
A timely contribution to studies of the poetry of the First World War, *Perspectives on World War I Poetry* is part of Bloomsbury’s multiple-genre ‘Great War’ collection, whose aim, in the centenary year of the outbreak of the First World War, is to provide a ‘one-stop resource for those seeking to understand the Great War and its impact’ (see: www.bloomsbury.com/thegreatwar).

As the book’s preface set out, its aims are primarily pedagogical and equalizing: to bring to the forefront of the study of the poetry of the First World War numerous relevant literary theories, while also dispelling the notion that literary theory is difficult or daunting. Many so-called ‘simple’ introductions to the study of literature through literary theory confuse rather than clarify through their attempts at simplification or accessibility, but Evans’s study, perhaps because he chooses a specific literary focus for the theoretical exposition, is not one of these.

It is unfortunate that there still should be an apparent need to dispel the myth of theory as the preserve of the over-complicating academic critic. And yet, in the average high school or even undergraduate classroom, the fear of ‘theory’ that this book seeks to address, is still all too apparent, manifesting as a disparagement of anything remotely abstract, and a resort to close-textual, biographical, or thematic readings. The pressures on teachers of literature by national or institutional bodies to take a ‘bit of everything’ approach to pedagogy (in the UK, the English A-Level ‘Assessment Objectives’ which each student must hit in order to get a high mark, springs to mind), coupled with the resistance of the student to read anything outside the text at hand, perhaps also contributes to the fact that the ‘theory myth’ is often only debunked once the reader in question has reached advanced undergraduate level or beyond.

As Evans writes in his introduction, ‘any reader of a literary text inevitably uses literary theory of some sort’ (1), and it is with this in mind that Evans uses the springboard of a selection of First World War poems to introduce the complexities of various theoretical approaches to his reader. In order to provide a framework through which the interested ‘lay’ reader can begin to engage with literary theory, Evans takes as a starting point M.H. Abrams’s schematic of writer-text-audience-reality-critic (2), which is expanded and tabulated in terms of the different literary theories the book later introduces in Table 12.1 (218-19). And in the chapters that ensue, the author looks at poems from a wide, international range of poets of the First World War, elucidating their various complexities from the most appropriate literary-critical angles.

To the academic reader who will likely take as a given that it is now impossible to ‘do’ literary criticism without a strong literary theoretical knowledge, Evans’s use of Abrams’s framework may seem outdated, as may his use of a chronological theoretical trajectory, from the Classical literary criticism of Aristotle and Plato to those theoretical standpoints more popular in present-day criticism (such as ecocriticism and postmodernism). The short paragraph summaries of a selection of 18 different theoretical approaches will seem both generalising and reductive to the literary critic, and the emphasis placed on Classical approaches to literary criticism will seem rather strange. However, these summaries, when used alongside the table (12.1), the list of further reading, and the final chapter of the book (a series of questions, written by Christina M. Garner, demonstrating the ‘kinds of questions different critics ask’ (203)), are a useful tool for teaching advanced school students, and may also be of some use as a revision tool for undergraduates taking literary theory courses.

The first eleven chapters of *Perspectives on World War I Poetry* take as a starting point a short lyric, or excerpt from a longer poem, from the First World War period. Each chapter is concerned with at least three (sometimes many more) poems; each poem or excerpt which is addressed is...
printed in full. The scope of Evans’s selection is broad. Although slightly more attention is paid to the more canonical war poets (Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen), this is not surprising, and no little attention is paid to less well-known poets (for instance, there are poems by Sara Teasdale, James Weldon Johnson and Vera Brittain) or to those poets who are not immediately associated with war poetry (Thomas Hardy, A.E. Housman, e e cummings). Twenty-four poets and 39 poems are discussed in total, and in this way the book serves well as a rather short but thorough annotated anthology, and a springboard to deeper study of any of the poets or the period.

The perhaps predictable way in which Evans structures each chapter – each poem is printed in full followed by a few paragraphs on different theoretical approaches – is not elegant, but functional. However, for a book which does not seek to be a critical work, but, rather, a useful student/teacher text, I would hazard that this is the best and clearest manner in which to demonstrate the ways in which close reading of poetry can never be exclusive of a theoretical approach. And although there is perhaps too much emphasis placed on the Classical precedents to Anglophone literary criticism (four of the 18 approaches addressed by Evans are Ancient), the critical apparatus is sound, and benefits immensely from Evans's deft and sensitive critical touch.

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