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REVIEW

Journey westward: Joyce, Dubliners and the literary revival, by Frank Shovlin, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2012, 180 pp., £65.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781846318238

This elegantly written and illuminating study of Joyce’s *Dubliners* is a powerful argument for the view that the deepest understanding of Joyce’s work is to be found in the dense network of its allusions to the cultural and historical contexts of Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century. Shovlin’s title is borrowed from the final paragraph of “The Dead”, where Gabriel Conroy, gazing from a window of the Gresham Hotel, decides that “the time had come for his journey westward”. In one of the most memorable passages in all of Joyce’s work, there follows a westward-sweeping vision of snow falling over all of Ireland, from the dark central plain to the “dark mutinous Shannon waves”. In its immediate context, this moment acquires a complex of meanings that brings together thoughts of the West with the sense of life as an inexorable movement towards death, as in Donne’s poem “Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward”. However, Shovlin’s larger purpose is to explore the notion that this westward journey, which for Joyce is one of both imagination and historical memory, lies paradoxically at the heart of the stories set in Ireland’s capital. Related to this notion is the claim that “*Dubliners*, through a series of subtle and historical literary allusions, goes about reacting to the conqueror” (11).

Shovlin’s work thus places itself both within and without the tradition of postcolonial approaches to Joyce. It lies within such a tradition in that Joyce’s allusions to the West inevitably evoke the struggle of an indigenous Ireland against British hegemony, as well as the struggle of the Catholic peasant class against Protestant landowners. It stands outside postcolonial studies in its freedom from theoretical jargon and its dedication to the specificity of Irish history and culture. Shovlin’s case for the “Western” orientation of *Dubliners* thus is concentrated on three particularly Irish subjects: the Irish whiskey industry, the memory of failed Jacobite intervention in Ireland, and the modern Irish Literary Revival.

In the chapter on whiskey, Shovlin shows not just the degree to which Joyce’s work is saturated with the stuff but also the political import of whiskey distilling and selling. Like all Irish industries, the distilleries were owned by Protestants, with names like Jameson and Powers, a fact with political implications when one considers the epidemic of alcoholism among Irish Catholics. Shovlin argues that Joyce refers to whiskey repeatedly “with exactitude and intent” (15), and that the fictional characters of Old Cotter, James Duffy, Mr Alleyne, and Mr Browne are not only “all of or at the distillery”, they are all figures of “negativity, death, and loss” (15); they are associated, moreover, with Joyce’s memories of his own father, briefly a secretary in a distillery, and more lastingly an alcoholic. In “The Dead”, Gretta Conroy’s story of Michael Furey is set at her grandmother’s house on Nuns’ Island, Galway. Shovlin shows how this name evokes, for the informed reader, a complex texture of associations. Nuns’ Island was the site of Persse’s Nuns’ Island distillery, owned by a branch of Lady Gregory’s (née Isabella Augusta Persse) family, known for its fierce Unionism and anti-Catholicism, and hated by
the Catholic workers. The very name of Nuns’ Island is thus fraught with the kinds of political and social tensions that resonate throughout Joyce’s work.

As Gretta tells her husband, Michael Furey used to sing “The Lass of Aughrim”, which she has just heard sung by the tenor Bartell D’Arcy. The song is not chosen lightly by Joyce. In his chapter on Jacobitism, Shovlin revives the memory of the Battle of Aughrim of July 1691, where the forces of William of Orange defeated an army of mostly Irish Catholics under the Marquis de St Ruth in what proved to be the end of Stuart Ireland. Shovlin ingeniously shows how the callow Jimmy Doyle of “After the Race”, surrounded by treacherous “friends”, can be read as a figure for James III in a modern, degraded Ireland. “The Lass of Aughrim” also contains a barb for Lady Gregory: in the story told by the song, the lass with a child in her arms is turned away from the door of the great house by the mother of Lord Gregory, i.e. “Lady” Gregory. Once again, Galway, where the Battle of Aughrim was lost, is evoked as a place of sadness and loss; Shovlin reads “The Dead” as an elegy “for the fallen of Aughrim and the last of Gaelic Ireland” (121).

The chapter on Revivalism provides original and salient material on Joyce’s relation to Yeats and to the lesser-known Revivalist William Rooney, whose poem “The Priest of Adergool”, though of mediocre literary quality, nonetheless provides material both for “The Dead” and the “Sirens” episode of Ulysses. It is a good example of what Shovlin calls Joyce’s “imaginative absorption of stray material” (150), while it tends to confirm Joyce’s own self-characterisation, in a letter to Georges Antheil, as a “scissors-and-paste man” (151). Shovlin offers a number of reasons for why Joyce worked this way. Joyce is a playful writer, and historical and literary material provides abundant material for play. Much of this material is also the object of homage, as well as satire: Yeats, for example, is a large enough figure to serve as both. Finally, Joyce considered himself as having a classical rather than a romantic temperament. In Stephen Hero, Stephen says that the classical temper, rather than disregarding its own limitations, chooses to bend upon things that are present and “so to work upon them and fashion them that the quick intelligence may go beyond them to their meaning which is still unuttered” (154). It is just such an unuttered meaning, below the surface of Joyce’s language, which Shovlin frequently discovers.

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