. It consists of dividing the students into groups, if possible, and presenting them with a challenge. They receive four poems into English, written by poets who fought in the First World War, as well as a handout with a short list of information on the author's life and, especially, style of writing. The exercise can be employed with the participants doing individual work, but many of them feel reluctant to talk afterwards and develop on their findings. Whereas, within a group, their insights have less chances of being overlooked, especially due to the nature of the established goal.

It is preferable for the poems to be placed on the same page, because they will be easier to compare. The name of the author is placed only above the corresponding bio-note, not alongside the poem they wrote as well. The challenge is for the students to determine who wrote what poem on the basis of the information provided.

One of the main risks that come with this exercise is that they might be tempted to simply "flip a coin" or rush through the texts and be done with it. Therefore, it is essential for the teacher to emphasize the fact that the "correct" answer is not what is going to matter in the subsequent conversation, but the arguments supporting their choices. It might be useful to ask for a number of arguments, as well. However, that may prove daunting for the students and it may shift undue focus on the number, rather than on the solidity of the arguments. Moreover, in the case of students who feel less comfortable with literary criticism and, therefore, do not usually take part in such activities, the discovery of one appropriate evaluation might be considered a success.

The initial spark of inspiration for this approach was provided by an online game as part of a tutorial by Stuart D. Lee (1996) on a site managed by the University of Oxford and which challenged the user to identify the nationality of the poets who wrote certain war poems presented in their English translation. When considering the objectives, the author mentions: "not only will [this tutorial] bring some other poets to the fore from non-British backgrounds, but it will also ask users to question their own inherent prejudices. To most people in English-speaking countries the German, Turkish, or Austrian soldier is an unknown quantity, vaguely referred to in some of the poems. Yet what sentiments were the poets from those countries attempting to express? Similarly, even though they were allies during the War, the poetry of the soldiers of France, Russia, or Italy are seldom read outside of their countries by the beginning student".

While the objectives of the class described in these pages are quite different, and the selection of the texts may change completely, depending on the aims of the lesson, the class under focus kept the idea of poems coming from four different literary traditions and decided upon the following: *Grodek*, by Georg Trakl (in English by Michael Hamburger), *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, by Wilfred Owen, *Leaving for the Front*, by Alfred Lichtenstein (translated by Patrick Bridgwater) and *Gala*, by Guillaume Apollinaire (in Oliver Bernard's translation). This allowed for a view of literature beyond conventional borders and provided perspectives from both sides of the conflict which reveal what Puissant (2009) remarks in connection to Isaac Rosenberg's poem, *Break of Day in the Trenches*: "the rat will 'do the same' to all enemies at the front, a fact which exposes the distinction between enemy and ally or between nationalities to be artificial. In the rat's eyes these differences do not exist and are therefore absurd." (36) In other words, this moves the focus from 'x' vs. 'y' onto the individual experience of a traumatic event.

Another aspect that can shift the focus of the conversation is the information provided for each author and which should be read aloud before the group work begins, with the teacher providing clarifications where necessary. Besides minimal detail about birth and circumstances of death – which, in the case of these four poets are all related to the war – the lists should include enough clues to guide students in their readings, but not too many or too obvious ones, which would detract from the pleasure of discovery. An example of a possible process of selection is presented in the following sub-sections.

4.1. GEORG TRAKL – GRODEK

Since *Grodek* is more concerned with the aftermath of battle, one detail which may help students in their quest is the fact that Trakl was trained in medicine and he was on the front as part of the Medical Corps. Added to this is the mention of the “sister’s shadow” (l. 12), which, in this case, may also refer to the sisters of mercy who were involved in caring for the wounded during World War I, not only to the frequent presence of the sibling in Trakl’s poetic works. Although such details do not pertain to the area of stylistic analysis, they still require close reading and the ability to make connections, which are some of the aims of the exercise.

A clue that is closer to the practice of literary criticism and which may be included on the handout is the author’s connection to expressionism. In *Grodek*, “the opening lines of the poem are marked by a striking disparity between the visual and auditory perceptions of the speaker: the idyllic evening landscape of ‘autumnal forests,’ ‘golden plains’ and ‘blue lakes’ is offset by the violent sounds of battle emanating from it. [...] This incongruity of sight and sound underlines the alienation of man, here perceived aurally, from the cosmic harmony embodied in the natural environment, perceived visually.” (Millington 2012: 253) Therefore, a well-known painting such as Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* may be used as didactic aid when presenting expressionism and before the group activity takes place. The visual aid should also provide a hint on the use of colour, which is also conspicuous in the poem. As Stillmark (2005) notes: “they are employed not naturalistically but rather with emotive and connotative force, their significance changing according to context.” (xviii) However, since Trakl’s is the only poem out of the four chosen to use colour to that effect, it would perhaps be better to omit this clue from the handout, and allow the students to make the connection with expressionism on their own, or, if they do not, to comment upon it during the subsequent discussion. Additionally, the long sentences, the experiments with syntax, the lack of rhyme, the imagery and the mood of the poem, as well as the general theme, which are in keeping with Trakl’s literary works in general, may also be explored in this latter part of the exercise.

4.2. WILFRED OWEN – ANTHEM FOR DOOMED YOUTH

The English poet is the best example, out of the four, of someone who was not only painfully aware of the disparity between the representation of war at home and the reality on the battlefield, but who also wrote about it. Kendall (2013) remarks: “His own ambition, as expressed in the draft preface to a volume of poems that he would not live to publish, was to ‘warn’: ‘That is why the true Poets must be truthful.’” (253) Therefore, this is one of the aspect that should be included on the handout, although the manner in which the “dialogue” on this topic is carried out in *Anthem* is highly ambiguous at times.

Another mention can be made to his complicated relation with organized religion in general and Christianity in particular. At first glance, this inclusion may seem to make the students’ work too easy, due to the numerous references present in the text: “bells” (l. 1), “orisons” (l. 4), “prayers” (l. 5), “choirs” (l. 6, 7), “candles” (l. 9), “holy” (l. 11). However, they often get distracted by the inclusion of the “angry god” (l. 8), “altars” (l. 15), “spirit” (l. 16) in *Grodek*, which is placed first on the page, and they attribute this poem to Owen. However, this leads to an interesting conversation afterwards, when they realise that the above-mentioned elements can be associated with other religious beliefs, especially since the reference is to “a god”. Otherwise said, it becomes a type of cautionary tale for those who rush through.

Two more pieces of the puzzle that may be added to the inventory are the lack of self-pity in Owen’s poems and a particular characteristic of his style: “he sought new ways to use language, and his mastery of alliteration, onomatopoeia, assonance, and dissonance have been often cited” (Canfield 2012: 140) It is particularly tempting since the students spent several hours during their first year at university studying Old English poetry, therefore, they would have to put to good use their previously acquired knowledge. The fact that the selected text is a sonnet can be exploited in a similar fashion during the discussion after group work, as the whole of their second semester during the same first year of study is

dedicated to renaissance literature and, quite extensively, to this type of poem. Some additional suggestions for this part of the lesson may be found in R.C. Evans's (2014) *Perspectives on World War I Poetry*, where he adopts in turn formalist, Marxist, traditional historical and postmodernist views in reading *Anthem for Doomed Youth*.

4.3. ALFRED LICHTENSTEIN – LEAVING FOR THE FRONT

Although generally associated with German expressionism (Newton 1971; Beutin et al. 2005 (1993); Donahue 2005), Lichtenstein's poem included in this selection may not be the most relevant example of that. Therefore, the information handout did not include that connection, but rather a mention of his use of irony and grim wit. Besides providing the students with one more opportunity to use their prior knowledge, it also adds to the challenge, as the title of Owen's poem at least is based on the same trope.

Although to reveal that "his war poetry is honest, simple and totally unheroic" (Furness and Humble 1997: 200), might over-simplify the task, one may, alternatively, find inspiration in Ida Porena's (1984) description of Alfred Lichtenstein war poems as free of rhetorical masks, as the expression of an act of surrender, as a realization of helplessness. (182) After the exercise, this can also be correlated with the simplicity of the distiches employed, which almost remind one of children's songs.

As in the case of Georg Trakl, the bio-note may also provide a lead for detection, since *Leaving for the Front* is, as the title announces, a poem that presents a scene that occurs before reaching the battlefield and Lichtenstein perished in the early days of the conflict.

4.4. GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE - GALA

This is the only name that is usually familiar to some of the students. Which does not necessarily entail an easier journey towards identifying which poem belongs to him. However, there have been instances when that was the case.

With Apollinaire, the mention of surrealism and cubism is almost self-evident, which is another opportunity for the students to acquire new notions and widen their perspectives or to contribute to the lesson by using their own experience, at the same time, making connections with other arts or other texts. The observation that his poems are "a genuine attempt to extend poetic suggestiveness, to bring about a new kind of synthesis (either between disparate material or between the pictorial and verbal arts), and to move poetic appreciation on to a more relevant foundation" (Broome and Chesters 1999: 89) seems particularly relevant for *Gala*. Moreover, the emphasis on modernist techniques and means of expression is enough for some of the participants to notice the absence of punctuation and add it to their list.

On the other hand, the surprising mixture of erotic or festive imagery with the military terminology, of nature and mechanical devices, of life and death provides another worthy addition to the set of modern poetic representations of war, which should help emphasize the diversity of styles, modes and perspectives.

5. CONCERNING METHODOLOGY

After the handout containing information about each of the poets is read aloud and the teacher makes sure the concepts pertaining to literary and cultural theory are discussed, the first reading of the poems is done aloud as well and it is followed by a basic disambiguation of the meaning expressed, which is also the moment where new vocabulary should be clarified. The disambiguation, more often than not, takes the form of an oral paraphrasing translation.

The next step is for the students to work in groups and decide upon the author of each piece, which they write on a slip of paper and hand in when ready. This way the nerves associated with "guessing" the correct answer are eliminated and the participants are free to focus on the discussion and on the persuasiveness of the arguments, theirs and their colleagues'.

It is recommended for the teacher to avoid dismissing any earnest contribution, but rather point out or ask about elements that may come to contradict it. An example was the case of references to religious practices and beliefs with Trakl and Owen. Even though the lists that they are given may seem short, they contain as many aspects to be taken into account when they read each of the texts. One of the main purposes of the exercise is for them to read the poems more carefully than if they had been given the text

and asked to analyse it. An additional purpose is to keep them involved or at least interested throughout. Which, in the majority of cases, is achieved quite successfully. Even the students who tend to daydream or try to use their time otherwise employed during literature classes are intrigued by the riddle. The fact that the reading is guided and that they are taking steps towards literary analysis is, naturally, of great importance to the teacher, but less daunting for the student when being presented under the form this game.

Moreover, the students often come with their own interpretation of the text and with surprising connections and insights even if sometimes while following the “wrong” lead. “No one ‘owns’ poetry. What the teacher offers is familiarity with the knowledge base and a willingness to investigate the uses of poetry.” (Wormser and Cappella 2000: 335) By the end of the exercise, many of the participants forget that they have not yet found out who wrote which poem and they are caught in the process of finding and following clues more than they are interested in the solution.

6. CONCLUSIONS

While attitudes and habits can hardly be changed with one exercise or one lesson, the practice class described above may be used in such a manner so as to combine several positive aspects:

- encouraging students to make connections across the curriculum and activate their prior knowledge, while providing a glimpse into modernism, which is part of the curriculum in their third year of study;
- teaching them how to approach and read a text from the perspective of a literary critic;
- creating a situation in which the participants exchange views not only with the teacher, but among themselves as well, and in this way learn from one another and become aware of the possibility of multiple readings;
- allowing the students to practice and improve their reading, speaking, and listening skills;
- opening a discussion which is both competitive and analytical;
- setting a task that is deeply connected to their philological training, while at the same time it allows for a dynamic, interactive, playful manner of solving it, etc.

Throughout the lesson, the teacher plays several roles: provider of information, mediator, assessor, manager, etc. As mentioned previously, one of the most important aspects that the organizer of the class should take into account is the need for an open, encouraging attitude when the various readings and solutions are discussed, while at the same time helping the student become aware of contradictions, faulty assumptions or any other weaknesses in their arguments. However, there are many other aspects that should be considered and carefully managed, i.e. time, the manner in which groups work together, students’ reactions to the solutions presented by colleagues, etc.

With these thoughts in mind, the result and the experience itself may prove rewarding both for the teacher and the students, leaving them not only with an improved level of (self) awareness and knowledge, but also with pleasant memories. Perhaps an even more noteworthy development would be for the participants to consider and analyse the positive and negative aspects of the exercise and feel inspired and motivated to come up with their own approaches to teaching poetry when it is their turn to be the leaders of their classes. However, such matters would be quite difficult to quantify.

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