

**“Chain Has Bound Me”: Song in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man***

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In both *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, James Joyce uses popular music to ground his narratives in a tangible cultural space. Joyce’s writing is wedded to his own musicality and vocal training, and the connection bears particular resonance for the semi-autobiographical *Portrait*. The novel’s structure and language center around Stephen Dedalus’s aesthetic maturation. Joyce traces Stephen through infancy and adolescence to the development of an aesthetic ideal: that the work should take on “a proper, intangible aesthetic life” and exist entirely apart from its creator. Joyce traces the transformation from infancy to maturity with free indirect discourse that reflects a developing voice. Stephen’s apprehension of sound, however, is another tool by which Joyce depicts that shift.

Two of *Portrait*’s most overt references to popular music bookend the novel: young Stephen’s “little green place” song at the novel’s beginning, and the air he sings with his siblings near the end of Chapter 4. Both passages use song to paint a bleak image of childhood, associating it with death and premature weariness. Together, they mark shifts in the language with which Stephen relates to art, his attention to textual subtleties, and his broadening emotional register. However, Joyce’s use of real Irish folk tunes rather than fictional music invites us to examine the implications embedded in the songs themselves. In this essay, I examine their lyrics and musical characteristics in the context of Stephen’s developing aesthetic ideal, assessing their symbolic impact on the detachment to which he aspires as an artist.

As early as the novel’s first page, Joyce uses song to convey Stephen’s budding sense of identity. *Portrait* opens with Stephen’s father telling him a story, and we witness the child’s

comprehension that he and his father are separate beings. Then Stephen's self-identification with the story's "baby tuckoo" marks the ensuing discernment of his own separate consciousness. Joyce has opened our experience of his narrative by positioning narrative itself as a catalyst for self-discovery. Immediately thereafter, we witness a newly self-aware Stephen's first encounter with music:

*O, the wild rose blossoms*

*On the little green place.*

He sang that song. That was his song.

*O, the green wothe botheth.* (19)

As with the story, Stephen seems to have heard the song from an adult, perhaps his father. He claims it for himself by attempting to sing it, and his lisp is an aural precursor to the youthful inexperience that will frustrate his social and artistic pursuits in later chapters. The passage marks a clear distinction from the preceding baby tuckoo episode: Stephen now claims his aesthetic experience not by placing himself within its fantasy, but by performing it himself. The (auditory) experience of storytelling has drawn Stephen to his first aesthetic development, an understanding of his separation from other beings—but he failed to recognize his separation from the narrative itself. It is only by performing the song he hears, "his song" rather than a song about him, that he recognizes his distinction from aesthetic experience, and thus his power to generate and shape it. Even before he can produce sibilant sounds, Stephen is developing in artistic autonomy, demonstrating an urge to create and re-create.

While young Stephen is more attuned to sounds themselves than to their emotional register, this particular song embodies (and perhaps incites) a latent morbidity that will come to define his formative years. It is "Lilly Dale," written in 1852 by American composer H. S.

Thompson. Its text envisions “friends mute with grief” at the death of a young girl, who “[b]y the hand of disease had turned pale.” Stephen sings the refrain:

The musical score consists of two systems of music. The first system has four measures. The vocal line (treble clef) starts with a half note 'Oh!', followed by quarter notes 'Lil-ly', 'sweet', 'Lil-ly', 'dear', 'Lil-ly', and a dotted half note 'Dale,'. The piano accompaniment (bass clef) provides a steady harmonic support with chords. The second system starts at measure 5 and has four measures. The vocal line continues with quarter notes 'wild', 'rose', 'blos-soms', 'o'er', 'her', quarter notes 'lit-tle', 'green', 'grave,', a dotted half note ''Neath the', quarter notes 'trees', 'in the', a dotted half note 'flow'-ry', and a final half note 'vale.'. The piano accompaniment continues with chords, ending with a double bar line.

The song’s major key, rhythmically active melody, and four-voice texture more closely resemble a triumphant military march than a lament for early death. These musical features signal the onset of Stephen’s lifelong juxtaposition between exultant (self-)creation and mournful deflation.

Stephen’s designation of a lament for early death as “his song” establishes a fixation on sickness and dying that he carries with him to Clongowes—but, in keeping with the song’s musical self-contradictions, it simultaneously demonstrates his burgeoning creative power. Joyce has replaced the word “grave” with “place,” though the source of this alteration remains unclear. Perhaps the song’s adult performer adjusted the lyrics, but it is equally plausible that Stephen has re-created the song by his own aesthetic standard. One might assume that he is also familiar with the verses, which are unmistakably elegiac; regardless, the song’s implicit morbidity clarifies part of its role in developing Stephen’s consciousness. Had he inserted himself into its narrative the way he did with the moocow story, he would have rendered himself either “mute with grief” or, in fact, dead. It is perhaps out of necessity, then, that he

develops beyond that stage of direct self-association with a narrative, involving himself instead with its production. One might recall this initial shift much later, when Stephen has “arisen from the grave of boyhood” (174) to become an artist. From his earliest moments, Stephen’s creative impulses have been his *raison d’être*, keeping him always a step ahead of a kind of death.

In a study of Joyce’s language, the author and composer Anthony Burgess devotes a chapter to the “musicalization” of Joyce’s prose, and his techniques can shed further light on the role “Lilly Dale” plays in *Portrait*. He examines the music of *Ulysses*, positing both the songs characters hear and musical forms in general as structuring principles for the novel. In the “Wandering Rocks” episode, for example, he notes a contrapuntal presentation of dialogue from spatially separate scenes that occur simultaneously (Burgess 83), and he reads the “Sirens” scene as a highly innovative textual fugue (84-6). In the “Circe” chapter, he suggests, the lyrics and musical features of the song the characters hear are woven into the passage’s language (88). Burgess’s musical erudition serves *Ulysses* well, but his approach should be applied to *Portrait* with caution—especially early in the novel, when its structure and style correspond to those of young Stephen’s thoughts; attributing its form to any strict musical structure may not be appropriate. Burgess can guide us, however, to consider how “Lilly Dale” permeates both the language and the events that follow it.

For example, producing and re-creating the song with his own voice stimulates Stephen’s fascination with color, which comes to structure many of his early aesthetic and political considerations. With the “little green grave” transformed into an ambiguously pleasant “place,” he continues to re-create the song, modifying the word order to form “O, the green wothe botheth [rose blossoms].” Perhaps this could be attributed entirely to infantile error, but

the image resonates far beyond his infancy. During one of his reflections on color at Clongowes, Stephen recalls “the song about the wild rose blossoms on the little green place. But you could not have a green rose. But perhaps somewhere in the world you could” (24). The green rose has come to represent Stephen’s artistic sense of a shifting reality and unstable assumptions, which is the basis for the crescendo-deflation motif that structures the entire novel.

Beyond the image’s aesthetic ramifications, the green rose embodies young Stephen’s developing power to re-create, and his urge to re-create himself. Subsequently, re-writings and re-creations become central both to Stephen’s art and to Joyce’s narration. Even in the bird girl scene near the end of the novel, for example, Joyce conveys the nuances of Stephen’s perception by presenting and re-presenting images:

He was alone. He was unheeded, happy, and near  
to the wild heart of life. He was alone and young and wilful  
and wildhearted, alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish  
waters and the seaharvest of shells and tangle and veiled grey  
sunlight and gayclad lightclad figures, of children and girls  
and voices childish and girlish in the air. (175-6)

After his encounter with the girl in the river, Stephen leaves, vowing “to recreate life out of life!” (176). The song, then, shapes throughout the entire novel both the development of Stephen’s aesthetic awareness and the language Joyce uses to convey it. In this light, we might consider *Portrait* a precursor to the even more radically “musicalized” prose of *Ulysses*.

The ways “Lilly Dale” permeates the text it precedes seem to evoke the internality of sound, its capacity to penetrate and inhabit a listener as no other sensory experience can.

Angela Frattarola suggests that modernist fiction devotes unprecedented literary attention to sound, precisely because it can present “a self immersed in the world” (133), allow writers to better express ineffable emotion, and facilitate formal experimentation (e.g. stream-of-consciousness). In *Portrait*, she argues, early-childhood Stephen favors words’ sounds over their meanings—for example, in his poetic reconfiguration of the threat to “pull out his eyes” if he does not “apologise” (Joyce 20)—and he carries this tendency with him into adulthood. For one thing, it seems to direct him toward an interest in poetry, which values words as much for their music as for their content. Again, though, “Lilly Dale” permeates the novel’s form in addition to its content.

As Stephen matures, Joyce repeatedly uses musical metaphors to convey inarticulable emotions. In the final chapter, for example, he registers his anticipation of a new life at university as “notes of fitful music leaping upwards a tone and downwards a diminished fourth, upwards a tone and downwards a major third” (170). That a diminished fourth is the same interval as a major third highlights the ties between musical expression and re-creation through language. Later, Stephen hears “a confused music within him . . . then the music seem[s] to recede, to recede, to recede” (172). Frattarola’s analysis addresses neither this emotional music nor the songs Stephen hears, but both fit well with her assessment that emphasis on sound allowed modernists to convey what could not be expressed using more traditional (visual) narrative methods. In fact, Joyce uses “Lilly Dale” itself to convey what the toddler-voice of his free indirect narration cannot: the uncanniness of Stephen’s morbidity, and the inception of his drive toward artistic autonomy.

If “Lilly Dale” launches Stephen onto the trajectory of aesthetic maturation at the core of the novel’s structure, a second allusion to popular song heralds the culmination of that

narrative momentum. Near the end of Chapter 4, just before the bird girl scene, Stephen learns from his young siblings that the family is moving again to avoid debt. Upon this disclosure,

[t]he voice of his youngest brother from the  
farther side of the fireplace began to sing the air *Oft  
in the Stilly Night*. One by one the others took up the  
air until a full choir of voices was singing. (168)

Stephen's apprehension of song has shifted markedly from the Lilly Dale scene—he knows the tune by its given title, and refers to it with the more esoteric musical term “air.” Furthermore, the hierarchy is reversed, with Stephen the adult hearing children's voices. Even without knowing the song itself, then, we recognize it as a demonstration of Stephen's nearly-achieved maturity.

By including its title, however, Joyce invites us even more directly to consider this song's particular implications. “Oft in the Stilly Night,” composed in 1818 by Irish songwriter Thomas Moore, bears a strong musical resemblance to “Lilly Dale.” Both feature simple meters and verse-refrain structures, with key signatures a half-step apart. Furthermore, each presents decidedly morose lyrics in major keys, with consonant harmonies beneath rhythmically active melodies. While a folk song is perhaps not as closely tied to its key as a work of concert-hall classical music, the numerous sonic links between the songs Joyce includes encourage us to consider their symbolic links. They do diverge in their speakers' specific circumstances—Moore's lyrics lament not the loss of life but the loss of youth. The following lines repeat throughout:



The image shows two staves of musical notation for the song "Oft in the Stilly Night". The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom staff is the piano accompaniment. The key signature is two sharps (D major), and the time signature is 2/4. The lyrics are: "Oft in the stil-ly night Ere slum - ber's chain has bound me, Fond Mem - 'ry brings the light Of o - ther days a - round me." The first staff ends with a double bar line, and the second staff begins with a measure rest marked with a '6' above it.

Ruth Bauerle notes the song's ironic relevance to the Dedalus family, which has often moved under cover of darkness to evade landlords (*Songbook* 189). The children's performance represents, in part, the diminishing opportunity to assert themselves as individuals, with the family's descent into poverty. While Stephen formed his identity singing a song written for four voices, his chorus of siblings makes do with a single melodic line. Again, Joyce uses music to express a deprivation and a melancholy that neither Stephen nor his siblings (nor, by extension, the narrative voice) can articulate. However, the song's text bears further implications for Stephen, functioning in tandem with "Lilly Dale."

Like "Lilly Dale," "Oft in the Stilly Night" is fundamentally unfit for the children's voices that perform it. This time, however, Stephen notices the contradiction, rather than participating in it:

He was listening with pain of spirit to the overtone of weariness behind their frail fresh innocent voices. Even before they set out on life's journey they seemed weary already of the way. (169)

The impossibility of a young child's nostalgia for "the smiles, the tears/of boyhood's years" echoes the impossibility of a green rose. Yet while a green rose existed solely in young Stephen's imagination, his siblings' disillusionment is an unmistakable reality. "Oft in the Stilly Night" draws Stephen into the same attunement to ambiguity that "Lilly Dale" did; this time, though, he registers the strangeness more acutely and articulates it more precisely. On one level, his siblings' uncanny yearning propels Stephen to the epiphanic realization of his own aesthetic yearning in the bird girl scene. On another, however, Stephen's comprehension of the song's subtle contradictions connects this musical moment to his earliest one. Here, Frattarola's approach can expand even further—in addition to expressing the ineffable, the two songs work as a barometer for Stephen's own growing capacity to register and articulate emotional nuance.

Furthermore, after listening and reflecting, Stephen echoes his earliest creative impulse by joining his siblings in song. Again, he renders himself the song's performer. This time, though, he is as much its content as its creator. As the only singer among his siblings who lived through the family's more prosperous days, he expresses a solitary nostalgia for that idealized security. But reading this passage with the "Lilly Dale" episode in mind clarifies that "the light of other days" is in fact, for Stephen, the recollection of his own premature grief. He now sings with the choir that his earliest performance lacked, but this song is as much "his song" as "Lilly Dale" was. He mourns, ultimately, the innocence he lost in his performance of "Lilly Dale," when his urge to create and re-create first emerged. That first taste of artistic autonomy propelled him into pursuit of total self-creation, prompting his loss of many other kinds of innocence: virginity, political ignorance, religion, national identity, family intimacy. With all of these lost childhood purities to grieve, Stephen's emotional circumstances are precisely

those that “Oft in the Stilly Night” expresses. The creative power he harnessed by performing “Lilly Dale” now seems unattainable—in performing “Oft,” he has inadvertently inserted himself into its narrative, just as he did with the moocow story.

This failure to distinguish himself from the sonic art he creates is an ominous prelude to the aesthetic ideal he asserts in the following chapter. In performing “Oft in the Stilly Night,” Stephen is far from “refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (217). Ultimately, then, the novel’s two songs work together to hint that the authenticity Stephen envisions for himself as a creator is impossible, before he has even envisioned it fully. This tension embodies the structuring principle on which the novel’s five parts are founded. Joyce builds each section up to Stephen’s arrival at a new epiphany and deflates it in the following chapter; likewise, he opens the novel with Stephen’s claim to separation from his first artistic creation, only to deny that claim toward the end of the novel. The structural continuity between the songs and the novel’s overall form provides further support for this reading of them.

We can derive another structural approach to the songs, however, from Burgess’s musicalization theory. Following his model, it is possible (and plausible) to read *Portrait* as structurally derived from the sonata. In this tightly organized classical form, the first section presents musical themes that a second section develops, exploring their motivic and harmonic possibilities in a variety of keys. Then a third section recapitulates all of the original thematic material. This symmetry is evident in *Portrait*, specifically in the novel’s use of music itself. If we consider Stephen’s “Lilly Dale” performance and its implications for his aesthetic ideal a theme, it is certainly recapitulated in his performance of “Oft in the Stilly Night,” though its tone shifts drastically. In between, this thematic material is developed in Joyce’s use of musical metaphor to explore ineffable emotions, but also in the re-creating and the attunement to

ambiguity that his experience with “Lilly Dale” incites. In the final chapter, then, this thematic material gives way to a kind of coda, in which Joyce uses an abundance of musical metaphors and subtly explores the ramifications of Stephen’s encounters with music for his future as an artist. This structural musicalization emphasizes the songs’ significance for the narrative whole, suggesting that the conclusion they draw together about the impossibility of Stephen’s aesthetic model will permeate his life in the same way that their musicality has permeated his coming-of-age story.

Ultimately, Joyce uses song in *Portrait* the way Frattarola suggests much of modernist literature does: to convey what his words cannot. Because he ends on Stephen’s exultant departure to pursue his creative ideal—to create himself, and to create art that is wholly separate from himself—Joyce cannot deflate this epiphany, the way he has deflated all so far, within the space of the novel. He deftly embeds the deflation, instead, in the musical experiences that frame Stephen’s coming-of-age. The extent to which music is infused in the novel’s structure and language invites us to ascribe great significance to its ramifications for Stephen; Joyce suggests that, likewise, the artist’s inevitable presence in his creation will permeate Stephen’s life thereafter, keeping those fingernail clippers always just out of his reach.

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