

JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

21

**LANGUAGE  
AND LANGUAGES  
IN JOYCE'S FICTION**

Edited by  
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## BOOK REVIEWS



## BOOK REVIEWS

Richard Barlow, *The Celtic Unconscious. Joyce and Scottish Culture* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press – 2017, pp. 298, \$50)

Richard Barlow's *The Celtic Unconscious* is an original, thorough study on the influence of Scottish literature, philosophy and culture on Joyce's works. The kernel of the book lies in its very title. Barlow brilliantly argues that the Celt is concerned with the mind, "the tenebrosity of the interior" (*U*, 14.380) while the Anglo-Saxon, representing materialistic civilization, is with the control and understanding of the exterior. This explains why Scotland is a minor presence in Joyce's early output, while it becomes increasingly important in *Ulysses* and even more so in *Finnegans Wake*. Quoting from Kiberd, who describes Ireland as "England's Unconscious", Barlow makes a Joycean application of the term, relating it to its opposite, the "dead to the world" / the "dreamer" of *Finnegans Wake*. Barlow argues that it is easier to find direct and relevant references to Scotland in the two later masterpieces than in *Portrait* or *Dubliners*.

*The Celtic Unconscious* also deftly distinguishes the double trap implicit in post-colonial studies and dualities that are approximations. Barlow's investigation into how Scottish philosophers and writers influenced Joyce's works actually contributes to defining an alterity and distance from England and empire. Furthermore, he warns against the simplistic equation that Ireland and Scotland are the Celtic race, and highlights the frequent over simplification of the term British / Britain as synonym of English / England (thus excluding Scottish / Scotland). In so doing, Barlow's discussion adds to the lively – though relatively recent – debate on Joyce studies and post-colonialism, tackling important issues such as the question of hybridity and race.

The first chapter of the book deals with the references to Scotland in *Dubliners* / *Portrait* and mentions the 1894 journey to Scotland that Joyce made with his father when he was an adolescent. Yet these instances, albeit interesting and relevant, are marginal if compared to the presence of Scottish culture in *Ulysses* and especially in the *Wake*. A long part of this section is dedicated to the character of Crotthers in the "Oxen of the Sun" episode of *Ulysses*, the first real appearance of the Scots. He

is seen as reflecting the concepts of hybridity and diversity, and is compared with the English Haines and with the Ulsterman Deasy, who are associated with imperialism and the dominant power. Crotthers is not a negative stereotype, but represents positive qualities such as those embodied in the maritime relationship between Scotland and Ireland: he represents the possibility to *cross* over. This possibility also leads to the concepts of cross-fertilization and hybridity, and alludes to “Joyce’s interest in the ‘crossed’ populations of Scotland and Ireland, how they have become intermixed over the cyclical course of history through such disparate events as the migration of the Scoti and the Ulster Plantation” (p. 214).

*The Celtic Unconscious* focuses mainly on *Finnegans Wake*. Indeed, there seems to be some relief when, in the first lines of the second chapter, Barlow states that “now that the links between Scotland and Ireland in works previous to *Finnegans Wake* have been established, we can go on to consider the role of Scottish culture in the *Wake* itself” (p. 62). Here Barlow may sound a little apologetic, as if he does not want to linger over Joyce’s previous works due to their lack of relevance to the argument in hand. This, however, is not the case. Barlow simply states, and convincingly demonstrates, that the presence of, and the allusions to, Scottish culture, history and philosophy are much more important and worth investigating in the *Wake* than in the earlier works.

The second chapter of the book deals with *Finnegans Wake* and the philosophy of David Hume. It is based on a recognition of the dichotomy apparent in the whole structure of the discourse: Hume, the philosopher of the Enlightenment, is read here as a champion of both the idealism and scepticism that ties Scotland to Ireland, and he is portrayed as a master of incertitude with regard to Irish and Scottish philosophy. Hume in the *Wake* is also associated with sleep, death and burial (inhumation) “involving the dualities of a fractured psyche and the experience of a life divided between day and night” (p. 85). This idea is strictly linked to the third chapter, devoted to the relationship between Joyce and two Scottish writers, namely Hogg (*The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*) and Stevenson (*Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), who both represented the divided self and split personality in literature. Barlow constantly emphasizes the concept of “the coincidence of oppo-



sites” and eventually associates it with the structure of the *Wake*, and especially with the duality expressed by the characters of Shem and Shaun regarding the divided psyche of HCE, and, metaphorically, the separate political and religious traditions within Ireland.

Chapter Four focusses on Scotland itself, describing its hybrid nature comprising two different peoples, the Scots and the Picts. In this central chapter, Barlow takes up the notions introduced earlier and provides a brilliant analysis of the historical influences on, and domination of, the Irish and the Scots. He thus illustrates the mutual exchange between Ireland and Scotland, as well as the similarities and differences in their experiences of the processes of colonization and fragmentation. This leads to an awareness that such mixtures of ethnicities and cultures resist any oversimplification.

The last two chapters are devoted to the relationship between Joyce and two Scottish poets: James Macpherson and Robert Burns. Ossian provides the opportunity to tackle the notions of authenticity and purity in relation to race, and to notions of forgery, theft, and plagiarism seen as a process of cannibalizing the past and recycling myths and tradition. Macpherson demonstrates that the writer is an artist, but also a “copyist and cheat” (p. 173). Yet “Macpherson’s Ossian is not simply a literary forgery to Joyce. It is a heavily distorted echo of Irish culture, a reminder of the historical and linguistic heritage shared between Scotland and Ireland” (p. 163). Finally, in chapter Six, which examines all the occurrences of Burns’s songs and poems in *Finnegans Wake*, Barlow explains how “themes of mental duality, imperialism, and racial mixing, all converge when one studies Joyce’s use of Robert Burns in *Finnegans Wake*” (p. 183). Burns also suggests a duality, a further ‘Celtic’ contradiction: he can be seen as a pro-independence and anti-imperialistic patriotic Scottish poet, but he can also be associated with the Ulster Scots. In line with the dualities and dichotomies that structure the whole book, Barlow argues that “the function of Burns in Joyce’s works is an inversion of Macpherson’s role” (p. 188). “Macpherson in *Finnegans Wake* represents the idea of repetition and recycling of ancient Gaelic material, and therefore Ireland’s influence on Scotland and the connections between the cultures of the two countries” (p. 200). On the other hand, “sections alluding to Burns provide a commentary on the opposite process, the Scottish impact

on Ireland” (p. 188); these sections are “part of a representation of the more modern presence of Scottish culture and Scots language in Ireland” (p. 200).

Though the six chapters deal with various authors and philosophers, Barlow’s highly researched, nuanced book constantly offers the reader unifying and convincing motifs, providing illuminating connections and coming to original and thought-provoking conclusions. In sum, the book provides deep insight into the complex representation of Ireland’s links with her sister across the sea as expressed in the work of James Joyce.

*Fabio Luppi*