

CALVO, CLARA and WEBER, JEAN J. *The Literature Workbook*. London: Routledge, 1998 (xiv + 148 pp). ISBN: 0415-169879.

A Shakespeare specialist from Spain and a Twentieth-century Fiction specialist from Luxembourg have joined forces to put their knowledge and teaching experience at the service of students and teachers of English. The result is *The Literature Workbook*, an introductory course in Literary Studies and Critical Analysis, which is as encompassing, as varied, and as comprehensive in chronological and generic scope as could be expected from such a team of disparate experts (perhaps it will become increasingly usual to find textbooks written by non-British academics, since I believe textbooks rate zero in the research assessment exercises in Britain). As Calvo and Weber state in their preface, their book is intended for beginning students of English literature and can be used either for independent study or as part of a taught class, since it uses a highly practical approach, which constantly calls for group discussion or cross-checking with fellow students. Throughout the three main parts of the book, the authors suggest a set of analytical techniques which drive us through several kinds of poetry, drama and fiction. Chapters 1 to 3 deal with poetry, moving chronologically from "Miniature Poems" (the Elizabethan sonnet), via Milton and the Romantics, to twentieth-century women's poetry. The three following chapters are devoted to drama, and the last section explores several aspects of fiction, ranging this time from Jane Austen and the Victorian novelists, to contemporary authors like Brian Moore. All the chapters begin with a few paragraphs of theoretical explanation and historical contextualization of texts, followed by set sections which offer three kinds of exercises: "Activities" (intended to work on and discuss the texts featured in the book); "Project Work", which requires going beyond the book and doing several types of research-work, and "Discussion" exercises, which raise various problems of literary criticism. The book does not follow any systematic approach to each of the genres, nor does it explain why it begins with poetry and finishes with fiction, something which elsewhere tends to appear in the reversed order for reasons of linguistic complexity. On the contrary, each type of text is exploited to put into practice different interpretative skills in a rather eclectic manner which, nevertheless, is, to my view, successful in its eclecticism.

Let us now go through all three parts, commenting on some of the issues raised. The chapter devoted to the analysis of Sonnets is the longest, since not only does it provide extensive explanations of the sonnet form from Petrarch to the present (Edna St Vincent Millay), but it also provides glossaries to help students understand Elizabethan English. The chapter is very illuminating indeed and provides a highly condensed summary of virtually everything a non-specialist student needs to know about the sonnet: its European sources; its historical *raison d'être* in the court of Elizabeth I; its main English practitioners (with examples from Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard, Michael Drayton Richard Barnfield and, of course, Shakespeare and Wordsworth, among others); and prosodic issues such as rhyme, metre, rhythm, sound, or *topoi*. Characteristic subject-matters of sonnets are also scanned in a socio-historical perspective (not all sonnets are about love!) and the practice of scansion is never neglected. The authors have opted for the original version of Elizabethan sonnets. I am afraid, however, that far from being a "gift" for the student, such a

choice constitutes a hindrance, at least for the non-native speaker of English. It is difficult enough to analyze a sonnet in which every word is fully understood on a first reading, without adding to it further linguistic difficulties. Moreover, the anthologized adaptations of sonnets to modern English are, on the whole, so accurate that the poems do not lose any of their original grandiloquence.

The following two chapters depart from the more traditional approach to the sonnet that we found in the first chapter, and move to very different matters, still around the interpretation of poetry. Chapter 2, entitled “What’s Syntax Got to Do with Poetry”, speaks for itself: the paragraphs devoted to syntax as a refraction of a particular “mind-style” should be welcomed by any teacher of literature, for it is here that the student understands the potential usefulness of syntactic analysis in formalistic literary commentaries, and not as an end in itself. This does not mean that the chapter constitutes an overall summary of English syntax (in fact, the network of syntactic choices is extremely simplified), but it does, quite convincingly, follow the now common practice of examining topics at the literature/language interface in the teaching context. The syntactic options of Milton and the Romantic poets are, thus, reviewed in the light of their thematic and political concerns, as expressed in their poetry.

And from here we move on to a title as promising as “Women’s Poetry: Same or Different?”. Obviously, the question is not answered —feminists have used rivers of ink for decades now, and have not yet reached an agreement on the same question— but the chapter does provide some useful guidelines to approach women’s poetry. Still, the themes proposed as “typical” of female poetry seem to be too restricted: sisterhood or female friendship, mental disturbance and death, and the rewriting of myths. The title is, perhaps, too wide-ranging for only a few pages which conduct a thematic analysis of a selection of poems by Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton from the twentieth century, and by Christina Rosseti as representative of earlier poetical traditions. One very positive activity found in this chapter, and elsewhere, is the one that fosters comparative literature; in this case, gender comparison and contrast: the myth of Eve is explored in both male and female-authored poems (Aemilia Lanyer’s and Milton’s Eve are cunningly surveyed, even from the resisting reader’s point of view. Since the myth of Leda is discussed as viewed in Yeat’s poem *The Tower*, I missed having it contrasted with, say, St. Vincent Millay’s sonnet “I dreamed I moved...”), in an attempt to amplify the subject of “women’s poetry” and include also “poetry about women”.

From poetry the book proceeds to drama. Chapter 4 focuses on tragedy or, more particularly, on the great tragedies of death and revenge, exploring and exemplifying issues like catharsis, pathos, death and its metaphors, black humour, and power, in fragments taken from *Hamlet*, *The White Devil*, or *The Duchess of Malfi*. Since “all tragedies are finished by a death” and “all comedies are ended by a marriage”, as Lord Byron says in *Don Juan*, from death the book turns to marriage and education as the most frequent subject-matter of comedies. Chapter 5 devotes several pages to Sheridan’s *The Rivals* as the comedy which encapsulates most of the “musts” of comedies: marriage, women’s education, the confusion of identity, irony, and lexical humour through malapropism and hyperbole. Finally, twentieth-century drama is dealt with in chapter 6, through the critique of certain plays written by the main representatives of the Irish Literary Revival, and the cultural stereotypes they seek to undermine in their works. After an explanation of concepts such as otherness, ideology,

reification or denaturalization, this chapter plunges the student into the not-so-canonical Irish plays of the first decade of our century, and the strong political content of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* or Yeats's *Cathleen ni Hoolihan*. I have just now praised the inclusion of less canonical texts, and it is evident that one of the authors' major concerns is to insert writers and texts that are seldom envisaged in introductory courses. However, the great dilemma of selection is that it is hard to decide what to incorporate and what to leave out. In the case of the drama chapters, the overview is arranged in such a way that it can produce the misleading idea that there is a particular genre for each period: tragedy for the Elizabethan and Jacobean age, comedy for the Enlightenment, and political drama for the contemporary age. Perhaps —since the book constantly prompts cross-references between chapters, authors, genres and periods— a revision of tragedy through, say, Arthur Miller's plays, or an inclusion of some hint of the Theatre of the Absurd would have made the boundaries between the three chapters more flexible. To be fair, the activities do elicit such interconnections (in fact, Elizabethan and Restoration comedy are mentioned as “project Works”) but, as I will explain below, some of these activities have been designed with what I would euphemistically call exceedingly optimistic expectations.

Fiction follows, in the last four chapters. Characterization is studied through Austen's *Emma* (Chapter 7); simile and metaphor are amply discussed, as exploited by Dickens in *Hard Times* (Chapter 8); concepts as varied as lexical repetition, intertextuality and post-colonialism are exemplified in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (chapter 9), and point of view is illustrated with references to Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (chapter 10). In all cases, the key terminology is always defined with an impeccably precise language, and constantly typified in the appropriate text.

So much for a brief description of the contents of each chapter. I have not referred to the activities, though, which comprise over fifty percent of the book, since it is a *Workbook*, rather than a textbook, although it really can be considered a mixture of both. As far as its practical aspect is concerned, the book constitutes a remarkable concentration of well-chosen passages and of interesting tasks to be done by the student (and it is here that the *Workbook* is most resourceful and innovative, if compared with other “approach to literature” textbooks of a same, introductory kind); indeed, Calvo and Weber have provided us with a substantial variety of analytic and interpretative skills that are essential for a literary evaluation. The most outstanding virtue of these proposed activities is that, as I have already stated above, they encourage comparative analysis and incorporate cross-references, so that very often the activities proposed fill some of the gaps left by oversimplified theoretical introductions and the sharp chapter division. There are, however, two observations I would like to make, since they have worried me during my reading. The first is that it is a workbook whose “homework” is done for the student in many cases. In fact, the sections called “*Discussion*”, are potential answers to the exercises that follow the reading of a given text. The authors are aware of this, and explain in their preface that those discussion notes are only *their* hints and suggestions intended to “make you think about the literary texts, and certainly not the final word”. Ideally, this is how it should work, but in actual fact, having the solutions so near at hand probably steers the student's response to the texts in the direction suggested by the authors, and, therefore, inhibits the more personal, impulsive, unbiased impressions of the “innocent” reader (or of the “resisting” reader,

for that matter). A possible solution would be to provide a suggested “Key” at the end of the Workbook, or even a separate addenda to the Workbook itself, in the form, perhaps, of a Teacher’s guide. The second observation concerns the “*Project Work*” activities. If the Workbook is intended and submitted as an introductory course on literary interpretation, some of these assignments are far too demanding for the intended audience. Let me give just a few examples: Chapter 2, which presents basic syntax as expression of a “mind-style”, proposes the following project: “Read some other Romantic poems and... try to decide whether there is a characteristically Romantic world-view. If yes, define ...what it consists in; and if no, explain why you find it impossible to talk about a unitary Romantic world view”. Similarly, Chapter 6 (on the transgression of cultural stereotypes in Irish drama) proposes the exploration of class, race or gender in several “Condition-of-England Novels” as one possibility, and of “the changing nature of racial representations from Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* via Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”, as a second project. Needless to say, most suggestions are appealing, comprehensive, far-reaching and engaging, but not for first or second-year undergraduates: in an introductory course on text interpretation we cannot expect our students to read several novels, or to have the selective maturity necessary to build up a corpus of Romantic poetry, and come up with conclusions or with a thesis that could even fit the requirements of a monograph or a B.A. dissertation, but that certainly surpass those of an assignment for an undergraduate who is still learning to find his way through texts. Still, it is worth considering the projects and using them for our upper level students. One further merit of the book is that the chapters are not followed by an endless, anodyne bibliography: since this book is aimed at students, it simply gives the references, and is concerned with the very valuable and significant suggestions for further reading, always annotated as to their contents and their usefulness for each particular chapter. Another characteristic in its favour is its user-friendly layout: the reader constantly encounters visual aids in the form of capitalized key terms, lettering in bold, italics, different fonts for different parts of the book, and so on. The Workbook closes with a glossary of key terminology, and a subject and name index.

To conclude, and in spite of the very few objections I have put forward above, I find *The Literature Workbook* quite an original idea in its case-study approach to the teaching/ self-learning of literature. And in so far as it encourages the opening up of strict canons, comparative approaches to literature, its historical and cultural contextualization, and the going “beyond” the examples they provide (i.e. “reading”, instead of accepting the experts’ opinions as a substitute for the reading of primary texts, something which happens far too often these days with student-oriented books), it is not only very valuable, but a very captivating “Workbook”.

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