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**A REVIEW OF CLASSICAL PRESENCES IN IRISH POETRY
AFTER 1960: THE ANSWERING VOICE**

Florence Impens, *Classical Presences in Irish Poetry after 1960: The Answering Voice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). ix + 210 pp. ISBN 978-3-31-319-68230-3.

Reviewed by Matthew Campbell

In her 1990 volume *Outside History*, Eavan Boland initially declares her garden “free of any need / for nymphs, goddesses, wounded presences.” These are would-be green-fingered deities like Daphne, who found herself turned into a laurel; but also Ceres, goddess of the harvest who loses her daughter for half of every year. The mythical entities haunt suburban spaces—a garden with a conservatory and roses or the edge of the city at evening. But for all that, Boland says that these spaces have no need for such wounded presences; they continue to lurk ominously at the edges of the domestic, as at the end of “Daphne Heard with Horror the Addresses of the God”:

A suggestion,
behind it all, of darkness: in the shadow,
beside the laurel hedge, its gesture.²

The poems have presences which gesture at both history and mythology, structures of feeling with which the poet feels familiar but which nevertheless transgress the familial.

The speaker of Boland’s poem “The Making of an Irish Goddess” ends as Ceres, worrying about a daughter who might be a latter-day Proserpina—though the daughter is merely out playing on a summer evening. The poem had traversed difficult material to get to its worry, in which the historical becomes mythological, and myths from history retain their power to unsettle. It presents a vision of famine, “the failed harvests, / the fields rotting to the horizon, / the children devoured by their mothers.” That image is historically contentious: were there any instances of starving mothers eating their own children during the Great Famine? And it is also aware of what is historiographically contentious, as in the subsequent statement, “myth is the wound we leave / in the time we have.” This I take to be an updating of both myth and history—myth as history and vice versa—into a present lived moment, where the latter-day Ceres or Daphne or Proserpina admonish the contemporary self. In the case of *Outside History*, in 1990, the presence of these figures from Roman mythology in Irish poems had been used to make complaint against the perpetuation of political violence and the continued mythologization of the wounded female form.

Florence Impens’s *Classical Presences in Irish Poetry after 1960: The Answering Voice* draws our attention throughout to such moments as these in

contemporary Irish poetry. In these poems classical myth not only found a home, but also allowed poets to address issues of myth and history which are slanted differently from other anglophone poetry, for all its centuries-long borrowing from the literatures of Greece and Rome. Impens works across a broad canvas, from Yeats and Patrick Kavanagh and Louis MacNeice through to Peter McDonald and Paula Meehan. In three central chapters she gives an overview of classical presences in Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon and Boland. If the figures of Virgil and Homer loom largest, then Ovid (as with Boland) plays a strong supporting role. And various fugitive and fragmentary lyric verses also find their way in here, from the expected—Sappho—to the less so, culled from the obscurer reaches of the Loeb classical library. Longley’s “Praxilla” is a case in point, a short lyric which takes issue with the criticism of Zenobius (retold by the editor/translator of the Loeb edition of her work) that the Greek poet was “feeble minded” (113). The only reason we have one fragment from Praxilla is where Zenobius demonstrates her bathos, retelling how that along with the sun and moon Adonis in the underworld missed cucumbers. This is the cue for Longley’s poem, where he celebrates unpacking the day’s shopping with direct quotation from his Greek foremother: “ripe cucumbers and apples and pears.” “I subsist on fragments and improvisations” Longley tells us in the poem, one of a number of *ars poeticae* for a late style re-immersing itself in the quotidian of the Greek and Latin that has been a presence in his poetry for decades.⁴

Given the breadth of her project, the value of Impens’s work is in the amount of material it brings into play and conscientiously amasses in solid, more or less chronological, detail. Impens has a new story to tell about the oldest things which have been cropping up in Irish poetry since 1960. If the emphasis is on Northern poets (Boland aside), then that is hard to avoid given the particulars of their grammar-school education and the ways that they choose to adapt classical material, not just for contemporary political concerns but also to answer a number of poetical questions that could be better solved with a look backwards beyond the peculiarities of an Irish poetic tradition. The version Impens gives of classical rewriting lands at one point in various versions of *Antigone*, a model for a particular type of Ulster political drama arising out of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The example of Conor Cruise O’Brien and his antagonist Tom Paulin is strong here, as in the account of Tom Paulin’s *Riot Act* (170–72).

Impens’s canvas is large enough to show that, as historical events moved on, so too did the preoccupation with other versions of the classical, the drama giving way to epic. This is manifest in rewritings of Homer or Virgil, or poetic investigations of lyric, seeking international cross-linguistic connections through translation, adaptation and creative and often synthetic rewriting. A number of texts and styles and languages coalesce. Her account of Heaney’s *Midnight Verdict*, a folding of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice into Brian Merriman’s *Midnight Court* in the early 1990s context of the controversy surrounding the *Field Day* anthology, is an intriguing example of this, matching

canonical classical and Gaelic texts with late-twentieth-century culture wars. Heaney brought contentious materials to this match. Though Impens is censorious of a distortion of tone by the melding of the satiric and the tragic, she does let Heaney off the hook for what she implies is anti-feminist allegory, by calling the treatment “tongue-in-cheek” (68). *Midnight Verdict* retains the ending of Orpheus where the lyrist is torn apart by the Maenads, whereas Merriman’s hero had merely woken up in an empty Clare countryside like a true *aisling* poet, his male virginity and his own attitudes to women intact.

It is to Impens’s credit that she remains circumspect in the proximity of such controversy. There is much to contend with, not the least of which is the use of poetry, and particularly epic, which tells of myths of imperial foundations and adventures. This is written by poets who are themselves anti-imperial or decolonizing, nevertheless writing in the midst of situations in which the post-colonial paradigm is treated at times by the poets with suspicion, and in the main with hostility. Of course, this is not the case with much Irish criticism, drawn as it continues to be to the sureties of materialist critique. And on the other side, as Impens shows, in the hands of writers such as Yeats, there has been more-than-a-little desire to sit on imperial golden boughs and sing to lords and ladies of Greco-Roman glories. If Heaney or Mahon were beneficiaries of the classical education afforded to the lower middle classes by the UK welfare state, Yeats viewed such a thing with horror: “A Helen of social welfare dream / Climb on a wagonette to scream” (“Why Should Old Men not be Mad,” quoted, 17).

It is in her account of education and the ways in which the Irish poetry of the last fifty or so years engages with the classics that Impens is most persuasive. Hers is a deliberately non-linguistic, even non-artistic, analysis. She has little to say about Greek meter, say, or Latinate etymology. The engagement with other languages is by those who mainly have school (and even Church) Latin and—with Longley the exception—little Greek. The majority of Irish versions of almost all of these classical poets and playwrights were by means of English cribs. Ciaran Carson is the exception, as he is a rare example of a polyglot bi-lingual writer. Yet his classical, like his French or Irish, poems have the habit of turning into the Carsonian cento, a tissue of quotation and translation and slanted allusion, even if they usually seem to end up in the accent of one location of Hiberno-English, Belfast. The more clearly internationalist writers—Boland, Mahon, and Heaney—engage with differing cultures and places in different languages and registers. Mahon’s long sequences of international displacement, *The Yellow Book* or *The Hudson Letter*, parse Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater and fin de siècle ennui with Homeric journeying and urban dissolution (135–40). When even Longley seems to be reading the poets through their Loeb translators, the poets are seen by Impens as the beneficiaries of Penguin Books as much as the Stormont version of R. A. Butler’s Education Act. Oxford World’s Classics has picked up Peter Fallon’s *Georgics*.

The picture that emerges from Impens’s fascinating study, a compilation of much richness which proceeds by empirical accretion as much as by direct

argument, effects a recalibration or re-steering of Irish poetry away from familiar preoccupations and complaints. The contribution of writing by women has not quite emerged into this account, despite the prominence given to Boland in the main story of the book. Impens suggest this is because the classical model has receded in the education of subsequent generations (although a discussion of Leontia Flynn's recent scabrous versions of Catullus and her reanimation of a broadly "augustan" satire might have made for a useful coda).⁵ There is no place for Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's "The Second Voyage," nor is there space for that poem's broad conception of a classicism of the sea that goes back to Tennyson's "Ulysses" and the Irish *Immram*.⁶ But to make classicism a presence rather than the classical would be a different, narrower book. As it is, Impens doesn't attempt a definition of "classicism," or even "Irish classicism," such concepts being by turns impossibly precise and diffuse.

Impens reads Derek Mahon's late masterpiece "Calypso" biographically, as "an allegory of Mahon's hesitations as to his imaginative return to Ireland" (143), and there is an unmistakably Atlantic rather than Mediterranean sea-board scene in the poem. Like "The Second Voyage," Mahon's poem feels the tug of the sea in its prosodic rigging, a poem of harbor breezes, creaking tackle, pier-side mutterings, and a half-sensed late-night Oceanic swell. It is set in the home place but also tells of being haunted by wandering and return. "Calypso" begins with the error of the poet: "Homer was wrong, she never ceased to please." But the error, the choice of withdrawal from the epic, is eventually, grudgingly, corrected:

Homer was wrong, he never made it back; or,
if he did, spent many a curious night hour
still questioning that strange, oracular face.⁷

Mahon's ending is of a kind of unknowing, a road taken rather than not taken but with uncertain results, a classicism which is by turns oracular and strange. It is, to use Impens's subtitle, a request for an answering voice, except the sheer size of the classical engagement means that we cannot quite pin it down in forms other than oracles.

NOTES

1. Eavan Boland, *Outside History* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), 35.
2. Boland, *Outside History*, 35.
3. Boland, *Outside History*, 32.
4. Michael Longley, *Snow Water* (London: Cape, 2004), 57.
5. Leontia Flynn, *The Radio* (London: Cape, 2018), pp. 41–43.
6. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Second Voyage* (Meath: Gallery, 1986), 26.
7. Derek Mahon, *Harbour Lights* (Meath: Gallery, 2005), 60.