

*Three Versions of Judas*. By Richard G. Walsh. London: Equinox, 2010. Pp. viii + 179.

The term “tone poem,” native to orchestral music, refers to a work that meditates upon the expanse of a single theme. Its composer plays with the paradox of canon— scaling the staffs of freedom and fixity. Upon the finale, the hearer holds an invested yet tentative attachment to the theme; he or she has been brought to see music that rests in and yet beyond the theme itself. Similarly, Richard G. Walsh’s titular riff leads readers not only through Jorge Luis Borges’ “Three Versions of Judas” but also into a discourse concerned with the very way that Christendom reads its myth. And by examining the many stories or “fictions” that the West has told about Judas, Walsh diagnoses a latent truth: myths require a tending that undermines the very certainty they aim to exude.

Walsh commences the volume by layering the scholastic project alongside the Argentine fictionist’s “aesthetic worldview.” The preface to *Three Versions* introduces us to Walsh’s own interest in Judas as a contested figure. From confessional canons to controversies surrounding the Gospel of Judas, Walsh muses about the multiplicity of Judases in the history of biblical interpretation. We are pointed to Borges’ work, which relishes in hearing the polyphony of fictions within a single myth as a strategy for negotiating the human condition. The certainty of mortality becomes obfuscated by the realized benefits of limitless interpretive play. So, rather than seeking a historical-critical Judas, Walsh wonders about the variations of the Judas myth and what these interpretations say about their interpreters.

Those familiar with Borges’ short story can hear its theme in Walsh’s exposition. “Three Versions of Judas” takes the form of a scholarly review on the fictitious, early twentieth-century scholar, Nils Runeburg. The names and footnotes blend real life and imagination in order to help the reader appreciate Runeburg’s quest for Judas Iscariot. In *Kristus och Judas* (1904), Runeburg renders Judas Iscariot as the necessary interlocutor for the gospel’s effective proclamation. Upon receiving criticism for having made Christ dependent on Judas, Runeburg concedes the Christological debate and instead plays upon the notion of Judas as disciple. A later edition of *Kristus och Judas* explains how Judas had to lessen himself to the role of betrayer in order for Jesus to become greater. Runeburg’s magnum opus, *Den hemlige Frälsaren* (1909), embellishes upon this by concluding that Judas’s selfless decision to foil Christ for God’s sake transfigures the disciple into God incarnate. But Runeburg’s own acquisition of *gnosis* goes unnoticed. The scholar dies as a dismissed or even forgotten figure.

For Borges, Runeburg’s fulfilling yet futile quest epitomizes all human beings. Yet for Walsh, Borges’ aesthetic lends itself to greater theoretical abstraction about how humans read myths and create fictions. In this way the book proceeds with études designed to show how these fictions are laden within contemporary portrayals of the figure. “The cooperative Judas,” “the ascetic Judas,” and “Judas the God” play roles in numerous modern significations. Walsh writes most eloquently when commenting on the filmic techniques used to scandalize Judas in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) or to humanize him in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). No second-hand telling could do justice to Walsh’s pitch-perfect blending of Barthes’ *Mythologies*, J.Z. Smith’s

comparativism, and other erudite voices. One comes away realizing that these Judas fictions correlate with Geertzian “moods and motivations”—too complex to distill yet too crucial to ignore for the scholar of the humanities.

Thus Walsh’s finale leaves us with an unsettling, Borgesian conclusion. Fictions work to resolve the inadequacy of mythic certitude; all the while, these fictions reinforce mythic ambiguity. In the case of Christian myth, the versions of Judas point to Christendom’s shortcomings and the lengths people have gone to overcome them. One may wonder why readers do not just abandon a flawed myth, but Walsh’s work shows that, at least historically, reinterpreting them has proven the more excellent way. The most persistent myths detail reality in such a compelling way that any misgivings the reader has become negligible upon further reading. Borges and Walsh draw our attention to the talent we have for so doing.

Yet *Three Versions of Judas* embraces critical modes that will leave some unsettled. For instance, Walsh could have used his analysis to extrapolate profiles of Judas readers and their motives, but judiciously he does not over-determine these readers, he only seeks to understand them. The book’s abbreviated conclusion, however, left me with something to be desired. Walsh begins to theorize about the social impact of interpretation; I wish he had continued this further. Maybe this whetting bodes well for Walsh’s future research, or perhaps he is inciting us to muse further about the ideas he has presented. In any case, more work needs to be done, and Walsh has raised the bar for us all.

Walsh’s overall presentation invites such participatory reading. His thorough footnotes make sure that artists, historians, and theorists have sufficient entrée into this transdisciplinary study. Additionally, the footnotes contain web addresses to most of the iconic images referenced; this makes Walsh’s work accessible in a truly multimedia way. The *Three Versions of Judas* should be considered for use in advanced undergraduate and graduate-level seminars interested in theorizing about reading, religion, and (re)interpretation. The smooth prose makes the work a fairly easy read, and I expect it will become a much-cited resource for those interested in Judas stories.

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