Berthy Feng
ENG 324: *Ulysses*
January 16, 2018

Literary Chords: The definition of a literary harmonic structure in “Sirens”

39 Black. Deepsounding, Do, Ben, do.
40 Wait while you wait. Hee hee. Wait while you hee.
41 But wait!
42 Low in dark middle earth. Embedded ore.
43 *Naminedamine*. Preacher is he.
44 All gone. All fallen.
45 Tiny, her tremendous fernfoils of maidenhair.
46 Amen! He gnashed in fury.
47 Fro. To, fro. A baton cool protruding.
48 Bronzelydia by Minagold.
49 By bronze, by gold, in oceangreen of shadow. Bloom. Old Bloom.
50 One rapped, one tapped, with a carra, with a cock.
51 Pray for him! Pray, good people!
52 His gouty fingers nakkering.
53 Big Benaben. Big Benben.
(*Ulysses*, “Sirens,” 211)

Joyce’s musical aspirations in “Sirens” ring clear, even amidst the scholarly debate about the structure and efficacy of the musical form. The general consensus, supported by confirmation from Joyce himself (Zimmerman 108), is that he wrote “Sirens” in a fugal form. While scholars disagree about the success of Joyce’s translation of a musical form into prose, many critics applaud his effort to effect simultaneity in an inherently linear art form. Nadya Zimmerman, in her paper “Musical Form as Narrator: The Fugue of the Sirens in James Joyce’s Ulysses,” posits that the fugal form allows for a “simultaneous reconciliation of various strands of self in the moment” (Zimmerman 110). Her thesis, however, does not explore the exact methods by which

Joyce achieves simultaneity in prose. It is not sufficient to recognize that certain themes and phrases appear throughout the episode outside of chronological and spatial order. The complexity of a musical fugue arises not from the repetition of themes, but from the intricate interactions between voices that create harmonies through the mere fact of their sounding simultaneously. Since voices operate in counterpoint by playing at harmonic intervals with each other, the recreation of a fugal form, which is based in counterpoint, requires the definition of literary harmony. For a successful translation of a fugue in literature, the prose must offer some site of simultaneity that functions like a chord in music. We can find this site of simultaneity at the points of intersection between the subjects in "Sirens," and these points of intersection are often words or themes that pervade multiple voices and represent multiple experiences simultaneously.

This analysis focuses on one particular section of "Sirens": the section in the prologue that loosely portrays Ben Dollard's performance of *The Croppy Boy* later in the episode. This section contains many intricate intersections between subjects that originate both in the episode and outside the book. Let us define a "subject" as an action, image, or storyline that recurs in the text. The prologue presents most of the subjects in "Sirens" in what might constitute the "exposition" part of the fugue. Later in the episode, in the "development" of the fugue, Joyce expands on the themes, illustrating them with more descriptive images and placing them in a chronological context. An example of an action as a subject is the scene of Boylan knocking on Bloom's door for his rendezvous with Molly. The line "One rapped, one tapped, with a carra, with a cock" (11.50) refers to the sound and action of Boylan tapping on the Blooms' door, among other subjects, which develops later in the episode. An example of an image as a subject appears in the line "Bronzelydia by Minagold" (11.48). The image first appears in the opening

line, “Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons” (11.1) and develops after the prologue: “Bronze by gold, miss Douce’s head by miss Kennedy’s head” (11.64). Then there is the storyline as subject. In the section of focus, *The Croppy Boy* provides a parallel storyline that becomes the main subject in several lines. For example, “Amen! He gnashed in fury” (11.46) refers to the climax of the plot in the song: “And Amen! say I, may all traitors swing!” (*The Croppy Boy*, line 39*). References to *The Croppy Boy* provide thematic comparisons to subjects strictly from *Ulysses*, as we will see later. Subjects throughout the episode take turns as the main voice in the narrative, while other subjects linger as “countersubjects.”

To mimic fugal counterpoint, Joyce repeats this pattern: present a subject, transition to another subject, and present the new subject while continuing the previous subject as a countersubject in counterpoint. Consider this pair of lines:

> Bronzelydia by Minagold.
>
> By bronze, by gold, in oceangreen of shadow. Bloom. Old Bloom.” (11.48-49)

Line 48 illustrates the image of Miss Douce’s hair next to Miss Kennedy’s hair. The next phrase, “By bronze, by gold,” transitions the focus to the next subject, the image of Bloom leaving the Ormond. Upon a first reading, “bronze” and “gold” as transition words might seem arbitrary, because the words more clearly belong to the first subject than to the second subject. However, as *Ulysses* always requires re-reading, notice that in the development of the second subject which concerns Bloom later in the episode, Joyce imbues the description of Bloom with the exact images of bronze and gold: “By rose, by satiny bosom, by the fondling hand, by slops, by

empties, by popped corks, greeting in going, past eyes and maidenhair, bronze and faint gold in deepseashadow, went Bloom, soft Bloom, I feel so lonely Bloom" (11.1134-37). By depicting Bloom's surroundings as he leaves the bar, Joyce ties the image of "bronze and gold" to this particular subject. Thus the image of "bronze and gold" becomes a connecting image that bridges Bloom and Miss Douce and Miss Kennedy. In the prologue, given knowledge of the development of both subjects later in the episode, these two lines portray two subjects interacting with each other through shared words and images. A strictly linear narrative does not require such connections between subjects, since the progression of subjects follows some logical order, usually chronological. To unite subjects that occur at different points in time and space requires another logical structure.

In music, notes follow the logical order of a mode or key and thus exist in harmony with each other. To make a logical transition between subjects, Joyce often utilizes a shared word. Take these lines as an example:

> Wait while you wait. Hee hee. Wait while you hee.
>
> But wait! (11.39-40)

The first subject refers to Bloom's musings on the pun on "wait": "Pat is a waiter who waits while you wait. Hee hee hee hee. He waits while you wait" (11.916-17). The second subject refers to Bloom's decision to stay at the bar to hear *The Croppy Boy*: "But wait. But hear. Chords dark" (11.1005). Subjects that occur at different times appear logically adjacent to each other because of the shared word "wait." Bloom's pun clues us in on the word's function, since a pun

draws its humor from the multiple meanings of one word. A pun exemplifies the multidimensionality of a word. We usually read words linearly, ascribing to them meanings that make the most sense in the current narrative, but we approach the ability to read a text multi-dimensionally when we encounter a word as a site of multiple meanings, where each meaning belongs to an alternative storyline or subject.

The word "wait" in this section actually evokes a third, less obvious subject. Readers who know the song *The Croppy Boy* might recall the lyrics: "But you must wait, till I go see / If the holy father alone may be" (*The Croppy Boy*, lines 7-8). The song explores the theme of deception by telling the story of a young rebel deceived by a British soldier masquerading as a priest. Deception is another application of the simultaneity of words. One word may take on different implications, depending on the motives of the speaker and the assumptions of the listener. Similar to puns, deception operates on the simultaneous meanings of words. In the two lines revolving around the word "wait," Joyce gives us most of the clues to understanding his method of verbal counterpoint. One word signals the reader into at least two different contexts: Bloom's musings on a pun and Bloom's decision to stay at the Ormond. Then there are subject "overtones," the subjects that lie further away from the text but are nevertheless implied through a point of intersection. Since "wait" is a critical word in the plot of *The Croppy Boy*, it evokes that storyline while referring to two other subjects that originate in *Ulysses*.

Among other examples of a word operating as a point of intersection between subjects are the words "cock" and "tap." Consider the line:

One rapped, one tapped, with a carra, with a cock. (11.50)

The two obvious subjects here are the action of Boylan knocking on the Blooms' door and the sound of the piano tuner. The development of these subjects occurs later in the episode: "With a cock with a carra" (11.1118) and "Tap. Tap. Tap" (11.1119). However, if we recall the three lines preceding line 50, we remember that the subject of Lydia Douce is still present:

> Fro. To, fro. A baton cool protruding.
>
> Bronzelydia by Minagold.
>
> By bronze, by gold, in oceangreen of shadow. Bloom. Old Bloom. (11.47-49)

Line 47 presents the subject of Miss Douce stroking the beerpull, which is described as a phallic image. It is no coincidence that in the development of this image later in the episode, the subject immediately slides into the line "With a cock with a carra" (11.1118) to describe the sound of the piano tuner. The word "cock," operating as both slang for "penis" and an onomatopoeic word depicting a piano tuner, unites two subjects through two widely different meanings. How does Lydia's subject connect to Boylan's subject? They connect through a pun on the word "tap," which is both an onomatopoeic word describing the sound and action of Boylan knocking and another term for "beerpull." This excerpt places at least three subjects in counterpoint, and the words connecting them constitute a verbal "chord."

Each point of intersection functions as a chord, or a tonic statement that opens up multiple dimensions in which each subject operates. Take the word "wait" again. As a junction between multiple subjects, it allows for the previous main subject to continue as a new subject

begins, creating a "lingering" effect of previous subjects and even bringing in subjects that are not written in *Ulysses*. The effect of a shared word between storylines is similar to the effect of an allusion, which continues the main narrative while implying other narratives and themes by reference. By establishing a site of simultaneity in the shared word, Joyce allows for multiple subjects to continue simultaneously throughout his prose. For example, the subject of *The Croppy Boy* functions as a "pedal tone" throughout this section of the prologue. In music, a pedal tone is a sustained note that continues in harmony with other voices, taking on different pitches in a chord depending on the other notes playing at the moment. Similarly, *The Croppy Boy* hangs over the passage, even functioning as the main subject in several lines. It provides the same narrative significance as the viceregal cavalcade, which threads the narrative of "Sirens" and indirectly unites all the characters. Behaving in counterpoint, *The Croppy Boy* highlights certain themes and ideas depending on the surrounding subjects. The line "Amen! He gnashed in fury" (11.46) refers to the following line in the song: "And Amen! say I, may all traitors swing!" (*The Croppy Boy*, line 39). Recall the three-line excerpt that follows the line from *The Croppy Boy*:

> Amen! He gnashed in fury.
>
> Fro, to fro. A baton cool protruding.
>
> Bronzelydia by Minagold.
>
> By bronze, by gold, in oceangreen of shadow. Bloom. Old Bloom. (11.46-49)

The *Croppy Boy* line offers a counterpoint to Bloom's subject, which appears in line 49: "Bloom. Old. Bloom." The reference to successful revenge directly contrasts Bloom's pitiful inaction. The language in *The Croppy Boy* even mirrors Bloom's situation: "may all traitors swing!". In Bloom's story, Boylan is the traitor. While it might seem insulting to place Bloom in the same position as the villain in the song, the comparison actually places Bloom in a sympathetic position. He is not the violent avenger, but a forgiving and reserved man. The point of harmony is to allow the listener to hear notes in different contexts while providing additional emotion and meaning to a melody. Each melodic line depends on other melodic lines to create a harmonic whole. By contrasting the melodic line from *The Croppy Boy* with the melodic line describing a frail Bloom, Joyce places these two subjects in thematic counterpoint, highlighting the violence of the song's antagonist and the peacefulness of Bloom.

The idea of thematic contrast pushes us to consider points of intersection beyond just words, as subjects also intersect at shared images and themes. For example, the image of metals threads the prologue and unites various subjects. In the line "Low in dark middle earth. Embedded ore" (line 41), the image unites the subject of Bloom deciding to stay at the bar with the subjects of Miss Douce and Miss Kennedy. The phrase "embedded ore" comes after the description of the dark chords that convince Bloom to stay later in the episode: "Chords dark. Lugugugubrious. Low. In a cave of dark middle earth. Embedded ore" (11.1005-06). While there are not any lines about Miss Douce of Miss Kennedy near line 41 in the prologue, the image of ore recalls the metallic description of their hair. In fact, it sets up the re-entrance of that subject three lines later: "Tiny, her tremulous fernfoils of maidenhair" (11.45). The phrase "fernfoils of maidenhair" foreshadows the description of Miss Douce's reaction to the performance of *The*

Croppy Boy: “At each slow satiny heaving bosom’s wave (her heaving embon) red rose rose slowly sank red rose. Heartbeats: her breath: breath that is life. And all the tiny tiny fernfoils trembled of maidenhair” (lines 11.1107-09). Contrasting the dark mood of the line about “embedded ore,” this description of the barmaidens’ hair is more positive. In another example of counterpoint providing multiple contexts to the same theme, we are able to consider this subject through different perspectives because of its relevance in multiple subject lines. Whereas the image of metals, which ties to the image of Miss Douce’s hair, comes amidst a contemplation of dark human primitivism, the image of Miss Douce’s hair re-appears in a more positive contemplation of birth and life. Furthermore, birth is a common theme between Bloom’s subject and the barmaidens’ subject, and both subjects present the theme through a different perspective. A theme such as birth, by appearing in multiple subjects, gains dimensionality through multiple perspectives similarly to the way in which a word achieves simultaneity through multiple meanings.

It is not a coincidence that Ben Dollard’s performance in the prologue concludes with the image of Big Ben: “Big Benaben. Big Benben” (11.53). The clock and bell that tower over London and, by extension, the British empire, serve as the ultimate symbol of simultaneity. Line 53 likens Ben Dollard to Big Ben, comparing his music to the sound of the Great Bell. Ben’s notes pervade the bar, bringing together multiple characters and their narratives through the uniting force of music. His music as a point of intersection represents the manner in which Joyce conjoins multiple narratives through multidimensional words, images, and themes. The literary analogue of a musical mode or key is the multidimensional word, the recurring image, and the re-applicable theme. Each site of verbal harmony adds to the emotional depth and complexity of

a subject while gaining its own emotional complexity with each new appearance. In his experiment with a musical form, Joyce reveals the site of maximum simultaneity in literature.

*All lines from *The Croppy Boy* are quoted from Gifford, page 293. Gifford also helped in figuring out the references of each line in the section.

This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.

Works Cited

Gifford, Don. *Ulysses* Annotated. University of California Press, 1988.

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Gabler ed., Random House, 1986.

Zimmerman, Nadya. "Musical Form as Narrator: The Fugue of the Sirens in James Joyce's Ulysses." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2002, pp. 108-118.