

THE PRECISE MUSIC OF THE IMPRECISE: JOYCE'S POETRY AND THE INFLUENCE OF VERLAINE

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De la musique avant toute chose, ...
Rien de plus cher que la chanson grise
Où l'Indécis au Précis se joint.

(Verlaine, "Art poétique")

Musemathematics. And you think you're listening to the ethereal. But suppose you said like: Martha, seven times nine minus X is thirtyfive thousand. Fall quite flat. It's on account of the sounds. it is.

(*Ulysses*, "Sirens")

"When Joyce turns from the speculative to the sensuous", says Harry Levin, thereby suggesting that there *is* a parallel development between the artist and his fictional self, "his first results show no further fusion of theory and practice. If his criticism is too abstract, his poetry is too concrete, with an opaque kind of concreteness that may be only another form of abstraction. His plaintive and cloying little stanzas could only have satisfied George Moore's canons of pure poetry. They are not merely empty of meaning—a deficiency which poets have been known to survive— but of colour. The words, almost without visual quality, are conventionally blocked into the metrical patterns. Even the exceptional vividness of 'I hear an army' comes from crying into the night and moaning in sleep, 'clanging' and 'shouting'; the army is heard and not seen. Lyrics in the strictest sense, all of Joyce's poems have the practical virtue that they can be set to music and sung."¹

The similarity between Joyce and Stephen is such that it invites an exploration of the differences in order to discover, mirror-like, the reflection of Joyce's own poetic achievement. Both, author and fictional *alter-ego*, seem to be more concerned with poetics than with poetry, and when they write poems there is an evident gap between theory and practice, as Harry Levin

¹ Harry Levin, *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction*, Faber & Faber, London, 1971, p. 26.

indicates. Yet Stephen's poetic efforts do not exactly duplicate Joyce's even though, as we learn from his brother Stanislaus, Joyce wrote the 'villanelle of the temptress' as part of the collection he had entitled *Shine and Dark*, which he never published.² By not publishing it as one of his own poems, the villanelle is no longer Joyce's but only Stephen's, and this marks a significant departure in the artistic development of both (Stephen 'rejoyces' in what Joyce rejects!). I would like to examine the villanelle as a background to the examination of Joyce's poetry.

1

Are you not weary of ardent ways,
Lure of the fallen seraphim?
Tell no more of enchanted days.

Your eyes have set man's heart ablaze
And you have had your will of him.
Are you not weary of ardent ways?

Above the flame the smoke of praise
Goes up from ocean rim to rim.
Tell no more of enchanted days.

Our broken cries and mournful lays
Rise in one eucharistic hymn.
Are you not weary of ardent ways?

While sacrificing hands upraise
The chalice flowing to the brim.
Tell no more of enchanted days.

And still you hold our longing gaze
With languorous look and lavish limb!
Are you not weary of ardent ways?
Tell no more of enchanted days.

The writing of the villanelle comes after the peripathetic expostulation of Stephen's aesthetic theory, so that the juxtaposition of poetics and poetry invites comparison. The reader finds the poem sadly inferior to the theory, and yet the very interaction of theory, poetic text and the emotional experience that generates it, confers upon this poem a richness of meaning

² Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper*, Faber & Faber, London, 1958, p. 100.

which it loses completely if detached from its diegetical function. Read as an individual poem, it is curiously "opaque" and hollow-sounding. The form chosen, the villanelle, with its rhythmically alternated refrain verses, ensures the continuity and unity of the poem; it also ensures the persistence of one central image or motif, in this case that of fire. But the formal intention of *integritas* is only that: formal; it is also artificial. To borrow Stephen's terms, this poem, clearly belonging to the lyrical form, is certainly not the "simplest verbal vesture of an instant of emotion"; nor is that emotion conveyed as such, but is itself forced into some strange kind of theologico-liturgico-sensuous mood that is vague because it is contrived. Here it is not the uncertain nature of the verlainian emotion, which is vague because it is undefinable and because the nature of the emotion itself is the wavering and uncertainty of feeling; here the emotion has a false intellectual ring to it; it perverts Stephen's own dictum that the lyric is a simple "cry or a cadence or a mood".³

When seen in its proper context, however, the poem becomes just one piece in the complex network of intertextual relations. The constant juxtapositions of the poetic text to the context of the circumstances of its gestation and the background of the aesthetic theory, constantly echoed at the level of language, give the poem a richness, a *claritas* that is obviously not its own; it is light borrowed from this intertextual constellation. The first stanza radiates meaning in all directions:

Are you not weary of ardent ways,
Lure of the fallen seraphim?
Tell no more of enchanted days.

Like the tip of an iceberg, the "you" is, on the intentional surface, the person of E.C. (presumably the Emma Clery of *Stephen Hero*), but the texture is multilayered. It echoes that fragment from Shelley, which has haunted Stephen's imagination, like a *leit-motif*, for a long time.

Art thou pale for weariness
Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth,
Wandering companionless
Among the stars that have a different name?

Again and again Stephen has identified himself with these 'lunar' attributes—"weary", "different" and "companionless"—and he has come to see in this a token of his vocation as an artist. Another echo that we hear in these first verses comes from Jonson, a song that Stephen has always delighted in:

³ James Joyce, *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, Penguin, Great Britain, 1972, p. 252.

I was not wearier where I lay
 By frozen Tythons side tonight;
 Then I am willing now to stay,
 And be part of your delight.
 But I am urged by the day,
 Against my will, to bid you come away.

The line from Jonson's poem which is echoed in the first line of the villanelle may have been one of the sources of the temptress idea in the villanelle. Aurora having carried off Tythonus from his father's palace, like Stephen's temptress, has had her "will of him", and the language has of course a strong similarity to stanza one of the villanelle. Tythonus' suffering from immortality without youth is the sort of living death the phoenix-persona of the villanelle would escape if only the temptress will let him go.⁴

Later on, when the moment of inspiration has been broken, Stephen exclaims, "Weary! Weary! He too was weary of ardent ways".⁵ E. C. (even the very identity of her name is thinned out to mere initials) is not a woman, she is more an image of all the women in *Portrait*,

disorted reflections of her image started from his memory: the flower girl in the ragged dress with damp coarse hair... the kitchen girl... a girl who had laughed gaily to see him stumble... a girl he had glanced at... she was the figure of the womanhood of her country, a bat-like soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness.⁶

E.C. is more like a figment of his imagination; while the language with which he addresses her is actually the language with which he articulates his own religious obsessions and artistic concerns. The "you" becomes a disguised "I". *He* is the one weary of ardent ways. The second line of the villanelle is an image of the nature of his experience—"In a dream or vision he had known the ecstasy of seraphic life".⁷ Initially his ecstasy is perceived more as a religious, even aesthetic experience than a sensuous one. The interlocutor is the Virgin Mary, rather than Emma at this stage—"Gabriel the seraph had come to the Virgin's chamber." It is almost like an afterthought that he relates this glow to E.C.: "That rose and ardent light was her strange, wilful heart". The attribution falsifies the experience at its very inception and is responsible for the strangely contrived emotion, which I have called theologico-liturgico-sensuous (not far in its abstruseness from

⁴ Zack Bowen, *Musical Allusions in the Works of James Joyce*, Albany State University of New York Press, 1974, p. 39.

⁵ James Joyce, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 259.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 255.

the gothico-sensuous version of Stephen's poem in *Ulysses*: "On swift sail flaming/ From storm and south/ He comes, pale vampire, / Mouth to my mouth."⁸ Hugh Kenner probes deep into this fusion of women figures:

The woman is simultaneously Stephen's faint love "E.C." and the antique courtesan of Yeats' "Adoration of the Magi", which Joyce knew by heart at nineteen. "Lured by that ardent roselike glow the choir of the seraphim were falling from heaven". The music of the choirs descends from heaven to refresh and celebrate the mystical Bride; but the choirs themselves, the seraphim themselves, fall lured by the temptation of a woman. But it was of intellectual pride that the tenth part of the angels fell; the woman is more than flesh; she contains the pride of Stephen's aesthetic vocation as well.⁹

"Tell no more of enchanted days" echoes his fascination with the Italian physiologist and his phrase, "enchantment of the heart", which Stephen has called up to mind facetiously as an analogy to his notion of the stasis of the aesthetic experience. When he wakes up he uses the metaphor to describe his ecstatic experience —"An enchantment of the heart! The night had been enchanted".

Thus, what is formal continuity in the villanelle, due to its refrain pattern, is discontinuous in the experience. The first three stanzas are composed in a flow from the remnants of the ecstatic dream, but, as the incantatory rhythm of the verses dies down together with his dreamy mood, memories of the everyday Emma fill his mind with anger and frustration.

Rude brutal anger routed the last lingering instant of ecstasy from his soul. It broke up violently her fair image and flung the fragments on all sides. On all sides distorted reflections of her image started from his memory...¹⁰

None of this anger and fragmentation, however, survives in the stanzas that follow. It is not so much that the experience has been sublimated in the verses written, it has simply been eliminated, forced to fit a preconceived rhyme scheme —"The rose-like glow sent forth its rays of rhyme; ways, days, blaze, praise, raise."¹¹ One could hardly think of any other reason for such an image like "from ocean rim to rim" except the need to fit a rhyme scheme conceived even before the subject of the poem has been thought out.

After the fourth and fifth stanzas have been written, there is yet another

⁸ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, N. Y., Random House, 1946, p. 132.

⁹ Hugh Kenner, *Dublin's Joyce*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1955, p. 101.

¹⁰ James Joyce, *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, pp. 258-59.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 255.

shift of mood in Stephen. His fantasy evokes Emma's nakedness, "radiant, warm odours and lavish limbed."¹² This time the verses do translate the mood: "And still you hold our longing gaze / With langorous look and lavish limb!"; perhaps the only verses that have anything to do directly with E.C.

If Aquinas has been instrumental to the formulation of his aesthetic theory, the use of religious imagery to convey the sensuous proves detrimental to his poetry, for it distorts and falsifies his experience. As Charles Rossman says,

He has abandoned the outward signs of religion, but continues to feel, and be crippled by, its concepts and attitudes. Thus, the art he practices ironically functions as a surrogate for religion, an instance that repeats the type. Like his earlier poem, Stephen's villanelle leads him out of the world.¹³

In fact, Stephen's villanelle breaks all the canons of his own aesthetic theory: it is not "the simplest verbal vesture of an instant of emotion"; neither is he "more conscious of the instant of emotion than of himself as feeling emotion"; nor has his mind been *arrested* by the apprehension of the aesthetic image, if anything it has excited him into an erotic revery of Emma's "radiant nakedness". ("The feeling excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing"¹⁴.)

Joyce's *Chamber Music*, though partially sharing the shortcomings of the poetic production of his *alter ego*, is a significant departure from the villanelle type of poem. There is no trace of the contrived religious imagery of the villanelle; the poems of *Chamber Music* are closer to that ideal of the lyric as "cadence or mood", the language is simpler and musical effects are more deliberately sought. The musical effect of the villanelle is in the nature of the form itself, whereas in the poems of *Chamber Music* Joyce makes use of poetic devices, such as alliteration, repetitions, echoes and sound modulations, to achieve this effect. This mode of poetry as music Joyce learnt mainly from the Elizabethans—especially Jonson—and from Verlaine.¹⁵ Joyce speaks of this predilection as early as 1902 in his essay on Mangan.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 262.

¹³ Charles Rossman, "Stephen Dedalus' Villanelle", *James Joyce Quarterly*, vol. 12, No. 3 (Spring 1975), p. 285.

¹⁴ James Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 240.

¹⁵ Echoes from Shakespeare, for example, are heard in poems like No X "Leave dreams to the dreamers/ That will not after/ That song and laughter/ Do nothing move." Poem VIII echoes Jonson's "Charis' Triumph" in that sequence of questions followed by closing exclamations, and at the same time, the way the questions are formulated reminds us of Yeats' "Who goes with Fergus?" Poem XXIII ("Now, o now, in this brown land"), with its similar pattern of repetition in each stanza, echoes Jonson's "From the Shepherd's Holi-

A song by Shakespeare or Verlaine, which seems so free and living and as remote from any conscious purpose as rain that falls in a garden or the lights of evening, is discovered to be the rhythmic speech of an emotion otherwise incommunicable, at least so fitly.¹⁶

This is the intention behind the poems of *Chamber Music*: to create songs that give the impression of freedom and spontaneity; no more "eucharistic hymn", "flowing chalices" or "sacrificial smokes". What Verlaine taught Joyce", says Hugh Kenner, "was the interdependence of rhythm, phrase and syntax; the elimination of fat; the self-sufficiency of unadorned presentation and constation. Verlaine was good medicine for one wanting to escape —let us say— Byron's rhetorical facility."¹⁷

Joyce's translation of Verlaine's "Chanson d'automne" illustrates not only what he learnt from Verlaine but what interested and did not interest Joyce at the time he translated this song.

"Chanson d'automne"

Les sanglots longs
Des violons
De l'automne
Blessent mon cœur
D'une langueur
Monotone

The voice that sings
Like viol strings
Through the wane
Of the pale year
Lulleth me here
With its strain.

Tout suffocant
Et blême, quand
Sonne l'heure,
Je me souviens
Des jours anciens
Et je pleure;

My soul is faint
At the bell's plaint
Ringing deep;
I think upon
A day bygone
And I weep.

Et je m'en vais
Au vent mauvais
Qui m'emporte
Decà, decà.
Pareil à la
Feuille morte.

Away! Away!
I must obey
This drear wind,
Like a dead leaf
In nameless grief
Drifting blind.

day" ("Thus, thus begin the yearly rites... Strew, strew the glad and smiling ground..."). Echoes from Yeats are also constant, especially of the Yeats of *Crossways* (1889), *The Rose* (1893) and of *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899); poem XXXI, for example, echoes "Down by the Salley Gardens": "O, it was out by Donneycarney / When the bat flew from tree to tree My love and I did walk together."

¹⁶ James Joyce, "James Clarence Magan", *James Joyce Quarterly*, vol. 14, p. 32.

¹⁷ Hugh Kenner, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

Ellmann quotes this poem¹⁸ as an example of a greater ease in translation, at least as a better translation than the ones Joyce had made of Horace. Hugh Kenner finds it faulty and describes its shortcomings very aptly. I quote the passage in full so as to elaborate further on his views:

This is the cruellest test to which words can be put. The wonder is not that the translation is faulty but that it reads as well as it does. Every third or fourth syllable is involved in the rhyme-scheme, which the translator was determined to retain though much of its function vanished. With his third and sixth lines in each stanza Verlaine's altered sound marks a coming to rest; the translation manages this five times out of six, but stumbles at the very first hurdle: "Through the wane / Of the pale year" is not only a seven-word dilutation of "De l'automne" but an unfortunate prolongation of a movement that should pause with some finality of sense upon "wane". The rhyme is an impossible task-master. The translator cannot, like Verlaine, lay his poem gently down with "dead leaf", he is forced to tip that card prematurely and contrive an alternative strong ending. Enforced circumlocutions harrass him: "Monotone" is onyx, "With its strain" is paste; "Et je m'en vais" is a sigh, "Away! Away!" is conscripted Keats. It is instructive to see the impossibilities Joyce was willing to wrestle with. . . .¹⁹

Joyce's youthful translation is also instructive of the choices the translator made, which were in keeping with the views that he held on poetry at the time. Stanislaus Joyce records his brother's preferences then:

His personal preference was for poems the interest of which did not depend on the expression of some poetical thought, but on the indefinable suggestion of word, phrase and rhythm. The poems that he liked sought to capture moods and impressions, often tenuous moods and elusive impressions. . . .²⁰

What clearly interested Joyce in the Verlaine poem is the rhythm and the way in which sounds echo each other. As to the emotion conveyed, the translator does not seem to be interested in it to render it accurately; his interest does not go beyond the general impression that the poem is about some "tenuous mood" of grief. His attention on the technique of the poem blinds him to the way in which feeling itself is organized in the poem and the precision with which it is recreated. Therefore, Joyce ignores the "ennui" and the gradual *depersonalization* of feeling in the "Chanson".

The first stanza of the French poem is constructed upon a double move-

¹⁸ Richard Ellman, *James Joyce*, Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 79.

¹⁹ Hugh Kenner, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²⁰ Stanislaus Joyce, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

ment: *away* and *towards* the personal. The word "sanglots", sighs, usually has a human quality about it; by linking it to "violons", it is placed at one remove from the human—the instrument still mediating between the human and the non-human; when this in turn is associated to the autumn, the sighs have been diluted almost to the point of non-existence. These vague, ubiquitous sighs wound the poet's heart, this wound constitutes a return to the personal. "Blessent" is a strong word, not only semantically, but phonetically within the context, for it breaks the echoing sound pattern made up of *ō*, *o* and *o* established in the previous lines. But this return to the personal only initiates a movement towards the faint and the impersonal again: "languer", "monotone", "tout suffocant Et blême". "Monotone", that "onyx" phrase as Kenner calls it because it is both strong and compact, is the perfect choice, not only because of the rhythmic cadence that it gives to the whole stanza, but also because the word gathers and echoes in itself the dominant sound pattern of the stanza; and it also means what it does: "Monotone" means not only boring, monotonous, but also *one* tone. All this is lost in the translation. In Joyce, it is a "voice" which, even though undefined, retains its identity as such (even in spite of the simile, it remains separate; it is not the voice of the "viol strings" but *like* them only). If anything, the relationship is inverted: if in Verlaine the sighs, refined almost out of existence, have the capacity to wound, in the translation the singing voice "lulleth" the poet; it eliminates the contrast in the original.

In the second stanza of the "Chanson", the movement is once more from the impersonal to the personal. Everything, undefined and undefinable, is suffocating and wan; the extreme enjambment with an adverb, "quand", almost mirrors this suffocation—indeed the line is choked with the adverb. "Sonne l'heure" also remains ambiguous; we do not know who or what rings, or what time it refers to, what *hour*. In the translation the faintness is attributed to the "soul", thus personalizing the undefinable sensation; while the bell becomes too particularized: to the neutral, almost fateful "Sonne l'heure", the translation makes it into a concrete bell (why not clock?), personalized with a "plaint" and the added, superfluous, "Ringing deep". In the third stanza of the translation, apart from the "conscripted Keats" (and the faint Shakespearean echo: "Away and mock the time with fairest show"), Joyce uses words that are too strong to render the "tenuous mood" of the original: "drear" is too strong for "mauvais"; while "grief" is not only too strong but betrays the purpose of the original of not mentioning anything as strong as grief, even though there are sighs and weeping, for it is essentially "une languer / Monotone".

The villanelle and the translation of "Chanson d'automne" represent stages in Joyce's development which he outgrew. As we have observed before, by not publishing the villanelle as one of his own poems, and by making this the *only* poem that Stephen writes in *Portrait*, Joyce's development as a poet proves both convergent and divergent from his fictional *alter ego's*. His verlainian apprenticeship —among other influences— allows him to realize, if not wholly, at least partially, his ideal of the lyric form as "cadence or mood". In that respect, Joyce's poetry is closer to Stephen's theory than Stephen's. The poetry of *Chamber Music* still betrays that delight in words for their musical quality alone, apparent in the writing of the villanelle, that "rose-like glow" sending "forth its rays of rhyme", words and rhythm for their own sake, often at the expense of meaning as Harry Levin has observed, but nowhere in his poetry will he use again the artificial imagery so redolent of liturgy as in the villanelle; nor will he choose such restricting metrical patterns again which, for Joyce, become a mechanical way to achieve unity of effect and rhythm. In that respect Levin's criticism of Joyce's poetry is unfair; words are not just "conventionally blocked into metrical patterns", there is a constant effort to suit the meter to the mood. If the translation of Verlaine's poem is faulty, it has the merit of fairly rendering the musicality of the original, even though the contents of the original get lost in the process. This, however, is a problem that achieves partial resolution in *Chamber Music*, as Hugh Kenner notes of the first poem in that collection. Words are no longer superfluous and there is a greater adequacy between meter and the musical phrase.²¹

It is also unfair of Harry Levin to dismiss Joyce's poetry on the grounds of 'opacity'. If approached with the wrong sense, it is indeed "opaque", for its purpose was never to achieve a visual effect; to borrow Pound's terminology, Joyce's poetry is not essentially "phanopoetic" but "melopoetic". Levin's example, poem XXXVI, "I hear an army charging upon the land", is a case in point; it is also illustrative of the lessons learnt from Verlaine.

I hear an army charging upon the land,
 And the thunder of horses plunging, foam about their knees:
 Arrogant, in black armour, behind them stand,
 Disdaining the reins, with fluttering whips, the charioteers.

They cry unto the night their battle-name:
 I moan in sleep when I hear afar their whirling laughter.

²¹ Hugh Kenner, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

They cleave the gloom of dreams, a blinding flame,
Clanging, clanging upon the heart as upon an anvil.

They come shaking in triumph their long, green hair:
They come out of the sea and run shouting by the shore.
My heart, have you no wisdom thus to despair?
My love, my love, my love, why have you left me alone?

(*Chamber Music*, XXXVI)

The emphasis, in this poem, is all on the ear, the "thunder", the "whirling laughter", and the "clanging", which evoke, not a literal army, but the mad beating of the poet's heart. The visual is used only for the sake of the auditive, to create a dream-like mood of despair. One could say of this poem what Symons said of Verlaine's "landscape painting", that it "is always an evocation in which outline is lost in atmosphere".²² The visual is reduced to a few essential strokes and those, in turn, diluted to create a mood, to blend with the images that are purely auditive. In this respect, Joyce's poem could be compared with Verlaine's "Charleroi" from *Romances sans paroles*.

Dans l'herbe noire
Les Kobolds vont.
Le vent profond
Pleure, on veut croire.

Quoi donc se sent?
L'avoine siffle.
Un buisson gifle
L'œil au passant.

Plutôt des bouges
Que des maisons.
Quels horizons
De forges rouges!

On sent donc quoi?
Des gares tonnent,
Les yeux s'étonnent,
Où Charleroi?

Parfums sinistres!
Qu'est-ce que c'est?

²² *The Symbolist Poem*, p. 332 (from Arthur Symons, from "Paul Verlaine", in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899)).

Quoi bruissait
Comme des sœurs?

Sites brutaux!
Oh! votre haleine,
Sueur humaine,
Cris des métaux!

Dans l'herbe noire
Les Kobolds vont.
Le vent profond
Pleure, on veut croire.

No doubt, there are here a few strokes that suggest the visual —“herbe noire”, “buissons”, “avoine”, “bouges”, “gares” etc.— yet their visual quality is deliberately subdued. We are not meant to visualize this “paysage”, any more than we are meant to *see* the “Kobolds”; we are meant to *hear* it, and hearing it, to be seized with a dark mood of foreboding and gloom. One might, at first, think that the low visual quality of this poem is due to the predominance of black colours, with only a sudden glare in “forges rouges” (which is also an auditive glare, so to speak), but a quick juxtaposition of this poem to “Effet de nuit”, from *Poèmes Saturniens*, will show us how vividly visual an effect can be achieved with greys and blacks— “Un ciel blafard que déchiquette / De flèches et de tours à jour la silhouette / D'une ville gothique éteinte au lointain gris.” In that “eau-forte”, the intention is clearly visual: from the constant short phrases (like titles of paintings or headings for stage directions, “La nuit”, “La pleine”, etc.) to the intensely visual tableaux that Verlaine paints in this poem— “Un gibet plein de pendus rabougris / Secoués par le bec avide des corneilles. . . / Tandis que leurs pieds sont la pâture des loups.”

In “Charleroi”, by contrast, the intention is clearly auditive. Different sounds, like different chords, dominate each stanza, and all sounds combine to create a “mode mineur”, which gives its mood to the poem. In the first stanza, dark vowel sounds and diphthongs predominate (o, ô, ua). The second stanza is composed mainly with sibilants, preceding or following nasals, which evoke the wind. The dark diphthongs of the previous stanza are still heard as an echo in “Quoi” and “avoine”. The third stanza emphasizes the 3 sound of “bouges” and “forges rouges”, and dark vowel sounds predominate again, with a faint echo of the sibilants in the previous stanza in “Quels horizons”. In the fourth stanza it is an explosion of ‘t’s and the fifth and sixth powerfully insist on the sibilants again, combined this time with stop consonants (t, k) and open vowel sounds (E, I:)— the combination reflects, auditive, the metallic violence of this industrial “paysage” that Verlaine

describes. The sixth stanza also combines this effect with dark vowel sounds (“brutaux”, “métaux”) which lead back into the gloom of the first stanza, repeated at the end. This hostile landscape which literally *strikes* the poet (“Un buisson *gifle*/ Iœil au passant”) is thus recreated more through the ear than the eye. The inner landscape is a counterpart of uncertainty and anxiety to the one outside; this is reflected in the nervous quality of the questions that punctuate the poem —“Quoi donc se sent?”, “On sent donc quoi?”, “Où Charleroi?”

Another feature that stresses the purely evocative nature of Verlaine’s poetry is the typically Verlainian odd word or collocation that startles the reader and highlights the line, or else introduces a deliberately discordant note,²³ a source of auditive contrast and evocation. The odd word is usually either an obsolete term, a specialized or rare word, or lexical items taken from different registers which jar in the context (this is the particular use Verlaine often makes of ‘argot’). In this poem, the odd word chosen is “sistres”. Because the word is far-fetched in meaning, the reader does not immediately establish a connexion between the ‘signifiant’ and the ‘signifié’, the ‘significant’ alone rings pure as an echo, or rather, as an extension of the already striking and superbly evocative collocation “Parfums sinistres”. Once the meaning of “sistres” is known —an Egyptian musical instrument that produces a peculiarly metallic and grating sound— the intellect is also deeply satisfied with the incredible precision of the choice.

The immediate contrast, in this volume of poetry, to “Charleroi” is provided by the poem that is printed face to face: “Walcourt”. Here, the inner and outer landscapes exult in the delight of living, and this is purely conveyed by the music of the poem; on the phonetic level of this music, this sunny landscape is painted by dominant open vowels, especially (I): and liquid sounds —“Briques et tuiles / O les charmants/ Petits asiles/ Pour les amants!”

Not one verb, not one regularly constructed sentence, not one transition. A succession of brief notations, within a luminous and cheerful tonal key. Like the Impressionists Verlaine paints with pure light, concerned now entirely in rendering the marvelous play and vibration of light. Like them too he ignores contour, boldly juxtaposes tones... Verlaine’s poetry

²³ Jean-Pierre Richard notes the effect of the discordant word in Verlaine’s poetry and says that, “dans la masse de la sensation vague, la puissance corrosive de la dissonance ou de l’impair creuse des fêlures, crée des lignes de rupture, taille des plans de déséquilibre, qui, sans renvoyer à l’évocation d’aucune réalité précise, rompent pourtant d’une certaine manière la cohésion harmonique du sentir. C’est cette même puissance qui retient la somnolence sur la pente du sommeil. Toute la réussite verlainienne fut donc de se fabriquer une incantation qui invitât à la fois à la jouissance d’une indétermination et à la delectation d’une extrême acuité sensible” (p. 168).

concentrates on recording the transitory features of a landscape in a moment of light... The essential thing for the poet painter is not to impose arrangements—to repel the intervention of the intellect which orders, and consequently, falsifies and distorts—but rather artlessly to collect impressions, capture them in their natural freshness.²⁴

If “Walcourt” is constructed as “a succession of brief notations, within a luminous and cheerful tonal key”, “Charleroi” is set in the minor key of gloom and anxiety.

Like Verlaine in “Charleroi”, Joyce attempts to paint his landscape, in “I hear an army”, with only a few, vague strokes of darkness— even the charioteers are in black armour. As in “Charleroi”, there are only a few scattered flashes of light here and there: the foam about the knees of the plunging horses, which is then internalized in the “blinding flame” that cleaves “the gloom of dreams”. The landscape painted without is the same as the one within. What slightly dilutes the effect of this poem, however, is the mannered syntax which does not correspond to the “tenuous” dark mood it tries to evoke. On the other hand, the yeatsian echo is too strong in this poem (an echo that also includes Verlaine, for one must not forget that there is something of the verlainian twilight in Yeats’s “Celtic Twilight”). From the very first line, Joyce’s poem strongly echoes Yeats’s “The Shadowy Horses”, as it originally appeared in 1896 in *The Savoy*²⁵— “I hear the shadowy horses, their long manes a-shake”. To Joyce’s “thunder of horses” and “foam about their knees”, there are Yeats’s horses, “Their hoofs heavy with tumult, their eyes glimmering white”.

4

If *Chamber Music* has a restricted value, it is not so much because the poems are “empty of meaning”, or not visual enough,²⁶ it is rather because Joyce has not yet quite found his own voice. The echoes from other poets, Verlaine, Jonson, Yeats, even Margan at times, are too loud for the young poet to find his own poetic identity. Stanislaus Joyce’s observations on this point still hold:

²⁴ Antoine Adam, *The Art of Paul Verlaine*, trans Carl Morse. New York, New York University Press, 1963, p. 94.

²⁵ Quoted in *The Symbolist Poem* (ed. Edward Engelberg), p. 269.

²⁶ William Archer expressed qualms about Joyce’s poetry that were not very far from Harry Levin’s criticism:

...I confess to a preference for poetry embodying a definite thought, or a distinct picture, rather than poetry which suggests only a mood. You will say that this criticism would equally apply to most of Verlaine and a good deal of Shelley. Well, perhaps it would; but you have got to write as exquisitely as they before you can validly plead their precedent. From an undated letter sent to Joyce. Quoted in Stanislaus Joyce, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-50.

What was true, and what I was beginning to notice, was that not all Jim's personality nor even the most distinctive part of it found expression in verse, but only the emotive side, which in one respect was fictitious.²⁷

His poetic identity, as most Joycean critics agree, is to be found in his prose works, where it thrives. But throughout his life Joyce kept on writing poetry, very sporadically however; poetry with the lyrical qualities of *Chamber Music* which he never quite abandoned, though somehow, the poems that cover such a wide span of time and which Joyce gathered in the *Pomes Penneeach* volume, retaining the lyrical qualities of his earlier poetry, faintly echo, at the same time, the prose work in progress. "A Flower given to my Daughter", for example, is rhythmically reminiscent of the description of the girl by the beach in *Portrait* — "Frail the white rose and frail are / Her hands... Rosefrail and fair - yet frailest..." cf. "Her bosom was as a bird's, soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some dark-plumaged dove. But her long fair hair was girlish: and girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face" (*Portrait*).²⁸

A poem like "A Memory of the Players in a Mirror at Midnight" shares some of the distinctively onomatopoeic and alliterative style of much of *Ulysses* — "They mouth love's language. Gnash / The thirteen teeth your lean jaws grin with. Lash / Your itch and qualing, nude greed of the flesh" cf. "Mawkish pulp her mouth had mumbled sweet and sour with spittle." ("Lotus Eaters"),²⁹ or "His lips lipped and mouthed fleshless lips of air: mouth to her womb. Oomb, allwombing tomb" ("Proteus"),³⁰ or "SOPHIST WALLOPS HAUGHTY HELEN SQUARE ON PROBOSCIS. SPARTANS. GNASH MOLLARS. ITHACANS VOW PEN IS CHAMP" ("Aeolus").³¹

A poem like "She Weeps over Ragoon" illustrates this double echoing in Joyce's later poetry. It is reminiscent of the prose at the end of "The Dead", but it also echoes Verlaine's *ariette*, "Il pleure dans mon coeur".

Rain on Ragoon falls softly, softly falling,
Where my dark lover lies.
Sad is his voice that calls me, sadly calling,
At grey moonrise.

Love, hear thou
How soft, how sad his voice is ever calling,
Ever unanswered and dark rain falling,
Then as now.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 150.

²⁸ James Joyce, *Portrait*, p. 199.

²⁹ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 176.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 48.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 148.

Dark to our hearts, O love, shall lie and cold
 As his sad heart has lain
 Under the moongrey nettles, the black mould
 And muttering rain.

The poem exquisitely works with the rhythm, sound modulations and echoes so typical of Verlaine's poetry. The first stanza plays with repetitions, with variations of a syntactical pattern; in one case, syntagmatically, by an inversion of word order ("falls softly softly falling"); the same pattern is then used for a paradigmatic variation, in alternate lines ("softly falling — sadly calling"). In the second stanza repetition is only by paradigmatic substitution and only once ("how soft, how sad"); whereas the third stanza contains no repetition. This constitutes a shifting rhythm that changes as the speaking voice changes. In the first stanza the echoing and alternating repetitions create a lulling, pendulum-like rhythm, with the extreme points of its sway in the repeated syntactic model and its drop in the short line: "Where my dark lover lies" and "At grey moonrise". The rhythm, on the one hand, mirrors the incessant rhythm of the falling rain; on the other hand, it evokes the mood of reverie in which the "I" is lost, while the echoing words also suggest the faint, disembodied voice of the dead lover, "sadly calling", already made one with nature and the rain "softly falling".

In the second stanza a new "I" is introduced, not lost in itself as the first, but externalized and intent only in addressing the voice of the first stanza, which has now become a "you". This new "I", though sharing the trance-like mood of the first, to some extent, is more detached from the echoing voice, "sadly calling". Accordingly, the lulling rhythm has died down, the repetitions are fewer, and the last short and abrupt line of the stanza is no longer a dropping point in a swaying movement, but a fateful closure — "Then as now".

The last stanza is further removed from the lulling influence of the voice; it is the realization of the ultimate end that reaches us all. It is no longer "I" or "thou", but a general, all-encompassing "we", a "we" that also includes the dead lover by comparisons — "Dark *too* our hearts...", "As his sad heart has lain".

The end of "The Dead" is similar to this poem both in rhythm and subject (though with a greater scope than the poem). There we have similar inversions and sound modulations that evoke the gentle, lulling rhythm of the falling snow. The description ends with the semantic and rhythmic finality of the word "dead".

His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through

the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.³²

The kind of variations and sound modulations that Joyce has used in "She Weeps over Rahoon" somehow bear the typical Verlainian poetic signature: "la cloche, dans le ciel qu'on voit... Un oiseau sur l'arbre qu'on voit"; "La main blanche et la blanche patte"; "Bien que mon cœur s'en soit allé, // Bien que mon cœur, bien que mon âme"; "Qui ne pleure que pour vous plaire". Typically Verlainian too is that swaying rhythm which is almost incantatory and trance-inducing, as if to blunt with oblivion the edge of an otherwise too painful emotion. It is interesting to notice how frequently Verlaine resorts to images of rocking and lulling, and how sound repetitions are so moulded that they rhythmically insist on this pendulum-like nature of the emotions experienced: "Qui m'emporte / Deçà, delà"; "Va, vient, luit et calme"; "Où tremblote à travers un jour trouble / L'ariette, hélas! de toutes lyres!"; "Qu'est-ce que c'est que ce berceau soudain / Qui lentement drolote mon pauvre être?"; "Une aube affaiblie / Verse par les champs / La mélancolie / Ses soleils couchants. / La mélancolie / Berce de doux chants / Mon cœur qui s'oublie; Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit, / Si bleu, si calme! / Un arbre, par-dessus le toit, / Berce sa palme."

The Joyce poem somehow recreates this Verlainian lulling rhythm and evokes also a mood of oblivion, but in Joyce it is the oblivion brought about by death and dissolution, whereas in Verlaine oblivion, the rocking of emotions, seems to be the only antidote against pain. Indeed, one could say, with Harry Levin, that the lyrical quality of the poetry of both Joyce and Verlaine is such that their poems can be, and have been, set to music and sung. This in itself is no mean achievement. That we cannot speak of Joyce's "œuvre poétique" as we can of Verlaine's—since Joyce's poetic genius was channeled into prose—does not mean that many of Joyce's poems are not very fine lyrics indeed, or that being musical is a mark of inferiority.

³² James Joyce, *Dubliners*, Viking Press, S. A., p. 288.