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## Reviews

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## REVIEWS

Rhian Barfoot, *Liberating Dylan Thomas: Rescuing a Poet from Psycho-sexual Servitude* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015). Pp. 240. £24.99.

Floating about an academic bookshop, dipping between stacks, it is difficult not to feel that the Age of Good Titles is behind us. Recently, it seems hard to find a contemporary title that packs a punch, a title unhampered by the supposed responsibilities of description – who now would think (would be *allowed*) to brand a work of literary criticism *The Wheel of Fire* or *The Muse Unchained*? Rhian Barfoot has called her new study *Liberating Dylan Thomas: Rescuing a Poet from Psycho-sexual Servitude*, and for once that ubiquitous colon might prompt us to pause for a moment and think through the curious dynamic of a two-part title. For while Barfoot's title resonates unmistakably with the buzziest of buzzwords, it is also one that seems to pull productively in contrary motion. Is 'liberating' the same as 'rescuing'? Are mercy missions of this sort bound to end in intellectual freedom? And if, as Thomas once surmised in a letter to Vernon Watkins of 1936, the only way to 'get any real liberation, any diffusion or dilution or anything, into the churning bulk of [his] words' might be to 'stop writing altogether' (*The Collected Letters*, p. 249), can we be sure that someone schooled in the language of 'post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory' (p. 34) will know how far to go, or where to stop, in the name of recuperating this most vexed and sexed of modernist poetics? Repression, on occasion, can be a blessing.

Barfoot's book has surfaced at a time of serious and sustained reappraisal in the field of Welsh writing in English, and the case of Dylan Thomas is likely to be instructive. A number of similarly deracinated poets come to mind whose reputations today would benefit from Barfoot's exacting approach – Hilda Doolittle, Mina Loy and Djuna Barnes, to name a few – which has to do with holding in suspension Thomas's so-called 'schizoid neuroses' in favour of rendering legible the 'psycho-linguistic' energies that propel his verse in the early 1930s (p. 9). Lacan and Kristeva, then, rather than Freud and Bloom, are essential to Barfoot's thinking about the 'jouissance of influence' that colours and stimulates Thomas's youthful body of work, which appears

to have burst upon the literary scene in 1934 without the slightest hint of model or precedent (p. 21). Which would be quite true, Barfoot confesses, if it were not for the ministrations of modernism's 'high priest', T. S. Eliot (p. 12). At every stage of *Liberating Dylan Thomas*, but particularly in its first and third parts, the author of *The Waste Land* can be detected going about his spectral business, as though readying the scene once more for the younger poet's no less probing explorations of waste, spillage and 'the material feminine' (p. 105). Here, I think, we see Barfoot in her most radical humour, testing the claims and assumptions of psychoanalytic criticism, past and present, and making the case for the 'body-centredness' of Thomas's vision (p. 107). Far from indulging in any kind of received Eliotic abjection, Thomas 'harnesses the body', Barfoot suggests, 'celebrating and reclaiming it as a site of subversive potentiality, projecting the threat of an all too solid and "fleshy" corporeality into what for male modernists and mid-century critics alike was a horrible and menacingly close proximity' (p. 108).

Barfoot moves, in passages such as this one, towards an understanding of the ways Thomas failed to curry favour in the 1960s with the likes of David Holbrook, who attributed the poet's 'babble language' to the designs and desires of a fully-grown infant (p. 2). Barfoot, for her part, belongs to a generation that is newly alive to the possibilities of soaking up Thomas's intertextual verse, to its pains and pleasures, and to the 'promiscuous fecundity of the sign' (p. 128) as it operates especially in the 'process' lyrics that were to find a home in *18 Poems* (1934). In this respect, Barfoot positively shows herself to be the student of John Goodby, the new editor of Thomas's poetry, and she joins him in finding new and striking things to say about the poet's notebooks, which provided Thomas with a playground of sorts in which to flex and hone his 'hybrid' poetic in the early 1930s, slipping in the process from adolescence into manhood (p. 56). Given the drift of her attention, Barfoot might, I think, have spent some time trying to work out what consequences this formal development may have had for Thomas's sense of metrical pace and integrity. It is impossible to do or cover everything in a monograph, of course, but declining, as Barfoot does, to extend her interests in linguistic materiality in the direction of prosodic theory and its affective horizons does feel like a missed opportunity. Surely there is something important to say about the interface between bodily and poetic rhythms, between the pressures of somatic actuality and the ways one might configure those pressures – or stresses

– in a fully-integrated verse practice? This, for the moment, remains to be seen, and no doubt the present study will prove valuable to future critics if and when they feel an urge to pursue such lines of thought.

There are other things one might wish to quibble over in the broader scheme of *Liberating Dylan Thomas*. The air-time given, for instance, to Slavoj Žižek; the confidence Barfoot evidently has in the categories of ‘Modernism’ and ‘the postmodern’, the first unhelpfully capitalised, the second accompanied so often by that buoyant definite article (p. 121). Such things could be construed as a matter of taste, but they are also a question of economy, and when space is at a premium, critics of Barfoot’s theoretical persuasion must think carefully about the risks of moderating or skirting around voices that may, in the end, have more to tell us about Thomas’s decision making than those of a Žižek. It seems odd, at least to this reader, that Eliot should haunt the margins of *Liberating Dylan Thomas*, and yet should linger there so quietly, since we know that the poets not only read one another, but also corresponded in the years covered by this book, often about the mechanics of publication, sometimes purely about technique. Notwithstanding these reservations, Rhian Barfoot has written a powerful study, deeply-felt in its way, and sensitive to the possibility that Thomas is still not quite the open book his biographers would have us believe.

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R. S. Thomas, *Too Brave to Dream: Encounters with Modern Art*, ed. Tony Brown and Jason Walford Davies (Hexham: Bloodaxe, 2016). Pp. 112. £12.00.

Immediately following R. S. Thomas’s death in 2000, I set about following his instructions to assemble such poems as remained unpublished and to review them for possible publication. It soon became apparent that candidates for public release included two sets of painting-poems of somewhat uneven quality. These were quirky undated responses to some of the black-and-white reproductions of paintings from two old volumes edited by Herbert Read, *Art Now* (1933) and *Surrealism* (1936). However, on reflection I decided to stay my hand, judging that priority should be given at that delicate juncture to editing another set of poems for publication by Bloodaxe under the

title *Residues* (2002). To release two posthumous collections at much the same time seemed to me inadvisable.

Other concerns and other circumstances have prevented me from returning to my original plan, and so it is with real pleasure, and not a little guilt, that I now welcome this beautifully produced selection of those painting-poems I first set eyes on in manuscript all those years ago. It has been edited with a meticulousness I could never have equalled and features both colour and black-and-white images. The large print and generous margins do rare justice to a compressed minimalist poetry that demands intense meditative attention and there is a judicious, thoroughly informative, introduction as well as a set of notes. Particularly valuable is the way the joint editors deftly set these strange ekphrastic exercises in the context of R. S. Thomas's poetic output as a whole and sensitively indicate the connections between them and the psychological and spiritual crises that afflicted and bewildered him following his early resignation, in disgust and disillusionment, from the church he had served as priest so devotedly (if somewhat turbulently) for some forty years.

R.S. showed very little interest in visual lexicon and grammar. Indeed he readily admitted that, despite having spent most of his adult life in the daily company of a fine artist (his first wife, M. E. [Elsi] Eldridge) he had never (to her explicit disgust) troubled to master what he recognised to be the foreign and distinctively 'plastic and compositional values' of painting. He even pleaded guilty to 'draw[ing] out extended meanings' from individual compositions 'in a way which most of the painters would have found reprehensible'.

To this one might cautiously add one or two possibilities: that there may have been an element of jealousy of his wife's rival talents latent in his own 'vengeful' appropriation of 'her' art form for his own masterful writerly purposes; and that behind the austere diction of his painting-poems there may possibly lie a fearful wariness of the seductive 'feminine' sensuousness of the paint medium. There are after all several poems in this new collection where women are once more egregiously singled out for attack. His interpretation of William Roberts's *The Dressmakers* (c. 1931) is particularly bizarre for its insistence on treating an innocuous stylised scene of two female dressmakers snipping the fabric wrapped around two young women into shape as a sinister modern version of the Classical Fates cutting the threads to 'release / the garment towards which / the muscular lover / helplessly is

being drawn'. What 'muscular lover', one is left wondering? There is no sign of any such in the actual painting.

And indeed all of R.S.'s painting poems exhibit a like perversity of approach to their subject. They not only wilfully ignore but deliberately violate the meaning clearly intended both by the painter (manifest in the title) and by the painting itself (indicated by clear compositional pointers, including sight-lines, spatial positioning etc.). This is so, for instance, when Edvard Munch plainly labels a painting *House in Aasgaardstrand* (1905), and the point is further underlined by the placing of an eye-catching frontal image of a large house squarely right of centre: what does Thomas do but insolently begin his poem by insisting that 'the emptiness' in the painting 'is to draw our attention' not to the house but rather to an obscure group of figures in the lower right-hand corner. He next proceeds to imagine these huddled figures to be living a secret 'underground' existence. By exploiting this as a pun, he is able to claim that the figures may be members of the wartime 'Underground' in Denmark, before concluding, with a final extravagant twist, that they must be hiding not from the Nazis but from the sinister 'Gestapo of Time'.

How we respond to such "conceited" wilfulness is likely to depend on several factors, not least on whether or not we are prepared to tolerate Thomas's dark drive to find in paintings expressive images of his own innumerable obsessions. In his case, such misprisions and misconstruals repeatedly gave rise, or so a Bloomean defence would run, to a powerfully distinctive poetry uncannily attuned to the traumas of the age. But as for the impatient many who will have little patience with such travesties, they will no doubt wholeheartedly agree with Mildred Eldridge's tart opinion that 'it was not a good idea' for R.S. 'to try to put a painting into words'.

There is just one coda I would add in an attempt to detach these poems a little from the poet's chronic personal concerns. Their disconcerting practice of wrong-footing not just the painter but the viewer would seem to me to derive from a deep spiritual purpose. Because these radical exercises in the ekphrastic share with the post-Impressionist and Surrealist paintings to which they are a response a blatant intention to disrupt our conventions of viewing. They are intent on permanently and radically altering our comfortably established ways of understanding ourselves and our world. To pursue this perception further would involve tracing R.S.'s ludic use of a

plethora of destabilising devices in these poems, including wit, pun, paradox, parataxis, etc.. Suffice to say that in my opinion the result, at least in the form of the best examples to be found in this valuable, fascinating posthumous collection, is a virtuoso display of what early Soviet formalism famously called *ostranenie*.

‘Defamiliarization’: for Thomas it meant realising we were lost peregrine souls, existentially mired in mystery and fated ever to be strangers even to ourselves. And as these images intriguingly confirm, for him as a modern poet and as voluntarily “defrocked” priest, that modernist paintings could function much as religious icons had long done in the ancient tradition of Eastern Christendom; as sacred sources of precious spiritual discipline.

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Richard McLauchlan, *Saturday’s Silence: R. S. Thomas and Paschal Reading* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016). Pp. 240. £85.00.

Richard McLauchlan’s *Saturday’s Silence: R. S. Thomas and Paschal Reading* is a welcome addition to recent R. S. Thomas scholarship. It is enjoyable to read, and it has a convincing and original argument. The book views Thomas’s theologically charged poetics through the lens of the second day of the Paschal Triduum – Holy Saturday – arguing that the attentive reading of certain poems in R.S.’s *oeuvre* provides an opportunity for ‘a return’ to, or even a confrontation with, that significant day (p. 1). The Christian existence, McLauchlan argues, actually requires a constant engagement with this day of transforming silence. The author writes:

The silence of the poems may be viewed, I suggest, as re-presentations of the silence between Good Friday and Easter. In other words, they are able to make present for the reader the transforming silence of Holy Saturday, a silence which demands to be wrestled with, travelled through, and returned to. (p. 2)

It is this silencing ... that forces the precondition for authentic re-creation, since it opens a space where God is free to reveal himself as he is, rather than as we would have him be and to



transform without the disruptive clamour of our misshaping words. (p. 1)

This sophisticated work of criticism addresses the theological, as well as the spiritual, relevance of the activity of reading itself, as a practice of spiritual discipline. This paschal reading then allows for what McLauchlan calls *metanoia* (a transformation of the mind) that makes possible a far more responsible reading of Scripture and of the world. Perhaps *irresponsible* reading is one of the main hindrances we encounter when facing R.S.'s poetry. Dogmatically, we try to bring closure to the poetic concepts evoked, work them out fully, solve the puzzles and come to definite conclusions. But R.S.'s poetry is always opening up and presenting us with images, words and gaps that need to be mulled over and meditated upon again and again. How many of us have sought to construct our own God, and indeed our own R. S. Thomas, when reading R.S.'s poetry? We fail to remember that a crucial and much-forgotten element of religious poetry is what the psalmist refers to in Psalm forty-six: 'Be still and know that I am God'.

In the first chapter, McLauchlan begins by exploring the manner in which divine silence relates to theological language, successfully showing how the poems can affect our own speech about God, which can be renewed and purified. Close readings of 'The Gap', 'Nuclear', 'Shadows' and 'The Prayer' are, in some way, an opportunity for the reader to experience the 'Word of God being silenced' on Good Friday (p. 32). We follow the Christ into the silence of Saturday in order to experience the potential renewal of our words following the destabilisation of Calvary. McLauchlan argues that

To fashion our own language and silences accordingly (or, rather, to have them refashioned by the Holy Spirit, the primary agent of *metanoia*), in light of the Gospel events and by means of engagement with Thomas's poems, is also to be ever-more responsible, as the Christian tradition understands that word, with our speech. (p. 40)

As a part of this responsibility, he turns, in the second chapter, to something that relates to the silence of God – 'the Poetic Theology of Suffering' (p. 41). Using 'H'm', 'The Word', 'That' and other poems, McLauchlan notes how the poetry, and we ourselves, must not evade

the significant problems associated with divine silence. The poems lead us to silence as well as to *the* God who is silent in suffering. There are no solutions offered except for the 'stubborn presence' of the cross that, he states, 'simply is' (p. 64). Golgotha reminds us that at the heart of Christianity is that day of waiting at the horrific site of a God-forsaken death.

A. E. Dyson claimed that R.S., in Christian terms, was not a poet of transfiguration or resurrection but rather a poet of the Cross, the unanswered prayer and the bleak trek through darkness. However, McLauchlan formulates a response to this one-sided view in his third chapter, 'Silence, Epiphany and Hope'. Fundamentally, the great paradox of Christianity is that light comes out of darkness. Well-known poems such as 'In a Country Church', 'Kneeling' and 'The Bright Field' are re-visited in order to highlight that 'it is the presence of Sunday – however tentative, wavering or unfelt – that makes the silence holy' (p. 92).

However, for the Christian, the Resurrection does not – in the experiential sense – finalise God's silence or the feeling of God's absence. Somewhere between bewilderment and hope, 'one prays the prayer of the day between cross and resurrection' (p. 92). The author's argument culminates in the fourth chapter, that is entitled 'Prayer', which looks at how the prayer of Holy Saturday can become the prayer of the reader in the very act of reading. It is important to note that central to this chapter, and to the whole book, is the idea that silence need not be a hindrance or a barrier to faith, but rather its precondition.

One of the main successes of this book is the balance the author maintains between masterful literary criticism and a thorough theological approach. He engages with the ideas of theologians like Alan E. Lewis, Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Rowan Williams, but he also returns to the Bible, which critics should be doing when working on R. S. Thomas. McLauchlan rightly avoids over-focussing on the poet's biography or meticulously trying to discover what he read or what he did not read, allowing sufficient space for the poetry to speak or to remain silent. This book sheds light on some of Thomas's most misunderstood and difficult poems. It is in itself a 'sophisticated interplay between transfiguration and disfiguration, between epiphanic light and the darkness of the cross' and recognises the importance of Saturday's silence as a day, or a state of mind, where one looks back, looks forward or just stops and remains still (p. 80). It appreciates the 'mystery of

godliness' (1 Tim. 3:16) and demands that the reader participate in thinking about God, the Word made flesh, the 'unspeakable gift' (2 Cor. 9:15). When we struggle or are dumb-struck by a poem's ideas, we are in a way re-presenting our experiential *agon* with a God who is so often, but not always, silent.

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