

JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

21

**LANGUAGE  
AND LANGUAGES  
IN JOYCE'S FICTION**

Edited by  
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**ea**  
ANICIA

*Volume pubblicato con il contributo di The James Joyce Italian Foundation*

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Direttore responsabile: Franca Ruggieri

Registrazione Num.R.G, 1885/2016, Tribunale Ordinario di Cassino

**ISSN 2281 – 373X**

© 2019, Editoriale Anicia s.r.l. - Roma

<http://www.edizionianicia.it/store/>

[info@edizionianicia.it](mailto:info@edizionianicia.it)

Single copy price: €18.00

Subscription rates (one issue annually):

Personal: €18.00

Institutional: €30.00

The journal will be published on the following website:

**<https://thejamesjoyceitalianfoundation.wordpress.com/>**

Purchases can be made by directly contacting the publisher and then completing a bank transfer covering the price of the book and postage costs (this is €5.00 within Italy, but varies according to the country of destination).

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“[S]O AND SO MANY COUNTERPOINT WORDS”:  
THE CONTRAPUNTAL MUSIC OF “NIGHT LESSONS”

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James Joyce engaged with music throughout his life. He was a talented singer and even considered a singing career for himself. He played the guitar and the piano, and he was particularly drawn to the concept of counterpoint in music. During his time in Zurich, Joyce once told American composer Otto Luening that there were only two composers, “Palestrina and Schoenberg,” two composers that, as Luening himself said, Joyce liked because of the contrapuntal nature of both composers’ works.<sup>1</sup> Joyce fills his prose works with musical references, but he also goes beyond these references.

Counterpoint poses a challenge for Joyce. Paul-Émile Cadilhac, an author who attempted writing symphonic novels, lays out this difficulty, explaining

One cannot, as in music, write several sounds to hear simultaneously.... One can develop a number of themes simultaneously. To be specific, one can bring forward, in the same chapter and sometimes on the same page, different intrigues, descriptions, and dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

Writing specifically of Joyce’s polyphonic attempts in the “Wandering Rocks” episode of *Ulysses*, author/composer Anthony Burgess further explains: “Joyce wants to give us a model of a labyrinthine organism

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<sup>1</sup> Luening first reported this two composer statement in his *The Odyssey of an American Composer*. He later unpacks it, suggests the contrapuntal connection between the two composers, and also concedes that Joyce’s reference to Schoenberg may have been a little test by Joyce of Luening, since very little of Schoenberg’s music had been played in Zürich at the time of this conversation (Martin and Bauerle 1990: 42-43).

<sup>2</sup> Cadilhac’s preface to his novel *La pastorale* as quoted in Brown 1948: 174.

which can be viewed as a mechanism: his concern is synchronic, not diachronic, but the very nature of literature, which functions only in time ... forbids a true counterpoint of action” (Burgess 1983: 137-8).

In discussing counterpoint in a novel, I would like to separate contrapuntal writing into two broad categories: “writerly” counterpoint, and “composerly” counterpoint. Writerly counterpoint is not restricted to authors interested in creating musical effects in their writing, and, in talking about this as counterpoint at all, one is merely discussing the writing as very loosely analogous to a musical counterpoint. One type of this writerly counterpoint would be Cadilhac and Burgess’s “counterpoints” of plot and situation, for instance. Though we might label an author’s juggling of multiple characters and multiple storylines in a novel as counterpoint, there is nothing particularly *musical* about such writing. There are many polyphonic elements of printed texts that are not about music at all – the dialogic nature of the novel that Bakhtin discusses is “about” counterpoint in a text, but is not about music at all. This led Burgess, someone who actively engaged with writing both music and prose on a daily basis for most of his life, to relegate such attempts as not “true counterpoint.”

Texts aspiring in some way to be musical in nature may also attempt a “composerly” counterpoint. For a printed text, there is actually no way to create musical counterpoint, so discussing a “composerly” counterpoint marks the text’s striving toward something distinctly musical and also something unobtainable. Despite his critique of other writers’ attempts at writing prose that worked like musical counterpoint and musical forms, Burgess made a large-scale attempt at just that with his 1974 novel, *Napoleon Symphony: A Novel in Four Movements*. In the closing verse epistle to *Napoleon Symphony*, Burgess mentions Joyce’s musical “Sirens” and its *fuga per canonem* calling it “Most brilliant, most ingenious,” but also concluding that “this is really a piece of elephantine fun designed to show the thing cannot be done” (Burgess 1974: 363).

## **Joyce and Music and Polyphony**

James Joyce had a lovely tenor voice, and as a youth he placed third in the Tenor Competition division of the Feis Ceoil, the National Song Fes-

tival (as low as third only because, according to Oliver Gogarty, sight reading “embarrassed him” [Gogarty 1950: 59]). Joyce studied and performed music throughout his life. He proudly mentioned on more than one occasion that his maid sometimes mistook his own singing for a record of professional John McCormack (Bauerle 1993: 151).<sup>3</sup>

Joyce fills his works with musical allusions and depicts more than a couple of musical situations within his works. This is obvious from the very beginning of his career, with his early poetry collection carrying the title *Chamber Music*. In the schemata for *Ulysses* Joyce famously says that the governing science for the “Sirens” episode is music, and the particular technique is “*fuga per canonem*.” *Ulysses* also includes some actual musical notation. “Scylla and Charybdis” includes the incipit for the “Gloria” from the mass in mensural notation. And “Ithaca” includes the notated melody for the folksong “Little Harry Hughes.” *Finnegans Wake* takes the musical references even further. Joyce’s last novel, of course, takes its title from a song, and the story of the song figures prominently throughout the novel. It also, like *Ulysses*, includes music notation—with a four-note musical excerpt showing up in Book II, Chapter 2. (In addition, the melody for “The Ballad of Persse O’Reilly appears in Book I.2.)

Book II, Chapter 2 of the *Wake* is easily the most visually arresting of the novel. Here, unlike the rest of the novel, the text is divided into a main body of text on each page, and smaller bits of text in italics in the left-hand margin, with text in all capitals in the right-hand margin. There are also footnotes throughout Book II.2, and, in addition to the musical notation, page 293 includes the Euclidean diagram, and page 308 an actual child’s drawings of someone (Issy) thumbing her nose and also beneath that partial head (“skool”) the “crossbuns.”<sup>4</sup>

This section, “night studies”, is a problem. Part of this problem comes from its very long gestation, and the existence of large sections of Book II, chapter 2 well before it took on its form within the novel. Parts of “night studies” even appeared in print before Joyce imposed upon it the form of a schoolbook. The section that Joyce labeled in his notes as

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<sup>3</sup> Bauerle found this in Colum 1958: 184.

<sup>4</sup> Fritz Senn (2007: 48) says it was Hans von Curiel’s daughter Lucia who drew these. These appeared pre-*Finnegans Wake* in the 1937 limited publication *Storiella as She is Syung*.

“The Triangle” appeared twice in print without the schoolbook format, first in the magazine *transition* in February 1928 (called only “Continuation of a Work in Progress” and again in 1929 with the title “The Muddest Thick That Was Ever Heard Dump” as part of the limited publication *Tales Told of Shem and Shaun* (Crispi 2002). Joyce had actually completed “The Triangle” on 25 July 1926, and sent it to Wyndham Lewis for his new journal *The Enemy*, but rather than publish it, Lewis printed a sharp critique of Joyce in his new journal instead.

Much of the opening of *Finnegans Wake* II.2, along with the last few pages of it, appeared in the journal *transition* in July 1935. And they appeared again two years later with the title *Storiella As She Is Syung* in 1937 as a sort of illuminated manuscript, also forming the last excerpt of *Work in Progress* that Joyce was to have published (with the remaining 16 months before *Finnegans Wake* was to appear in print [Crispi 2007: 237]). In addition, an earlier section that Joyce gave the header of “The Letter” originally appeared alongside other draft materials of the chapter, then was removed from those, and then very late in Joyce’s work on the section, it reappeared *in toto* as one massive footnote presented on page 279.

Joyce goes back to old material, even already published material, and very late in the game imposes onto these materials his form for the section. And this form is all about polyphony. Admittedly, this is on the surface purely a writerly polyphony—Joyce imitates a schoolbook, with its footnotes. He also adds other voices to the polyphony with the marginalia. In a 1939 letter to Budgen, Joyce calls this section “the most difficult of all... yet the technique here is a reproduction of a schoolboy’s (and schoolgirl’s) old classbook complete with marginalia by the twins, who change sides at half time, footnotes by the girl (who doesn’t)” (Crispi 2007: 214).<sup>5</sup>

As I say, much of this text existed, and very close to the publication date for the novel as a whole, Joyce reworked it, imposing upon it this “new” form. As Crispi notes, the “pedagogical theme was not the chapter’s rationale for the first eight years of its gestation: it had its own specific ‘plot’ long before the chapter’s form took precedence over its content” (Crispi 2007: 214-15).

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<sup>5</sup> Joyce’s quote is from a July 1939 letter.



So, what about the counterpoint of “night lessons?” The contrapuntal layers of the *Wake* are inexhaustible. For now, I would like to lay out a few of the different kinds of counterpoint at play in “night lessons.”

(1) Just as he did with *Ulysses*, Joyce packs *Finnegans Wake* with musical references, chiefly snippets of popular song lyrics, advertising jingles, liturgical music, and opera aria quotes. In addition to musical references, and far more than in any of his other works, the text of the *Wake* develops pure sound. Though these are not arrows to counterpoint itself, they do prime the reader to think of music and even to sing bits of the text. Joyce manages this through quoting and parodying and distorting familiar lyrics, banking on his readers’ hearing already familiar melodies while addressing the text. For example, in a passage referencing the ever-present Garden of Eden story, we get a snippet of the *Gloria Patri*: “As they warred in their big innings ease now we never shall know” (*FW* 271.22-24). Joyce takes advantage of the tunes his readers already know. Coming to 272, lines 9-10 and addressing the lines “Dark ages clasp the daisy roots, Stop, if you are a sally of the allies, hot off Minnowaurs and naval actiums...”, many readers are going to sing “Sally of Our Alley” and that is just what Joyce was hearing. In Shem’s marginalia to the left of this same passage, we find Joyce’s only music notation presented within the pages of *Finnegans Wake*. Since in the central text here Joyce mentions B.C. and A.D., and these are the four notes given here on the staff, the message of the musical notation could be nothing more than a repeat of those letters. But, despite Joyce’s own hesitancy at sight-reading, I think it a natural thing for a reader to want to know what these symbols sound like, and to try them out. Otherwise, why not simply write in italics in that margin the four letters, why turn them into a tune?

(2) The complex nature of Joyce’s construction sends most readers to other texts. Joyce packs the *Wake* with obscure references and with words and parts of words taken from languages that the reader (and even the author) cannot (could not) read. This forces most readers to pause frequently to consult other texts. Roland McHugh’s *Annotations* condenses these actions to a two-part (two-book) back-and-forth: the reader using McHugh’s book lays out both it and the *Wake* side-by-side, and toggles

frequently between the two texts, thereby performing a polyphonic reading. And I believe this is a sort of polyphonic reading that Joyce *suggested* with the encouragement he gave to the whole *Finnegans Wake* critical apparatus, and simply by packing in references so obscure that some of them were bound to assert themselves to a reader as something she would need to consult another text to understand. Ironically, by supersaturating his text in the way that he does, I believe Joyce makes this sort of toggling reading impossible for a reader to perform. Though in some ways he encourages a scholarly unpacking of every line of the text, what the text, in the end, requires is a straight-through musical performance. Since the text makes it impossible to catch many of the references it makes, the text forces the reader—the one who will read for the inherent music of the text on its own—to surrender to the momentum of the text. The text defeats the scholarly reading, and the reader who surrenders to its motoric nature and reads straight through the text, as if listening to a live musical performance, misses much of the web of references, perhaps missing all of the Old Norse in the text, or the Gaelic, but the text actually rewards such a reader with its music.

(3) There is also the base musical nature of *Finnegans Wake* as a whole to consider. The *Wake* repeats its stories over and over. And the same little stories keep coming back. By creating a large cast of characters that may be seen as a handful of characters in different guises, *Finnegans Wake* suggests that each of these stories is running throughout the book, at the same time. So, the Tristan and Isolde story runs throughout, and so does the Garden of Eden, and so does the story of Mr. Porter the publican and his family, and Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker and his wife Anna Livia Plurabelle. The repetitious and circular nature of the text is inherently musical, not novelistic. Many musical forms are built as circles, and this carries over in some ways into some poetic forms such as the rondeau—but a circular novel, this is a new thing with the *Wake*.

(4) For II.2 Joyce adds the writerly polyphony of the section's specialized layout. In his "schoolbook" recasting of the chapter, Joyce forces the reader into a contrapuntal performance of each page of this section of the text in a way unique to this section of *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce, late in his

work on this section, recasts his text as a text filled with paratextual material in its margins. The reader thumbing through the novel might actually suppose that “night lessons” is written in such a way to assist the reader. As Luca Crispi notes, “Readers accustomed to find support in the apparatus of scholarly texts are encouraged by the appearance of the ostensibly familiar layout to seek the text’s remainder in its margins” (Crispi 2007: 214). Rather than help, what the reader finds instead in the margins is an increase of density.

(5) As Joyce published the pre-schoolbook form of much of II.2 before the novel appeared, a genetic reading connecting at least two forms of this text is built into its publication history. A scholar aware of “The Triangle” or *Storiella* may very well read “night lessons” alongside these earlier texts, reifying yet another text-to-text contrapuntal read of this section of the novel.

One of Joyce’s headings within his draft materials for book II.2 points to just this sort of reading. David Hayman in *A First-Draft Version of Finnegans Wake* mentions a portion of II.2 which has “an illegible title which may perhaps read ‘Te Deum’” and a little later he mentions that “Another passage clearly headed ‘Te Deum Antiphona after Δ’ is found on MS p. 124, which includes drafts...” of a couple of paragraphs to be found on *FW* 304-306 close to the end of II.2 (Hayman 1963: 144).

I think this points to the musical nature of Joyce’s recasting of “night lessons.” Antiphons (antiphona) are works typically performed interleaved with the lines of a psalm. Some monastic communities performed the materials of the antiphon in simple (and perhaps improvised) polyphony. Others sang the antiphon with the psalm as a call and response (either between soloist and group, or between two choirs, possibly with instruments). Without pointing at these possible polyphonic settings at all, the simplest form of presenting the psalm with the antiphon, which means literally ‘sounding against (the psalm)’, provides a nice analogy for reading “night lessons” alongside (interleaved with) the published, pre-schoolbook format.

## **The only way to take in a text like “night lessons” is in an aural performance**

Though lessons in counterpoint are a part of a student composer’s work, a facility with counterpoint that pushes these techniques exhaustively is usually the province of the master. Late in his life, J.S. Bach, often labeled as the greatest contrapuntalist of all time, launched on a couple of large-scale contrapuntal projects. In each case, there were certainly multiple motivations for the work, but a part of the motivation was surely the display of mastery. With both the *Goldberg Variations* completed in the last decade of Bach’s life and *The Art of Fugue* a late project that the composer left unfinished at his death, Bach presents an ordered catalog of contrapuntal techniques. In *Goldberg*, Bach presents an aria as a frame to a set of 30 variations on that aria, with each third variation a different kind of canon. The intervals of the canons’ voice relationships expand from the first, so there is a canon at the interval of the unison, then at the second, then at the third, and so on. The pieces following the canons also follow a pattern, so there are nine sets of variations in the pattern, with a canon, a genre piece, and an arabesque in each set, before the variation that should be the canon at the tenth breaks the pattern by being a quodlibet (a contrapuntal form which combines several different melodies simultaneously, unlike the canon, which instead presents different iterations of the same melody overlapping each other).

Similarly, with *The Art of Fugue* Bach presents an exhaustive exploration of imitative techniques. Bach scholar Christoff Wolff says that *The Art of Fugue* “was an exploration in depth of the contrapuntal possibilities inherent in a single musical subject” (Wolff 2000: 433). Not only that, but in *The Art of Fugue* Bach arranges the various fugues and canons on the single subject in order of increasing complexity. These are proto-Modernist statements, pushing the limits of contrapuntal technique in exhaustive cataloging works.

To draw an analogy, Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* packs his work with counterpoint of many different varieties, counterpoint within counterpoint, counterpoint of plot along with intertextual counterpoints; he constructs pages filled with artificial paratextuality—attempts through typography and page

placement to inscribe a counterpoint on the page itself, attempts to elicit an impossible contrapuntal performance from the reader.

Joyce saturates his text with returns, recurrences, and circular, that is, *musical*, devices. The whole novel is filled with sonic play that takes over and defeats lexical meaning: *Finnegans Wake* destroys words, and, in places, the reader is left with groups of letters merely recording sound. Joyce even includes actual musical notation, thereby inscribing the musical nature of the text on the page. And it is such a dense text, and composed of so many bits and pieces, that it practically demands the *Annotations* and other reference works, thereby suggesting to readers that they address the *Wake* simultaneously with other helper texts. And, *Finnegans Wake* is in some ways in counterpoint with the Works in Progress; its slow genesis and the long publication history of various bits of the novel leaves the reader with not only a text without an ending, but one which stretches back through many beginnings, a thoroughly open text always in conversation with its other forms. In the final form of Chapter II.2 Joyce gives a representation of a wholly impossible-to-realize, musically contrapuntal text. He takes an interest in how fugues work that he quizzed Otto Luening about, and leaves us with a contrapuntal gauntlet thrown down before the reader.

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