

# Editorial

'I have more confidence in the dead than in the living', wrote William Hazlitt in 1821, speaking of the difficulty of determining literary merit.<sup>1</sup> Most English teachers, I would guess, share the sentiment. It feels safer to go for the tried and tested authors, those who have firmly secured their place in the House of Fame. It helps to stave off the hypothetical subversive question we all dread – one we're as likely to ask ourselves as be asked – as to whether the text we've decided to spend the term slogging through is actually *worth* that much time and attention (*'of course it is; this many literary critics and English syllabuses can't be wrong!'*). The dead come conveniently preserved in a reputational aspic which it can be hard to strip away, to get at the really good stuff inside. Keats knows this in 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'. The 'deep-brow'd' Homer of which the sonnet's speaker has only 'been told' certainly seems worthy, but implicitly rather staid and off-putting for that; the plod of the pentameter in the octave underscores this thought. The point of the sonnet, of course, is that Keats's speaker doesn't really get what's so great (supposedly) about Homer until he encounters him in Chapman's translation. And it's at that point, at the beginning of the sestet, that he experiences the headrush of literary discovery: 'Then felt I like some watcher of the skies' (six strong stresses in a row, as I hear it, which gives to the feeling that the poem has just taken off). That's what every English teacher dreams their students will experience and recognise, that literature can get you high – at the end of the sonnet the speaker is still up there, 'Silent, upon a peak in a Darien'.

Living authors can also come with weighty reputations; not many of them will still be read and written about in two hundred years' time, but that's not a reason why we should shy away from teaching them now. Nor should we shy away from living writers who don't come with weighty reputations. If we want to enable students to experience the thrill of literary discovery then one effective way to achieve this is to pit them against a text which hasn't yet been done to death, or at all, by literary criticism. The poet and teacher Peter Carpenter writes in these pages of his first encounters with Geoffrey Hill's poetry (with an enthusiasm akin to Keats's), noting that 'It is hard to cleanse the poems of subsequent critical estimations (there were no reader's guides out there then, no York Notes,

no Google, no acclaim from apologists)'. In this connection, the annual T. S. Eliot prize shadowing scheme run by the Poetry Book Society can serve as a great way of cleansing students' critical instincts by setting them loose on some virgin critical territory. Interestingly, as an alternative to writing a critical rationale for one of the shortlisted poets, students are invited to compose a poetic response to one of the poems – a notion in keeping with the prize's patron's insistence that the critical faculties are always at work in poetic thinking.

This issue of *The Use of English* begins with some responses to a living poet who has featured prominently on GCSE and A Level syllabuses – Gillian Clarke. Paul Barnes makes a compelling case for teaching Clarke's poetry by explaining what he and his students have found vivifying. Part of it, he says, is the pleasure of dealing with a poet who enters into direct dialogue with her audiences, who is surprised and delighted by unforeseen interpretations; you don't get that, Barnes avers, from any of the 'DWM's' (Dead White Males) on the syllabus. Clarke's willingness to discuss her work is the impetus behind her own generous contribution to this issue, which will surely become as important a resource for students of her poetry as those mentioned in Paul Barnes's article: it's a reconsideration of one of her best-known, most-studied poems, 'Cold Knap Lake'. In her poetic prose Clarke explores the role of memory, of myth, of fairy stories and nursery rhymes, and the complicated relationship all this has with adult consciousness and the pull of language. While Clarke often welcomes readings which release unintended meanings, she is keen to set the record straight on one important point: 'the poem is NOT about suicide, as has been suggested by some teachers'. 'Cold Knap Lake', reprinted here with the kind permission of Carcanet Press, is set alongside another poem by fellow Welsh poet Glyn Edwards. It isn't usual for *The Use of English* to publish original poetry, but Edwards's poem falls into the bracket (mentioned above) of the poetic response. 'Gertrude' meditates the Millais painting (or perhaps another of the artistic representations of Ophelia) which Clarke says she may have been unconsciously recalling in her poem, questioning why Millais, and why Gertrude, embellish Ophelia's death in the way that they do. Water, as Clarke explains, is the key metaphor for memory in 'Cold Knap Lake', and both have 'impenetrable muddy depths'; so too in Edwards's 'Gertrude': 'What is truth? / A report so young that / words drip with dew, / Then puddle and grow so quickly green and stagnant // They could cloud memory and coronate / A kinder loss'. Lastly on Clarke, Sarah-Jane Bentley's scholarly article situates her work in a tradition of Anglo-Welsh poetry, plotting illuminating connections with R. S. Thomas and Dafydd ap

Gwilym (c. 1320-1370), among others. Bentley rightly insists upon Clarke's attunement to nature and her quasi-maternal love of the Welsh landscape – a landscape touched by tragedy, as Clarke's poems on the foot and mouth crisis of 2001 attest.

The focus on contemporary poetry (the emphasis on poetry in this issue will be evened out over the next few) continues with Peter Carpenter's moving homage to Geoffrey Hill, who died at the end of June this year. To read Hill in earnest is to recognise that his work will endure, and I share Carpenter's puzzlement that this isn't much recognised in schools; and I concur with Hill that it's better to have faith that readers and students will rise to a challenge, rather than patronizing them by prioritizing 'accessibility'. Malcom Hebron's inspiring reading of the fifteenth-century anonymous lyric 'Adam lay ibowndyn' reminds us that when teaching poetry we need to dig down beneath the level of meaning to the sensuous 'subsoil' of poetic language; we've all attempted to sell a crass point about alliteration, but Hebron helpfully points out that 'we shouldn't be anxious to make sound patterns *mean* something; often they are simply part of the physically pleasurable part of a text, about which there is not much of an interpretive nature to be said'. Charlotte Unsworth's article on Christina Rossetti will help those new to teaching Rossetti's work to plot a path through her complex oeuvre. The 'fractured understanding' of the article's title identifies conflicts which Unsworth argues are central to in Rossetti's thinking: faith and doubt; joy and despair; human and divine love.

The issue concludes with three radical perspectives on teaching and learning in English Studies. Elizabeth Chapman Houtt, whose research bridges the disciplinary boundaries of English and Sociology, believes that the study of literature is unique in that it provides a way of looking at the world, at human nature and experience, and seeks to understand why this is so. She argues that this facet of literary studies is a source of resilience and an act of resistance to the government's assumption that the choices students make about what to study at university are informed by their desire to increase their 'future productivity'; 'for some people', Houtt remonstrates, 'there really is no other option than English Literature, regardless of what that might mean in terms of future income'. Oli Belas interrogates the philosophical distinction between knowledge and skills in which much recent education policy is rooted, concluding – contra E.D. Hirsch and Daisy Christodoulou – that it doesn't exist. Thus it is impossible to think of the knowledge that we gain through studying English without thinking of the way that we come know it: and thus, literary criticism

needs to be thought of not as a tool which unlocks the body of knowledge that is literature, but as a means of creative dialogue with literature, part of the literary process itself. Finally, Daniel Xerri issues a clarion call to educators to hang on to their radicalism and 'weirdness' in a sector which is often hostile to free thinking.

In the reviews section, Jenny Stevens gets her hands on *The Tempest* for the iPad; Andrew Lloyd considers two edited collections of essays on poetry pedagogy; Katherine Mair assesses Catherine Belsey's latest guide to criticism; and Kate Ash-Irisarri discusses a recent monograph in the field of memory studies.

### **Thomas Day**

#### **Note**

1. Hazlitt, w. (1970), *Selected Essays* (London: Nonesuch Press), p. 40.