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Strange Words, Strange Music: The Verbal Music of the "Sirens" Episode in Joyce's *Ulysses*

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> Words? Music? No: it's what's behind. (703)
> There's music everywhere. (964)

Among the many codes human beings have at their disposal for expressing themselves and for communicating with each other, language and vocal music share a number of common traits. In their primary, basic form they are produced orally, transmitted by sound-waves and received through the ear, but both can also be represented by a written code, in which the primary acoustic signals are converted into secondary graphic ones, written or printed on paper. Both words and music are subject to the laws of time: speech sounds and musical notes as acoustic signs can only be produced and received one after the other, in a linear sequence, which is represented in the written code by signs that are written and read (conventionally) from left to right and from top to bottom. However, this is where the similarities end, and a number of differences come to mind, the following four being the most obvious ones:

(1) The suprasegmental features of stress and intonation excepted, language is exclusively sequential or syntagmatic, the paradigmatic axis only offering options from which a speaker has to select, either choosing one item at the expense of another or placing two or more items in a particular sequence.[1] Thus we must say *John and Mary* (or *Mary and John*)

[1] According to Saussure (103) this "caractère linéaire du signifiant" is the second of the two basic characteristics ("deux caractères primordiaux," 100) of the linguistic sign, the other being "l'arbitraire du signe" (100–02 and 180–84).

came to see me, although *John and Mary* do not semantically represent a sequence. Two speakers could, of course, articulate the words *John* and *Mary* at the same time, but the resulting acoustic signal would be judged as unintelligible rather than as a meaningful combination of the two names. In writing one could, in principle, resort to a representation like $\frac{John}{Mary}$ *came to see me*, but even then our convention of reading from left to right and from top to bottom would make us read the above as *John* [*and*] *Mary* and not, say, as *Mary* [*and*] *John*. Music, as we have seen, is also essentially sequential, but in contrast to language it may employ what I want to call co-sequentiality. Two speakers cannot (or should not) speak simultaneously, but two singers can easily sing together in homophony, that is sing the same melody together as chords, or in polyphony or counterpoint, that is sing different melodies. Musical notation easily represents this co-sequentiality with two or more staves written or printed above each other. Language, then, is essentially monophonous, while music may be monophonous, homophonous or polyphonous.

If we call sequentiality a form of *nacheinander* and co-sequentiality a form of *nebeneinander* we realize that the case of language versus music is a side issue of the aesthetic problems discussed by Lessing in his *Laokoon* (Chapter XVI and *passim*), where he claims "that poetry has to do with *Handlungen* (actions), i.e. objects existing one after the other (*nacheinander* or *aufeinander*) in time. In painting and sculpture, objects are *Körper* (bodies), presented one beside the other (*nebeneinander*) in space."[2]

(2) In (1) above I mentioned intonation as one of the suprasegmental features of language, but variation of pitch (or intonation) is clearly of less importance than the segmental phonemes and their sequence. In English, for example, intonation may be used over and above syntax to mark grammatical structure (such as clause and sentence boundaries or sentence types) or to communicate personal attitude (such as irony or annoyance). In music, by contrast, variation of pitch is a central feature, for what is melody if not a sequence of sounds of varying pitch (together with rhythm, discussed below)? In accordance with this difference in importance, written language has hardly any means of indicating intonation

[2] Senn, from whom this quotation is taken ("Esthetic Theories" 134), discusses Joyce's preoccupation with the problems of *nacheinander* and *nebeneinander* and his indebtedness to Lessing.

except punctuation,[3] whereas in musical notation the lines of a stave serve this purpose well.[4]

(3) Language has rhythm, but like intonation it is a marginal feature which is employed, for example, for added emphasis or for aesthetic purposes in literary language, especially poetry. With music, on the other hand, rhythm (and a regular beat that underlies rhythmic variation) are essential constituents. The conventions and possibilities of the two written codes may again serve as an indicator of the relative importance of metre or beat and rhythm: in music metre (to use this word now) is indicated by the time signature at the beginning of a piece and by the vertical bar lines indicating measures, while rhythm is marked primarily by the different values given to individual notes. In written prose rhythm can only be imperfectly hinted at through repetitions, syntactic arrangements and punctuation.[5] Even poetry, rhythmical language par excellence, is conventionally written without metrical notation, and the reader has to make do with line breaks as the only indicators of metre (and hence: rhythm).

(4) Finally, and most importantly, language or rather the linguistic sign is the arbitrary and conventional combination of a form (a signifier) with meaning (the signified).[6] A permissible combination of phonemes in a particular language may or may not have meaning (/sɪt/ has a conventional meaning in modern English, whereas /tɪs/, though permissible, does not), but a combination of musical sounds, even a well-known one, does not: nearly everyone is familiar with the beginning of Beethoven's 5th Symphony, but it is nevertheless not associated with a specific, conventional meaning.

Human beings normally use language and music separately and for different purposes. However, there are a number of ways in which the two

[3] ". . . We may assume that written prose has an implicit, 'unspoken' intonation, of which punctuation marks are written indicators. This certainly seems to be what many writers on prose style have in mind when they discuss the 'rhythm of prose'" (Leech and Short 215). See also Leech (103–04).

[4] Crystal (169–73) neatly summarizes linguistic functions of intonation as well as similarities and differences between speech and music.

[5] See note 3.

[6] This is the first of the two basic characteristics of the linguistic sign according to Saussure: see note 1.

may come together and interact. "Prosaic" cases like, for example, music criticism (language dealing with music) apart, there seem to be three "artistic" forms of interaction, namely words and music going hand in hand, music representing words, and words representing music:

Words and music may accompany each other as lyric and song or, in opera, as libretto and aria. Although the two codes are nominally equal in this case, in practice music is usually felt to be the dominant partner. A song cycle like *Winterreise* evokes the name of Schubert before that of Wilhelm Müller, and *The Magic Flute* is Mozart's before it is Schikaneder's. However, this inequality may well be due to the historical fact that composers often chose poems or libretti written by people who are nowadays felt to be minor writers, Richard Strauss and Hofmannsthal providing the exception that proves the rule.

Music attempts to take over the functions of language in what may be called programme (versus absolute) music, when it wants to tell a story or to conjure up a poetic or dramatic scene. However, Liszt, the inventor of the form, still relied on language when he defined programme as "any preface in intelligible language added to a piece of instrumental music, by means of which the composer intends to guard the listener against a wrong poetical interpretation, and to direct his attention to the poetical idea of the whole or to a particular part of it" (cited in Scholes 834). Even later tone poems based on literature, but without such a preface, like Richard Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche* or Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* do not manage to tell the story on their own, but rely on the listener's familiarity with it. For music to tell a story in the strict sense of the word it needs words to precede, accompany or follow it, and on its own it can only produce certain acoustic effects that form part of a story or scene (such as the cannons in Tchaikovsky's *1812* ouverture or the shepherds' flutes in Beethoven's 6th Symphony). Programme music thus remains music and does not escape from its limitations or break its norms.[7]

If music cannot become language, can language become music? This question and its implications will be the main concern of this paper, its title indicating that in an attempt to become music language will break some of its conventions, will disrupt some of its norms, will – in short – become

[7] In avant-garde music, of course, one finds combinations of words and music that transcend traditional genres like opera or programme music.

strange. Poetry as the form of language that is most akin to music is an obvious candidate for study, but here I would like to concentrate on an experiment in prose, namely on "Sirens," the 11th episode or chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*. To begin with, I will discuss a number of devices used by Joyce in his attempt to turn language into music. Although these devices may strike the reader as highly original, some of them are not confined to "Sirens" and may be encountered singly or in combination in other literary works as well. In conclusion I will look at the overall effect produced by the musical devices in "Sirens." It is my contention that in their totality they form a whole that transcends the sum of its parts and that the strangeness of this whole is both novel and significant in ways not appreciated so far.

The connection of "Sirens" with music is obvious and fully explicit. In the famous schema reprinted by Stuart Gilbert (38)[8] the "scene" of the episode is given as "The Concert Room [of the Ormond Hotel]," the "organ" is the "Ear," the "art" is "Music" and the "technic" "*Fuga per canonem*." This last, explicit reference to a well-defined musical form, namely "a fuge with invariable congruent repetitions of theme" (Bowen "Libretto" 156) has given rise to a lively debate concerning the musical form of "Sirens." The result appears to be that it is neither a *Fuga* nor any other explicit musical form and that its most music-like part is the introduction, a kind of overture that introduces "themes," that is words and fragments of sentences that will re-occur in their proper context later in the episode.[9] Two examples from the very beginning of the episode will suffice:

> *Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing. (1)[10]

is taken up by

> Bronze by gold, miss Douce's head by miss Kennedy's head, over the crossblind of the Ormond bar heard the viceregal hoofs go by, ringing steel. (64–65)

while

> Imperthnthn thnthnthn. (2)

is later contextualised as

[8] On Joyce's schemas for *Ulysses*, see Ellmann (xvi f. and 187 f.).

[9] The debate is summarized in Bowen *Allusions* 51–53; for a musical interpretation of the introduction together with an interesting discussion of the problems involved see Lees.

[10] All quotations from *Ulysses* are from the 1986 Penguin edition; the underlinings are mine. The references are to lines in the "Sirens" episode.

> A haughty bronze replied:
> —I'll complain to Mrs de Massey on you if I hear any more of your impertinent insolence.
> —Imperthnthn thnthnthn, bootssnout sniffed rudely, as he retreated as she threatened as he had come. (97–101)

How can one characterize the musical quality of this overture?

Like pure music the "themes" sounded in the overture have no intelligible meaning. Or rather, they appear to be practically meaningless at first, but gain meaning when they recur later on in the episode in their proper context. A first, "meaningless" sounding of a theme thus points forward (cataphorically or proleptically) to a second, "meaningful" one.[11]

The overture is, further, characterized by various kinds of lexical and nonlexical onomatopoeia. The first kind is exemplified here by the word *steelyringing*, whose four light (or front) vowels may be taken to represent the sound of horseshoes on cobblestones. The second line at first looks like non-lexical onomatopoeia (a rendering of pure sound), but in its later context it turns out to be half-lexical, that is a "rudely sniffed" version of *impertinent insolence*. It is often pointed out that an onomatopoeic word is rarely, if ever, a direct, fully iconic representation of pure sound, and that its interpretation, like that of ordinary words, depends on conventional associations between form and meaning.[12] This is borne out by these two examples: the noise of hoofs can also be represented, in English, by the verb *clop*, and the difference between *steelyringing* and *clop* shows that conventionalized meaning and context (*hoofirons*, *steelyringing*) are at least as important here as purely phonological associations. Furthermore, following the equine context of the first line, *Imperthnthn thnthnthn* could easily be taken for the snorting of horses (an association, by the way, which was strengthened by the fact that in older editions of *Ulysses* it

[11] Gilbert (213) perceptively notes that these fragmentary phrases "are like the overtures of some operas and operettas, in which fragments of the leading themes and refrains are introduced to prepare the hearer's mood and also to give him, when these truncated themes are completed and developed in their proper place, that sense of familiarity which, strangely enough, enhances for many hearers their enjoyment of a new tune."

[12] For an informed discussion of onomatopoeia in "Sirens" and a detailed analysis of its last lines (1284–94, quoted below) see Attridge.

erroneously followed *steelyringing* without a line break!)[13] and it is only in the context of lines 97–101 that it is explained as the "rude sniffing" of boots. If, in the following, onomatopoeia is quoted as an exception to the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, then for these reasons it will always be understood as a partial exception only.

It is worth mentioning, finally, that the two examples of onomatopoeia just discussed represent noises rather than music. This is true by and large for the whole of "Sirens" and for onomatopoeia in general, since noises are more easily imitated by speech sounds (especially consonants) than "pure" music. This does not invalidate my argument here, however, since the music of "Sirens" explicitly encompasses the whole (or nearly the whole) universe of sounds:

> Sea, wind, leaves, thunder, waters, cows lowing, the cattlemarket, cocks, hens don't crow, snakes hissss. There's music everywhere. Ruttledge's door: ee creaking. No, that's noise. (963–65)

It is thus only fitting that the episode which begins with a half-musical overture should end in the same fashion with the polyphony of Robert Emmet's last words in Bloom's interior monologue (and associated by him with Meyerbeer's oratorio (Bowen *Allusions* 210)), the noise of a passing tram and Bloom's breaking wind:

> Bloom viewed a gallant pictured hero in Lionel Marks's window. Robert Emmet's last words. Seven last words. Of Meyerbeer that is. (1274–75)

> Seabloom, greaseabloom viewed last words. Softly. *When my country takes her place among.*
>
> Prrprr.
>
> Must be the bur.
>
> Fff! Oo. Rrpr.
>
> *Nations of the earth*. No-one behind. She's passed. *Then and not till then*.Tram kran kran kran. Good oppor. Coming. Krandlkrankran. I'm sure it's the burgund. Yes. One, two. *Let my epitaph be*. Kraaaaaa. *Written. I have*.
>
> Pprrpffrrppffff.
>
> *Done*. (1284–94)

[13] See, for instance, the 1968 Penguin edition (254).

Explicitly "musical" music is, of course, also present in "Sirens," but less in the form of onomatopoeia than through songs and arias (that is, music accompanied by words!) that are woven into the fabric of the episode in a multitude of ways, be it as leitmotifs that introduce a character ("When the Bloom is on the Rye," 390 and 1126), be it as a topic of conversation (for instance "*Tutto è sciolto*" from Bellini's *Sonnambula* (610); see Bowen *Allusions* 174), be it as songs that are actually sung in the Ormond (notably "*M'appari*" from Flotow's *Martha* and "The Croppy Boy"). Bowen (*Allusions* 53) has counted no less than "one hundred fifty-eight references to forty-seven songs" in the whole episode, and they play a major role in giving depth to the seemingly trivial events of the plot and in connecting "Sirens" with other parts of *Ulysses*.[14] My concern is not with these songs, however, but with other, more narrowly linguistic ways of rendering music in "Sirens", and for this purpose I would like to go back to the four features distinguishing music from language that I briefly discussed at the beginning, namely (1) polyphony, (2) melody, (3) rhythm and (4) absence of referential meaning.[15]

(1) Language is sequential, a *nacheinander*, whereas music combines *nacheinander* with *nebeneinander* (what I have called the co-sequential or polyphonic aspect of music). How can Joyce indicate this *nebeneinander* short of using deviant typography (which is a means not used in *Ulysses*)?[16] The technique he resorts to is to "cut up" the various parallel continua of sound (the "themes") into short fragments and to "splice them together" as one continuum. A classical example is to be found in the following passage at the end of Simon Dedalus's rendition of "*M'appari*," where his audience's appreciative shouts and their clapping happen together as two parallel continua of sound ((a) and (b) are my reconstruction of the technique, (c) is the text as found in *Ulysses*):

[14] For a full documentation see Hodgart and Worthington (68–72), Bowen "Bronzegold Sirensong" and Bowen *Allusions* (160–211).

[15] This is not by any means a complete list. From "the hundreds of musical forms verbally reproduced in the course of this episode" Gilbert (223) mentions a few at the end of his "Sirens" chapter (221–25).

[16] In her early article on "The Language of James Joyce" (which deals mainly with *Finnegans Wake*, however) Margaret Schlauch already comments on Joyce's revolutionary attempts to approximate "the values of polyphonic music in literary discourse" (483). In his essay on "Narrative Dissimulation" Senn discusses this aspect of Joyce's narrative technique in detail and with many examples.

(a) – Bravo! Good man, Simon. Encore! Sound as a bell. Bravo, Simon! . . .
– Clapclap. Clappyclapclap. Clapclipclap clap. Clapclopclap. . . .

(b) – Bravo! Good man, Simon. Encore!
– Clapclap. Clappyclapclap. . . .

(c) – Bravo! Clapclap. Good man, Simon. Clappyclapclap. Encore! Clapclipclap clap. Sound as a bell. Bravo, Simon! Clapclopclap. Encore, enclap, said, cried, clapped all, Ben Dollard, Lydia Douce, George Lidwell, Pat, Mina Kennedy, two gentlemen with two tankards, Cowley, first gent with tank and bronze miss Douce and gold miss Mina. (756–60)

In passing we note that Joyce carries this experiment of *nebeneinander* one step further into word-formation, with the neologism *enclap* incorporating the *en-* of the word *encore*, the onomatopoeic sound of *clap* plus (in this combination) the repetition of the clapping.

In a second example the clock striking four o'clock provides one sound-continuum (*Clock whirred. Clock clacked. Clock clacked. A clack. O'clock.*), the noisy activities of the two barmaids and of Blazes Boylan the other:

> Clock whirred. Miss Kennedy passed their way (flower, wonder who gave), bearing away teatray. Clock clacked.
>
> Miss Douce took Boylan's coin, struck boldly the cashregister. It clanged. Clock clacked. Fair one of Egypt teased and sorted in the till and hummed and handed coins in change. Look to the west. A clack. For me.
>
> – What time is that? asked Blazes Boylan. Four?
>
> O'clock. (380–86)

Such "cutting and splicing" is not limited to brief passages of text and time, as shown by the following example, which extends across the whole of the latter part of the episode. The sound in question is the tapping noise made by the blind piano tuner's cane as he makes his way back to the Ormond Hotel to retrieve the tuning fork forgotten earlier (compare 275–82 and 313–16). It begins lightly (and presumably far away) as a single *Tap* (933), but gradually increases and culminates in an intense *Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.* (1223) before subsiding to a low *Tap. A youth entered a lonely Ormond hall* (1273) and *Tip. An unseeing stripling stood in*

the door (1281).[17] In its monotony the tapping of the piano tuner's cane functions as a kind of "pedalpoint" (Burgess *Here Comes* 141) within the music of the whole episode. It signals one continuum of sound (and action), which is paralleled in the whole episode by a number of others that together amount to polyphony from the musical point of view and to "genuine counterpoint of action" (Burgess *Here Comes* 138) from the point of view of narrative technique.

In doing so, does Joyce break any linguistic conventions? I would maintain that he does, if we take into account the communicative function of language, for Joyce's "cutting and splicing" results in severely weakened textual cohesion within the episode. Intermittent occurrences of the isolated word *Tap*, for example, which are not explained by their immediate context, remain erratic blocks of language, unless the reader pieces them together as parts of one continuum of sound and action and connects them with what he already knows about the piano tuner and his forgotten tuning fork. It is mainly the reader, then, who creates the coherence of the episode, and he is helped little (considerably less than usual) by its textual cohesion.

(2) Music differs from spoken language (and also from most noises) by its full exploitation of variation of pitch as melody.[18] The only way for language to represent melody onomatopoeically is through vowel quality, but the limited vowel repertoire of English (as of human language in general) does not offer many possibilities. In "Sirens" there are only few attempts to render actual music in this way, but the representation of certain noises draws on the same resource. Here is an onomatopoeic rendering of music, namely of Bob Cowley's improvising on the piano:

> But wait. But hear. Chords dark. Lugugugubrious. Low. In a cave of the dark middle earth. Embedded ore. Lumpmusic. (1005–06)

[17] The onomatopoeic effects here are quite subtle: the increasing number of taps presumably represents increasing proximity and loudness, while the contrast between earlier *Tap* and final *Tip* may indicate a different surface (the street outside versus the floor of the Ormond hotel).

[18] Crystal (173) also points out that musical pitch is absolute while pitch in language is relative.

And here are some noises:[19]

> O, look we are so! Chamber music. Could make a kind of pun on that. It is a kind of music I often thought when she. Acoustics that is. Tinkling. Empty vessels make most noise. Because the acoustics, the resonance changes according as the weight of the water is equal to the law of falling water. Like those rhapsodies of Liszt's, Hungarian, gipsyeyed. Pearls. Drops. Rain. Diddleiddle addleaddle ooddleooddle. Hissss. Now. Maybe now. Before. (979–85)

> – True men like you men.
> – Ay, ay, Ben.
> – Will lift your glass with us.
> They lifted.
> Tschink. Tschunk. (1276–80)

The resource exploited in each of these examples is the difference between the "light" front vowel /ɪ/ and the "dark" back vowels, with /æ/ taking a middle and thus neutral position. The auditory similarity between "pure" sounds and their representation in speech is further strengthened by their similar method of production, since the oral cavity as a resonance chamber iconically represents the clapping hands, the chamber pot and the glasses respectively. This kind of onomatopoeia may be called auditory iconicity,[20] and Joyce employs it with great dexterity. However, due to the limited number of vowels, not to mention vowel graphemes (as compared with the far greater number of musical notes) it can never be more than a marginal phenomenon, and like all onomatopoeia it relies for its effect not just on its (imperfect) mimesis of sound, but also on context, on literary and lexical associations and even on visual patterns: in 756–60 the fully lexicalized *clap* is the reference point for the more directly onomatopoeic *clip* and *clop*, in 979–85 *ooddle* conjures up both *pool* and *puddle*, while the repetitions of *oo* and *dd*, like that of *ssss* in *Hissss* works visually as well as

[19] See also lines 756–60, quoted above.

[20] I use this term to distinguish it from what I call articulatory iconicity, where it is the position of the articulatory organs rather than the resulting sound that is taken to be represented iconically. Examples of the latter would be *this* versus *that* (proximity versus distance of tongue and palate) or *little* versus *large* (narrow versus wide opening between tongue and palate).

onomatopoeically, in 1276–80 *Tschink* (*Chink*) is a literary reference to "the patriotic boozy thirty-two counties song" (Bowen *Allusions* 209–10), and so on.

It is obvious that onomatopoeia, especially of the non-lexical kind, is a form of deviation. A word like *clap* is fully lexicalized and as such a conventional lexical item of English. A "word" like *addleaddle*, however, is not and can only be interpreted onomatopoeically and in relation to its context.

(3) Rhythmical patterns would appear to be obvious devices that need no special exemplification. The only exclusive means ordinary written prose has to indicate rhythm is punctuation (spatial configurations and capitalisation as well as more unusual typography excluded), and Joyce makes full use of it by deviating from standard practice through under-punctuation and over-punctuation.
Compare:

> Miss Douce halfstood to see her skin askance in the barmirror gildedlettered where hock and claret glasses shimmered and in their midst a shell. (118–20)

with:

> Will? You? I. Want. You. To. (1096)

In the first example the uninterrupted sequence of words may be seen as another attempt to catch the *nebeneinander* of all the things visible to Miss Douce at a glance in the mirror: her skin, the gilded letters on the mirror, hock and claret glasses and the shell. In the second example we have an extreme case of the breathless, staccato-like rhythm of interior monologue.

The extreme musical rhythmicality of Joyce's prose is most evident in those passages where he attempts to represent pure music. He makes use of a dazzling array of devices, such as onomatopoeia, repetitions and punctuation, which in their totality escape the fetters of syntactic organisation and meaning and approach the quality of pure music. The following is a selection from Bloom's interior monologue while he follows Bob Cowley first improvising and then playing the minuet from *Don Giovanni* on the piano:

> Bloom mur: best references. But Henry wrote: it will excite me. You know how. In haste. Henry. Greek ee. Better add postscript. What is he

playing now? Improvising. Intermezzo. P.S. The rum tum tum. How will you pun? You punish me? Crooked skirt swinging, whack by. Tell me I want to. Know. O. Course if I didn't I wouldn't ask. La la la ree. Trails off there sad in minor. Why minor sad? Sign H. They like sad tail at end. P.P.S. La la la ree. I feel so sad today. La ree. So lonely. Dee. (888–94)

Bob Cowley's twinkling fingers in the treble played again. The landlord has the prior. A little time. Long John. Big Ben. Lightly he played a light bright tinkling measure for tripping ladies, arch and smiling, and for their gallants, gentlemen friends. One: one, one, one, one, one: two, one, three, four. (958–62)

Minuet of *Don Giovanni* he's playing now. Court dresses of all descriptions in castle chambers dancing. Misery. Peasants outside. Green starving faces eating dockleaves. Nice that is. Look: look, look, look, look, look: you look at us. (965–68)

In these examples language may be said to mimic actual (though wordless) music, but the text of "Sirens" is musical in a playfully rhythmical way even where there is no such iconic connection. This is especially evident in the passages of third-person narration dealing with Pat the waiter of the Ormond restaurant. The following is again a selection:

Bloom signed to Pat, bald Pat is a waiter hard of hearing, to set ajar the door of the bar. The door of the bar. So. That will do. Pat, waiter, waited, waiting to hear, for he was hard of hear by the door. (669–72)

Bald Pat at a sign drew nigh. A pen and ink. He went. A pad. He went. A pad to blot. He heard, deaf Pat. (822–23)

Bald deaf Pat brought quite flat pad ink. Pat set with ink pen quite flat pad. Pat took plate dish knife fork. Pat went. (847–48)

Bald Pat who is bothered mitred the napkins. Pat is a waiter hard of his hearing. Pat is a waiter who waits while you wait. Hee hee hee hee. He waits while you wait. Hee hee. A waiter is he. Hee hee hee hee. He waits while you wait. While you wait if you wait he will wait while you wait. Hee hee hee hee. Hoh. Wait while you wait. (915–19)

Pat is practically deaf and is not quoted as actually saying anything (let alone singing!) in the episode. Nevertheless Joyce gives him an ingenious verbal "soundtrack" all on his own, which, like real music, is much easier to

read (aloud!) than to describe in detail. Very occasionally Joyce's "musical tricks" (Burgess *Here Comes* 139) convey meaning,[21] but mostly they simply produce verbal music.[22]

Can one generalize from this list of norm-breaking, music-making devices found in "Sirens"? Is there any significance to the strangeness we encounter in the episode? I think there is, and I believe that the key to it is to be found in a book published only six years before *Ulysses*.

In his *Cours de linguistique générale*, posthumously published in 1916, Ferdinand de Saussure defines the linguistic sign as the arbitrary and conventional linking of a signified with a signifier, of meaning with form (or vice versa). This linking is arbitrary, because there is no natural connection between a meaning and the form through which it is expressed. At the same time it is conventional, that is institutionalized by a society (which is also a linguistic community) that defines itself and its values through a shared and reasonably stable system of such signs. (In this connection it is important to see how Saussure again and again stresses the inherent stability and regularity of the synchronic system and the – to him almost annoying – irregularity of diachronic changes!) Seen from this point of view convention is not just an aspect, but the very essence of the linguistic sign. Linguistic signs and the systems constituted by such signs *are* convention.

By way of conclusion I will now claim that "Sirens" shakes the very foundations of this position, but not in the way as it appears at first sight. Onomatopoeia (and for the sake of simplicity I will now call all music-making devices in "Sirens" by this name) is an exception not to the conventionality of the linguistic sign, but to its arbitrariness. The word *cuckoo*, for instance, is not an arbitrary sequence of sounds that somehow has become linked to the call of the bird in question, but it represents the very sound itself (or at least an approximation to it governed by the phonological, phonotactic etc. rules of English). Truly onomatopoeic

[21] The repetition of the phrase *the door of the bar* in 669–70 thus may indicate Bloom's insistent signalling to Pat to open the door. The twice eight monosyllables of *Bald deaf Pat brought quite flat pad ink. Pat set with ink pen quite flat pad.* (847–48), on the other hand, probably represent the *scales up and down* of 842. The second of these examples was brought to my attention by Fritz Senn.

[22] David Crystal points out to me that deaf people often speak in an extremely clipped way. Pat's "soundtrack" may thus be partly iconic after all.

devices (and for the moment we assume that they are possible) would thus be non-arbitrary, that is natural, and would not need the sanction of convention for their existence. If a linguistic community had no options in assigning forms to meanings, if that connection were given by nature, then there would be no need to make it legitimate and stable through convention. Onomatopoeic signs, in this view, are "better" than conventional signs, because they are natural and absolutely (rather than just relatively) stable. A text like "Sirens," in which onomatopoeia reigns supreme, thus conjures up a natural and stable world in which meanings are naturally linked with forms, in which signified and signifier are so near to each other as to be almost one. "Sirens" is not about music, "Sirens" directly represents music.

And yet this is all wrong, for there is another aspect of onomatopoeia in "Sirens" that tells a completely different story. Onomatopoeic devices, first of all, are foregrounded in the episode through their much higher than normal frequency and through their unconventional originality. Secondly, the link between many of these devices and the sounds they supposedly represent is really a very tenuous one, the best example (from the ones quoted here) being the waiter Pat who makes music linguistically although on the level of plot he makes no music at all. The essence of Joycean onomatopoeia in "Sirens" is thus not that it *represents* music iconically, but that it *makes* music linguistically and all by itself. Joycean onomatopoeia is not the natural union of meaning and form, of signified and signifier, but quite on the contrary it is the signifier freeing itself from the link with the signified and taking off all on its own. "Sirens" is thus a step towards absolute form, towards abstraction, but it obviously just loosens rather than severs its ties with meaning: as part of the narrative of *Ulysses* it continues and elaborates the story of Leopold Bloom and the other protagonists, but language, the means by which the story is told, emancipates itself and draws attention to itself as pure form. "Sirens" could thus be compared to a cubist painting, which still has a recognizable subject but which gives equal emphasis to the forms that the subject is composed of, to "the cylinder, and the sphere and the cone" (to quote Cézanne's famous remark cited in Gardner 783). Like cubist art, "Sirens" thus calls into question or even breaks with the representational conventions of naturalistic and realistic fiction and points the way towards modernism. It is of course not the only modernist episode in an otherwise conventional *Ulysses*, as indeed each episode breaks with one or several

such representational conventions. However, the formal, material side of language is sound, and by concentrating on sound, by not merely writing strange words but by making these strange words make strange music, Joyce places himself in the very centre of the modernist revolution not only of literature, but of the language of literature.[23]

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