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Gabriel Insausti. 2015. *Tierra de nadie: la literatura inglesa y la Gran Guerra*. Valencia: Pre-textos. 434 pp. ISBN: 978-8-4164-5313-9.

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Among the many commemorations of the Great War's centenary, it is a pleasant surprise to discover the work of the poet and scholar Gabriel Insausti, and with it, an informed and comprehensive approach to the British literary responses to the First World War. *Tierra de nadie: la literatura inglesa y la Gran Guerra* was awarded the 2014 Amado Alonso International Prize for Literary Criticism and was published by Pre-textos in 2015. While Insausti's primary focus is on how British poets confronted the problem of representing the war experience, he also places the literature of the Great War in its historical, social and cultural perspective and traces the continuities and discontinuities between pre-war and post-war representations of the conflict.

The book is in four chapters, the first of which is an introduction entitled "Punto sin retorno" ["Point of no return"]. In the tradition of Paul Fussell's seminal study, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), Insausti explores the First World War as a crucial turning point that calls into question a wide range of assumptions on which English literature had been based: "No solo la literatura inglesa cambió la imagen de la guerra, sino que la Guerra cambió a su vez la literatura inglesa" ["Not only has English literature changed the image of war, but the Great War has in turn changed English literature"] (17). Yet, although the author points both at the irony resulting from the modern understanding of the conflict and at what Samuel Hynes calls a "sense of radical discontinuity of present from past" ([1990] 1992, ix), he rejects the simplistic idea that English poetry was Georgian in 1914 and turned modernist at the war's end by placing an emphasis on the literary continuities rather than on the discontinuities between the "before" and "after" periods.

In fact the title of the book, *Tierra de nadie* ["No-Man's Land"], alludes to Insausti's reluctance to situate the best poetry of the period within either of the previously acknowledged literary movements. The author criticises literary scholarship for not interpreting what is most valuable and authentic about some of the Great War poets, that is to say, their ability to defy one-dimensional readings and traditional contexts. In this sense, Insausti aligns with those scholars—Rutherford (1978), Onions (1990),

Bracco (1993), Dawson (1994), Winter ([1995] 1998; 2006), Bond (2008) and McLoughlin ([2011] 2014), among several others—who argue that the literature of the Great War transcends patriotic-protest and Georgian-modernist readings to explore the ambiguities, to put opposing ideas into dialectic proximity and to eventually acknowledge the multi-layered impact of the First World War. These literary critics, like Insausti, focus on “*the myriad faces of war* with the aim of achieving a better understanding of the essential continuities, transformations and mutual dependence” among different literary voices (Owen and Pividori 2016, 5; my emphasis). More specifically, Insausti’s idea of a literary “No Man’s Land” is also developed by Rob Hawkes’s *Ford Madox Ford and the Misfit Moderns* (2012) in relation to Great War prose. Hawkes studies Ford Madox Ford as a sort of “misfit modern” because his novels assume “a form of in-betweenness” or non-conformity to either modernist or Edwardian writing (5). Like Hawkes, Insausti problematises the ease with which literary categories can be manipulated and seeks new terms rather than stretching existing ones.

In line with this idea that the best war poetry adopts a liminal position in relation to the current literary movements, Insausti focuses on a group of civilian and soldier poets that, in his view, defy labelling and easy definition.<sup>1</sup> The organising figure in chapter two, entitled “*Tambores de guerra: Edward Thomas, W.H. Davies y la poesía de retaguardia*” [“*War Drums: Edward Thomas, W.H. Davies and the homefront poetry*”], is the notion of the “home front.” In claiming that neither Davies nor Thomas got to fully experience the drama of the war, Insausti is not merely making the point that they looked at the war experience from the *physical* home front. He also claims that war poetry can be written outside the world of the trenches, and that Davies and Thomas could foresee the war before it began through their noticing of the violence already implicit in the suffering of the working classes in industrial England.

There are, however, some clarifying points to be made as regards Davies’s and Thomas’s civilian status. While W.H. Davies’s age and physical disability prevented him from becoming a soldier or adopting a soldier’s perspective, Edward Thomas did in fact enlist in 1915 and was transferred to France in 1917, where he was killed. Insausti, however, insists that Thomas wrote his war poetry while he was undergoing training: “a partir del momento en que cruzó el canal ya no escribió un solo verso” [“from the moment he crossed the Channel he stopped writing poetry”] (105). The author therefore suggests that both poets adopted a civilian view of war, which should not be interpreted as failure to address the conflict or as anxiety to retreat to the nostalgia of a bucolic England, but rather as the ability to adopt “una excepcional posición intermedia” [“an exceptional intermediate position”] between the imagination of the soldier and the civilian (121). Because of the “oblicuidad y discreción” [“obliquity and discretion”] of his writing style (117) and “elocuente silencio sobre el conflicto”

<sup>1</sup> Some of the poems discussed in *Tierra de nadie* have been translated into Spanish by Gabriel Insausti himself. See *Poesía completa* by Edward Thomas (2012) and *Poemas de guerra* by Wilfred Owen ([1921] 2011).

["eloquent silence during the conflict"] (110), Davies and Thomas have been critically regarded as Georgians, a label which, in the modernist perception, meant "la calificación como descriptivo" ["the espousal of a descriptive literary mood"] (130), the overuse of conventional verse and an emphasis on nature for nature's sake. The author dismisses these accusations arguing that silence constituted "un posicionamiento ético en sí" ["an ethical stand in itself"] (110) and a sign of courage and independence that distinguished them from the deliberately propagandistic and old-fashioned Georgian war poetry.

Chapter three, entitled "Dios en el barro: Owen, Graves, Sassoon y la literatura de trinchera" ["God in the Mud: Owen, Graves, Sassoon and the Trench Literature"] focuses on the poetry of three of the canonical war poets. Unlike the previous chapter, which was concerned with the home-front experience, here Insausti almost *literally* gets into the mud to offer a thorough view of the reality of the trenches in all its devastation and destruction. By dwelling on the specifics of what Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon witnessed at the front, Insausti vindicates their authority as tellers of their own story. In fact the metaphor of "God in the Mud" in the chapter's title alludes to the war poets' literary and ethical repositioning in relation to what Insausti calls "un derrumabamiento ético" ["an ethical collapse"] (220) of the propagandistic means and moral principles on which British imperialism, its heroes and the idea of war as adventure had been consolidated and perpetuated. Making abundant references to the war poetry itself, particularly to that of Sassoon and Owen, Insausti focuses on the war poets' progression from the older tradition of the epic to the lyric and stresses their use of the first-person experiential poem as a more immediate means to convey the subjective point of view of the soldier, described no longer in martial terms as the warrior hero, but as an anonymous cog in the mass of draftees marching to mechanised destruction. Interestingly, Insausti also distinguishes the immediacy of the Great War lyric from the sense of totality and universalization of the modernist lyric developed by T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and David Jones with which, however, the Great War lyric shares a concern about the decline of civilisation and the treatment of war in the context of Christian theology as the "Harrowing of Hell."

Finally, Insausti suggests that the poets' ethical repositioning, which is mainly grounded in scepticism and religious deception, does not necessarily mean the disappearance of moral values, but rather their substitution by new ones. Indeed, the chapter concludes with a hopeful look at the literary legacy of the three poets, claiming that their ultimate aim was to turn the sacrifice of those who died at the front into a means of deepening anti-war consciousness and of vindicating the capacity of men to retain their faith in humanity.

In the chapter of conclusions, entitled "Sendas perdidas" ["Lost Paths"] as a homage to this "lost generation" of war poets, Insausti returns to his initial thesis, that is, to his reading of the poetry of Davies, Thomas, Graves, Owen and Sassoon as a literary "No-Man's Land" between tradition and novelty. His main premise throughout the book is to prove that, without being modernists, the war poets pursued the critical reflection

that modernists demanded from Georgians, particularly in their preoccupation for finding the appropriate language to represent war. Moreover, the author insists that the war poets reformulated the Georgian tradition in such a way that they were able to overcome its crises, especially the propagandistic imperatives imposed on them, without betraying their own voices. Lastly, he suggests that the war poets' ability to verbalise the idea of war's unrepresentability constitutes a truly modern response to the Great War: "nuestros poetas se hacen más modernos, que no modernistas, a medida que reconocen la realidad de la guerra" ["our poets become more modern, rather than modernists, as they recognize the reality of war"] (338).

Although Insausti's approach is not original in itself but continues, as mentioned above, the work initiated by other scholars, the individual readings of the chosen poets are illuminating and support his main argument. The author deserves critical recognition for his solid work of compilation and for his knowledgeable argument in favour of the poetic production of a group of men who have been unfairly pigeonholed as war poets, in a subtle attempt to highlight their experience over their genuine literary talent, and then underestimate their poetic significance for not having become modernists. Probably herein lies the most significant and complex issue addressed by this volume. When confronting the inescapable problem of representing the war, these poets were characterised, as Hawkes claims when discussing Ford Madox Ford's prose, by "a form of in-betweenness" that "undermine[s] the distinctions upon which many of our assumptions about early twentieth-century literature rest" (2012, 5). On the whole, *Tierra de nadie* not only acknowledges this crucial moment of literary liminality in British war literature, but proves once again that the Great War topic is sufficiently controversial to avoid conclusiveness and thus gives those interested in the area of war representations a particularly engaging object of study.

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