

Thinking in Circles

Music and Cyclical Form in Joyce's *Chamber Music*

There are many ways in which the idea of cyclical form might be brought to bear in an analysis of Irish cultural history. One of the most relatable in the context of this book is the pattern of boom and bust which Marxists regard as characteristic of a capitalist economy. According to this theory a boom is driven by the rapid expansion of credit to the private sector, which leads to inflation, speculative over-borrowing, a rise in consumption, spiralling property prices, and so on. After a point of critical mass is reached, there follows a credit crunch, which leads to a financial crisis, which leads in turn to economic recession.¹

Without delving too deeply into the complexities of economic theory, it seems clear that at least some aspects of this account resonate in relation to the inglorious career of the Celtic Tiger (Allen 2009; Kirby 2010). From a Marxist perspective, the movement traced by that career – from pain to relief to pleasure and back to pain again – is exemplary rather than exceptional. It appears, moreover, to adhere to a model of cyclical patterning that is deeply embedded within the Irish (in fact the human) imagination. It wasn't just a case of the gloom-mongers beating their breasts and prophesying that all this couldn't last; it was a much more insidious sense – brutally repressed but palpable still beneath all the 'stuff' with which our lives suddenly became encumbered – that whatever trajectory we were launched upon couldn't maintain its upward curve indefinitely, and that after the apogee there would have to be a fall followed by some kind of reckoning (O'Toole 2009, 2010).

The cyclical imagination offers itself as an interpretative mechanism in relation to all kinds of contexts, scenarios and analyses: economic, as already mentioned, but also philosophical, historical and literary, and in the opening sections of this essay I want to delineate some of those familiar accounts as they

figure in modern Irish cultural history. But of course the cycle (including quite centrally the related effect of repetition) also looms large in musical discourse, and later on I shall consider its relevance to an analysis of a musical version of James Joyce's lyric sequence *Chamber Music*.

Cycles in Philosophy and History

The idea of time as cyclical was deeply embedded within the world view of the Indo-European culture that spread during the Stone Age from the Asian sub-continent to the Atlantic Archipelago (West 2007). Echoes of such a belief resonate throughout a range of systems and practices, from reincarnation in the east to the myth of the Fisher King in the west. The issues raised by a cyclical view of time also contributed in large part to the philosophic tradition inaugurated by the Greeks, which in turn bequeathed to Western thought a recurring series of problems concerning *inter alia* identity, repetition, fate and free will – problems with which the inheritors of that tradition are still grappling (Dowden and Livingstone 2011).

During this same period Western thought has also come under the influence of various Abrahamic religious systems emerging from Semitic culture and what historians and theologians have identified as its characteristic linear view of time (Pinch 2002: 57-98). In Christianity, for example, time progresses through a series of stages from stasis (heaven before Satan's rebellion, Eden before the Fall) through sin and suffering (human life) towards judgment and eternal fate (salvation or damnation). The implications of such a view for the human subject are deep and powerful: we are in effect each set adrift in a vast ocean of time, the current dragging us inexorably forward, where each and every action has a potentially eternal significance, and where only the guiding hand of the church and its agents can bring us safely to land.

In practice, Indo-European and Semitic influences have comingled throughout European cultural history – nowhere more so, in fact, than in

Ireland, where Celtic and Christian beliefs and practices managed to reach a working (although somewhat forced) accommodation over an extended period of time (Toulson 1987). Meanwhile, time itself continued to exercise the Western imagination – in religious and cultural discourses, as might be expected, but also in that unruly collection of superstitions, prejudices and practices from which the modern discourse of science emerged (Gribbin 2003; Holford-Strevens 2005).

The work of the early modern Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico represents a key intervention in the human imagination of time. Vico proposed a complex system of cyclical stages through which civilizations pass, each characterised by specific forms of political, social and artistic activity. This is the famous model of *corso* and *ricorso* in which ‘human history’, as Edward Said explains, ‘continues by repeating itself according to a certain fixed course of events.’

Thus the sexual relations between men and women give rise to matrimony, the institution of matrimony gives rise to cities, the struggle of plebeians gives rise to laws; people in conflict with laws give rise to tyranny; and tyranny leads finally to capitulation to foreign powers. Out of this last debasement a new cycle will begin, arising out of man’s absolute degeneration in the wilderness (1991: 112).

Reduced to bare bones, this model instantiates a pattern of necessity, utility, comfort, pleasure, luxury and collapse which, Vico’s research assured him, had been and would continue to be repeated in different times and different places throughout history. Such a project represents a strategic engagement with various contemporary forces (most centrally, Catholicism and Cartesianism), but it is first and foremost a humanism – which is to say, an attempt to elaborate

a scientific system for the understanding of the human subject as it experiences and passes through time. Vico claimed to have discovered

not the particular history in time of the laws and deeds of the Romans or the Greeks, but (by virtue of the identity of the intelligible *substance* in the diversity of their *modes* of development) the ideal history of the eternal laws which are instanced by the deeds of all nations in their rise, progress, maturity, decadence, and dissolution.²

The New Science is particularly interesting for its author's postulation of what Hayden White (in an essay on Vico's amenability to structuralist and poststructuralist thought) calls 'the "poetic" origins of all cultural formations' (2010: 204). Vico's ascription of rhetorical analogues to the various recurring stages of history will be of major interest when we come presently to consider the literary theory of Northrop Frye. In the meantime, we should acknowledge that cyclical form after Vico developed into a central resource of the modern Western imagination, making itself available across a range of scientific, philosophical and cultural contexts.

In the years after Vico, historians as diverse as Edward Gibbon, Leopold von Ranke and Karl Marx, as well as philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Hegel and Søren Kierkegaard, continued to ponder the poetics and the possibilities of cyclical form as part of their wider integrated systems (Stern 1970). In each of these treatments ideas relating to repetition and return assume an array of moral and socio-political overtones, depending on the systems within which they are recruited. Historical repetition may be good or bad, progressive or reactionary, a sign of natural health or of cultural decadence; when invoked as part of the scientific stand-off between intelligent design and accidental evolution, moreover, it can be the key issue upon which the entire fate of the species depends.

Such is the status of cyclical time in the thought of one of the most sensitive, certainly the most challenging, of modern philosophers. Friedrich Nietzsche endured a complex relationship with the idea of repetition. At times (such as in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*) he appears to endorse a model of recurrence recognisable within the broad parameters of oriental reincarnation:

‘Behold, we know what you teach: that all things recur eternally and we ourselves with them, and that we have already existed an infinite number of times before and all things with us ...’

And if you should die now, o Zarathustra: behold, we know too what you would then say to yourself ...’

“Now I die and decay,” you would say, “and in an instant I shall be nothingness. Souls are as mortal as bodies.

“But the complex of causes in which I am entangled will recur – it will create me again! I myself am part of these causes of the eternal recurrence.

“I shall return, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent – not to a new life or a better life or a similar life:

“I shall return eternally to this identical and self-same life, in the greatest things and in the smallest, to teach once more the eternal recurrence of all things ...” (252-3).

Even towards the end of this passage, however, things have started to become complicated. An exact repetition different from the original would be unrecognisable; but how may one conceive of a repetition that is ‘identical and self-same’ rather than different in some degree or respect? Nietzsche here seems to be denying the possibility of the past repeating itself in the present or in the future; the concept of ‘eternal recurrence’, rather, appears to signify not the return of the same (which is the usage implicit in the Vichian system and all its derivatives), but the repetition of the principle of *difference* which is embedded in the will to power. The image of linear time (past, present and future) is thus

refused; rather, all time inheres in the moment of perception, in the act of will which calls the subject into being. Gilles Deleuze, perhaps the most faithful of Nietzsche's philosophical heirs, puts it like this:

[The eternal recurrence] must not be interpreted as the return of something that is, that is 'one' or the 'same'. We misinterpret the expression 'eternal return' if we understand it as 'return of the same'. It is not being that returns but rather the returning itself that constitutes being insofar as it is affirmed of becoming and of that which passes. It is not some one thing which returns but rather returning itself is the one thing which is affirmed of diversity or multiplicity. In other words, identity in the eternal return does not describe the nature of that which returns but, on the contrary, the fact of returning from that which differs.³

Nietzsche's counter-intuitive approach to time found parallels in the theories of Albert Einstein, whose special theory of relativity first appeared in a paper of 1905, five years after the death of his philosopher compatriot; and indeed, time has continued to loom large within the traditions of Western philosophy and science down to the present. Meanwhile, cyclical history returned with a vengeance in the work of Oswald Spengler whose book *The Decline of the West* (1922-3) proposed the theory that meaningful world history is comprised of a series of recognisable cultures, each lasting about 1,000 years, each passing through a series of stages over the course of its irresistible rise towards civilization and inexorable fall into what he termed 'Caesarism'. Each culture, as the Canadian literary historian Northrop Frye explains, '[goes] through four main stages, which Spengler symbolizes by the seasons of the year' (1974: 2); and this deference to a readily available image of organic recurrence will re-emerge shortly in relation to *Chamber Music*.⁴

Spengler's theories also influenced the work of the British historian Arnold Toynbee, whose twelve-volume *Study of History* (published between 1934 and 1961) followed the emergence, growth and disintegration of nineteen civilizations across a broad swathe of time and space.⁵ Infused with German idealism on the one hand and English empiricism on the other, the detail, as well as the moral dynamics, of cyclical history as imagined by Spengler and Toynbee contrasted markedly (Marwick 1970: 85-9). Despite this, and despite the fact that each remains deeply unfashionable within the (post-) modern academy, the cyclical model they inherited and elaborated has been maintained and continues to exercise an influence. It seems that the idea of emergence and decline, repeated across a range of geo-historical contexts, speaks to something fundamental in human psychological evolution, and this may be one of the reasons why (ironically enough) it recurs throughout the related histories of science and philosophy.

Cyclical Form and Music

For those appropriately sensitised, the pattern of emergence, refinement and decline, allied to the effect of cyclical repetition, cannot fail to evoke the idea of music. In the discourse of art music, for example, 'cyclic form' refers to the '[formal] structure of a composition in which one musical theme is heard, sometimes in a varied form, in more than one movement' (Kennedy 1994: 212); during the nineteenth century this effect became associated with a range of techniques encountered in the work of composers such as Beethoven, Berlioz, Liszt, Wagner and Franck.⁶

Rather more interesting from the present perspective is the frequency with which music features in the many and varied accounts of cyclical history, and the inference that music may be both the cultural expression and indeed the ontological form taken by cyclical time itself. Certainly, that inference is there at the outset of modern Western civilization, in the opposition between a

primarily ocular Indo-European principle (the *vision*) and a primarily aural Semitic principle ('*Hear the Word of the Lord*'). It's there, famously, throughout the work of Nietzsche, as a key element of his account of the emergence of tragedy from a combination of Apollonian and Dionysiac forces (1956: 1-146).⁷ And it's there also in Spengler's assertion that contrapuntal music is the central art of Western 'Faustian' man (Frye 1974: 4).

It's the work of Vico, however, that most readily adumbrates a musical analogue to the concept of cyclical time. On one level, this concerns the rhetorical detail of specific historical cycles; thus, for example, Vico includes an account of the emergence of different poetic forms as part of his system, noting how in ancient Greece, '[the] new lyric poets were the melic poets, whose prince is Pindar, and who wrote in verse what we in Italian call *arie per musica*, airs to be set to music' (1961: 277).

Music inheres not just within the detail, however; it provides a useful analogy with which to understand the principle of cyclical history itself. Thus, as Edward Said points out in an essay 'On Repetition' included in his collection *The World, The Text and the Critic*:

[formally] speaking, Vico's understanding and use of repetition bears a resemblance to musical techniques of repetition, in particular those of the *cantus firmus* or of the chaconne or, to cite the most developed classical instance, Bach's *Goldberg Variations* ... As Vico saw the phenomenon in human history, there is in these musical forms a tension between the contrariety or eccentricity of the variation and the constancy and asserted rationality of the *cantus firmus* (1991: 114).

In this analogy, the ground bass represents the recurring stages of history – relentless, rational, implicit – while the melodic variation represents the multitude of ways in which people engage with the specific structure within

which they find themselves. The one provides order and degree, the other, expression and identity. This, for Said, is what enables Vico's thought to be salvaged for a kind of radical humanism in which people generate the systems within which they exist, rather than being the product of an ideal or 'sacred power standing outside history' (114).

Another (I believe more enabling) way to approach the idea of cyclical history with reference to music is through the theory of modes. As employed in musicological discourse, 'mode' generally refers to particular kinds of scale, the intervals of which endow these scales with certain characters or identities (Agmon 2013). The usefulness of such an analogy in this context is that it enables us to consider, compare and contrast the 'character' of the different stages through which, in Vico's account, history is passing (Mooney 1985). And just as the 'character' of the musical mode is comprised of the relations *between* particular notes, so the 'character' of history is dependent on the relations between the various stages of which it is comprised. The philosopher of history Hayden White describes the implications of such a model:

This relationship of the beginning of a poem to its conclusion, or of a prefiguration to its fulfilled form, served Vico as a model of the relationship between primitive and civilised consciousness, of that between the earliest age or originary period of a civilization and its latest or decadent period, between the imagination and reason, between popular culture and high or elite culture, and between the human body and the human mind. He did not view the relations thus posited as being either causal or teleological in kind ... They are, rather, more in the nature of modal transformations of the kind encountered in music or mathematics, with the difference that they exist in things human and historical rather than only in concepts or in algorithms (2010: 267).

White makes this point in an essay on Northrop Frye, who we have already encountered in relation to Spengler, and whose book *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) featured a theory of literary modes which resonated strongly with the idea of cyclical history. Frye's book is nothing less than a highly integrated account of the emergence, structure and variety of Western literary discourse. That account is organised in terms of a recurring four-fold structure based on the example of the natural world, as evidenced in the seasons of the year (spring, summer, autumn, winter), the periods of the day (morning, noon, evening, night) or the four 'stages' of life (youth, maturity, age, death). Frye adapts these natural structuring systems in order to describe the 'anatomy' of his theory in terms of modes (fictional, tragic, comic and thematic), symbols (literal / descriptive, formal, mythical and anagogic), myths (comedy, romance, tragedy and satire) and genres (epos, prose, drama and lyric).

As with Vico, music features as an important element of Frye's account, especially in relation to the emergence of lyric form; and his pronouncements on this subject will be of interest in the final section of this essay. But music is also implicit, I believe, both in respect of the quadrifarious structure to which Frye consistently defers (with its repeated movement from emergence to decline and re-emergence) and in respect of the theory of modes with its implication of a specific formal / conceptual signature emerging from the specific arrangement of certain components and forces.⁸ Such at least represents the key attraction for an analysis of cyclical theory from the perspective of music.

From a different perspective, that of modern literary theory, Frye is the figure who has most consistently borne the brunt of the critique which has always attended the notion of cyclical history – namely, that it is ahistorical, deterministic, functionalist and, not to put too fine a point on it, boring (Eagleton 1983: 91-3) White (2010: 265ff) defends Frye robustly against such charges, insisting on the expansive potential inherent in his system. As with Vico, the cyclical imagination is not a counsel of despair in the face of a

preordained blueprint, but rather ‘a way of showing that history and actuality are all about human persistence’ (Said 1991: 113). That debate, cast in recognisable (and categorically irresolvable) terms, is one with which we are all familiar, and it appears likely to persist. A musicological dimension, however, brings something relatively fresh to the table, and offers modes of conceptualisation (linear and cyclical, horizontal and vertical, spatial and temporal, etc.) that could feasibly develop the debate beyond increasingly unfeasible accounts of the stand-off between structure and agency.

Cycles in Irish Literary History

Cyclical thought plays a key part in the work of two of Ireland’s leading literary figures: W.B. Yeats and James Joyce.⁹ In 1917, Yeats was a famous and successful man of letters – a poet and playwright who managed to balance a range of esoteric interests with a practical appreciation of the rigours of modern life. As a younger man he had become fascinated by the theory of cyclical history (as represented, for example, in the tenets of Theosophy), and such an idea had continued to exercise his enquiring mind well into middle age (Foster 1997: 50). It was in 1917, however, that Yeats began (under the influence of his new wife’s supernatural experiences, in particular her on-demand production of ‘automatic writing’) to develop an elaborate personal philosophical ‘system’ into which his own work could be integrated. In his book *A Vision* (first published in 1925, although later editions were more authoritative) Yeats described this system at length, drawing on a range of arcane mystical discourses encountered and accumulated over many years of interest. This system defies synopsis (it is on fact one of those ‘unfeasibly’ complex accounts mentioned at the end of the previous section). It is worthwhile pointing out, however, that one of its key aspects was the author’s conviction as to the cyclical nature of experience; amongst many other things in his strange book Yeats proposed a series of 2,000-year ‘historical cones’, themselves comprised

of twenty-eight recurring phases within which the fabric of history and on individual identity played itself out.

Yeats was trying to develop a system which would enable him to make sense of history, of Ireland, and of his own experience as both a human being locked in an apparently chaotic time and as a spiritual presence unfortunately fastened (as he famously put it in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, the opening poem from *The Tower*) ‘to a dying animal’. He came to believe that human civilisation was locked into a recurring cycle of history that was itself the reflex – the pulse, as it were – of the universe (Arkins 2010: 83-102; Cormack 2008: 117-52). Many individuals (such as the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg), religions (especially Eastern religions such as Buddhism) and philosophies (the Neoplatonic tradition emerging in the wake of Plotinus) had discerned aspects of this system over the course of human civilisation; but Yeats seems to have believed he had somehow tapped into its core.

Yeats’s philosophical convictions informed all his activities during the latter decades of his life, including his poetry. In ‘The Second Coming’, for example, he used the image of a falcon ‘turning and turning in the widening gyre’ – the latter being his word for the vortices of ‘Discord’ and ‘Concord’ which order human history. That same poem also provided the twentieth century with some of its most powerful and enduring imagery, when the poet described how ‘The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity’, and the terrifying image – some ‘rough beast ... [slouching] towards Bethlehem to be born’ – with which it ends. In others such as ‘Meru’, ‘Amongst School Children’, and ‘Leda and the Swan’, he continued to work through both the detail and the implications of the system.¹⁰

While Yeats was developing his esoteric vision, James Joyce was increasingly indulging his own, evidently ‘natural’, proclivity for cyclical thought – a proclivity fostered during his early exposure to Jesuit pedagogy and

nurtured further by his own undergraduate researches. Despite his quintessential ‘modernism’, Joyce’s work is in fact saturated with classical and medieval thought – a tradition from which he drew freely in accordance with his own aesthetic needs. Much of that tradition, as has already been suggested, concerned the nature of time in general, and the implications of repetition and cyclical return in particular.

Umberto Eco has pointed out that Vico provided Joyce with a congenial (not to say *commodious*) model of order within which he could represent the chaos and the multiplicity of contemporary life. In *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Joyce drew on an eclectic range of theories – including Vico, Einstein, and various eastern philosophies – to represent what Eco describes as ‘the circularity of Being’:

Thus, in the fabric of the *Wake*, the historicist theory of *ricorsi* becomes an esoteric notion of an ‘eternal return’ in which the historical aspect of development is overlaid by the circular identity of everything and the continuous repositing of original archetypes ... [Armed with various adaptations from Vico and Bruno] Joyce designs an image of the earthly cycle, with its *corsi* and *recorsi*, that achieves salvation through the acceptance of the circularity through which it infinitely unfolds (1989: 63-4).

The circularity of *Finnegans Wake* is famously encapsulated by the fact that the end of the novel returns the reader back to the start:

A way a lone a last a loved a long the ... riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs (2012: 628, 3).

It's true that his encounter with a range of philosophical and theoretical systems provided Joyce with an elaborate set of resources which he utilised freely throughout *Finnegans Wake*;¹¹ but it's equally true that ideas and images of circularity – of this 'commodious vicus of recirculation' – may be found throughout Joyce's earlier works. It's there in *Ulysses* (1922), with its nightmare of history, its tracking of Bloom's movement around the city, and its movement between the sleep which precedes the opening of the novel and the sleep which follows its end. It's there centrally in Joyce's recourse to mythology (the myth of the departure, journey and return of Odysseus) in order to give shape and structure to the apparent randomness of modern life.

Cyclical form is likewise present in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), and once again it is manifest in respect of a range of formal and conceptual aspects. We observe it in relation to the linguistic development of Stephen Dedalus – how, having acquired his own voice at the end of the novel, he's in a position to begin narrating the story of a young man who must struggle to acquire a voice with which to describe his response to the world. The text is thus locked into a paradoxical pattern of image and flow, in which the end of the narrative signals the (re)commencement of narration. This pattern is, uncoincidentally, reflected in the *mise en abyme* of the elaborate aesthetic theories described in the final chapter of the book – in the relationship Stephen discerns between artistic 'stasis' and the 'rhythm' (179) of beauty. Such images sensitise Joyce's readers to an idea – the idea of phenomena subject to rhythmic, repetitious temporal forces – that will continue to grow in Joyce's aesthetic imagination.

Continuing to move backwards through the principal monuments of the Joycean *oeuvre*, cyclical form is present in *Dubliners* (1914), in the development from childhood through adolescence and maturity and on to the memorable images of death which close and open the collection. Indeed it's the deadening circularity of life in Dublin that animates what may be regarded as

the text's informing tone: the characters' desperation on discovering (through the mechanism of the epiphany) that they are trapped within debilitating cyclical systems (religion, nationality, family) not of their own design.

The concept of circularity is also present in Joyce's first published work: the collection of thirty-six poems entitled *Chamber Music* (1907). Elsewhere I have described at length the background to the composition of these poems, the appearance of the volume, and some of the issues attending its musical status. In the final section of this essay I would like to suggest that cyclical form attends Joyce's youthful composition in a number of observable *literary* ways – ways that principally, at least in the first instance, concern language and imagery. But cyclical form is also (as remarked above) a fundamental element of musical discourse, deeply embedded within the musical imagination at a number of levels. I shall therefore further be suggesting that it's only in and through the musical realisation of Joyce's lyrics that the impact of his cyclical imagination may be discerned; and that such a critical process is necessary for a full and proper appreciation of the role played by cyclical thought in his maturing work.

Cyclical Form in *Chamber Music*

Whatever Joyce's original intention or conception, *Chamber Music* came to embody a cyclical narrative (based in part on early modern and Romantic aesthetics) in which the poet moves through the stages of a love affair: from initial loneliness to first encounter, to courtship, to passionate consummation, to post-coital reflection, to the diminution and disappearance of passion through a process of intellectualisation, and finally, a return to loneliness. This is very much a young man's vision – one read about rather than experienced; nevertheless, the 'problem' of the relations between the sexes broached here was one that Joyce spent the remainder of his life and his career refining.

Joyce deploys two conventional images of temporal structuring in the suite: that of the day and that of the year. With reference to those lyrics

containing explicit references, those linked temporalities might be represented thus:¹²

Lyric Day	Year	
3	night / dawn	
4	twilight	
5	evening	
6	evening / dusk	
7	day	spring
8	day	spring
9		spring
13	day	summer
14	noon	
15	noon	
17	night	
19	dawn	
21	day	
23	evening	summer
24	night	
25	night	
26	night	
28	night	
29	evening	
31	night	winter
32	dusk	
33	dusk	autumn / winter
34	night	winter
35	day / night	winter
36	night	

As one may see, these usages are not rigorous, although a clear movement – from morning to night (in terms of the one) and from spring to

winter (in terms of the other) – is discernible within the overall structure. The impulse, as remarked above, is entirely conventional, with each temporal ‘moment’ corresponding to one or other of the four mythic ‘modes’ described by Frye: spring (comedy / morning), summer (romance / noon), autumn (tragedy / evening), and winter (irony / night). Such, indeed, describes the course of Joyce’s imaginary love affair as it moves through a series of more or less recognisable stages from encounter to courtship, to estrangement and finally embittered reflection. In this way, the loneliness of the cycle’s end – ‘why have you left me alone?’ (#36) – anticipates, in fact precipitates, the loneliness of the beginning – the ‘high unconsortable one’ (#1). The general trajectory follows the subject *through* experience *towards* knowledge; and as an example of how Joyce’s early aesthetic concern were themselves to recur, such a trajectory also anticipates the pattern of *A Portrait of the Artist* in which the movement is likewise *through* experience (the experience of Stephen / Joyce as the content of the narrative) *towards* knowledge (Stephen / Joyce and the process of narration).

Another way in which ideas relating to cyclical form are broached in *Chamber Music* is through what Northrop Frye refers to as ‘the rhythm of association’, by which he means ‘an associative rhetorical process, most of it below the threshold of consciousness, a chaos of paronomasia, sound-links, ambiguous sense-links, and memory-links very like that of the dream. Out of this the distinctively lyrical union of sound and sense emerges’ (1957: 271-2). Rhythmic association – of words, images, rhetorical figures, and sometimes just vague impressions that are difficult to name – these represent a means whereby Joyce accumulates resonance across and between the individual elements of the cycle.

In the first scholarly edition of *Chamber Music*, William York Tindall noted the prevalence of the words ‘sweet’ and ‘soft’ (twenty-four and seventeen usages respectively), although for him this was one of the reasons why Joyce’s

first book had acquired a ‘reputation for triviality, emptiness, and sentiment’ (1954: 218). Regarded from one perspective this may be so. It’s also possible, however, to regard each individual usage as a single node in an accumulating, organic matrix of meaning – as a kind of linguistic *leitmotif* which invokes previous meanings while simultaneously establishing a new meaning in the present and anticipating still other meanings in the future.

Other words and images recur: the ‘glory’ lost in the first line of the opening lyric (‘He Who Hath Glory Lost’) is found in #26 (‘What Counsel Has the Hooded Moon’); while the bending motion introduced in #2 (‘Strings in the Earth and Air’) recurs in #4 (‘The Twilight Turns from Amethyst’), #5 (‘When the Shy Star Goes Forth in Heaven’) and #8 (‘My Love is In a Light Attire’). Crucially, music itself is repeatedly invoked throughout *Chamber Music*, featuring in eighteen of the thirty-six lyrics, and hovering around the edges of a number of others. This latter usage is a special case of an effect at work throughout the cycle at large: the use of repetition to create the effect of a complex living system in which meaning is produced from the constant interplay of various forces operating in time (past, present and future) and space. This latter point refers to what might be termed the ‘geography’ of the lyric sequence, by which I mean the relative location of repeated words and images throughout the entire cycle.

Let us observe Joyce’s use of repetition in concise form in Lyric #15:

Go seek her out all courteously,
 And say I come,
Wind of spices whose song is ever
 Epithalamium.
O, hurry over the dark lands
 And run upon the sea
For seas and lands shall not divide us

My love and me.

Now, wind, of your good courtesy
I pray you go,
And come into her little garden
And sing at her window;
Singing: The bridal wind is blowing
For Love is at his noon;
And soon will your true love be with you,
Soon, O soon.

This lyric is a model of controlled development and repetition of the kind that inspired Yeats to write from London in November 1902 to tell Joyce that ‘Your technique in verse is very much better than the technique of any young Dublin man I have met during my time’.¹³ We see, for example, that the opening ‘Go’ is balanced by the ‘come’ in the second line, and that this movement is then repeated in the second and third lines of the second verse. On the one hand the movement between ‘go’ and ‘come’ implicates the Lover in a degree of positive action over and against the stance of solitary, passive reflection with which the cycle opened, and *to* which (did he but know it) both he and the suite itself are bound to return. At the same time it creates a pattern of movement *within* the individual lyric – from line to line, stanza to stanza, and image to image. Added to this is the fact that ‘come’ has featured in three of the previous four lyrics (11, 13 and 14), and will be invoked in four more before the end (16, 29, 31 and 36). The word thus assumes a developing cross-lyric significance in which, charged with a developing sexual resonance (first noted by Tindall, 194), it indicates the stage of sexual anticipation into which the lover has moved.

This pattern is then underpinned by a series of linked repetitions throughout the lyric. The first lines of the two verses are connected by

differently inflected usages of the same root: 'court'. Whilst relocating the action away from the pastoral setting of many of the other lyrics, this word also invokes the civic humanism popularised in Baldesar Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528).¹⁴ Likewise, the wind invoked in the third line of the opening verse recurs in the second, including an ironic usage as part of the mis-stressed word 'window'. As with the references to music noted previously, moreover, the wind assumes a self-reflexive charge, as it must report upon its own heraldic mission – the bridal wind, that is to say, sings about the blowing of the bridal wind. The 'lands' and 'sea' introduced in lines 5 and 6 are re-invoked for rhetorical emphasis in line 7, while those same *dark* lands resonate in relation to a love which is now 'at his noon' – at the zenith, that is to say, of its brightness and passion. The implication is that night has given way to dark, and winter to summer. The sense of sexual anticipation is then further underpinned by three close repetitions of a particular word ('soon') which contains within itself an image of temporary deferral: the imagined reality – in this case, a highly desired sexual reality – is imminent, and language itself 'performs' this imminence through the act of repetition.

Each verse follows a simple rhyming pattern: ABCBDEFE. Whereas the 'E' rhymes are unproblematic in each case, however, the 'B' rhymes are pretty strained: 'come' with 'um' in the first verse, and an accented 'go' with an unaccented 'dow' in the second – the latter, as described by Tindall, 'an offbeat which anticipates some of the technical experiments of the 1930s' (1954: 198). These unexpected rhymes make for a slightly hesitant reading which belies the Lover's ostensible sense of confidence at this stage. The same is true of the rhythm in which the forceful four-stressed opening line of every couplet is followed by a much more tentative, even awkward, second line which in each case slows the reading considerably. The overall effect is one in which stridency is constantly undercut by doubt, and sexual desire is haunted by a reticence

which harks back to the protagonist's solitary status at the outset of the cycle, while at the same time anticipating his isolation at the end.

In the light of all the foregoing, the question arises as to an appropriate musical treatment of this lyric. The first point to acknowledge is the obvious, historical and sustained association between lyric poetry and music – as James William Johnson puts it in his article on 'Lyric' from *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*:

The *irreducible* denominator of all l. poetry ... [comprises] those elements which it shares with the musical forms that produced it. Although l. poetry is not music, it is representative of music in its sound patterns, basing its meter and rhyme on the regular linear measure of the song; or, more remotely, it employs cadence and consonance to approximate the tonal variation of a chant or intonation. Thus the l. retains a structural or substantive evidence of its melodic origins, and this factor serves as the *categorical* principle of poetic lyricism.¹⁵

So, it's important to remember that we are talking about a poetic form that is *irreducibly* and *categorically* wedded to music at a deep level; as we have already observed, moreover, this relationship was intuited by many of the figures (including Vico, Nietzsche, Yeats and Frye) who featured in the earlier sections of this essay. It's not unreasonable to assume that Joyce's similar intuition of this relationship accounts for the widespread presence of music as a theme throughout the *Chamber Music* suite.

When it comes to the question of setting these lyrics, we may observe that there is in theory no end to the ways this could occur; and indeed, many composers have essayed the task with many different results. The setting of 'Go Seek Her Out All Courteously' by Joyce's favoured composer, Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer, for example, is typical of the art song tradition in so far as

it's highly nuanced in terms of certain musical values – tempo and dynamics, for example, as well as the complex interplay between voice and instrument (Teicher Russel 1993: 69-70). Occurring as it does in the course of an extended (although not complete) musical response to the lyric suite, Palmer's treatment represents an ekphrastic response on the part of the composer – an attempt, that is, to elucidate the poet's words by means of their musical equivalent, as expressed through a range of properly musical discourses (key and time signatures, melody, harmony, counterpoint, dynamic, etc.).¹⁶

Given the peculiar array of Joyce's tastes and interests, given especially both his life-long predilection for cyclical thought and his deeply-embedded love for song as an artistic form, I would like to suggest that *the ballad* represents the most appropriate form with which to approach a setting of this lyric, and indeed the other lyrics throughout the cycle. This is because the ballad instantiates cyclical vision as part of its formal composition – by which I mean the resonance accumulated over the course of the song by the use of lyrical and musical repetition.¹⁷ Each of the poetic examples noted above (in relation to words such as court, go, come, wind, land, sea and soon) have their musical counterpart in ballad form, in which repeated musical (melodic and harmonic) effects create within the listener complex overlapping patterns of expectation, anticipation and signification. No longer restricted by the ekphrastic vision of the art composer desperate to capture and translate the essence of the words, such patterns in fact extend the emotional and intellectual remit of the lyric in highly complex and creative ways. In the case of the fifteenth lyric of *Chamber Music*, the result would be a musical event in which cyclical form inheres in both the lyrical *and* the musical aspects of the performance, as well as in the constantly evolving relations between those two related signifying systems.

Cyclical form is also present in as much as the melodic range of the typical ballad tends to be dominated by a tonic key *from* which and *towards* which the melody is constantly moving. This formal aspect of the ballad is the

musical analogue of the journey away from, and back to, home, such as the one undertaken by the character Leopold Bloom in the pages of *Ulysses*. In musical terms, Bloom sets off from the ‘home chord’ of Eccles Street early in the morning of 16 June 1904, ‘modulates’ around the city of Dublin encountering various melodic and harmonic possibilities (other characters on different journeys), before resolving once again to the home where, despite the adulterous activities of his waiting wife, he belongs. The inference is, moreover, that this is a repetition in basic outline of a journey that took place on 15 June, and which will take place again on 17 June. The meaning of the Bloomsday journey is thus an effect of its internal cyclical form (departure, return) as well as its position within an ongoing repeated pattern (yesterday, today, tomorrow); and this is essentially an effect derived from musical discourse

As Kierkegaard wrote in his enigmatic ‘essay in experimental psychology’, ‘[when] one does not possess the categories of recollection or of repetition the whole of life is resolved into a void and empty noise’ (1941: 52-3). From the simplest folk song to the grandest symphony, music instantiates the possibility of return, restatement and repetition. At the same time, music also instantiates the impossibility of return, the impossibility of saying again – or playing again, or hearing again – what you have already said or played or heard; for every re-iteration represents a modification in some degree of the previous iteration. Music is thus the cultural form most attuned to the recurring mystery of human experience: the mystery whereby, as Deleuze puts it in his explication of Nietzsche, ‘[the] present must coexist with itself as past and yet to come’ (1983: 45); or – more proverbially – whereby everything changes and everything stays the same.

Notes

1 The theory of ‘boom and bust’ economics emerges in the first instance from the thought of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. See in particular ‘The Law of the Tendency to a Fall in the Rate of Profit’ in Volume 3 of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1992: 317-77). For a contemporary commentary see Alex J. Pollock’s *Boom and Bust: Financial Cycles and Human Prosperity* (2011).

2 Vico 1961, 373, original emphases. The invocation of ‘modes’ will be revisited later in this essay.

3 Deleuze 2006: 45. See also his book *Difference and Repetition* (1994).

4 In this essay Frye denies that Spengler’s view of history is cyclical, although he then appears to contradict himself. He also points out the historian’s unacknowledged influence on much twentieth-century art, including the later work of Yeats.

5 The philosophical and methodological implications of Toynbee’s work are considered at length in the final volume of the series, *Reconsiderations* (1961).

6 Interestingly, in *The Oxford Companion to Music*, Percy A. Scholes suggested that ‘[the] term is doubtless borrowed from literary usage, and quotes the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of ‘cycle’ as ‘[a] series of poems or prose romances collected around a central event or epoch of mythic history and forming a continuous narrative, as “The Arthurian Cycle”’ (1938: 244).

7 Nietzsche was also particularly fascinated by the music of Richard Wagner, and with what the latter’s unparalleled success might imply for the current phase of European culture. See the extracts from *The Wagner Case* (1888), reprinted in *A Nietzsche Reader* (1977), 134-44.

8 At the beginning of his 1994 essay on Frye, Hayden White mentions their common interest in ‘the relation between the musical and the literary or poetic notions of modality’ (2010: 263).

9 The paper on which this essay is based was originally read at a conference entitled *The Seim Anew? Cyclical Patterns in Contemporary Ireland - Cultural Memory, Literature and Society*, held at the University of Trieste in May 2012. In that paper, besides the references to Yeats and Joyce expanded here, I also considered the profile of Flann O’Brien – seriously, in respect of the vision of a circular hell in his novel *The Third Policeman*, and rather less so in relation to his lifelong interest in bicycles.

10 The poems containing specific reference to *A Vision* are included in the edition selected and edited by A. Norman Jeffares (1990).

11 According to Richard Elmann: '[Joyce] admired ... Vico's positive division of human history into recurring cycles, each set off by a thunderclap, of theocratic, aristocratic, and democratic ages, followed by a *recorso* or return. Joyce did not share Vico's interest in these as literal chronological divisions of "eternal ideal history", but as psychological ones, ingredients which kept combining and recombining in ways which seemed always to be *deja vus*' (1983: 554).

12 The numbers here refer to the revised lyric sequence described in the essay "'I Have Left My Book": Setting Joyce's *Chamber Music* Lyrics to Music', located elsewhere on this site.

13 Quoted in Foster (1997), 277.

14 It's interesting to note, moreover, the latter's emphasis on music as an indispensable element of proper courtly behaviour. See Castiglione (1903), pp. 62ff, and Woodhouse (1978), 94ff.

15 Johnson 1993: 714-15, added emphases. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche quotes the German Romantic poet Schiller on the 'musical mood, which precedes the lyric: 'With me emotion is at the beginning without clear and definite ideas; those ideas do not arise until later on. A certain musical disposition of mind comes first, and after follows the poetical idea' (1951: 37).

16 According to Werner Wolf, 'ekphrasis ... in its traditional sense ... only denotes a limited field of intermediality' (1999: 5); it should however be noted, he goes on, 'that the term ... has recently been extended from the verbal representation of works of the visual arts to any "*fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system*" including music'. The italicised material here is quoted from an essay by Claus Clüver entitled 'Ekphrasis Reconsidered: On Verbal Representations of Non-Verbal Texts' (1997).

17 In his book *The Experience of Song*, Mark W. Booth writes that 'repetition of phrasing in successive stanzas, where small modification adapts the words to a new use or effect, is the signature of the oral ballad' (1981: 59).

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