

REVIEW ESSAYS

UNJUST ATTACKS, BATTLEFIELDS AND NAVIGATIONAL AIDS: RECENT WORK ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETRY

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John Osborne. *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Pp. 304. £50.

Tim Kendall. *Modern English War Poetry.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. 276. £24.

Delia Da Sousa Correa and W.R. Owens eds. *The Handbook to Literary Research,* 2nd edn. Abingdon: Routledge, 2010. Pp. 258. £18.99.

Perhaps the first question to ask in relation to *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence* is whether the world really needs yet another critical monograph on the slim output of Philip Larkin; for what other poet of the twentieth century has generated more critical prose in proportion to the amount of work he has published? Larkin wrote two novels and was a jazz columnist for the *Daily Telegraph*, but were it not for three almost pamphlet-thin collections of poetry he would have been forgotten long before it became fashionable to vilify him for his personal proclivities. Those three volumes—*The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974)—contained a number of poems in an instantly recognisable voice that struck a chord with casual and ‘serious’ readers alike (‘a unique double-whammy’, in Osborne’s no-nonsense language) and made Larkin, during his lifetime, as close to an English national icon as any poet other than John Betjeman.

Within eight years of his death, Andrew Motion’s biography, *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life* (1993), had presented in fastidious detail a racist, two-timing sexaholic drunkard miser, and the more lurid passages in the *Selected Letters* (1992), edited by Anthony Thwaite, seemed to some to confirm as much. As Osborne points out, ‘literary critics and journalists greet[ed] each new disclosure with the glee of cannibals spicing a baby’: Peter Ackroyd found Larkin ‘rancid and insidious’; to Tom Paulin the

Letters was a ‘revolting compilation’, when the vast majority of it quite simply is not—unless letters about mice to one’s mother and the like are revolting. Larkin’s least considered private words had been turned, perhaps inadvertently, into a carthorse that dragged the poet’s own name through the mud. In the more than twenty years since the posthumous publication of *Collected Poems*, it has become increasingly fashionable, even *de rigueur*, to write off Larkin as a scandalously odious man, and to allow this normally uneducated opinion to influence any judgement of the poetry. Germaine Greer was up to this as early as 1988, claiming that Larkin’s poems are ‘anti-intellectual, racist, sexist and rotten with class consciousness’. To a considerable extent, then, this book exists to reappraise Larkin’s work in light of this over-eager brand of criticism, and Osborne does not mince his words: ‘before the aforementioned critics proceed to travesty the work, they first travesty the life: the effect is doubly detestable’ (16).

It is hard, even with the best of intentions, completely to ignore a biographical line of criticism when that biography is so well documented. Nevertheless, at this stage in the advancement of the industry that is ‘Philip Larkin studies’ (an industry that might leave the poet gyrating wildly in his plot at Cottingham Cemetery, Hull), in an age in which Larkin’s private opinions and off-the-cuff remarks have been pulled out of context and torn apart and are as well-known as all but the most famous of the poems, Osborne is determined to oppose rather than advocate ‘the use of lurid biographical detail in the evaluation of literature’ (15). Indeed, more than this, his aim is to challenge the efficacy of taking ‘the short but lethal step towards rolling into one the narrators of separate poems and then conflating that composite figure with the author’ (17), as the poems and the life (and the *Life*) have encouraged even most of the finer critics to do unquestioningly in the case of Larkin. Moreover, Osborne claims, this has always been a problem in studies of Larkin, ever since David Timms’s *Philip Larkin*, the founding text for Larkin studies, was published in 1973:

[Early critics of Larkin’s work] established the methodological malpractices that Larkin’s detractors would later use to wantonly denigrate the work, [and] in the process they already started to carve a poet of autobiographical directness out of highly ambiguous verse. (19)

Osborne is basically right, which is not to say that all of these other critics are wrong. But to answer the question I raised at the start of this

review, it does go a long way to justifying the appearance of this book: it is an answer to Larkin's critics that focuses on the text and eschews the biographical model that has always been central to studies of this poet's work:

Of the twenty to thirty critical books and sixty or so worthwhile essays on Larkin, well over ninety per cent employ the biographical approach. My primary objective is to revolutionize Larkin studies by releasing the poems from this hegemonic methodology, and to do so in a manner applicable to innumerable other authors. (24–25)

How interesting that a self-professed 'friend' of Larkin's should write the first major evaluation of that poet to pay more than scant attention to the death of the author—and how overdue that study is.

But with Larkin it is an almost impossible undertaking: we know too much, and pretending otherwise can be fatuous. When Osborne writes that the first line of the unfinished poem 'The Dance', 'Drink, sex, and jazz—all sweet things, brother', makes it 'perfectly permissible, though not obligatory' to consider the narrator as 'a black jazz *aficionado* contemptuous of (in all senses) pale British imitations', eyebrows are wont to rise involuntarily: no poem could be *more* autobiographical, surely (236). We have letters that document as much. If Andrew Motion, David Timms and all of the other critics Osborne mentions have a tendency to swing the pendulum too far in one direction—and perhaps they do, on occasion—Osborne has a tendency to thrust it too far the other way. And this is the overwhelming problem with Osborne's method: all too often, the 'anti-biographical' stance is reductive in light of what we know, both about Larkin's life and about the genesis of so many of the poems. Moreover, it is a shame that so much of this study, albeit out of necessity, amounts roughly to pointing the finger at critics guilty of biographically-informed presumptions about the poems. Still, for all of its flaws, Osborne's passion for showing that Larkin's poems are often, in fact, 'anti-patriarchy, anti-heterosexism, anti-homophobia, anti-biological essentialism (racial or sexual), anti-the marital monopoly and...anti-capitalism' is an overdue spur to many of Larkin's critics, and this book is a welcome and cogent attempt to rescue Larkin's reputation from the frequently unfair charges that have been made against it (187).

Tim Kendall's *Modern English War Poetry* is a collection of essays, really, rather than a coherent book; but it does chart a course through 'war poetry' by English writers in more or less chronological order, from the Boer War to the on-going conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, via the

trenches and the Blitz. What it lacks in cohesion, however, it more than makes up for in critical flair and acumen. The book begins with an occasionally damning critique of the Boer War poems of Thomas Hardy and Henry Newbolt: the former opposed to the conflict—against the tide of British imperial jingoism—whilst the latter was fully in favour, with a nationalistic fervour that has come to seem shockingly outmoded, at least on this side of the Atlantic. Kendall's juxtaposition of these very different poets is striking and fruitful; always intelligent and perceptive, he provides a thorough discussion of how 'Both poets cunningly dress opinion as *réportage*, most obviously in their fashioning of other voices to deliver authorial beliefs', employing sharp and insightful close readings to support his point (14).

Kendall's brand of historical criticism makes this book extremely interesting for the general reader as much as for the specialist one. He notes that Hardy responded to events in the Boer War 'as they happened, and published quickly', believing such pieces had no value for posterity, their interest 'of a temporary kind' (6). His poetry in opposition to this conflict is a fascinating precursor to the anti-war poetry written during the Great War, as Newbolt's is to the propagandistic poetry of the later conflict. And rather than Hardy the Great Poet we are presented with Hardy the keen propagandist: 'in his eagerness to provoke a desired emotional response, he counteracts one kind of insidious war propaganda with another' (8). *Modern English War Poetry* guides the reader along similarly opinionated, occasionally polemical, always fascinating paths through the 'war poetry' of Kipling, Gurney, Auden, Hughes and a few others. A central thesis of the book is that:

War poets cannot wholly regret even the most appalling experiences, as they transform violence, death, atrocity, into the pleasing formal aesthetics of art. Poetry, we never cease to be told, makes nothing happen; but war makes poetry happen. (2)

Could a poet of war not have simply written something else, had they been in a different situation? And not all conflicts produce great poetry. But, then, what poems would Wilfred Owen have produced? His juvenilia is terrible; the Great War made him a memorable poet at a frighteningly precocious age, as well as ensuring that he would not grow old.

Also central to this book is the belief that 'the best war poets of the twentieth century reject the acceptable in favour of the true' (2). Owen, among others, did as much, but more recent poets have often failed in

this regard. Kendall's final chapter, 'The Few to Profit', is a excoriating attack on poets who have 'profited' from taking the anti-war position in recent conflicts, allegedly writing meritless verse motivated by a desire to bolster their own profiles—a matter that seems particularly relevant in the decade since 9/11, with its often-maligned and on-going conflicts in the Middle East. Andrew Motion, for example, comes in for sharp condemnation for his anti-war quatrain-poem 'Causa Belli', which begins: 'They read good books, and quote, but never learn / a language other than the scream of rocket-burn'. This—though Motion can be a fine poet in other places—is so obviously bad as to seem to have no need for deconstruction. But Kendall's point here is that most of the recent English war poetry lacks 'the authority of experience, is less a means of discovery and revelation than (at best) a redundant exercise in stating the obvious' (246). Whilst Kendall is on perilously soft ground when he attempts to second-guess the motivations for writing such poetry, his argument is pertinent, unflinching and considered, and deserves an audience. He is a critic who can infuriate and anger, and is all the more important for it: his criticism stands to improve the art about which he writes.

This is not a book without significant faults, however. Among England's serving soldiers in the Second World War were a number of fine poets who wrote about their experiences, and unfortunately Kendall does not make enough of them. More work needs to be done, for instance, on the neglected war poems of poets such as Alan Ross and Charles Causley. Kendall provides a disclaimer of sorts in the introduction: 'those [omissions] which remain are the result either of a value judgment or of a belief that I can add little to existing scholarship' (4); but these are poets with a significant reputation and readership who are nonetheless almost entirely neglected by critics, and Kendall does nothing to redress the balance. It is something of a pity, but not enough of one to detract from this being a beautifully written and argued companion to the English war poetry of the last hundred and something years.

Following on from reviews of two books in very different styles of literary criticism, here is one of a book that aims to help new researchers to work on a project of their own. Now in a second edition, *The Handbook to Literary Research* includes contributions from a disparate array of British academics, eight out of ten of which are affiliated to the Open University. The book is divided into five sections, each covering a different aspect of the multifaceted topic that is literary research. These are, respectively: 'Tools and Techniques for Literary Research'; 'Textual Scholarship and Book History'; 'Issues and Approaches in Literary

Research’; ‘Planning and Completing a Research Project’; and ‘Reference’, a handy list of libraries, other physical and online resources, and specialist terms and acronyms.

As a careful reader will no doubt have discerned by this point, *The Handbook to Literary Research* is very much a book for the neophyte postgraduate, which makes the more ecumenical title somewhat misleading. The introduction to Part 1 begins by taking the following as a premise:

You have registered for a taught postgraduate degree, or are contemplating moving on from a degree in English (or another humanities discipline), and are looking forward to developing your own research interests through the MA dissertation, and after that, perhaps to shaping an original research topic for a potential PhD. (9)

I haven’t and I’m not, actually—and nor, I imagine, are most of the readers of this review. But there is certainly a market for concerned students, new to postgraduate study and terrified by the challenges that confront them, and to those people this book could prove a godsend: it is simple to navigate and clearly written, despite its multiplicity of authors. Moreover, essays such as David Johnson’s ‘Literary Research and Interdisciplinarity’, Simon Eliot’s ‘History of the Book’ and Suman Gupta’s ‘The Place of Theory in Literary Disciplines’ sit comfortably alongside the more pragmatic sections of the book. Gupta’s contribution, in particular, both provides considerable intellectual stimulation, and forces readers to formulate informed opinions of their own about a subject from which they might have previously maintained an over-respectful distance. From the outset, Gupta makes it clear that a literary researcher cannot afford to avoid ‘Theory’, and that it is anyway not something that deserves to be feared:

Postgraduate students are given to understand that their projects and dissertations must demonstrate an awareness of Theory, even if not directly addressed to theoretical questions. In some quarters this causes anxiety, as a wide-ranging knowledge of various ‘schools’ of Theory seems to be called for. This anxiety actually arises because of the misconceived manner in which Theory is now presented in dominant academic discourse: as a body of knowledge that is out there, distinct from and yet

somehow inevitably relevant to literature and criticism, which has to be acquired and applied.... I argue here that Theory is not a given field of knowledge with many 'schools' which has to be sampled and picked from and applied, but is an institutional extrapolation from an ongoing process of debating and thinking about literature and criticism. (109–10)

His argument is clear-sighted and encourages a response—and as such, stands to teach readers something about Theory rather than scaring them away from it.

As a whole, the book revels in this clear-sighted, jargon-cutting—though not jargon-avoiding—spirit; and as I slowly read through it, my preconception that it might prove little more than an *Idiot's Guide* dissipated rapidly. The experience was largely enjoyable and always engaging, though in many ways it was also something akin to reading through the highway code a few years after passing a driving test: it was immediately obvious that, though I had thought I knew it all, there were in fact small and not-so-small holes in my research skills that stood to benefit from the patient tone and rigour of this little handbook. With its useful index and glossary, its practically-titled sections and subsections that make it so easy to dip in and out of, its considered concision, its focus on modern innovations in the field, its carefully-edited lists of suggested further reading, its step-by-step guides on matters such as how to get the most out of visiting archives, this book would be of considerable value to any newish literary researcher, and many more seasoned ones besides.

DIFFERENT NARRATIVES: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR STUDIES OF WOMEN'S WRITING

ALEX PRYCE

Sorcha Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson eds. *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Pp. 245. £80.00

Laurence Lerner. *Reading Women's Poetry*. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2009. Pp. 194. £18.95.

Moniza Alvi's 'Foreword' to *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation* hails this volume as 'surely in the vanguard of literary criticism' (xi). Of course, feminism's concern with rape is certainly not new in itself, as Sorcha Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson discuss in their introduction. They refer to texts such as Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975) and Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver's *Rape and Representation* (1993) which brought rape to a wider public consciousness. In a *Times Higher Education* article (3 December 2009) the editors answered the question friends and colleagues asked, 'Why not choose a happier subject?', and express the effect their research had on them; 'there have been times when we have felt physically ill or nauseous and have had to stop reading'. The concern which makes this volume necessary despite second wave feminism's consciousness-raising work, Brigley Thompson and Gunne pose, is that now it 'is not just whether we speak about rape or not, but *how* we speak about rape and to what end' (3). The essays included explore how writers address 'physical violation through speaking or silence...discuss[ing] the subversive and elliptical narrative strategies by writers (mainly women) when dealing with rape and sexual violence' (4). In such 're-theorising' they focus in particular on narratives which refuse the simplistic cycle of 'voyeurism and exploitation', scripts which 'break the victim/perpetrator binary' (3).

The distances travelled by the chapters are vast; the editors have striven for inclusivity within the limits of an English language text. Contributors address novels, poetry, plays, sci-fi television, young adult fiction, documentary fiction and autobiography. The literature encompassed includes writing from diverse cultures and reflects as far as

possible Chandra Mohanty's concept of 'feminism without borders', feminism which 'create[s] a broader scope that does not privilege' (4). This text does however privilege the brave texts which dare to address sexual violence, wherever it occurs, in ways which invite and promote (re)consideration of the patriarchal norms which allowed it to happen in the first place. Lisa Fitzpatrick's essay in this volume, 'Signifying Rape: Problems of Representing Sexual Violence on Stage', succinctly notes that the variety of representations suggest 'that sexual violence is a prominent concern across cultural borders though refracted differently through the specific cultural circumstances' (183). The journey of this collection is hard for this is a volume about violation, but the arguments are delicately measured between horror and the hope that comes through knowledge of such horror.

The first three essays deal with subversion of rape scripts. Carine M. Mardorossianin's chapter is a fitting starting point as the genesis of volume was discussion of her 2002 essay 'Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape'. Mardorossianin takes issue here with how 'the West has reinterpreted sexual violence as...interiorized passivity rather than social inequality', yet finds Caribbean writing newly engaging with rape while maintaining preexisting concerns with 'history, the political and postcoloniality' (24). Mardorossianin finds that this writing, particularly representations of heterosexual women raping women, exposes the binaries of 'racialized masculinity and femininity' as the inherited means of social domination by the West, 'rape by proxy' (35). Tessa Roynon's chapter 'Sabotaging the Language of Pride: Toni Morrison's Representations of Rape' further explores how gender and race are linked with rape narratives. Following Morrison's politics from *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to *A Mercy* (2008) through novels and non-fiction, Roynon finds that Morrison deprives language of the showiness of shame, leaving rape 'deafeningly under-spoken...diminish[ing] its power' (52). Robin Field's 'Revising Chicana Womanhood' addresses rape in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), a book ostensibly 'for' a young audience. Cisneros finds hope in womanhood, despite patriarchal and sexual violence; Field finds her 'vignettes encourage dialogue and an exchange of knowledge about female identity... resisting the silence and disapproval surrounding...rape and gender violence' (64).

Following from Alvi's excellent 'Foreword', in which she offers insight into writing a rape narrative and her use of symbolism to depict the violation in *Europa* (2008), the chapters in 'Metaphors for Resistance' seek 'a new lexical set, new metaphors' (13). Anna Ball's 'Between *Awra* and Arab Feminism: Sexual Violence and

Representational Crisis in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*' notes the complexities of the potentially subversive symbology in relation to the Arab world, and points out that the novel goes some way to 'facilitating... a space' for perspectives on sexual violence (82). Fiona McCann's essay looks at resistance metaphors in Zimbabwean Yvonne Vera's novels, and at the tropes at play. Susan Billingham looks at Canadian novelists Camilla Gibb and Elizabeth Ruth, and draws on queer theory to discuss how these novels refigure mental illness to suggest that those beyond the status quo 'pos[e] questions that problematise our assumptions' about normalcy (111).

For Zoë Waxman, Belén Martín-Lucas, Anany Jahanara Kabir and Gunne, silence becomes a language. The chapters in 'The Protest of Silence' address the inarticulation of sexual violence as 'an untold chapter...of the Holocaust' (117), in the refugee camps of Yamin Latha's documentary fiction, in South Asian discourse including public speeches and newspaper articles and in South African fiction post-apartheid. Finding voices in silence may seem fantastic; but through finding silence and giving voice to it these contributors highlight the necessity of re-theorizing oppression.

The volume concludes with three essays on the visual in the representation of rape on stage, in poetry and crime and sci-fi television drama. These chapters by Lisa Fitzpatrick, Brigley Thompson and Lorna Jowett finally get down to the issue which seems to shadow the whole collection. Are readers, critics and audiences exploitative in watching sexual violence represented? There can be no 'right' answer to this, but this volume goes some distance to exploring the necessity of representing rape 'to create a discourse around it' (184). This volume, while not the first to theorize rape, re-theorizes it to create such discourse.

Laurence Lerner's *Reading Women's Poetry*, like *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives*, also attempts to generate discussion in areas where he feels there has been too much silence. Not to say that there isn't already a considerable amount of research on women's poetry, but Lerner's study is notable for its broad scope. He begins with the 'first Englishwoman to achieve fame as a poet' (11), Katherine Philips—'the matchless Orinda'—and finishes three hundred years later with the equally matchless Sylvia Plath. As a literary survey, *Reading Women's Poetry* is ambitious—having identified that 'there are surprisingly few general histories of discussions of women's poetry', Lerner does remedy the matter somewhat (10).

Lerner anticipates criticism of his selection of poets, 'I have selected those I believe to be the best and most interesting', of his neglect of poetry

post–Plath, ‘I chose an arbitrary end point’ (6) and of his neglect of feminist theory (specifically French feminism, post–structuralism and gynocriticism). Lerner admits ‘little sympathy with such theoretical movements’, which will no doubt place him at odds with many academic readers, not least because he states that his position will seem ‘to the feminist theoretician...typical of patriarchy’ (7). He qualifies his intent, stating that he is writing for ‘lovers of poetry’ rather than students of literature (9). Absent theory aside, this study is a valuable exploration of the history of women’s poetry for students of literature and lovers of poetry (and particularly anyone who falls into both of these camps).

Lovers of verse will find extensive quotation and discussion of individual poems in their socio–historic contexts. To this end, the chapters are chronological, working from Katherine Philips through the Augustan and Romantic and women poets such as Annie Finch and Charlotte Smith. Dorothy Wordsworth seems a strange omission from this section, although comparisons are made between Smith and her sibling; ‘Smith is a minor poet compared to Wordsworth but we can ask what she offers that he can’t’ (45). The nineteenth century gets a sizeable proportion of Lerner’s attention and introduces to readers probably already familiar with Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti the less well known ‘radicals’ Augusta Webster, Mathilde Blind and Amy Levy (100). Charlotte Mew closes the nineteenth century with ‘a truly modernist poem’ despite pre–dating the theorising of the twentieth century (127). The American modernist poets dominate discussion of the twentieth century since by Lerner’s reckoning ‘the best and most interesting women poets...were Americans’ (130). English women figure later, represented by Stevie Smith, Kathleen Raine, Ruth Pitter and Elizabeth Daryush. Here, the author does dabble briefly with some theoretical terminology, dealing with *écriture féminine* which he admits ‘sounds relevant’, but unsurprisingly finds unfit (128).

Appended to the chronological criticism are two chapters worth drawing attention to. The first, ‘*Aurora Leigh* or What is it like to be a woman poet?’ has been saved to the end because it is ‘so close to the concerns of this book’ (177). *Aurora* (the protagonist of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s nine–book epic poem) can, Lerner believes, teach us something about the nature of poetry by women. As *Aurora* views art as disjunct from personality, so writing ‘may be harder for a woman, but there is no suggestion that the poem she writes will be different from men’s poetry’ (188). Yet Lerner back–steps on this confident assertion, noting that *Aurora Leigh* ‘springs out of the author’s own situation as a woman writer’ (188). The second chapter in this final section, ‘A Name of One’s Own’ is playful, teasing out some of the complications in

naming women poets. George Eliot is commemorated with a plaque on her Geneva apartment that declares that ‘a young English writer called “Miss Evans”” lived in that building, we know Virginia Woolf by the family name of her husband, but Sylvia Hughes would be unrecognisable despite her famous marriage to Ted (190). What all this has to do with reading women’s poetry isn’t perhaps fully clear, but the final sentence does pledge to keep their names (in whatever form they take) and work alive, ‘that is what we can do for our dead mothers’ (192).

Parallels between Lerner’s *Reading Women’s Poetry* and *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives* may seem hard to argue. One engages with theory in order to re-theorize atrocity, while the other dismisses feminist theory from the outset and heads for a more popular, easy-to-read discussion. One deals with writers who are dead and makes a case for their remembrance and value, while the other takes more recent writing and even popular television and argues its value to contemporary feminism. While these texts take vastly different routes in their consideration of writing by women, their scope—across history in Lerner’s case and across borders and taboos in Brigley Thompson and Gunne’s—make them valuable new additions to the field.