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*Estudios de Literatura Comparada 1 (Vol. 1)*

# LAS ARTES DE LA VANGUARDIA LITERARIA

**EDITORA GENERAL**

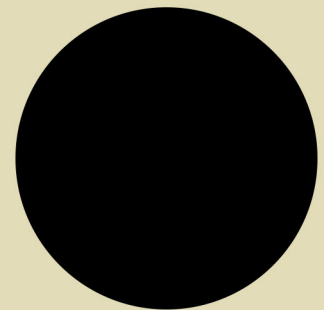
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# *Joyce and music: the sound of avant-garde prose*

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## *Abstract*

James Joyce's *Ulysses* is arguably the most famous example of avant-garde prose ever written; in this novel he chose the arduous task of representing a sonic art (music) in language (literature) revealing a fascinating dynamic between the two media. This paper will explore the literary uses of music in the Sirens episode of *Ulysses* with the aim of addressing four key interrelated research questions: (1) how the representation of music in *Ulysses* informs our reading by elucidating the major themes and characters of the novel; (2) how language and literary techniques are used to convey musical structures and forms; (3) how Joyce responds to the contentious idea of music as an 'absolute' or 'pure' art, residing above language; and (4) how Joyce rewrites the Sirens myth and in so doing evokes the significant connection between music and myth, which was revitalized during the modernist period.

KEY WORDS: Joyce, *Ulysses*, music, myth, avant-garde.

## *Resumen*

El *Ulises* de James Joyce es quizá el ejemplo más célebre de prosa vanguardista jamás escrito; en esta novela, Joyce eligió la ardua tarea de representar arte sonoro (música) en lengua escrita, revelando así una dinámica fascinante entre ambos medios. Este artículo explorará los usos literarios de la música en el episodio de las sirenas con el fin de examinar cuatro preguntas interrelacionadas: (1) cómo la representación de la música en el *Ulises* influye en nuestra lectura al dilucidar los temas y personajes principales de la novela; (2) cómo la lengua y los recursos literarios son utilizados para transmitir estructuras y formas musicales; (3) cómo Joyce responde a la noción problemática de que la música es un arte "absoluto" o "puro"; y (4) cómo Joyce reescribe el mito de las sirenas, evocando el vínculo significativo entre la música y el mito, un vínculo que fue revitalizado durante el período modernista.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Joyce, *Ulises*, música, mito, vanguardia.

Walter Pater (1877/1980: 102-22) boldly declared in his essay *The School of Giorgione* that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" and E. M. Forster (1951/1972: 105) claimed that "music is the deepest of the arts and deep beneath the arts". Given his preoccupation with music, James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is perhaps the finest example of the reaction of the modern novel to such statements. Daniel Albright wisely pointed out that "to study one artistic medium in isolation from others is to study an inadequacy" (Knowles 2013: xvii). While much attention has been paid to the relation between the visual arts and avant-garde literature, far less has been paid to that between music and avant-garde literature, which I would argue is due to the difficult and often nebulous relationship between the two media. Joyce's literary uses of music have however been well documented by a number of scholars, most famously by Zack Bowen and Sebastian D. G. Knowles, but a specific aspect that can shed further light on the relationship between music and avant-garde literature, namely the connection between music and myth in modernist prose, has been largely ignored. It is the contention of

this essay that by considering first the musical qualities of Joyce's prose and secondly the intersection of literary uses of music and myth, and their parallel functions, one can attain a deeper insight into arguably the most famous work of avant-garde literature ever written. There is a distinct impression that in myth and music, the crowning authors of literary modernism<sup>1</sup> found subject matter that offer holistic forms of expression that move beyond the mimetic claims of language. As Thomas Mann wrote in a letter to one of the twentieth century's foremost mythologists, Karl Kerényi, on the 20<sup>th</sup> February 1934: "it appears that a confrontation with the mythical sphere becomes the crowning, the chosen task of the greatest novelists"<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, Timothy Martin has suggested, that for Joyce at least, "the attraction to music was especially powerful among writers of fiction, who saw analogies between the score and the narrative, both of which must be realized in time, and to whom Wagner's music in particular seemed to embody, as Arthur Symons put it, the whole expression of the subconscious life" (Martin 1991: 119-120). How, then, can an author hope to depict an auditory art form which is by and large abstract, and which can embody the whole expression of the subconscious life? This is a great challenge to which Joyce rises in a unique and fascinating manner. For the purposes of this essay I will turn specifically to the Sirens episode of *Ulysses* to examine this relationship between music, myth and literature, as it is the section in which Joyce claims to have written a symphony.

The sound of Joyce's prose is one of its highest achievements and the Sirens episode of *Ulysses* is one of the more explicitly musical in the novel; when read aloud the text begins to reveal Joyce's musical preoccupations. Is it not the sound and repetition of the affirmative "yes" that lead Derrida to his *Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce? As Derrida* (1984/2013: 49) proclaims in this work: "*Yes in Ulysses can [...] only be a mark that is both spoken and written, vocalized as grapheme and written as phoneme, yes, in a word gramphoned*". The visual and aural qualities of written language in Joyce are thus, if we follow Derrida to his conclusion, of equal importance, especially if we consider Joyce's explicit musicality. While scholars such as Zimmerman (2002: 108-118) attentively outline the specifics of Joyce's self-declared adoption of particular musical forms and structures, such as the somewhat conflicting claim that the Sirens episode was written as a fugue or as a *fuga per canonem* with eight voices, we can refine our grasp of the chapter and indeed the novel as a whole by considering the unique intersection of music and myth, taking the musical qualities of the Sirens episode as a starting point. Joyce uses numerous innovative modernist literary techniques to evoke the condition of music (and its emotional resonance), in particular: alliteration (including sibilance and assonance), onomatopoeia, puns and wordplay. This is where we see an explicit response to Pater's claims about art aspiring to the the condition of music, implicitly referring to the union of subject matter and form in art which, according to Pater, was predominantly accomplished in music. An excerpt of the introduction (often described as the overture to the chapter) to the Sirens episode of *Ulysses* will evidence this:

Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips. Horrid! And gold flushed more.  
A husky fifenote blew.  
Blew. Blue bloom is on the  
Gold pinnaced hair.  
A jumping rose on satiny breasts of satin, rose of Castille.  
Trilling, trilling: I dolores.  
Peep! Who's in the... peepofgold?  
Tink cried to bronze in pity.  
And a call, pure, long and throbbing. Longindying call.

<sup>1</sup> Alongside Joyce we can observe this preoccupation in the works of Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, Rainer Maria Rilke, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, E. M. Forster, Hermann Hesse, Virginia Woolf and many others.

<sup>2</sup> Cited from Alexander Gelly trans. (1975). *Mythology and Humanism: The Correspondence of Thomas Mann and Karl Kerényi*. Cornell University Press: London, 44-45.

Decoy. Soft word. But look! The bright stars fade. O rose! Notes chirruping answer. Cas-  
tille. The morn is breaking.

Jingle jingle jaunted jingling.

Coin rang. Clock clacked.

Avowal. Sonnez. I could. Rebound of garter. Not leave thee. Smack. La cloche! Thigh  
smack. Avowal. Warm. Sweetheart, goodbye!

Jingle. Bloo.

Boomed crashing chords. When love absorbs. War! War! The tympanum.

A sail! A veil awave upon the waves. (*U*, 11.1-21)<sup>3</sup>

This overture to the Sirens episode may initially appear to the reader as random sonorous phrases which seemingly demonstrate a preoccupation with sound rather than narrative. However, after a close reading of the chapter, one soon realizes that the overture actually comprises of a series of Wagnerian leitmotifs introducing the themes, songs, characters and what Lawrence L. Levin calls the “voices” of the Sirens episode, all interwoven to evoke a practical and emotional condition of music which all the while sustains the ancient myth of the Sirens. Lawrence Levin (1965: 14) points out that “these voices would be those of Miss Douce and Miss Kennedy (the Sirens), Bloom, Simon Dedalus, Lenehan, Boylan, the piano tuner, Dollard, and Pat the waiter, with Cowley, Lidwell, Kernan, and Goulding functioning as free counterpoint”. Timothy Martin (1991: 107-108) takes this further and deliberates on what might be called Joyce’s narrative counterpoint, which consists of the idea that

five characters in “Sirens” have what amount to their own leitmotifs. Bloom’s “Bloo-  
ho,” Boylan’s “jingle”, the piano tuner’s “tap”, Miss Kennedy’s “gold”, and Miss Douce’s  
“bronze”. They form a quintet of three men and two women who move independently  
through the chapter [...] and pursue their own thoughts.

Indeed, their leitmotifs recur strikingly throughout the novel: Miss Kennedy’s “gold” and Miss Douce’s “bronze” leitmotifs are an obvious example of this development. The overture immediately demonstrates the parallels Joyce marks between score and narrative, music and literature, in truly Wagnerian fashion, by populating his introduction with literary leitmotifs. That Joyce develops and utilizes a musical idea that flowered in Wagner’s music drama is no surprise; as Sam Slote (2014: 6-7) highlights, Joyce’s paper «Drama and Life», delivered in Dublin in 1900, takes inspiration not just in name from Wagner’s *Opera and Drama* (1851) but also the idea that drama has the ability to overpower other literary forms because of its ability to portray truth through an interplay of passions, resulting in a communal art. The leitmotif (assigning each character their own sonorous phrase) is central to this idea and thus we see Joyce pushing the limits of the novel by incorporating techniques typical to music drama. This perhaps offers partial explanation as to why Eliot (1923: 483) raises the question of *Ulysses* in relation to the limits of the novel as a form or Harry Levin (1960: 207) having described it as a “novel to end all novels”. Joyce’s success however lies in the variety of techniques he uses to express music. As has been mentioned, the musicality of the prose itself via such literary techniques are impressive, however Joyce’s uses of literary cadences, leitmotifs, trills and even a literary “tuning up” of the “orchestra” (i.e. of his characters) elevates the musical qualities of the Sirens episode. The “tuning up” is evidenced by such narrative description as: “Miss Kennedy sauntered sadly from bright light, twining a loose hair behind an ear. Sauntering sadly, gold no more, she twisted twined a hair. Sadly she twined in sauntering gold hair behind a curving ear” (*U*, 11.80-83). The variation of the same phrase is much like a string player tuning up, emphasizing Miss Kennedy’s place in the quintet. Moreover, we later encounter further evidence of this kind of technique: “Bloom unwound slowly the elastic band of his packet. [...] Bloom wound a skein round four forkfingers, stretched it, relaxed, and wound it round his troubled double, fourfold, in octave, gyved them fast” (*U*, 11.681-684). The “elastic band” is

3 All quotes from *Ulysses* will be taken from: James Joyce (1922/1986). *Ulysses*. London: The Bodley Head.



often described as representing the bands that tied Odysseus to the mast of his ship, solidifying the link with the original myth. I would suggest in addition however that Bloom's motion of winding and unwinding the band evokes the tension and release of tuning strings, demonstrating Bloom's part in the quintet alluded to earlier. Joyce himself told Georges Borach in 1919: "I finished the Sirens chapter during the last few days. A big job. I wrote this chapter with the technical resources of music [...]: *piano, forte, rallentando*, and so on. A quintet occurs in it, too, as in *Die Meistersinger*, my favorite Wagnerian opera [...]" (Borach and Prescott 1954: 326-327). This is particularly striking if we consider Susan Mooney's (2013: 229) observation that the "complicated interplay of acoustic emissions, repetitions, and resonances accounts for an hour spent at and around the Ormond Hotel". The interweaving of literary techniques and orchestral parallels as a means to evoke music is where we see Joyce at his best, and the Sirens episode can indeed be experienced as music in prose, justifying Joyce's declaration that he had written a symphony, albeit a somewhat cacophonous one.

Joyce's use of abstraction and literary technique evokes both the "condition" and "sound" of music while simultaneously sketching out the narrative we are to encounter through his treatment of myth. The artistic preoccupation with myth is a trope of Romantic music, in which composers see in myth an emblem, with ancient origins, of a type of literature in which the conventional mimetic properties of language are transcended. In literary modernism, music too provides this function, it offers a form of expression that lies beyond language. Therefore, myths in which music plays a central role, such as the Sirens myth, are of particular interest to modern novelists such as Joyce; they provide a model of related ineffable subjects that pose an exciting and testing challenge to represent in prose. The following quote exemplifies how Joyce deals with the myth of the Sirens (as told in Homer's *Odyssey*) in relation to Bloom, his hero, and his Odysseus:

Draw near, illustrious Odysseus, man of many tales, great glory of the Achaeans, and bring your ship to rest so that you may hear our voices. No seaman ever sailed his black ship past this spot without listening to the honey-sweet tones that flow from our lips and no one who has listened has not been delighted and gone on his way a wiser man. For we know all that the Argives and Trojans suffered on the broad plain of Troy by the will of the gods, and we know whatever happens on this fruitful earth. (Homer. *The Odyssey*. Book XII: 161-162, lines 185-193)<sup>4</sup>

– O greasy eyes! Imagine being married to a man like that! She cried. With his bit of beard! [...]

–Married to the greasy nose! She yelled.

Shrill, with deep laughter, after, gold after bronze, they urged each each to peal after peal, ringing in changes, bronzegold, goldbronze, shrilldeep, to laughter after laughter. And then laughed more. Greasy I knows. Exhausted, breathless, their shaken heads they laid, braided and pinnaced by glossycombed, against the countderledge. All flushed (O!), panting, sweating (O!), all breathless.

Married to Bloom, to greasesebloom. (*U*, 11.169-180)

This comic parody of the "Sirens song" here emphasizes the significance of the music and myth connection. This example is as close to the sound of the Sirens' song that we get in *Ulysses*. Their "song" is not melodic, lyrical or beautiful but sexual and animalistic as the sirens "shriek", "pant", "laugh" and so on. Throughout the episode however, men sing, often beautiful lieder; this clever inversion of the Sirens myth illustrates how Joyce uses myth to articulate music – he uses the musicality of his prose to elucidate the inversion of the Sirens myth while keeping "actual" music playing in the background of the narrative, striking through intermittently with key lyrics of the songs, often verging on puns and alluding to major themes and events of the novel. This is exemplified in the songs: «Love and War», «M'appari» (or Martha),

4 Quoted from Homer, *The Odyssey* trans. by Robert Fagles (1997). London: Penguin Classics.



and «The Croppy Boy», to which we'll return later. The inversion of the Sirens myth also points to the fact that one of the primary functions of the Sirens is to distract Bloom from the startling realization that in the same room at the bar in the Ormond Hotel is the infamous Blazes Boylan who will soon cuckold him. All the language of this passage suggests as much. The “bronzegold” of Miss Douce and Miss Kennedy, our Sirens, conveys their narrative function to distract: the bronze and gold allude to the shimmering of their hair and clothes and as vocalists they are abrasive and hard to ignore. Joyce has inverted the myth of the Sirens as its traditional function is no longer fit for modern purposes, “they still want to draw their victims back into the past: but their outmoded art offers little benefit to modern-day people, among whom only the elite are still given the chance to listen to it (e.g. opera)” (Kiberd 2009: 174). In spite of the unconventional functions of the sirens in this chapter, the link to ancient mythology is palpable, as Kiberd (2009: 171) notes: the Sirens “stand beside the “reef” of their counter, their shoes and stockings cracked and dirty like the unseen fishtails of beautiful mermaids, while their satin blouses shimmer”. Moreover, the amused barmaids' depiction of Bloom's “greasy eyes” on to his “greasy nose”, culminating in the cadence repetition and a trill: “married to Bloom, to greaseaseabloom”, denotes a reference to the sea as domain of the Sirens and a uniting of the sea image with Bloom and subsequently Odysseus. Bloom also “eyes” a “poster, a swaying mermaid smoking mid nice waves. Smoke, mermaids, coolest which of all. Hair steaming: lovelorn” (*U*, 11.299-301). The episode is full of such subtleties which unite music and myth. Finally, and most unambiguously, Simon Dedalus emphatically declares to one of the Sirens “that was exceedingly naughty of you, [...] tempting poor simple males” (*U*, 11.201-202). The union of high (myth) and low (music) culture and art in this episode is symptomatic of Joyce's major literary preoccupation on unifying high- and low-brow subjects. In his motivation to present lowly subjects with dignity in his narrative, and by analyzing the relationship between myth in relation to music, we are able to attain a deeper insight into both Joyce's concerns as an artist and *Ulysses* itself.

To expatiate this, the final point to raise in conjunction with Joyce's literary uses of music and myth is his use of song. Conversely to the points made earlier, Joyce also uses music to articulate myth: the song «Love and War», sung by Cowley and Dollard and whose text reveals the major conflicts of the episode harks back, obliquely, to the Homeric source: the Sirens' song promises love's pleasures after the perils of war. Like the lover and the warrior in the song, Zack Bowen (1975: 171) observes: “the boys in the Ormond Bar decide musically to blend love's wounds with battle's scars / And call in Bacchus, all divine / To cure both pains with rosy wine”. The songs sung in the Sirens episode, such as «Love and War», are multifaceted and serve many purposes. The quote below refers to the scene in which the song «Love and War»<sup>5</sup> features most prominently in *Ulysses*:

[Dollard's] gouty paws plumped chords. Plumped, stopped abrupt. [...]

Jingle a tinkle jaunted.

Bloom heard a little sound. He's off. Light sob of breath Bloom sighed on the silent blue-hued flowers. Jingling. He's gone. Jingle. Hear.

–*Love and War*, Ben, Mr Dedalus said. [...]

Over their voices Dollard bassooned attack, booming over bombarding chords:

–*When love absorbs my ardent soul . . .* [...]

–War! War! cried Father Cowley. You're the warrior.

–So I am, Ben Warrior laughed. I was thinking of your landlord. Love or money. [...]

–. . . . . *my ardent soul*

*I care not for the morrow.*

5 See Zack Bowen (1975: 170-171) for the full song «Love and War», where the constituent 'Lover' (tenor) and 'Soldier' (bass) sing the last stanza in unison.

In liver gravy Bloom mashed potatoes. *Love and War* someone is. Ben Dollard's famous. Night he ran round to us to borrow a dress suit for that concert. Trousers tight as a drum on him. Musical porkers. Molly did laugh when he went out. Threw herself back across the bed, screaming, kicking. With all his belongings on show. (*U*, 11.452-557)

The passage illustrates Joyce's technique and intentions well: Bloom hears Boylan's developed leitmotif, "jingle a tinkle jaunted", which reminds him that Boylan is now leaving to embark on his lover's tryst with Molly. The lyrics of the song intersperse the narrative which itself is music in prose: the sibilance of Boylan's "jingle" is followed by the "bassooned", "booming" of Dollard's bass over "bombarding chords", pointing to the fact that Ben Dollard is singing the wrong part, he is a bass and thus should be singing the "War" while Cowley takes up the tenor "Love". The "War! War!" also recalls a line from the overture. Moreover, the song forces Bloom to recall the past, to Molly laughing at Dollard's inappropriate clothing one night. All this points to my observation that songs and the Sirens function independently to tempt Bloom into distraction, and though he occasionally succumbs, like Odysseus, he is bound for home and ultimately resists the Sirens and the songs. The utilisation of music and myth here is emblematic of Joyce undertaking with precision and skill Ezra Pound's modernist imperative to "make it new". In other words, we have further evidence of Joyce modernising the Sirens myth for his own purpose; functioning on an aesthetic level (the Sirens' physical and sexual attraction) and on a musical level (the songs sung by men in the bar), they combine to form different and powerful forms of temptation. Songs such as the aria Simon Dedalus sings from the opera «M'appari» also affect Bloom, leading him to mediate in stream-of-consciousness narrative with ironic puns such as: "tenors get women by the score. Throw flower at his feet. When will we meet? My head it simply. Jingle all delighted" (*U*, 11.686-687); the "jingle" here referring once more to Boylan and his leitmotif, "delighted" by his sexual encounter with Molly. Moreover, the singing of Ireland's native doric «The Croppy Boy», also tempts Bloom to distraction and to reflect on the fact that he is the "last of his race" due to the untimely death of his only son, Rudy, a running theme in the novel. Nevertheless, Bloom, like Odysseus, ultimately resists temptation, as the effect of music is "too irrational for a man as measured as he" as Kiberd (2009: 180) describes him. One passage in particular leads us to this assumption:

Numbers it is. All music when you come to think. Two multiplied by two divided by half is twice one. Vibrations: chords those are. One plus two plus six is seven. Do anything you like with figures juggling. Always find out this equal to that. Symmetry under a cemetery wall. He doesn't see my mourning. Callous: all for his own gut. Musemathematics. And you think you're listening to the ethereal. But suppose you said it like: Martha, seven times nine minus x is thirtyfive thousand. Fall quite flat. It's on account of the sound it is. (*U*, 11 228)

Bloom's meditation on the essence of music in mathematical terms is typical of his rationale and subsequently he, like Odysseus, is immune from the intoxicating effects of music. Bloom reduces music to its mathematical and scientific properties (vibrations, symmetry, numbers and so on), which has a sobering effect on our reading of the inebriating experience of the last hour at the Ormond Bar. The dichotomy between the intoxicating power of music and the rational method of composition (in this case in mathematical terms) which occurs in Bloom's stream of consciousness is a trope in philosophy, musicology and literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Furthermore, this dialectic can be read as a response to Nietzsche's main argument in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) in which he argues the rational Apollonian has been favoured in art since Socrates and Euripides and in doing so has overshadowed the intoxicating Dionysian and thus, for Nietzsche, tragic art and culture has declined into obscurity. The coexistence of the two artistic forces represented by the Greek myths, Apollo and Dionysus, is, according to Nietzsche, not only the foundation of all art but where art reaches its peak and what artists must be striving towards. If Bloom is our Apollonian character in *Ulysses* (as expressed by his stream of consciousness on the rational, mathematical qualities of

music here) then Stephen Dedalus is our Dionysian, evidenced by his literal (drunkenness) and intellectual (artistic genius) states of intoxication. At the time of writing *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche mistakenly believed that he had found the individual (Wagner) and the work (music drama) through which the Apollonian and Dionysian would once again work in tandem and produce a rebirth of tragic art, but it is actually in the modernist novel that “Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo; and Apollo, finally the language of Dionysus; and so the highest goal of tragedy and of all art is attained” (Nietzsche, 1872/1967: 130). This can provide yet another fruitful example of how Joyce responds to the historically intimate relationship between music and myth and demonstrates how in critically evaluating the musical qualities of Joyce’s prose we are taken down fascinating avenues of enquiry. In *Ulysses* he treats music in relation to myth by a modernist retelling of the Sirens episode of Homer’s *Odyssey* and responds, consciously or otherwise, to Nietzsche’s conception of aesthetic mythology in relation to the spirit of music as the foundation of all art, presented in *The Birth of Tragedy* in the form of the Apollo/Dionysus dichotomy.

The long novel of the early twentieth century evidently offered the correct form for music and myth to be explored as literary subjects as it allows for deep and sustained philosophical meditation on the subjects, and *Ulysses* is the perfect example of the potential success of such an enterprise. In contrast to other literary forms, it presented one with sufficient space for innovative modernist techniques to develop and flourish in long, free-form narrative, such as stream of consciousness, dramatic monologues, panoramic depictions of events (such as the scene at the Ormond bar where the Sirens episode takes place) and so forth. The radical advances in literary uses of language stem from the inclination of modern novelists to tend toward an interdisciplinary focus in the arts, evidenced by Joyce in his clear adoption of musical forms, structures and techniques in *Ulysses*. Furthermore, the artistic challenge of representing a sonic art in language, in literature, appears irresistible to twentieth century authors and is evidence of the modernist preoccupation with ineffability. As an amateur musician himself, Joyce (who it is said could have made a career as a tenor), could not resist the challenge of depicting music (both abstract and concrete) in his prose, and indeed *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939) can both be elucidated by contemplating this nebulous intersection of music, myth and literature, with the question of ineffability at the fore. While there is work to be done on the scope of this topic in the broader context of literary modernism, it is demonstrable that in analyzing the sonorous qualities of Joyce’s prose in light of the connection between music and myth we attain profound insights into *Ulysses*. Harking back to his Homeric source, Joyce investigates the power of music; sonically by evoking music in prose via avant-garde literary techniques and aesthetically by rewriting the myth of the Sirens. It is in the union of music and myth in prose that we see the height of literary achievement in the modernist period.

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