

# A Prelude to Joyce's *Chamber Music*

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James Joyce's first published book, *Chamber Music* (1907), is a sequence or a suite of thirty-six short pieces that revisit several traditional themes and topics in European love poetry and reshape them in the light of late 19<sup>th</sup> century sensibility and musical taste.

Ominously enough, the manuscript had been rejected by no less than four publishers (Grant Richards, John Lane, Heinemann and Constable) before Elkin Mathews agreed to have it printed. In fact, professional critics later echoed such an apparent lack of spontaneous interest and for the past hundred years the book's place in Joyce's canon has often been controversially discussed.

Several early reviewers bitterly regretted that Joyce's lyrical inspiration was mainly of a literary nature and clearly out of touch with the cultural and political reawakening of contemporary Ireland. For all his enthusiasm about a fellow countryman's work, even Yeats later remarked that Joyce had never anything to do with Irish politics, extremist or otherwise, because he seemed to have only literary and philosophic sympathies. Furthermore, later day critics have not been particularly enthusiastic about the somewhat retrospective character of *Chamber Music* and its tribute to allegedly exhausted literary clichés, especially when compared to the challenging, groundbreaking achievement of Joyce's mature masterpieces, namely *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

Nevertheless, while conceding that there is some indisputable truth in a comparative assessment of *Chamber Music* as a minor work by a major author, we should guard ourselves against the sheer dismissal of Joyce's early verse as an uninspired prologue to higher achievements. In fact, Joyce's life and artistic career are a sustained continuum where, more often than not, the existence of dark holes and false starts should be ascribed to the

misguided critical judgement of biographers or literary historians, who fail to establish the links between the various stages in the development of the artist's work.

As a matter of fact, it seems appropriate not to overlook the documentary value of *Chamber Music* in so far as it might be profitably approached as a kind of aesthetic laboratory where Joyce experimented with various styles, forms, and modes of expression. In particular, the book documents an early Joycean attempt to explore the interaction between sound and meaning, with a view to the ideal blending of two complementary discourses, i.e. poetry and music. Such a reevaluation would redress the balance in establishing the literary interest of *Chamber Music*, which might then emerge as a significant step both in the progress of Joyce's art and in the development of the poetry and poetics of the pre-modernist generation.

In fact, Joyce's plan to publish a volume of poems dates back to 1902-03, when a number of pieces had reached their final version but it took the author another five years to complete the whole, rearrange the sequence and overcome his hesitation in submitting the manuscript to would-be publishers and finally seeing it through the press. Somehow, he was probably aware that the politically uncommitted tone of his poems would hardly meet the taste and expectations of both the public and the critics. Besides, the impersonal undertones of the text's outmoded amatory art seemed to show through the surface of his lyrics, turning them into a kind of period pieces, possibly apt to be published and set to music as a suite of songs after the model of Elizabethan composers. In fact, a letter to Stanislaus (February 1907) reads:

I don't like the book but wish it were published and be damned to it. However, it is a young man's book. I felt like that. It is not a book of love-verses at all, I perceive. But some of them are pretty enough to be put to music. I hope someone will do so, someone that knows old English music, as I like.<sup>1</sup>

The title chosen, *Chamber Music*, obviously announces the enclosed, intimate atmosphere that normally surrounds the performance of a very

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Gilbert (ed.), *The Letters of James Joyce*, London, 1957, I, 45.

limited number of string instruments. It also stresses the predominance of rhythmical and melodic effects over the general argument of the lyrical sequence and over the verbal substance of each particular poem. Nevertheless, let me add in parenthesis that in his characteristically ironic, scatological vein, Joyce has later given rise to the belief that the title simply alluded to the sound of young lady's urine while she made use of a chamber pot. The misnomer requires no further comment here, but readers will probably notice that references to bodily excretions or any obscene associations have no place in *Chamber Music* that in fact excludes every substandard language register.

The macro-structure of *Chamber Music* follows the fashion of Renaissance sonnet sequences, since the final arrangement of poems illustrates the fictional narrative of the various stages in the personal involvement of young lovers and their initiation into the exhilarating pleasures and inevitable shortcomings of erotic experience.

It is worth noticing that Joyce had delved into Elizabethan literary conventions and symbols to the point that even the metaphorical structure of *Chamber Music* reflects the influence of Shakespearean imagery. The sequence encompasses the cycle of the year's seasons and the periods of the day, as a means of evoking the cosmic counterpoint of human life, as the episodes of the love story alternate from intense euphoria to deepest melancholy. The very choice of the English bard as a model may sound slightly puzzling but on closer look two complementary explanations can be offered. First, in spite of the fact that his plays unmistakably hinted at the supremacy of England and her Empire, Shakespeare's genius had been hailed since the Romantic age as the supreme example of the way in which the great classics do supersede all polarities and lie beyond the boundaries of time and space, as signposts of the world literary heritage. Secondly, in line with cultural nationalism and the nostalgia of primitive lore that were being transmitted to the younger generation at the turn of the century, Joyce may have used Shakespeare as a universal model for all who called upon themselves the task of fostering literary production and enhancing the cultural alertness of a new Ireland.

As for the inner structure of the sequence of poems in *Chamber Music*, Joyce briefly comments in one of his letters:

The central song is XIV after which the movement is all downwards until XXXIV, which is vitally the end of the book. XXXV and XXXVI are tailpieces just as I and III are preludes.<sup>2</sup>

Literary analysis confirms Joyce's tripartite pattern (ouverture, development, and finale) but if you disregard poems *per se* and use a structural grid to identify the major thematic clusters, each section can be extended and made rather more comprehensive.

Accordingly, the first movement (Poems I-XIII) is dominated by the often-uncoordinated moves of each lover in the absorbing, all-embracing search for the possession of the other. This is further complicated by the conflict between the desires of reunion and the idealistic need to preserve solitude, in order to live up to the poet's responsibility towards intellectual life. After lyric XIV – the central song in the series, in Joyce's own words – the second movement (Poems XIV-XXII) expands the clash between love and creative imagination and suggests the limitations of heterosexual involvement, an option that precludes the poet's solitary destiny but excludes the otherwise vital stimulus of male companionship. The final movement (Poems XXIII-XXXVI) shows a way out for the earlier dilemma crisis, by recognising the fickleness of women and the inconstant, *false ingénue* passion that once enticed the poet and threatened his freedom.

The poet thus hails the triumph of the creative imagination over human concerns and struggles to accept his exile on the fringes of society, as the radical condition of any artist doomed to pay a heavy price for reaping his aesthetic harvest. In the wider context of Joyce's work, this attitude of exile evidently foreshadows *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where the hero's awareness of the paradox between the sweet imprisonment of passion and the unrestrained love of freedom triggers his escape from political and religious institutions.

However true this may be, it does not necessarily follow that *Chamber Music* should be primarily read as a series of autobiographical, wordsworthian confessions that reflect the growth of a poet's mind. On the contrary, the collection documents Joyce's elaborate irony and

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<sup>2</sup> Stuart Gilbert (ed.), *op. cit.*, I, 67.

detachment as part of his reaction against the romantic theory of literary production, which had led critics to believe that their main task was to comb poetry in search of the master key that would unlock an author's heart, and disclose the personality of the man behind the words.

In truth, both the mid-Victorian dramatic lyrics composed by Browning, Tennyson and by their successors Swinburne or Yeats at the turn of the century had long challenged the premises of authorial sincerity and Joyce's generation followed suit in undermining the autobiographical fallacy that identified a man's life with a poet's work. In the case of *Chamber Music* the vagueness of the time and space setting, the non-referential denotation of characters and their interaction and the conventional themes and images add to the impersonal effect that was about to be explored in similar terms by early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism. In order to reinforce the significance of such links, it should be stressed that Joyce's place as a virtual modernist poet was publicly acknowledged when Pound decided to include one of his poems in the famous anthology *Des Imagistes* (1913).

As a kind of compensation for its remoteness from everyday reality, *Chamber Music* constantly draws inspiration from the fictional world of other literary works and Joyce again anticipates both Eliot and Pound in the practice of relying on quotation, witty pastiche, parodic forms and other intertextual devices to revisit their common mythical heritage. The latter makes up a choral framework that both amplifies the poet's single voice and echoes the European literary tradition, thus weaving a fabric of cultural cross-references that can carry subtle undertones and raise the level of the reader's enjoyment. In this way, the wheel turns full circle, as the detachment effect, obtained by quoting from heterogeneous sources, inversely secures the reader's empathy, by assigning him the task of deciphering references, identifying voices, unveiling allusions, and sharing in the experience of collective history, that poetry has made his own.

In this sense, *Chamber Music* is a historical repertoire of styles and forms and an experimental text where the poet tries his hand at the art of writing and feels free to test a variety of rhetorical figures, similes, images, symbols, as well as different metres, stanzas, rhythms and rhymes. This eclecticism could be interpreted as homage paid to Joyce's predecessors in the sense that modernists believed that a regeneration of past literary conventions was fully justified in deriving innovative energy from traditional

sources, since avant-garde aesthetics involved a reactivation rather than a rejection of history.

Accordingly, when we try to establish the intertextuality of *Chamber Music*, it is no wonder that the Bible should have provided Joyce with so many episodes and quotations, either taken from various passages of the Gospels or strongly reminiscent of the passionate eroticism of the Old Testament's *Song of Songs*. Additionally, medieval literature also proved a never-ending source of poetic materials ready for adoption. These ranged from technical structures – such as the consonantal rhymes and the alliterative prosody of Early English literature – to the revival or even subversion of staple themes and conventions of courtly love, as developed by ancient troubadours in their exquisite roundelays and villanelles. Furthermore, Joyce's literary inclinations made him a poet akin to the holistic, allegorical sensibility of Renaissance neoplatonic circles, as reflected in the works of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Pico Della Mirandola and Giordano Bruno. On the one hand, these affinities may partly explain Joyce's poetics of obscurity, based on a concept of meaning as something to be grasped (if at all), after a strenuous process of piercing the surface of words to decode the deeper layers of sense. On the other hand, his familiarity with Renaissance culture further accounts for the influence of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century love poems upon *Chamber Music*, mainly the lyrics of Shakespeare and Herrick, as well as the rhythms of songwriters like Henry Lawes and John Dowland.

Considering that Joyce tended to ignore the contribution of neo-classical literature, we can conclude our mapping of his selection of past paradigms by noticing that the poetry and poetics of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Symbolism, mainly Paul Verlaine, rank high amid the intertextual references of *Chamber Music*. In fact, Verlaine's famous dictum – *De la musique avant toute chose* – reinforced Joyce's post-romantic belief that a poem is the product of unconscious powers and stems from powerful feelings that spontaneously overflow under the form of verbal music.

In fact, the inherent melody of Joyce's words dominates the text so overwhelmingly that *Chamber Music* has been open to criticism for allegedly failing to provide enough sense to such a wealth of sound. Be that as it may, such a lack of balance between the relative weight of message and medium can hardly be considered an aesthetic flaw, since modern

poetic trends have long dismissed dualistic theories that relied on sharp distinctions between form and content and tend to stress the intimate combination of both elements. Moreover, Joyce, himself an occasional amateur musician, belonged to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century neo-Elizabethan generation that admired the art of the lute song and praised the achievement of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century court composers, so that music can claim to be one of the poet's favourite arts and the natural companion of his words.

In addition, as his entire work progressed, Joyce gradually became aware of the limitations of words as too concrete, denotative, and referential instruments that fell short of conveying the immaterial ties that bind creatures together. Accordingly, when in the process of Joyce's poetic composition, emotions are so exacerbated that words cease to perform their expressive function and become what Browning once termed 'the filthy rags of speech', only two alternative paths lay open. The first path would be to compose wordless poems, a silence pregnant with inner meaning yet lacking the ability to communicate it. The second (and Joycean) path negotiates a compromise solution by downgrading semantic values and prioritising signifiers as musical sounds, in an attempt to turn them into vehicles for conveying those moods and emotions that lie too deep for words.

In more than one sense of the phrase, the poet's voice is thus available to recapture the original sense of song, as lyrics set to music. Indeed, Nora is reported to have said once that "Jim should have stuck to the singing", hereby praising her husband's near professional musical accomplishment and particularly the quality of his tenor voice. This artistic training made him undertake the task of composing a tune for Poem XI of *Chamber Music* ("Bid adieu to girlish days") and the sound workmanship of his verse has been a welcome challenge to a number of Irish composers.

The first was Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer (1882-1957), whom Joyce himself encouraged to set his thirty-six poems to music. The outcome of this incomplete project shows the composer's overall fidelity to the lyric and rhythmical features of Joyce's language with the occasional inspiration from Renaissance lute songs. Joyce has more than once expressed his satisfaction with Palmer's work, which he rated higher than other early attempts by Moeran, Bliss and Charlotte Milligan Fox. Indeed, in a letter to Palmer in 1909 Joyce remarked: "(...) you may set all of *Chamber*

*Music* in time. This was indeed partly my idea in writing it. The book is in fact a suite of songs and if I were a musician I suppose I should have set them myself.”<sup>3</sup>

This permanent convergence of music and words makes the literary translation of *Chamber Music* a possible but highly improbable task, considering the extreme difficulty in transposing the semantic features of Joyce’s poems into another language and keeping them singable at the same time. Translators face a similar crux whenever music is by definition an essential part of the overall meaning to be communicated – as in the case of an opera libretto – which implies a number of inevitable adjustments in the target text to reduce the level of distortion.

However, it is possible to adopt a tentative position of compromise by selecting several tools available in the target culture to recreate the musicality of Joyce’s verse, as expressed in diction, tone, rhyme, alliteration of consonant sounds, assonance of vowels, onomatopoeic effects, etc. This equipment may include not only the entire present-day phonological repertoire of prosodic options but also some of the stylistic resources that have been instrumental in various periods of literary history.

The truth is that any translator will have to pay an extremely heavy price for venturing into the task of importing Joyce’s poems into the context of an alien culture and one remark will make my point clear. While in *Chamber Music* constant allusion is made to objects, works and figures that belong to the heritage of English culture, a literary translator should be fully aware of the fact that, in order to be shared and enjoyed by foreign readers, this referential paraphernalia must be rewritten, transposed, and culturally recoded with materials drawn from the target system.

This is the reason why the forthcoming first translation of Joyce’s *Chamber Music* in this country contains clear echoes of Portuguese popular literature, as well as inspiration drawn from our medieval troubadours, Renaissance poets, mainly Camoens, and allusions to the poetic diction of late 19<sup>th</sup> century symbolists. But then, how else could we possibly comply with Ezra Pound’s famous order to aspiring translators of poetry: “Make it new!”?

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<sup>3</sup> *Loc. cit.*

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