The Art of the Fugue: A Sirensong in *Ulysses*

*Christopher A. Shera*

At the heart of the daedal labyrinth of *Ulysses* lurks no minotaur, but rather a poignant contrapuntal fugue. In the boneheaped sentences of ‘Sirens,’ Joyce’s voices, the “enchanters of all mankind and whoever comes their way” (O:XII.39), emerge into music from the silence of words on a printed page. The synchronous wanderings of the entr’acte now “swallowed <“O rocks!” (284.41)> by a closing door” (255.7), *Ulysses* begins anew with an episode of transition, transition from day to night, from narrative stream-of-consciousness to stylistic chaos, from the emotional stasis of impending cuckoldry to the swirling psychic maelstrom left behind in the wake of Blazes Boylan. Joyce places this critical threshold, this moment of temptation, in the ‘concert room,’ in a garden of forking paths, paths of which all but one become daedal dead ends strewn with the bodies of “men now rotting away, ... the skins shrivel[ing] upon them” (O:XII.46), false entries in the fugue offering “no prospect of coming home” (O:XII.42). In the words and “honey-sweet voices” (O:XII.187) of ‘Sirens,’ Joyce constructs a tantalizing harmonic labyrinth that is for *Ulysses* its “Shira Shirim” (729.4), its Song of Songs.

*The prelude ends. There is a moment of silence; then, one by one, the entering fugal voices sing . . .*

Joyce’s composition begins with a prelude <from the Latin praeludere, to play beforehand: “a piece designed to be played as an introduction, e.g., to a liturgical ceremony or, more usually, to another composition, such as a fugue <“a composition, or a compositional technique, in which imitative counterpoint involving one main theme is the most important or most characteristic device of formal extension. The concept of fugue entered music under the Latin form of the term, fuga, ... [which] describes the ‘fleeing’ or ‘chasing’ of voices characteristic of fugue” (G:8.9)> or suite” (H:692)>, an overture of fifty-eight <and there are forty-eight preludes and fugues in J.S. Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier; the difference between the products of the digits <“Do anything you like with figures juggling” (278.18)> of these <“Numbers it is. All music when you come to think. . . . Musemathematics” (278.16)> numbers “is eight about” (279.20); the overture is Joyce’s octaval <“the greatest possible ellipse. Consistent with. The ultimate” (504.27)> return to the music of Bach with all the difference of an upended infinity> disjointed fragments serving both to recall motifs from previous episodes <“bronze by gold” (256.1) recalls “gold by bronze” (252.31); “rose of Castille” (256.8); “Rows of cast steel” (134.19); “Do, Ben, do” (256.42), “Do. But do” (202.12); and “jingle jingle jaunted jingling” (256.15), both “the loose brass quoits of the bedstead jingled” (56.27) and “jauntily Blazes Boylan” (253.42) and to introduce melodies <for the fragments, like “Mrkgnao!” (55.17) and the “fourworded wavespeech: seeoso, hrss, rsseeiss, ooos” (49.29) from earlier episodes, are phonetic transcriptions of sounds,
of the spectrum of Dublin melody from manual <“clapclop. clipclap. clappyclap.”> to intestinal <“Eff! Oo! . . . Rrrrr!”> from the coming fugue. The section is both overture <“as said before”> and fifty-eight stringed guitar upon which the episode <with the text as both conductor <“as said before”> to “Done”> and score <complete with expression markings <those “signs or words (sometimes abbreviated) used to indicate details of performance”> interspersed throughout <“With sadness”>, “Strongly””, “Softly”> is to be played <the artist through himself evoking from the strings, each at first silent and separate, an expressive harmony from among the infinite possible combinations <“finding in the world without as actual what was in his world within as possible”>, both solo instrument and orchestra, tuning up for its performance of the choral symphony of the Sirens on the reef.

The prelude ends <“Done”>. There is a moment of silence <“attacca: “Begin””>; then <the text raises its baton <“as said before”>, one by one, the entering fugal <“Fugue has fairly been called a procedure (or even a texture)”> rather than a form, . . . [so to] cite as characteristic any formal features of fugue is to court refutation on the grounds that the classics of fugue are so diverse in structure as to defy classification. Much has been written about ‘fugal form,’ but in fact the monothematic and contrapuntal nature of fugue precludes any prescriptive form”>

One finds ubiquitous the aural effects of alliteration <“slow cool dim seagreen sliding depth of shadow”>, of consonance <“Tschink. Tschunk”>, of assonance <“He pleaded over returning phrases of avowal”> —<I could not leave thee”> and of multiple internal rhyme <“blew through the gale”>. One senses incessant repetition <as monotonic words hammer ostinato on a single sense <“Look: look, look, look, look, look”> and subtly modulate into different parts of speech <“Wait, wait. Pat, waiter, waited”>, an intricate interweaving of voices <“as in “Oxen of the Sun”, logogeny recapitulates ontogeny”> told Mr. Bloom, face of the night, Si in Ned Lambert’s, Dedalus’ house, sang”>, and of the word <“Bloohimwhom”>, harmonic development <“vast manless moonless womanless marsh”>, melodic and <“harking back in a retrospective sort of arrangement”> retrograde inversion <“Exquisite contrast”> <“inexquisite con-
rett, contrast inexquisite nonexquisite” (268.11)>, improvisation with modulation <from the key of pronoun to that of mirth and back again >.<“A waiter is he. Hee hee hee hee. He waits while you wait. While you wait if you wait he will wait while you wait. Hee hee hee hee. Hoh. Wait while you wait” (280.40)>, suspension and <with release of tension> resolution <“Upholding the lid he (who?) gazed in the coffin (cofn?) at the oblique triple (piano!) wires” (263.27)>, transcription <in this example, for unaccompanied footwear <“What is it? loud boots unman-nerly asked” (258.18)>, and incessant repetition <“as said <said before” (269.33) > before just now” (276.20)>. Musical offerings and ornaments include chords <the übereinander <rich in overtones> of words <“Coincidence” (263.42) > played together <“Blazure’s sky blue bow and eyes” (266.15)>, symbolic trills <“Lugugugubrious” (283.14)>, glissando <gliding while flying <or the “execution of rapid scales <“Blmstup” (286.34) > omitting those whole-note ose that earlier rang across the score with accents <“O!” (260.29)>, staccato chords <“I. Want. You. To.” (285.41)>, dulcet legato elisions <“whatdoyoucallthem dulcimers” (273.41)>, grace notes <both “Greaseabloom” (260.37) <for “grease” is pronounced ‘grace’ in Ireland” (N:242) > and “Luring. Ah, alluring” (275.28)>, fermatas <“the endlesnessnessness…” (276.5)>, echoes <“Impethn thn-thnn” (258.14)>, rhythmic augmentation <“walk, walk, walk … waaaaaal” (286.31)>, and, all in a single phrase, an inverted <“Like lady, ladylike” (264.35) > turn <always denoted by a crooked ess” (262.16)>, closing cadence, quarter rest, and a breath mark <“her wavyaweyvyeyervyeyeyuvyrhair un comb: ‘d” (277.31) > voices sing.

The first voice <for “by convention a fugue opens with a passage <called the exposition> in which a theme or subject is announced by a number <x equals <proven by algebra> −34937 (278.23)> of voices or parts in turn” (G:8.10) > rises “steelyringing” (256.1) in the Ormond bar <the Sirens’ reef of counter” (258.33) <point> from the chaotic, crosscutting coda of “Wandering Rocks” with the temptation and lechery of <“O wept! Aren’t men frightful idiots?” (258.1) > men <who, “unsuspecting” (O:XII.41) > are “killed looking back” (257.41), counterpointed <“from punctus contra punctum, i.e., ‘note against note’ or, by extension, ‘melody against melody,’ [the term] denotes music consisting of two <‘multiplied by two divided by half is twice one” (278.16)> or more lines that sound simultaneously” (H:208) > to create a harmonic whole greater than the sum <“one plus two plus six is seven” (258.18) > of its melodic parts> <“With sadness” (258.2) > “It’s them has the fine times, sadly then she said” (258.7) >. Against this harmonic backsound <the great tonic in the air” (261.33) > enters <like figure on ground> the answer <the “second statement of . . . theme in a fugue” (HB:12) >, “a man Bloowho” (258.9) <“bearing <ironically for others, “for Raoul” (258.11) > in his breast the sweets of sin” (258.9) > becomes by juxta- <and super-> position the impertinent ogling “goggle eye” (259.34), the hideous “snuffy fogey” (259.20) in Boyd’s <old “greasy nose” (260.23) > “greasey I knows” (260.27) > “greaseabloom” (260.31) <ancient mariner of the great grey-green greasy <Limpapa <“limp father of thousands” (86.41) > sea> >. Simon Dedalus <playing on his pipe “two husky fifenotes” (261.31) > a melody recalling Bloom, who “went by by <two husky goodbyenotes Moulang’s pipes” (258.9) > while playing wild with a hand <deuce of a kind> of Douce <“Tempting poor simple <Simon> males” (261.14) > and Blazes Boylan <“riding on a jauntingcar” (263.14) > that he’s <“How will you pun?” (280.6) > so merry on soon to be
Marion enter as <counterpointing countersubjects> counterparts to Henry <“So lonely blooming” (256.34) <“languid . . . flower” (86.42)>> Bloom. The “conquering hero comes” (264.39) blazing in and with him follow the frenzy <“Miss Douce reached high to take a flagon, stretching her satin arm, her bust, that all but burst, so high. —O! O! jerked <lend a hand> Lenehan, gasping at each stretch. O!” (265.20)> of frivolous <“No admittance except on business” (281.28)> flirtation and the pain <“Miss Douce’s brave eyes, unregarded, turned from the crossblind, smitten by sunlight. Gone. Pensive <“flower, wonder who gave” (265.40) (who knows?), smitten (the smiting light), she lowered the dropblind with a sliding cord <a sliding, gliding glissando fall>>. She drew down pensive (why did he go so quick when I?)” (268.6)> of frustrated fantasy, and Mr. Leopold Bloom <who <urged on by the fugal voices> no longer hurriedly hides <“Follow. Risk it. Go quick. At four. Near now. Out” (264.2)> to a “table <in the dining room from which spying Bloom <recalling Joyce himself, the “artist, . . . invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (P:215)> can “See, [but] not be seen” (265.17)> near the door” (266.12)> . Then <“Sonnez! cloche!” (266.25)> the “Clock clack[s]” (266.2) <“one, one: two, one, three” (282.7)> four. Unhindered, unquestioned, unstopped by Bloom, Boylan is off <“—I’m off <<He’s off. Light sob of breath Bloom sighed on the silent bluehued <Bloomo? The “unconquered hero” (264.41)> flowers” (268.1)>>, said Boylan with impatience” (267.9)>>; “He’s gone” (268.3).

Joyce’s fugue <“the overall structure of a fugue is an alternation of expositions and episodes” (H:335) <“section[s] of the fugue that [do] not include a statement of the subject . . . [but are often] based chiefly on short motifs derived from the subject or . . . countersubject” (H:335)>> now becomes an impromptu vocal concert and Bloom’s mind an Aeolian harp <for “We are their harps” (271.20)> upon which the songs and their performers gently blow <“Bad breath he has, poor chap” (270.41)> , stimulating his interior monologue. Ben <“Big <phallus <“a lot of adipose tissue concealed about his person” (287.29)>> Benaben. Big Benben” (257.14)> Dollard <fusing and confusing <“wept! aren’t men?” (266.40)> “Love and war” (268.4) <“Dollard bassooned attack, booming over their bombarding chords: —When love absorbs my ardent soul . . . ” (270.3)>> > “blunder[s] <“you’d burst the tympanum of her ear, man . . . with an organ like yours” (270.13)> huge” (270.12); Dollard <the “base barrettone” (270.38) with <“dead nuts” (91.6)> a lover’s part <“Empty vessels make most noise. Because the acoustics, the resonance changes according as the weight of the water is equal to the law of falling water” (282.30)>> cannot sing the lover’s part, foreshadowing the fall of Blazes <another rooster with a “loud proud knocker, with a cock carracarracarra cock. Cockcock” (282.36)> Boylan: “Poldy <Bloomo knows his love <“that that is really life, . . . the opposite of hatred” (333.11)>> has more spunk in him yes” (742.33).

Richie <“Rich sound” (272.36)> Goulding whistles Tutto e sciolto <to begin another episode in the fugue <a “major type of dissociative activity characterized by <“All is lost now” (272.32)> loss of <“want a good memory” (272.30)> memory and usually by actual physical flight from <the “shuttered cottage” (38.38) <“House . . . of decay” (39.33)>> with the “wheezy bell” (38.38)> one’s more usual environment. Psychiatrically it represents a drastic . . . type of escape <“Down among the dead <“Thinks he’ll cure it with pills” (90.29)> men. Appropriate” (272.16)> from an otherwise intolerable emotionally conflicting <“Face of the all is lost. Rollicking Richie once.
Jokes old stale now. Wagging his ear. Napkinring in his eye. Now begging letters he sends his son with. Cross-eyed Walter sir I did sir. Wouldn’t trouble only I was expecting some money. Apologise” (273.9) situation. . . . Sometimes the person assumes another “Who’s he when he’s at home?” (64.19) identity “Coming out with a whopper now. . . . Believes his own lies. Does really. Wonderful liar” (272.28) and may function in a fairly organized fashion” (E:8.61). Psychogenic fugue states thus share many of the prominent features of somnambulism > from Sonnambula; Richie Goulding <the sleepwalker> has succumbed <“Fall, surrender, lost” (272.40)> to the Sirensong of fantasy far from “wife and little children” (O:XII.43). Bloom <on Mollyself-reflecting>, too, is tempted <“Jingle jaunty. Too late. She longed to go. That’s why. Woman. As easy stop the sea. Yes: all is lost” (273.3)>, but the episodic sonic winds blow in everchanging directions through the mind and memory of Leopold Bloom.

Now Simon <no longer simply saying> sings <while <another piper> Bloom <in Molly-thoughts and on an “elastic <wedding> band” (274.7)> quietly accompanies> of the impossible return to lost and “remembered lives” (274.1), sings to a <“pulsing proud erect” (274.31)> masturbatory climax <“flood of warm jimmie jimmie lickity secretness flowed to flow in music out, in desire, dark to lick flow, invading” (274.35)> in which <by “met him pike hoses”> Simon and Leopold <through the song and name of “Lionel”> merge into one: “Siopold!” (276.7). By the arranger’s mocking arrangement all in this paternal fusion now becomes inverted. Bloom <once no father without a son “No son. Rudy. Too late now” (285.5) > becomes father <to fatherless Stephen> and Simon <once father Daedalus, now only so in molding Goulding faded fantasy “It soared, a bird, it held its flight, a swift pure cry, soar silver orb it leaped serene <and too Sirene>, speeding, sustained, to come, don’t spin it out too long long breath he breath long life, soaring high, high resplendent, aflame, crowned, high in the effulgence symbolic, high, of the ethereal bosom, high, of the high vast irradiation everywhere all soaring all around about the all the endlessnessnessness. . . ”(275.40)> becomes son <the drowning “Drink. Nerves over-strung. Must be abstemious to sing” (274.27)> Icarus, a failed <“faltered, confessed, confused” (272.1)> artist <“my dancing days are done” (271.38)> so that Stephen <the son once Icarus “Seabedabbled, fallen, weltering. Lapwing you are. Lapwing we” (210.36)> may become father <Daedalus, the artist>.

The reader, aware of the arranger <composer>, can sense possibilities for the future in the music of the past; but lonely “I feel so sad” (256.34) Bloom, unaffected by events on the symbolic level, returns <by making “Blumenlied” (278.32)> music “Bloom ungryved his criss-crossed hands and with slack fingers plucked the slender catgut thong. He drew and plucked. It buzzed, it twanged” (277.15)> to the sorrow <Bloomenleid> of the present, to Molly <to “thou lost one” (277.23) <for “all songs are on that theme” (277.23)> . Bloom <straining against his lashings <for “the heart within desired to listen” (O:XII.192)> to the here <he “heard in a profound ancient male unfamiliar melody the accumulation of the past” (689.22)> and the now <while the Sirens sing. —Come, for the now-here is the nowhere of those who no hear> feels drawn <drawn by the music by the seductive sounds of his own elastic “lamentation” (277.13)> by <the “traditional accent of the ecstasy of catastrophe” (689.33)> a sentimental nostalgia for the <long-departed> past to that “one night long ago” (276.38), to the halcyon hours that <never were> cannot be forgotten <“Yet more Bloom stretched his string. Cruel it seems. Let people get fond of each other: lure them on. Then tear asunder. . . . Gone. They sing. Forgot-
ten. I too. . . . He stretched more, more. Are you not happy in your? Twang. It snapped. Jingle into Dorset street” (277.33). The broken cord <the broken chord <a sentimental, harp-like arpeggio> > awakens <sleepwalking> Bloom to his own vicarious now-here <to a mechanical <“Remember write Greek ees. Bloom dipped, Bloo mur: dear Sir. Dear Henry wrote: Dear Maddy. Got your lett and flow. Hell did I put? Some pock or oth. It is utterl impass. Underline impress. <Bloom’s idling <“Bloom loop, unlooped, nodded, disnoded” (274.34)> thoughts echo those of a <voice of anachronism> distracted word processor> To write today” (279.11)> and meaningless <“Bore this” (279.15)> scarlet letterary <“c/o P.O. Dolphin’s barn lane, Dublin” (280.16)> adultery <“Jingle” (279.21)> with Martha <always merging <“Folly am I writing? Husbands don’t. That’s marriage does, their wives. Because I’m away from. Suppose. But how? She must. Keep young. If she found out. Card in my high grade ha. No, not tell all. Useless pain. If they don’t see. Woman. Sauce for the gander” (279.27) into <“Wish they’d sing more. Keep my mind off” (280.35)> Molly> Clifford>. The music resumes <“minuet of Don Giovanni he’s <Boylan’s> playing <Molly <her “body was like a harp and … [his] words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires” (D:31.19)> now” (282.11)>, but it carries no forgetfulness. Starting to leave <“Must go. . . . Yes, must” (283.8)> Bloom remains, held <commanded <“Listen. Bloom listened. Richie Goulding listened. And by the door deaf Pat, bald Pat, tipped Pat, listened” (283.41)> by the text> by the music <by the “Chords dark” (283.14), the “voice of dark age, of unlove, . . . painful, come from afar” (283.16) > as Gabriel Conroy once stood “in a dark part of the hall gazung up the staircase” (D:209.24) at his wife, at the “grace and mystery in her attitude” (D:210.1), while the “vague world” (D:220.20) of the past echoed in the sound of “distant music” (D:210.3)>. Carried by the song that the “sighing voice of sorrow sang” (284.13) <above the pedal <“Tap blind walked tapping by the tap the curbstone tapping, tap by tap” (288.20) point <a “long held note <†>, normally in the bass, sounding against changing harmonies . . . in the upper parts . . . [and] creat[ing] tension by sounding with chords that normally could not be combined with it” (HB:220)> crescendo <crescendo <“Tap” (281.15), “Tap. Tap” (285.28) “Tap. Tap. Tap.” (286.26) <echoing the bedspring <“jingle that jogged and jingled” (279.38)> crescendo of Molly and Blazes <“tipping her tepping her topping her” (274.36)>>, <“Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap” (287.35), “Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap” (289.10)> and decrescendo <“Tap. Tap” (289.27) “Tap” (290.32), “Tip” (290.41) <“Last tip to titivate” (284.22)> are often “indicated by the signs ‘<’ and ‘’ ” (HB:73) <signs also used occasionally to indicate entrances and exits in a fugue> of the blind <piano tuning> stripling>, Bloom falls into despair <“Hushaby. Lullaby. Die, dog. Little dog, die” (283.30)> until <when “All [is] gone. All fallen” (285.1)> his thoughts turn inward from the song <“I too, last my race. . . . No son. Rudy. Too late now. Or if not? If not? If still? He bore no hate. . . . Rudy. Soon I am old” (285.4)>.

Pondering the possibilities <for at-tunement with the perfect <sea†> pitch of Molly <“Understand animals too that way. . . . Gift of nature” (285.39)> Bloom> left open by these unanswered questions, Bloom <denying the Sirensong its sovereignty <“My country above the king” (285.12)> turn the paralysis of the past to reaffirm the present <“Who fears to speak of nineteen four?” (285.13)>, turns <“Time to be shoving. Looked enough” (285.13)> from

†A foot note.
death <from man <from “martyrs. For all things dying, want to, dying to die” (286.5)<> to life <to woman <“Poor Mrs. Purefoy. Hope she’s over. Because their <“liquid womb of woman” (286.8)< wombs” (286.7)>>. In Lydia Douce <“Body of white woman, a flute alive” (285.33)> Bloom sees incarnate <“At each slow satiny heaving bosom’s wave (her heaving ebon) red rose rose slowly, sank red rose. Heartbeats her breath: breath that is life” (286.10)> what has been <so far <and only for the reader>> merely symbolic: possibilities for his own paternity <“On the smooth jutting beerpull laid Lydia hand lightly, plumply, leave it to my hands… Fro, to: to, fro: over the polished knob… her thumb and fin…" (286.18)>. Leaving <the Sirens <“Get out before the end” (286.29)> with their meatless <“Popped corks, splash… broth, stacks…” (286.16)> carcasses of <“Mr. Dedalus… star[ed] hard at a headless sardine. Under the sandwichbell lay on a beer of bread one last, one lonely, last <“flush struggling in his pale” (285.10)> sardine of summer” (289.11)> men< the Ormond, Bloom <“Glad I avoided” (287.12)> frees himself from the paralyzing <“Music. Gets on your nerves” (288.13)> Sirensong so that he <“Might learn to play” (290.11)> may sing <“songs without words” (285.37)> a seashell song <“the plash of waves… a silent roar” (281.28)> of his own <“The sea they think they hear. Singing. A roar. The blood is it. Souse in the ear sometimes. Well, it’s a sea. Corpuscle islands” (281.29)>, a song <“What are the wild waves saying?” (281.34)> of neither war nor death, but <“Must be the cider or perhaps the burgund” (290.26)> a song <of the art <“Prrpf <of the fart” frrppff” (291.12)> of the fugue> of life.

What is done <the <the <the <the fugue> passing tram> Bloomian windnote> words of Robert Emmet<“cuckoldry of Leopold <“Bloom, soft Bloom, I feel so lonely” (287.4)> Bloom> is “Done” (291.13). But such knowledge <the “well-pleasing” (O:XII.188) knowledge of the Sirens <“Over all the generous earth we know everything that happens” (O:XII.191)> need not bring an end to life. The Dubliners lifting their <“troll with trolchunt” (257.18)> glasses at the Ormond bar are <“True men. Lid Ke Cow De and Doll. Ay, ay. Like you men” (257.17)> paralyzed; they have retreated from the present into an imaginary history <a history continually replaying itself <a sentimental song on a worn-out 45 <“And you think you’re listening to the ethereal” (278.21)> spinning around and around on the phonograph> with indifference>. They have become <“symmetry under a cemetery wall” (278.20)> skeletons <“killed looking <living> back” (257.41) in a fantasy past>, dead and dying on the “beach” (O:XII.45) while before them the wide sea <the “forsaken shell” (281.40)> beckons <“Listen!” (281.6)>. Only Bloom <“Bloom alone” (289.13)> survives the Sirensong temptation of paralysis <for he, like all Dubliners, is drawn to the song of that “malificent and sinful being” (D:9.14) <“It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work” (D:9.15)>>, choosing a life <perhaps unpleasant> in the present, for the possibilities <perhaps minimal> of the future. As separate contrapuntal melodies <fifty-eight once meaningless fragments> blend together in fugal harmony <the many become one>, so may Bloom <“Seabloom, greaseabloom” (291.3)> one day <this day?> come home, one, again, in love.
References

Immediately following the title the abbreviation used in the text is given in parentheses. When no abbreviation appears in the text, the quotation comes from Ulysses.