

HARRY WHITE, *MUSIC AND THE IRISH LITERARY IMAGINATION* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ISBN 978-0-19-954732-6, 260pp, £58 (hardback)

This book begins with a thoughtful discussion of Eavan Boland's comment about Derek Mahon. She notes that while he was trapped to a degree by his identity as a 'Northern' poet, she, as a woman, found herself 'without a discourse' (vii). This dialectic of inclusion and exclusion provides a stylistic point of origin, or *omphalos*, to use the title of chapter one, for White's discussion of the role of music in the Irish literary imagination. Structurally this is a trope that binds the book together as he traces the influence, overt or covert, of music in selected Irish writers. Unlike many contemporary critics, who leave it very much to the reader to judge the *telos* of their argument, White is commendably clear about his own aims and on the first page of the preface sets out his argumentative stall (or offers hostages to fortune) with admirable clarity, noting that:

the musical discourse which pervades Irish writing becomes more difficult to overlook, if only because its striking presence redeems the long absence of musical works from Irish cultural history, to the extent that Irish poetry, drama, and fiction have functioned as objective correlatives of musical genres which originated elsewhere. Certain Irish writers are explicit on this point (Bernard Shaw and James Joyce are good examples), but the discourse itself deserves an exposition and a history. (vii)

He traces this argument through Thomas Moore and the auditory imagination; Yeats and the music of poetry; Synge and the notion of abandoning music; Shaw and opera; the thought-tormented music of Joyce; words after music in Beckett; operas of the Irish mind and Friel; and he concludes with a chapter on Heaney on music and the jurisdiction of literary forms. White compares the influence of music on the German mind in the nineteenth century with that of writing on the Irish mind in the twentieth and goes on to suggest that music is not simply a striking absence but a 'vital presence in the Literary Revival and in contemporary Irish literature' (3). One could see this as pushing a deliberate agenda and one would be right as there is a strong argument at work here to make music, either in presence or absence, a defining trope of the chosen Irish writers: it is the 'sovereign ghost' of the Irish literary imagination (3). White hopes to show that the words of a significant amount of Irish writing are, in fact, words for music (9). As someone who has written about a number of the writers mentioned in this book, and as someone who had never really thought about the importance of music in their writings, I am, to an extent, White's ideal reader. So, does he make his case?

To paraphrase a rhetorical phrase which has come into the language since the last American election, yes he does. His discussion of Thomas Moore is a *tour de force*. Moore is a figure with a tenuous position in the Irish literary canon, and White sees

him as someone whose use of the harp was a definitive icon of a 'ruined (if once brilliant) civilization' (10). This is an index of White's perspective in that he is actively looking for the musical connection and foregrounds in each of his chosen writers. White, enlisting Mathew Campbell, makes an arresting case for Moore as a seminal figure in translating 'the music of one nation to the music of another' (68–9). In an intriguing analysis of 'Dear Harp of My Country', which swerves through the low culture of the ballad and images of its source, a 'country-dance tune' called 'New Langolee' (74), which is far more ribald than patriotic, alluding to images of 'an erect Irish penis' (74), to the finished version which instantiates the syncretistic imagination of Moore, 'the true intelligencer of Irish music' (73), White takes us on a journey from obscene lyric to romantic address, and this is explained in some detail.

I found his connection between Moore and popular culture intriguing, as is the analysis of the reasons for Moore's lack of canonical popularity. He traces 'Moore's swift declension from national poet to the embodiment of a popular culture which both the Gaelic League and the Literary Revival quickly disdained' (50) and he goes on to see Moore's displacement from the Irish canon as a metonym of a 'displacement of music itself, in favour of the music of language and the symbolic properties of musical discourse as these apply to poetry' (77). I would like to see more work done on the high cultural pretensions of the literary revivalists and perhaps a critique of their lack of interest in social matters and their almost default location of Irish writing in a voyeuristic middle-class perspective on noble Irish peasants (often seen as proto-middle-class in themselves, especially in terms of languages and ideological positions).

But this is to look for something from this book which White never attempts to offer (though one can only hope that he may do so in the future). Instead we are immersed in the work of writers and in their attitude to music. The style is engaging and scholarly and the close reading, on a musical level, of Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium' is excellent. Looking at Yeats through the frame of Heaney's distinction between *le vers donné* and *le vers calculé*, he sees the rhythms and metre of Yeats's ballads as developing on the 'iambic tetrameter of the English ballad' and proceeds to make the telling point that 'in his earliest verse an authenticity of voice transcends any dependence on the precedents of technique and form' (84).

His reading of the 'Sirens' episode of *Ulysses* is, as one might expect, informed and informing as he speaks about Joyce's 'self-conscious exploitation of affinities between musical and literary structure, as in the musical disposition of verbal phrases and neologisms with which it begins' (166). His pithy comment that 'to begin with a fugue and end with a fart suggests the nightworld of *Finnegans Wake* rather than the nighttown of *Ulysses*' (165) is worth the price of the book in itself, and he goes on to see Joyce's use

of sound as operatic as opposed to fugal. Later, he connects and contrasts Joyce and Beckett in terms of their different uses of sound:

The collapse of narrative structure, the disappearance of those 'lazy ways' from Beckett's writing, are both defined by an approach to language in which 'words for music' is a formula that gives way to words *after* music. Language is redeployed in the aftermath not only of Beckett's own musical experience and receptivity, but in the shadow of Joyce's assent to the imperium of sound. (204)

This traces a strong musical undertone in the works of these two masters of modernism.

And it is to the postmodern that the book turns in its final chapter, and White's location of Heaney's work within 'the interrogatory discourse' of postmodernism (230) is a placement with which I completely agree. To see Heaney still being written of as a muddy-booted blackberry-picker is critical laziness at its most telling, taking no account of a career of over forty years as a professional writer, Harvard and Oxford lecturer, not to mention Nobel Laureate. White begins by seeing Heaney as answering that most postmodern of questions—can there be art after Auschwitz?—citing Heaney's comments from 'Poetry and Professing' about the ethical value of the aesthetic of those who 'could authorise mass killings and attend a Mozart concert on the same evening', Heaney's only answer being that it is 'a danger and a delusion to expect music and poetry to do too much, it is a diminishment of them and a derogation to ignore what they can do' (229). This location of Heaney at the core of ethical and aesthetic debates does the work and the writer justice and the positioning of this debate between the 'eminence' of poetry as a self-standing preoccupation and the 'post-colonial backlash' of critical commentary, which White finds in the prose-collection *The Redress of Poetry*, is central to Heaney's work and thought.

Addressing Heaney's placement as a writer, White rehearses David Lloyd's critique, 'the most severe *j'accuse*' directed against Heaney's work (232), which sees his popularity as an example of cultural commodification, and which is due to his being viewed as a form of late romantic whose work sought, in Lloyd's words, 'to bypass on several fronts the problematic relation of writing to identity' (233). In the face of Lloyd's accusation that Heaney reduces history to myth through his bog poems, White makes the telling counter-assertion that to criticize the subordination of human agency to aesthetic form in Heaney's poetry is analogous to 'condemning Beethoven's idealism on the grounds that his late string quartets are immensely difficult to play' (234). I would agree that Lloyd's argument involves a flattening of discourse which sees little value in any form of language that 'deviates from an engagement with social history' (234), and I would further endorse White's suggestion that 'postcolonialism comes at a high price, especially when it identifies concepts such as "the aesthetic-

zation of violence” as an underlying motivation for Heaney’s poetry’ (234). He goes on to see the ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ as showing that the ‘portentous rhetoric’ of which Lloyd complains is not derived from ‘highly-strung aestheticism’, but rather from ‘an exact accord between the intelligibility of the form itself and the verbal music it controls’ (239).

And while the context is well-explored, it is the readings of the poetry that are especially strong here. White offers a reading of ‘The Flight Path’, which he sees as almost a riposte to Lloyd’s criticism of Heaney’s lack of political engagement. I have written elsewhere of how wrong it is to expect political proclamations from poetry which is a specific and different cultural form, but I quote from White’s reading of this text as he points up the complexity of Heaney’s response in a very cogent manner:

But the fourth section represents a tense confrontation between public and private in terms which Heaney has negotiated almost from the outset of his career, except that in this instance the problem is voiced *in extremis* as a reportage which transcends the visionary nightmares that periodically afflict the poet’s imagination and conscience. The obscene colloquialism (‘When, for fuck’s sake’) indicates the borderland between poetry and exasperated direct speech: when it occurs, Heaney signifies in turn the apparent recovery of his composure in the steady iambic pulse of ‘And that was that. Or words to that effect.’ Nothing prepares for the graffito of the line which follows, perfect in its iambic equilibrium, the measured tread deliberating the violence of the sentiment, the verse ending in a cauterised scrawl of excrement: ‘The gaol walls all those months were smeared with shite.’ Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Not on this occasion, thanks all the same. The metre is Elizabethan, as trim and regular as a court dance, but the sentiment is flung in the reader’s face nevertheless. (235)

In his probing and teasing out of the different discourses and rhythms at work here, White brings out one of Heaney’s most telling credos on the function of poetry, namely that ‘it should simplify’. And White’s readings bring out the complexity of the poetic response. His reading of ‘The Augean Stables’ (the fourth of the ‘Sonnets from Hellas’), traces the liquid tropes of blood and water from Greece to Bellaghy, ‘a river-run which blurs the difference between image, imagination, and place’ (240). His analysis of the way the formal structure of the poem, and its rhythmical configuration, foreground the theme is as clear as ice, and his exploration parallels the structure of the poem as he ends on the final couplet: ‘this couplet brings things to a head (as the form dictates), and voids in one compact image the impressionism and redeeming rhetoric of all that aquatic music. In its place: asphalt, a car park, and staccato intimations of mortal fear’ (240).

In summary, this is a fine book and a worthwhile addition to that broad church known as Irish Studies. To a non-musician, there are aspects of the book that require a slow reading but this is all to the good. I recommend this book as a thoughtful, well-written (the segues between chapters are exemplary), well-referenced piece of theory-

tical critique about an area of our culture that has too often been silenced. Joseph Conrad, in his preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, talks about the 'magic suggestiveness of music' which he calls 'the art of arts'. White has written a supremely intelligent account of music, as an absent presence, in Irish literature. As he notes, music may defer to language (109) but it is still a strong absent presence in language and he has given us an intriguing account of that absent presence as a formative and constitutive agent in Irish writing.

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