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Poetical Noises of a Novelist's Heart: A Study of James Joyce as a Poet

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Abstract

James Joyce, who is mostly celebrated for his novels such as A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Ulysses and Finnegans Wake, also composed poetry. Two existing volumes of his poems are Poems Penyeach and Chamber Music. Although we are not likely to find in Joyce's poetry the artistic grace of his fiction, his poems are of much significance in the sense that they help us to explore Joyce, the artist as well as Joyce, the man. He seems to unlock his heart through his poems. They are saturated with his emotions and desires, frustrations and anger, disappointments and disillusion. Joyce himself conceived of his poems as musical noises interpreting moods. He used his poems as an escape from the literalism of his meticulously detailed and precisely accurate exposition of the ordinary; in them he records his yearnings and his transient states of feeling. They are mood music. The present paper intends to study various aspects of Joyce's poetry.

James Joyce composed poetry during his whole life, and especially in his early years. A good deal of it was comic and satirical; he was expert at composing limericks and scurrilous rhymes about his friends and enemies; these are dotted throughout his correspondence. For instance, he vented his spleen against Sir Horace Rumbold (whom he called Sir Whorearse Rumhole) not only by making him write the illiterate hangman's letter in *Ulysses* (301) but in the following parody of Browning's "Pippa Passes":

"The Right Man in the
Wrong Place"

The pig's in the barley,
The fat's in the fire:

Old Europe can hardly
Find two pence to buy her.
Jack Spratt's in his office,
Puffed, powdered and curled:
Rumbold's in Warsaw –
All's right with the world.

(1-8)

Two longer and meatier satirical poems than such squibs as this are printed as a makeweight in the present Faber edition of *Pomes Penyeach*. They are "The Holy Office" of 1904 and "Gas from a Burner" of 1912. These are probably his best poems; they are lively, witty and well-managed attacks on people who had annoyed or injured him.

The title of “The Holy Office” betrays Joyce's anti-clericalism, but the poem's target is the 'mumming company' of Irish writers who were engaged in a resurgence of drama, poetry and novels in the Dublin that he was resolved to leave. According to him, they indulged in 'dreamy dreams'— which is a reference not only to the twilight Celtic legends that Yeats immersed himself in, but also to Yeats's mystical interests (as expounded in *A Vision*) and George Russell (A.E.)'s theosophy. Joyce attacked them for ignoring the physical side of life and, like his own Gerty MacDowell (*Ulysses* 357), thinking only in romantic and spiritual terms:

But all these men of whom I
speak
Make me the sewer of their
clique.
That they may dream their
dreamy dreams
I carry off their filthy streams
.....
.
Thus I relieve their timid
arses,
Perform my office of
Katharsis. (“The holy office,”
47-50, 55-6)

Of course, this is the 'holy office' that he means in the title; and the purging (katharsis) is performed in a domestic office furnished with a hole.

[Whatever truth there may have been in Joyce's ascription of spiritual bloodlessness to the poems of the early Yeats – such as “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” or “Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths”- it must be remembered that the later Yeats brought the physical side of love fully into consciousness in such lines as: “. . . Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement” (“Crazy Jane Talks With The Bishop” 15-6).]

Secondly, and probably more biting, he regarded their whole woolly philosophy as soft-centred, lacking in intellectual rigour. They shamle, crouch, crawl and pray, whereas he stands erect, boldly challenging all comers like a stage on a mountain-ridge; they have “. . . souls that hate the strength that mine has / Steeled in the school of old Aquinas” (“The holy office,” 81-2).

This mixture of Byronic self-doomed pride, mark of all romantic Cains, and intellectual arrogance, is one of the dominant features of Joyce's character. The last two lines [“And though they spurn me from their door / My soul shall spurn them evermore.” (95-6)], which were written in the heat of the very moment when he was leaving Ireland, make an interesting contrast with the calmer rationalization that he expressed when he looked back on Stephen Dedalus ten years later: “I go to... forge in the smithy of my soul, the uncreated conscience of my race” (*A Portrait* 196).

“Gas from a Burner” he wrote in a rage when the publisher who has signed a contract to publish *Dubliners* seemed finally to refuse to do so (Grose 18). It is a very funny but not greatly significant poem. It is written in the first person, as if by Roberts the publisher, who boasts of how broadminded he really is, having published many *avant-garde* works; but he cannot allow Joyce —“that bloody fellow, / That was over here dressed in Austrian yellow” (49-50) — to bring into disrepute the name of Ireland:

This lovely land that always sent
Her writers and artists to banishment,
And in a spirit of Irish fun
Betrayed her own leaders, one by one.
(15-8)

The end is masterly. Roberts says:
I'll burn that book, so help me devil
.....
The very next Lent I will unbare
My penitent buttocks to the air

And sobbing beside my printing press
My awful sin I will confess.
My Irish foreman from Bannockburn
Shall dip his right hand in the urn
And sign crisscross with reverent thumb
Memento homo upon my burn.

(“Gas from a Burner” 86, 91-8)

This is not the James Joyce of his serious poems, collected in *Chamber Music* (1970) and *Pomes Penyeach* (1927). The only feature the scurrilous poems share with these is the technical excellence of the verse. The lyrics seem to come from a completely different pen, the pen which wrote the precious pale effusion that Stephen Dedalus composed in *A Portrait*. This is a villanelle, an example of a form which requires great dexterity to its two rhymes and two alternating refrains:

Are you not weary of ardent ways,
Lure of the fallen seraphim?
Tell no more of enchanted days.
(*A Portrait* 172)

The obvious characteristics of this poem are its abundance of highly-coloured incense-laden words such as seraphim, Eucharistic, and chalice, and a concentration on liquid phrases of small significance: ‘languorous look and lavish limb’, for instance.

Of course one can dismiss this technically accomplished poem as a prentice effort, and say that Joyce is looking mockingly if still affectionately at the callow youth who produced it. But *chamber Music* abounds with lights of amethyst, night wind answering in antiphon, reverie, sweet bosom, light attire, virginal mien, welladay, zone, snood, cherubim, ancient plenilune, epithalamium, grey and golden gossamer, soft tumult of thy hair, tremulous, divers treasures, witchery, soft choiring of delight, the waters’ monotone. Well, you might argue that *Chamber Music* dates from the same period of Joyce’s development as *A Portrait*, so is bound to share its poetical

style. But *Pomes Penyeach*, put out by Joyce in his full maturity six years after *Ulysses* was finished, abounds equally in love-blown bannerets, shy sweet lures (as in the villanelle of Stephen), moon dew, lambent water, thurible, laburnum tendrils and seraphim. Joyce therefore conceived of his poems as musical noises interpreting moods; the man who wrote the Verlainesque lines:

All day I hear the noise of waters
Making moan
Sad as the seabird is when going
Forth alone
He hears the winds cry to the waters’
Monotone.

(*Chamber Music* xxxv 1-6)

is the composer of the miraculous ‘Sirens’ chapter (XI) of *Ulysses*.

But he is also the mocking concocter of the romantic sugariness that opens the ‘Nausicaa’ chapter (XIII) in the words of Gerty MacDowell, devotee of women’s trashy magazines (Grose 105). There is thus a paradox. Joyce wrote these swooning lyrics, expended much time and artistry on perfecting them, launched them into a cold world with every appearance of satisfaction at the same time he denigrated their style and manner by calling one little book *Chamber Music*, which could be and indeed was a reference to the sound of water falling into a bedroom utensil, and the other *Pomes Penyeach*, a possibly mock-modest assertion that they were not worth very much—and he even offered a “Tilly”, a little extra one, to give the customer thirteen, baker’s dozen, for the demanded shilling, or twelve pence of the purchase price.

The plain fact is that by our tastes today, in the post-Pound-and-Eliot era, these poems are empty exercises in factitious emotion-mongering. They are as soft-centred as anything written by the ‘decadent’ nineties poets or the Georgians, with their ripe sentiment, their hazy imagery and hazy rhythms, and their reliance on the mesmerizing power of ‘poetical’ words:

Meadows of England, shining in the rain,
Spread wide your daisied lawns
(Rupert Brooke, "Brumana" 2-3)

Or

Let me go forth, and share
The overflowing Sun
With one wise friend, or one
Better than wise, being fair
(William Watson, "Ode to May" 1-4)

It was Ezra Pound who made the
youthful T.S. Eliot focus his images
precisely, and so changed the course of
English poetry:

Remark the cat which flattens itself in
the gutter,
Slips out its tongue
And devours a morsel of rancid butter.

(T.S. Eliot, "Rhapsody on a
Windy Night" 35-7)

And oddly enough it was Ezra Pound who
'discovered' James Joyce through reading the
last poem of *Chamber Music*, "I hear an
Army charging upon the land". This poem
does present a hard violent image, and could
well at first be taken as an Imagist poem,
like those of Wyndham Lewis or Richard
Aldington, who were heading the new
movement; then in the last two lines it tries
to tie the image to the mood of the
despairing love-lorn poet. It is, however,
very different from the others in the book,
which all seem to lack energy. If Joyce was
to be a leader of any literary revolution, it
was clearly not to be through his lyrical
poems. As Anthony Powell says (in
Encounter, February 1973), talking of
Picasso:

One cannot help wondering whether
violent experiment was not vital for
Picasso, to avoid becoming trapped in
personal emotions less profound than
his actual skill as a painter. A parallel
might possibly be drawn with Joyce,
fleeing from his earlier naturalism, in
order to save himself from the
artificiality and elaboration of the late

19th century. This may be seen in *A
Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*
where . . . occur pompositives of
phrasing that nothing short of *Ulysses*
would cure. In somewhat the same
manner did Picasso turn to Cubism,
Africa, and all the experiments that
followed, to control an innate
sentimentality and romanticism.
(Grose 47)

Joyce did indeed use his poems as an
escape from the literalism of his
meticulously detailed and precisely accurate
exposition of the ordinary, in them he
records his yearnings and his transient states
of feeling. They are mood music.

If *Chamber Music* is read
continuously from the beginning, a sequence
of moods can be felt. Rather like some
romantic cycles of songs (Schumann's
Frauenliebe und Leben or Tennyson's
Maud, for example), they pass from early
love, possibly through marriage or
consummations, to desertion and despair.
The story is not explicitly told, each poem
can be read as a separate expression of
emotion. Their outstanding virtue is the
extreme delicacy of the verse. The words are
chosen for their subtle sound, and there are
close associations with the scriptures,
especially the Song of Solomon, and with
Shakespeare and the English madrigalists, as
well as with contemporary poetical swoony
language.

Pomes Penyeach do not make up a
whole. They are short lyrics, very like the
earlier poems in style and content, but they
appear to be celebrating events, significant
moments or moods in Joyce's life. "She
weeps over Ragoon", for example, is about
Nora Joyce's first love who had died young
(Grose 23). Another lyric ("A Flower Given
to My Daughter") talks of a flower given to
his daughter Lucia, and seems with
hindsight to foreshadow the mental and

spiritual troubles that were to beset her (Grose 17). “On the Beach at Fontana” enshrines a moment of loving fear for his son Giorgio. Others refer to nothing identifiable, but all are short and poignant in expression, and clearly meant much to the poet, even if they communicate little to us beyond a vague gush of feeling encapsulated in an image that relies rather on sound than sense. One short lyric printed in the present Faber edition is supernumerary to the original baker's dozen: it tells of the near coincidence of the death of Joyce's father with the birth of his grandson, and ends with a prayer for his father's forgiveness—

probably for deserting Ireland and for not offering the willing financial support that his father had hoped James's brilliant career as a doctor or professor would provide.

A child is sleeping:
An old man gone.
O, father forsaken,
Forgive your son!

(“Ecce Puer,” 13-6)

Coincidentally, the best poem— at least the hardest and most vital – among the thirteen in *Pomes Penyeach* is the “Tilly” that begins the collection, which refers to the death many years before of his mother.

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