

Book Reviews

Sarah Fekadu. Musik in Literatur und Poetik des Modernism: Lowell, Pound, Woolf. München: Wilhelm Fink, 2013. 357pp., 2 Fig. Pb. € 44.90.
ISBN: 978-3-7705-5280-1.

If covers shape reader expectations, the cover of this book is well chosen: Pablo Picasso's *Instruments de musique sur une table* (1924) shares key concerns with authors like Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound and Virginia Woolf. All these modernists were on a quest for a new aesthetics and new forms of representation. Where Picasso uses musical instruments as objects for his cubist still life, Lowell, Pound and Woolf employ references to music to reflect upon the poetics of their texts. This is where the present study comes into play, which seeks to investigate the aesthetic, epistemological, and social and political functions that references to music fulfil in modernist poetics. Its purpose is not only to contribute to the discourse about music in literature, but also to advance the cultural and historical contextualisation of modernism.

Before Fekadu embarks on analysing the functions of music in the works of Lowell, Pound and Woolf (who recommend themselves as objects of study because they refer to music in both their theoretical and literary texts), she gives a detailed introduction to the theoretical and historical basics. The first chapter of this part discusses the differences between musical and literary signification as well as the conceptualisation of music as a metaphor. The second chapter moves on to explore from different angles how music figures as a poetic ideal around the year 1800, tackling aspects such as the myth of a unity of word and sound, the linguistic crisis at the turn of the century, and the autoreferential character of music. Fekadu here draws on ideas and examples from various European literatures, which provides her study with a sound and broad foundation.

The analytical part of the study begins with a chapter on Amy Lowell, whom the author introduces as a figure of transition between the 19th and 20th centuries. Fekadu aims to revise critical assumptions about Lowell's rather minor status as a poet. Lowell, who promoted the cause of a 'new' American poetry not only as a writer, but also as a publisher and cultural manager, Fekadu argues, actually represents a key figure of early American modernism. In her essays, Lowell draws on music as a figure of thought to conceptualise her specific approach to a 'new poetry,' to which she intended to restore its originally oral, performative character. Fekadu contextualises Lowell's poetics with an early 20th-century aesthetic debate about commingling the arts, taking Irving Babbitt's *The New Laokoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (1910) and Clement Greenberg's "Towards a New Laokoon" (1940) as her authorities on the subject. While Lowell does favour

an intermedial poetics, she remains acutely conscious of media-specific qualities, using analogies to music – to the works of Debussy, Bartók and Stravinsky as well as to Ragtime – to foreground poetry's own aesthetic potential. Lowell's aim, according to Fekadu, is to introduce into imagism new modes of perception and to activate different senses, such as hearing, taste and touch, as well as to highlight an ideal of rhythm as a general principle of all aesthetic creation.

In the second chapter of this part, Fekadu traces how Ezra Pound develops his ideals of technical precision, economy of language, and objectivity from his early *motz el son* aesthetic modelled on the troubadours to the mature poetics of the Cantos. Fekadu shows how Pound's early poetry is characterised by an attempt to reconcile the concrete, exterior object of the image with an immanent expression. Inspired by the music of Bach and the concept of the musical phrase, he develops the principle of an absolute rhythm as a means of safeguarding the precision of expression. In the Cantos, Pound then turns away from his *motz el son* aesthetic, which was based on the idea of a symbiosis between word and music, without, however, rejecting music completely as a model, even if he favours a visual rather than musical poetics from the mid-1920s. Reconceptualising music as a spatial rather than temporal art, Pound now incorporates into his texts iconic signs such as key signatures, parts of musical scores, or libretti. With regard to Canto 75, Fekadu considers this technique of collage in light of its biographical background, foregrounding its ambivalence. On the one hand, this collage, which Pound devised when he was serving detention in an US military camp near Pisa for anti-semitic and anti-American comments, is part of the speaker's resistance against oblivion and destruction; on the other hand, however, the polyphonous, heterogeneous text resists this element of self-assertion.

The third and final chapter of this part focuses on Virginia Woolf as a representative of what Fekadu identifies as a paradigm shift in musical references in narrative fiction, which she locates historically in the first half of the 20th century: References to music are now no longer limited to the story, but also pervade the discourse. Fekadu maps out the development of Woolf's engagement with music from her early essays about Wagner, whom she then admired for the expressivity and polyvalence of his works; in the course of developing her own modernist poetics, however, Woolf began to reject Wagner for his overwhelming, sentimental style. From very early on, Woolf celebrated music above all as a metaphor for an all-pervasive structuring force and a model for inclusivity and diversity. Setting herself against interpretations that highlight the formalist, escapist tendencies in Woolf's work, Fekadu takes Woolf's engagement with music to exemplify how aesthetic reflection goes hand in hand in her novels with socio-political concerns. In *The Voyage Out* (1915), the struggles of the protagonist to assert her creative autonomy as a pianist are ultimately doomed, whereas her fiancé flaunts

the aggressive modernist rhetoric of writers like Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis. According to Fekadu, this illustrates how art is subjected to restrictive, gendered ideological norms and codes, and how Woolf questions the construction of a male-dominated modernism. Fekadu then reveals how Woolf uses music in *The Waves* (1931) on several levels: On the aesthetic level, she discards the linear, chronological concept of plot to adopt – influenced by Beethoven and Schönberg – rhythm as a structuring principle; on the social-political level, she uses music with its features of openness and polyvalence as a metaphor to suggest and advocate an ideal form of a diversified, heterogeneous community. In *Between the Acts* (1941), finally, Woolf integrates various forms of traditional and popular music with mere sounds, which belies the exclusive association of modernism with forms of ‘high culture’ popular up until the 1990s. This highly idiosyncratic mixture results in a radically open and heterogeneous cacophony of sound that denies any form of authoritative, totalitarian meaning, thus providing a sharp comment on the political culture of the time.

Reading modernist texts from a new and illuminating angle, this study gives an engaging and differentiated account of its subject. Even if the book might in some sections have benefitted from a more concise paragraph structure, it is well written, well researched and very accessible. Owing among other things to the very comprehensive theoretical and historical introduction, which comprises almost one third of the book, this study is relevant far beyond the authors discussed.

Caroline Lusin (Heidelberg)

E-mail: caroline.lusin@as.uni-heidelberg.de