DONALD S. HAIR. **Fresh Strange Music: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Language.** Pp. 1-ix + 302. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. Cloth, £72

This book is very welcome and timely in bringing together contemporary critical attention to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s (EBB’s) prosody (amid burgeoning interest in Victorian prosody more widely) with the intense interest in recent decades in the poet’s imaginative engagement with political issues. Music, in its technical sense of equal units of time, is not only essential to EBB’s prosody, this book persuasively argues, but is the ‘unifying note’ of EBB’s career, ‘tying together works that seem disparate and unrelated’ (p.3), from her early philosophical *An Essay on Mind* to the socio-political vision of her later works.

The early chapters intricately trace EBB’s (informal) contribution to Victorian prosodic theory. The scholarly patience of this foundational section of the book makes abundantly clear that EBB’s opposition to received wisdom in respect of prosody did not proceed merely from a personally idiosyncratic disposition, any more than it was the unfortunate by-product, as contemporary reviewers claimed, of EBB’s ignorance or disregard of poetry’s formal strictures. The poet’s bold experimentation with metre and rhythm was the outcome, rather, of a thoroughly informed and deeply-held poetic philosophy. At stake here, Hair argues, is the redefinition of ‘harmony’. A key word throughout EBB’s oeuvre, it had meant, since the eighteenth century, strict observation of the requirement for fully regular alternation of accented and unaccented syllables within a line of poetry. But these scansion rules bore no relation to what EBB was *hearing* in English poetry from Chaucer onwards. (One of the pleasures of this book is the reminder it gives of the breadth and depth of EBB’s reading and of how her instinct for her own poetry’s music was a trained and developed one, the gift of first-hand immersion in the work of her forebears.) Such poetry exploited the natural musical rhythm of spoken English language, where syllables characteristically organised themselves into units of equal time - ‘musical’ bars or ‘cadences’ to use EBB’s preferred term. Rigid scansion laws only served to obscure or destroy this deeper music – ‘the animal life of poetry … the harmony’, as EBB called it, the ‘beat’ of life (p.46). The poet’s objection was never simply technical. For, in neglecting poetry’s essential music, these super-imposed poetic laws were also obscuring a lost or forgotten rhythm or heartbeat of the universe, which it was poetry’s power and duty to recover. Poetry is not primarily art, for EBB, but ‘Nature’s language’ (p.37).

The poetic worldview upon which EBB’s theory and practice of music rests is essentially a religious one. This is the import of Hair’s chapter on EBB’s early dramatic endeavours. In her ventriloquizing of angelic song in *The Seraphim*,EBB regarded her language as producing not a ‘counterfeit’ but a ‘copy’ (ll. 1021, 1041), (which word Hair interprets in the Coleridgean sense of ontologically identical to an original rather than an imitation). EBB thus implicitly claims that her music, ‘however imperfect, participates in the essential being of that greater music’, ‘in the rhythm of creation itself’ (p.86). This is the first complete poetic statement of EBB’s belief in poets as God’s pilgrims ‘whose music is the link between heaven and earth’ (p. 127). The poem opposes the Lockean and Baconian empiricist theories of language (whose emphasis on words as conventional and arbitrary rather than natural and inevitable had troubled EBB), substituting a view of language as ‘containing within it the expression of an invisible, pre-existent spiritual world’ (p.280). In the immediate post-Fall world of *A Drama of Exile,* where, it is argued, the appeal to the ear is strong for both character and reader, Adam and Eve hear the resonance of the Paradise from which they have been expelled, as the reader hears, in the poet’s half or interrupted rhymes, vestiges of the full harmony – the original song, whole and comprehensive - of which the fallen world, and the poet’s recovered song, is an incomplete echo. EBB suggests that such a melody compensates for the Fall and is capable of reversing its effects.

It is this ancient idea of universal harmony - the music of the spheres - which at once underwrites EBB’s socio-political vision, and is modernised by it. ‘Beat’ is the master trope of *Casa Guidi Windows,* heard in the child’s singing ‘O bella liberta, O bella’ and in the ‘heart of Italy’ whose ‘beat’ responds, as well as in EBB’s rhythmic punning on the word throughout Part 1 of the poem. As the beat is the manifestation of divine energy within nature, the basis of all living things, so the beat is the agent of EBB’s politics and for the same reason - that ‘the kinesthetic rhythms of our bodily being are common to all … share[d] with nature and with all of creation’ (pp.195, 233). Religious and political purposes and inspiration are formally combined, suggests Hair, in EBB’s use of the prophetic mode. In *Casa Guidi Windows’* ‘urban version of [pastoral/natural] biblical prophecy’ (p. 210), the poet is seer and critic-interpreter, who reveals meanings hidden from ordinary sensory vision. One very valuable contribution this book makes to EBB studies is its thorough explication of the degree to which EBB’s conception of the poet’s duty and power found an essential touchstone in the writings of Thomas Carlyle.

Hair is surely right to stress that *Aurora Leigh*’s account of poetic composition should be regarded as equivalent to Wordsworth’s *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* and Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*, as well as to claim the poem as the culminating embodiment of the poet’s key assumption that prosody is not end in itself but the vital expression and transmission of a worldview. In this hybrid of the prosaic and prophetic-poetic, EBB’s exuberantly turbulent blank verse not only finds the music inside ordinary speech but finds it across all classes of society. This is revelatory not only of an immanent democracy, but of a ‘primal rhythm’ which, in one of the poem’s key images (‘Lava-lymph/That trickles from successive galaxies/… adown the finger of God’, V:ll), connects the astronomical and geological, the heavenly and the human body, in the widest possible view of the dynamism of the created world. So creation and revelation are not one-time events but ‘a continuous music’ (p.236) to which poetry bears chief witness. *Aurora Leigh* wants to ‘appropriate the energy that pervades man and nature for artistic and social ends’ and use it to move her readers, ‘to bring about an inward revolution in the way people think and feel’ (pp. 229, 231). In this sense, *Aurora Leigh,* is a contemporary Book of Revelation, its purpose the building of a New Jerusalem.

These are bold claims, but certainly no bolder than the poem’s own for poetry’s power. And it is important that this key chapter of Hair’s book catches the passion of the poet’s pulsing music, for there is a danger sometimes that, in the scholarly disclosure of that music across EBB’s oeuvre, the ‘animal life’ of individual poems is less urgently felt than this book argues it means (and needs) to be. But the book’s serious scholarly work is its own form of passionate defence in relation to a writer whose strange and brilliant music has sorely needed such strenuous and penetrating witness.

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