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Irish Song Craft

Irish Song-Craft and Metrical Practice Since 1600. V.S. Blankenhorn. The Edwin Mellen Press, Lampeter 2003. xii + 519 pp.

This is a detailed study of accentual verse in Irish, and as such is the first of its kind since the publication of Tadhg Ó Donnchadha's *Prosóid Gaedhilge* in 1925. Scholars in the past, of course, have made their own particular contributions to the study of the origins of accentual verse — Osborn Bergin, Tomás Ó Máille and James Carney being cases in point — while in more recent times Pádraig Breatnach, in particular, has drawn attention to the importance of its musical context. Dr Blankenhorn now aims at providing 'a comprehensive taxonomical survey' (p. 47) of accentual verse in Irish.

The book opens with an evaluation of Tadhg Ó Donnchadha's work on Irish versification which the author deems 'adequate as far as it goes' (p. 7), but inevitably narrow in its scope, as it concentrates heavily on Munster poetry and its summary of metrical vowels is based on usage in this dialect only. By contrast, the material in Dr Blankenhorn's study is expansive, amounting to some 1,279 samples from Munster, Ulster and Connacht, and embracing a wide chronological period from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.

A useful insight into the four main schools of thought regarding metrical theory is provided in chapter two: classical prosody, originally associated with classical Greek versification, which inspired English Renaissance poets to define verse structure in terms of feet comprising various combinations of long and short syllables; the eighteenth-century temporalist approach which sought to quantify the relationships between stressed and unstressed syllables; the structuralist and generative approaches, thus called because of their debt to twentieth-century developments in linguistics, the former advancing four separate stress phonemes and the latter striving to find rules which enable a native speaker to recognise verse (pp. 31-47). Dr Blankenhorn (like Ó Donnchadha, in fact) opts for the temporalist model which defines a foot as a metrical entity beginning with a stressed syllable and including all unstressed syllables up to the following stressed syllable. It is argued that this approach best suits a language such as Irish which is both 'stress-timed' (a term originally coined by Kenneth Pike in the 1940s) as well as having a phonemically-defined long and short system of syllabification.

In chapter three, the notion of a 'stress-timed' language is discussed, i.e. a language in which the intervals between stressed syllables 'are of apparently equal duration' (p. 57), while unstressed syllables are generally compressed so as to be accommodated between two stressed ones. The author's training as a musicologist is evident in her delineation, clarified by numerous examples, of four types of syllable in Irish verse: (a) primary- or fully-stressed syllables (including 'silent stresses') at the beginning of a foot, marking simultaneously the beginning of that foot and the end of the one preceding it; (b) nuclear-stressed syllables, i.e. primary-stressed syllables at the beginning of a cadential foot which serve as boundary-markers; (c) partially- or secondary-stressed syllables (including 'silent secondary stresses'); (d) unstressed syllables, i.e. grammatical words and destressed lexical words which include all other syllables in the line, be they within a complete foot or as an anacrusis.

The phenomenon of ‘silent stress’ in verse, referred to in the aforementioned (a), ‘functions as punctuation, marking the end of one thought before the beginning of the next’ and ‘in structural terms helps to mark the boundary between one line-unit and the next’ (p. 65). In Irish verse (as in English generally), silent stresses occur at the end of lines containing an odd number of feet. A case in point is the poem beginning *A chuaine chaomhsa i gcéin i bhfódaibh Fáil* by the seventeenth-century poet Pádraigín Haicéad. Because it contains five stresses per line, the addition of a silent stress is required at the end of every line in order to make up an even number. Were the poem to be uttered by leaving out the silent stress, ‘it would sound very odd indeed’ (p. 66):

A /chuaine /chaomhsa i /gcéin i /bhfódaibh /Fáil, /[^]
 /luaidheam /léigheann, /léigeam /brón ar /lár, /[^]
 /buaileam /fé gach /ceird de /nósaibh /cháich /[^]
 is fá /thuairim /Éireann /déanam /óla /chán /[^]

The ‘secondary-stressed syllable’ in (c) above functions like ‘the ‘weak’ beat in a musical bar 4/4 time’ (p. 67) and requires a foot of four syllables in length. Chapter three concludes with an account of rhythm, the Irish data indicating a predominant preference for triple rhythm, i.e. trisyllabic feet and / or dissyllabic feet with a long vowel in the first syllable, rather than the less variable duple variety, i.e. a rhythm with one quadrisyllabic foot as well as secondary stress per line.

Chapters four to twelve provide a taxonomy of accentual verse-forms based on line-length. A representative sample of lines is discussed, incorporating features such as cadence, phrasing, rhythm and ornamentation. In the case of the latter, the author makes interesting observations in her distinction between ‘structural’ and ‘non-structural’ forms, i.e. ornamentation which is important to the structure of verse and that which is not essential but has a decorative merit, respectively. While structural ornamentation is a predominant feature of the material under study, she observes that non-structural ornamentation ‘may be the single most significant feature distinguishing the poetry of the great 17th- and 18th-century Munster poets from that of their folk contemporaries and descendants’ (p. 320). In the case of Haicéad’s aforementioned poem beginning *A chuaine chaomhsa i gcéin i bhfódaibh Fáil*, for example, the structural assonances in the second, third and final feet are supplemented by two more assonantal vowels in the first and fourth feet:

A /chuaine /**chaomhsa** i /**gcéin** i /bhfódaibh /**Fáil**
 /luaidheam /**léigheann** [*recte léigheann*], /**léigeam** /brón ar /**lár**,
 /buaileam /**fé** gach /**ceird** de /nósaibh /**cháich**
 is fá /thuairim /**Éireann** /**déanaim** [*recte déanam*] /óla /**chán**

In the poem beginning *Do chuala inné ag maothlach muinteardha* by the same poet, the common feature of *aicill* rhyme in the middle of the line in four-stressed lines is supplemented by *aicill* in the first stressed syllable:

Do /chuala in /**né** ag /**maothlach** /**muin**teardha
 mar /nuadhacht /**scéil** ó /**chéile** /**Chuinn** is Chuirc
 gur /duairc le /**cléir** an /**Ghaeilge** /**ghrinn**shlitheach

/suairceas /**séimh** na /saorfhear /sinseardha

A second type, that of ‘supplementary reinforcement to basic *aicill*’ (p. 322), is evident in the case of lines which may be divided into two equal or nearly equal half-lines, i.e. in the six-stress *rocán* type, and in the seven- and eight-stress lines of the non-*ochtfhoclach* type. The vowels in this doubled *aicill* rhyme always occur in the same order. Thus, for example, the poem beginning *Sealad dem shaoghal go haerach iongantach* by Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin:

/Sealad dem /shaoghal go /haerach /**iongantach**
ag /déanamh /**tuirse** ’s ag /riaradh an /bhróin
go /ceasnathach /céasta /créachtach /**cunnail**-bhocht
in [recte i] /ngaorthaibh /**coille** ’s gan /aon im /chomhair

Irish Song-Craft concludes with a discussion in chapter thirteen of the important reciprocal relationship between the lexical and the musical texts of accentual verse in Irish. The work of scholars who have elucidated performance practices associated with Irish traditional verse — Pádraig Breatnach, A.M. Freeman, Terence McCaughey, Breandán Ó Madagáin and James Ross — is evaluated. The author states that a greater part of the material under consideration points to the importance of text over music, ‘the best musical setting [being] that which best serves the metrical needs of its text’ (p. 393). Exceptions, however, where the musical aspect is more important in them, include those descended from the Anglo-Norman *carole*. Songs such as *Beidh aonach amárach i gContae an Chláir* and *Is trua gan peata an mhaoir agam* are characterised by repetition, while in a song such as *Rince Philib a’ Cheoil* which also contains repetition, the connection with dancing is both explicit in the text and in an air typical of a slip-jig.

Both a preface by Professor William Gillies and a foreword by the author are provided as well as a general index, index of lines cited and a comprehensive bibliography. The reader is further facilitated by five appendices which list the printed sources of the verse cited, a summary of line- and stanza-types, a list of poets, a summary of verse samples and a glossary of technical terms.

Inaccuracies will inevitably occur in a book of this length. Cases in point include: the description of *barántas* as ‘a nineteenth-century genre’ in the glossary (p. 479), but it surely flourished also in the eighteenth century. Indeed, the passage by Tomás Ó Míocháin (c. 1730-1804) quoted in an earlier section (pp. 224-5) derives from a *barántas* concerning an incident in 1788 when Fr John Hogan was dispossessed of the parish of Doorra, Co. Clare, on the authority of the Bishop of Killaloe; Éadbhard de Nóglá from Cork who composed the passage from a *barántas* referred to further on (p. 338) also flourished in the eighteenth-century. It may be noted that Riobard Bheldon, al. ‘File an Chomaraigh’, was a native of Cork and died in 1914 (pace p. 437), and the edition of his work (P. Ó Macháin, *Riobard Bheldon. Amhráin agus Dánta*, 1995) could have been consulted here. It is somewhat unfortunate that the first passage of verse quoted in the book, that from *Messe ocus Pangur Bán* in the dedication, omits one word (*lēir*) and should read *oc mu lebrān lēir ingnu* (cf. W. Stokes, J. Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* II, p. 293). Regarding the song ‘Táilliúirín an Éadaigh’, one must question the validity of restoring *de na bóithrín* from *de’n bhóithrín* in the line ‘Nó /bláth

na súgh- /chraobh air gach /taoibh de na /bóithrín’ (p. 85), the form ‘in which de hÍde (as he tells us in a footnote) actually heard it’ (p. 410, n. 30). What Dr Blankenhorn does not mention in her own footnote (ibid.), however, is that the emendation *de’n bhóithrín* and the footnote *de na bóithrín dubhairt sé* occur on p. 31 of the revised edition of *Abhráin Ghradha Chúige Chonnacht* (1931) only, and not in the first one of 1893 nor in subsequent editions published in 1895, 1905 and 1909. She also omits referring to the introduction (reproduced in all editions) where it states that the song was collected eight years before publication from a Roscommon informant, Bháitéar Sgurrlog, since deceased. As the song, then, was collected in 1885, we can hardly expect de hÍde to be able to recall his informant’s exact words over forty years later. Dr Blankenhorn argues ‘while grammatically admirable [*de’n bhóithrín*], clearly does not embody the triple rhythm’ (p. 410, n. 30). We are still on shaky ground here though because if we take it that the preposition and article may be artificially stressed *metri causa*, not only does *de an* (de hÍde’s *de’n*) *bhóithrín* observe grammar, but it also observes the rhythm.

It remains, nonetheless, that students and scholars alike will benefit from the fruits of Dr Blankenhorn’s vast study. *Irish Song-Craft* is undoubtedly a welcome contribution to the study of accentual verse in Irish.

MEIDHBHÍN NÍ ÚRDAIL