A Question of Substance in Joyce’s *Chamber Music*

Toshiko Ariyoshi

I

Joyce’s *Chamber Music* may be considered a minor work in comparison with his four prose masterpieces. However, *Chamber Music* is notable as the origin of all his works. Louis Golding comments, “The James Joyce canon officially begins with the publication in 1907 of a collection of thirty-six poems entitled *Chamber Music*” (49). Moreover, T.S. Eliot also comments that his works are “the same work, written again and again with increasing complexity” (Tindall 62). In other words, his works from *Chamber Music* to *Finnegans Wake* seem to have consistent themes.

Some critics believe that the poems in *Chamber Music* are influenced by Elizabethan poetry. Moreover, the term “lack of substance” used by some critics (Russel, *James Joyce’s Chamber Music* 17) is more favorably considered by others as the influence of the “lightness” (17) in Elizabethan poems.

On the other hand, William Tindall approaches the question of substance from a different angle. He considers that the “lightness” in Joyce’s poems is caused by his personal experience in the Irish culture rather than by the imitation of the Elizabethan diction. Also, Tindall considers that the girl in *Chamber Music* seems to be “an embodiment of the hero’s feminine soul,” (85) like Jung’s anima.

In this paper I would like to compare two different approaches to the question of substance in his poetry, with the purpose of proving that
Tindall's assertion concerning the influence of Irish culture on Joyce's poems is more valid than any of the other theories.

II

As to the poems in Chamber Music, some critics generally regarded them as "a patent imitation of the Elizabethan songbooks" (Zabel 208). Actually, Joyce used to go to the National Library in Dublin to look for and copy his favorite Dowland's airs from Elizabethan songbooks. An English lutenist and a composer, John Dowland was of Irish stock, and his First Book of Airs was published while he was in residence at Trinity College in Dublin. Young Joyce with a sweet tenor voice loved singing Irish and English folk songs, especially, the old airs of Elizabethan lutenists and composers.

Arthur Symons is one of the critics who found a lack of substance in Joyce's poetry, but nevertheless found it charming. He wrote a review of Chamber Music in the magazine, Nation (22 June, 1907), and proposed a "quality of insubstantiality" (14) in the work:

The book is tiny; there are thirty-six pages, with a poem a-piece. And they are all so singularly good, so firm and delicate, and yet so full of music and suggestion,... No one who has not tried can realise how difficult it is to do such tiny, evanescent things as that; for it is to evoke, not only roses in midwinter, but the very dew on the roses.... There is almost no substance at all in these songs, which hardly hint at a story; but they are like a whispering clavichord that someone plays in the evening, when it is getting
dark. They are full of ghostly old tunes, that were never young and will never be old, played on an old instrument. They are so slight, as a drawing of Whistler is slight, that their entire beauty will not be discovered by those who go to poetry for anything but its perfume. (38-39)

Symons’s glowing review reminds us of “the Golden Age, the Renaissance of English music and poetry” (Russel, *The Elizabethan Connection* 145). It was a period when music and poetry had equal importance. Hallet Smith points out, “The ‘beautiful and nothing else’ attribute of the Elizabethan lyric may mean only that the poetry is waiting for music to give it tone and emphasis” (267-268).

Like Elizabethan songs, the poems in *Chamber Music* are also set to music by various composers. Actually, Joyce himself wished it. He wrote to an Anglo Irish composer, G. Molyneux Palmer in a letter dated July 19, 1909:

I hope you may set all of *Chamber Music* in time. This was indeed partly my idea in writing it. The book is in fact a suite of songs and if I were a musician I suppose I should have set them to music myself. (*Letter I* 67)

Thus, the poems in *Chamber Music* may be considered as an imitation of Elizabethan songs, and the “lack of substance” (Russel, *James Joyce’s Chamber Music* 17) in Joyce’s poetry may be merely the “lightness” (17) in Elizabethan poetry.

On the other hand, William Tindall argues that *Chamber Music* takes “the shape of narrative” (41) and also that:
Roughly and with a few variations, this is the outline of *A Portrait of the Artist, ...* Simpler than these novels, *Chamber Music* made of the same materials, ... (41)

*A Portrait of the Artist* is a brief prose sketch, and Joyce wrote it as a first draft of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Then he changed the title of it to *Stephen Hero* and decided to rewrite it as the novel we know as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Thus, according to Tindall's idea, *Chamber Music* is something more than a mere imitation of Elizabethan poetry. Joyce may have intentionally designed the story of *Chamber Music* from the beginning. Then its narrative plot may be the same as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

William Tindall outlines the narrative plot of *Chamber Music*:

The thirty-six poems tell a story of young love failure. At the beginning the lover is alone. He meets a girl and their love, after suitable fooling, is almost successful. Then a rival intrudes. The hero's devotion gives way to irony and, at last, despair. Alone again at the end, the lover goes off into exile. (41)

If we find what Tindall proposes as the narrative plot in *Chamber Music* to be like the one in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a portrait of Joyce himself as an artist will emerge in this suite of poems. If so, a girl without substance in the poems will represent a real woman in the Joyce's life. Thus, Joyce's poetry can be regarded not as *impersonal*, like Elizabethan poetry, but *personal*. 
Regarding Joyce’s collection of thirty-six poems, Stanislaus has written in his book, *My Brother’s Keeper*:

As for Jim, he had not yet found a title for his little collection of verses, and as usual, he asked me for suggestions. One of these, *Chamber Music*, he adopted. It had seemed to me suitable to the passionless love themes and studious grace of the songs. (178-179)

The title of *Chamber Music* was suggested not by Joyce but by his brother, Stanislaus. The poems may have reminded Joyce’s brother of the courtly love tradition and may have brought the old Elizabethan airs to his mind. However, in a letter to his brother dated March, 1907, Joyce wrote concerning his intention for these poems:

I don’t like the book but wish it were published and be damned to it. However, it is a young man’s book. I felt like that. It is not a book of love- verses at all. I perceive. (*Letter II* 219)

According to this letter, Joyce himself has not regarded his poems as love poems. Furthermore, he seems to imply another meaning of the title, *Chamber Music in Ulysses*.

Chamber music. Could make a kind of pun on that. It is a kind of music I often thought when she. Acoustics that is. Tinkling. Empty vessels make most noise. Because the acoustics, the resonance changes according as the weight of the water is equal to the law of
In Herbert Gorman's *James Joyce*, William Tindall finds out the details of the naming of *Chamber Music* through the incident of a pot in the room of a "hot-blooded widow" (71). After Joyce read his poems, she hid behind a screen to her pot and then a melodious tinkle sounded from there. At that time, "one of his bouncing companions, a sharp-witted intelligent zany" (116) said to Joyce that he heard how she appreciated his poems, and Joyce replied that he would call the book *Chamber Music* (71). If we consider this incident and Mr. Bloom's interpretation in *Ulysses* as the clues to one of the meanings of the title, *Chamber Music* seems to have been also chamber-pot music in Joyce's mind.

Even if Joyce did not regard his poems as love verses like Elizabethan poetry, he implied another meaning of the title, different from Stanislaus's intention. The theme of "love" in the traditional Irish myth must have come to his mind. Poem I and III are the prelude in a suite of poems, according to Joyce's letter to G.Molyneux Palmer dated 19 July, 1909:

Poem I

**STRINGS** in the earth and air
     Make music sweet;
Strings by the river where
     The willows meet.

There's music along the river
     For Love wanders there,
Pale flowers on his mantle,
Dark leaves on his hair.

All softly playing,
With head to the music bent,
And fingers straying
Upon an instrument. *Chamber Music* 393
(My emphasis)

Poem III
At that hour when all things have repose,
O lonely watcher of the skies,
Do you hear the night wind and the sighs
Of harps playing unto Love to unclose
The pale gates of sunrise?

When all things repose do you alone
Awake to hear the sweet harps play
To Love before him on his way,
And the night wind answering in antiphon
Till night is overgone?

Play on, invisible harps, unto Love,
Whose way in heaven is aglow
At that hour when soft lights come and go,
Soft sweet music in the air above
And in the earth below. *Chamber Music* 395
(My emphasis)
In these poems, "Love" seems to be an ancient Irish God in the myth, "The Dream of Oenghus." The protagonist, Oenghus is considered to be Gael’s Eros or a master of love. He falls in love "in absence" (An Anthology 40) with a girl in a dream. She appears to him every night and plays her lute for him. However, when he tries to take her and bring her into his bed, he suddenly finds that she has fled. He has suffered from a lovesickness for a whole year and at last, he finds that she is a daughter of the king of fairies and transforms herself into a swan every two years. Oenghus comes to the lake to meet her at the time when she appears and also tries to transform himself into a swan. It’s the time when they are united as one. According to Emma Jung’s analysis of the story, there can be no doubt that she is half of his soul, the anima, because it is clear that she appears during his sleep and he tries to meet her in her "element" (71), by transforming himself into a swan as well. Jung also insists that such a transfiguration as his is capable of uniting the two forever (71).

Oenghus’s attitude toward a girl parallels those of (1) the young man in Chamber Music, of (2) Stephen in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and of (3) Gabriel in “The Dead” in Dubliners. Each figure is Joyce’s alter ego and expresses his love toward his ideal image of girlhood or womanhood, using words like “sweet” (Poem I, III), “soft” (Poem III), and “softly” (Poem I) while actually he shrinks from physically loving a girl.

Actually, s-sound adjectives and adverbs such as soft, softly, sweet, sweetly, shy, shyly, slowly, secretly, and silently appear in almost all these poems. It is especially noticeable that soft, and sweet are Joyce’s favorite words, but also “these words were staples of the Elizabethan lyricists” (Russel, James Joyce’s Chamber Music 15). So William Tindall complains
of Joyce’s excessive use of *sweet* and *soft*, insisting that “they help give *Chamber Music* its reputation of triviality, emptiness, and sentiment” (15).

However, such words as *soft* and *sweet* do not merely signify the imitation of the Elizabethan diction. The incessant use of these words with the image of girlhood or womanhood comes from Joyce’s personal experience. This image, on one hand, shows the pure and innocent essence of girlhood or womanhood which is deified in the Blessed Virgin Mary. On the other hand, it also represents the image of girlhood or womanhood as a temptress. No doubt his use of this latter image arose out of the young Joyce’s suffering from an obsession with the concept of a woman as temptress who leads a man to commit sinful acts. This obsession has been deeply engraved not only in his heart but also in adolescent hearts in Ireland in general because of the severe religious discipline. This fact hindered the sincere and honest expression of love between a man and a woman.

In addition, music is also notable in these poems. “Strings in the earth and air” (Poem I) play sweet music and “the night wind and the sighs of harps” (Poem III) play to invite Love, who is lonely, to keep the gate open. This image of the “gates” may remind us of the scene in which Stephen daydreams about his ideal girl, Mercedes. He longs to meet in the actual world “the unsubstantial image which his soul so constantly beheld” (*A Portrait* 231). He expects to meet her quietly, as if they knew each other “perhaps at one of the gates or in some more secret place” (231). The “gates” (Poem III), as Tindall mentions, encompass the image of “desire” (184). “Invisible harps” (Poem III) play music and songs of love which present “the passionate love desire between a man and woman” (*Spirit Filled Life Bible* 946) such as “The Song of Solomon.” The phrase “invisible harps” (Poem III) or “sweet harps” (Poem III) encapsulates
Joyce’s ideal image of girlhood including both sacred and secular elements, and according to Tindall’s idea, it also suggests Ireland itself (184). However, in Poem XXXIII, Love no longer plays sweet music, and lovely Ireland has already gone. In “this brown land,” where Joyce himself experienced a paralysis, he was incapable of expressing passionate love for a woman. This paralysis is an Irish cultural trait which has strongly suppressed sexual expression by way of its strict religious education.

Poem XXXIII
Now, O now, in this brown land
Where Love did so sweet music make
We two shall wander, hand in hand,
Forbearing for old friendship’ sake,
Nor grieve because our love was gay
Which now is ended in this way.

A rogue in red and yellow dress
Is knocking, knocking at the tree;
And all around our loneliness
The wind is whistling merrily.
The leaves-they do not sigh at all
When the year takes them in the fall.

Now, O now, we hear no more
The villanelle and roundelay!
Yet will we kiss, sweetheart, before
We take sad leave at close of day.
Grieve not, sweetheart, for anything-
The year, the year is gathering.

(Chamber Music 425)
(My emphasis)

“This brown land” (Poem XXXIII) appears to be Ireland in those days when Joyce lived. William Tindall mentions that brown is “the color of Dublin” (A Reader’s Guide 44), referring to the brown roast goose which Gabriel in “The Dead” serves to the guests in the annual dance party. It is also the color which shows a paralysis of the Irish mind.

A young man sings the end of love in this poem. “If the girl is his Muse, the end of love means the end of poetry” (Tindall 220). “The villanelle and roundelay” (Poem XXXIII) are no longer sung by a young man. These are “the forms taken by Joyce’s earliest verses” (Tindall 220), but actually Joyce did not write poems after 1904. Chester G. Anderson points out:

After 1904 Joyce wrote no more verses, saying, “my dancing days over” (Letter II 181), until 1913, and thereafter until 1927, when soul-love and his muse made brief visits. Instead he wrote his four prose masterpieces... (134)

The year of 1904 was an especially notable one and constituted a turning point for his life. It is the year when Joyce met Nora Barnacle, who later became his wife, and the year when he began to write prose instead of poetry. Nora was just as much an ideal woman as “the unsubstantial image” (A Portrait 231) Joyce or his hero had been pursuing in the actual world.
Nora must have been a woman who had ideal beauty. In a letter to Nora dated August 21, 1909, Joyce described the state of his soul reflected by the image of beauty in Nora:

Do you know what a pearl is and what an opal? My soul when you came sauntering to me first through those sweet summer evenings was beautiful but with the pale passionless beauty of a pearl. Your love has passed through me and now I feel my mind something like an opal, that is, full of strange uncertain hues and colours, of warm lights and quick shadows and of broken music. (Letter II 237)

The phrase, “the pale passionless beauty of a pearl” (Letter II 237) represents pure spiritual beauty such as that in the Blessed Virgin Mary. Moreover, it reminds us of Joyce’s and his hero’s attitude toward a girl or a woman, and each one expresses his love toward his ideal image of girlhood or womanhood.

However, in the actual world, Nora invites him to real love with “the passionate love desire between a man and a woman” (Spirit Filled Life Bible 946) as “invisible harps” (Poem III) do. For Joyce, who has had a feeling of guilt for sexual encounter with prostitutes at the age of fourteen, Nora is a woman who rescues him, satisfies him, and forgives him as his young motherhood reflecting the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Maddox 48).

In Chamber Music, Poem XVI is a climax, according to Joyce’s letter to G. Molyneux Palmer dated 19 July, 1909. As Stephen’s girl is described with the image of a sea-bird or a dove, a girl in Poem XIV is also described as that of a dove.
Poem XIV
My dove, my beautiful one,
Arise, arise!
The night-dew lies
Upon my lips and eyes.

The odorous winds are weaving
A music of sighs:
Arise, arise,
My dove, my beautiful one!

I wait by the cedar tree,
My sister, my love.
White breast of the dove,
My breast shall be your bed.

The pale dew lies
Like a veil on my head.
My fair one, my fair dove,
Arise, arise! (Chamber Music 406)

In this poem, a young man calls his love to wake up, and he wishes her to come to him “by the cedar tree.” According to William Tindall’s idea, the phrase, “My dove, my beautiful one, / arise, arise!” comes from the Song of Solomon; “Rise up, my love, my fair one” (2:10) and “O my dove” (2:14). If this “dove” is the Biblical image, the land where “invisible harps” (Poem III) play sweet music, Ireland (according to Tindall’s idea),
will be the image of the Garden of Eden. Here, a young man can freely sing songs, such as “The villanelle and roundelay (Poem XXXIII), and can freely express “the passionate desire between a man and woman” (Spirit Filled Life Bible 943) as the lover does in “The Song of Solomon.” It is the time when a young man is about to win her love, and the poem will be a climax in a suite of poems.

IV

In a letter to his wife Nora, dated August 21, 1909, Joyce wrote about the girl in Chamber Music. “She was perhaps (as I saw her in my imagination) a girl fashioned into a curious grave beauty by the culture of generations before her...” (Letter II 237). According to Kyoko Miyata, the image evoked in the line, “a curious grave beauty by the culture of generations before her” (Letter II 237), suggests the Blessed Virgin Mary. Moreover, the girls in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Eileen, Stephen’s Mercedes in his imagination, and a girl in midstream, seem to have been created in the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary; the image of ivory with the words white, soft, and slight are qualities descriptive of Mary’s feminine divinity.

In the suite of poems in Chamber Music, some words indeed refer to the Blessed Virgin Mary: “the shy star” (Poem IV), “Golden hair” (Poem V), “that sweet bosom” (Poem VI), “dainty hand” (Poem VII), and “mien so virginal” (Poem VIII).

However, the girl in Chamber Music seems to have been created in the image of Siren; in other words, she is a “beautiful but treacherous” (Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery 425) woman and a temptress with a sweet voice. Joyce has written in Poem VII: “My love is in a light attire / Among the apple - tree” : William Tindall argues that “Apple trees in
Joyce’s works usually imply Eden, Eve, and temptation” (190).

In addition, in Poem XXXI, the image of “bat” seems to represent the Irish woman’s soul, especially “a figure of the womanhood” (A Portrait 362) of Ireland.

Poem XXXI
O, it was out by Donnycarney
When the bat flew from tree to tree
My love and I did walk together;
And sweet were the words she said to me.

Along with us the summer wind
Went murmuring -O, happily!-
But softer than the breath of summer
Was the kiss she gave to me.

(Chamber Music 423)

One day in summer, a young man walks with his lover in Donnycarney. William Tindall mentions that “Donnycarney, an outlying district of Dublin, is a place where lovers go to love in Ulysses and where Father Conmee surprises them” (218). As for the lines “O, it was out by Donnycarney / when the bat flew from tree to tree / My love and I did walk together,” Tindall writes that “the flitting of the bat from tree to tree... suggests the girl’s inconstancy” (218). He believes that the image of Siren in these lines comes to represent “the figure of the womanhood,” (A Portrait 362) of Ireland and the “batlike soul” (A Portrait 363) in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Stephen became drawn to a real girl, Emma, with
an awakening of sexual desire; but when her hand touched his, he could regard it only as "soft merchandise". (A Portrait 361) Such a hand as Emma’s lets Stephen recall “a figure of the womanhood” (A Portrait 362) of Ireland who is the image of “beautiful but treacherous women” (Dictionary of symbols and Imagery 425).

... a figure of the womanhood of her country, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness, tarrying awhile, loveless and sinless, with her mild lover and leaving him to whisper of innocent transgressions in the latticed ear of a priest. (A Portrait 362-363)

Stephen cannot help feeling a strong anger for Emma who obeys or flatters a priest rather than him, so he feels her hand as if it were a "soft merchandise," of a prostitute. His anger for Emma was Joyce’s own anger for the church and the obedient people. Joyce or Stephen, who has been abandoned by the Church, also leaves the Institution which is served by docile Irish women represented by Emma, and he decides not to be a Catholic priest but “a priest of the eternal imagination” (A Portrait 363). Stephen perceives that the figure of Emma who obeys or flatters a priest represents the quality of womanhood of Ireland.

According to Tindall’s idea, a bird including dove, bat, or sea-bird in the poems is one of Joyce’s recurrent images and a symbol of creative power (233). The image of a bird is used in Poem XXXV added by Joyce’s brother, Stanislaus in the suit of poems.
Poem XXXV
All day I hear the noise of waters
Making moan,
Sad as the sea-bird is, when going
Forth alone,
He hears the winds cry to the waters’
Monotone.

The grey winds, the cold winds are blowing
Where I go.
I hear the noise of many waters
Far below.
All day, all night, I hear them flowing
To and fro. (Chamber Music 427)

The image of a sea-bird with the water in this poem overlaps with that of a girl like a sea-bird in midstream in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. The girl, like the Muse, gives poetic inspiration to Stephen, as Nora does to Joyce.

Brenda Maddox points out:

The tributes to Nora are scattered through Joyce’s work - a continuous shining thread from Lily the serving girl to Gretta to Bertha to Molly to Anna Livia: Woman, from high-spirited youth to withered age... The homage to Nora’s surname, and by extension to geese and seabirds, can be found throughout Joyce’s work. There are sixteen geese in Ulysses, there is the brown goose
on the Christmas buffet in "The Dead" and seabirds in myriad forms all through the *Wake*. Of Joyce’s many references to the barnacle goose - his symbol Nora, of metamorphosis and resurrection - perhaps the most explicit is contained in one of the most obscure lines in *Ulysses*. (500)

As Maddox points out, it seems that Joyce uses a barnacle goose as a symbol of Nora Barnacle, and of transfiguration and rebirth in his works. For Joyce, Nora actually must have been just as much the ideal woman as “the unsubstantial image” he had longed to meet in the real world someday. Nora not only protected him from the sexual sin like the Blessed Virgin Mary, but also inspired him like the Muse, and provided him with a physical and spiritual beauty.

In a letter to Nora dated 5 September, 1909, Joyce wrote:

Guide me, my saint, my angel. Lead me forward. Everything that is noble and exalted and deep and true and moving in what I write, comes, I believe, from you. O take me into your soul of souls and then I will become indeed the poet of my race.

* (Letter II 248)

For Joyce, Nora is half of his soul, anima, and he must have hoped to unite himself with her as one. If we read the above-quoted letter, we will understand that perhaps each of Joyce’s works could never have been produced without his encounter with Nora.
Joyce chose Nora as his companion in a life of exile, and on the Continent far away from Ireland, he visualized Nora as the ideal woman: “Wherever thou art shall be Erin to me” (*The Exile of James Joyce* 515). Erin is an old name given to Ireland, and it comes from the name of a Celtic goddess. Nora is considered to have inspired Joyce in his description of women. Nora embodies the Irishness that Joyce longed for, and also her Irishness reflects Joyce’s feminine soul as Jung’s anima. In *Chamber Music*, Joyce must have wished to describe the process of his soul as an artist led into spiritual awakening by a girl. So a young man’s passionless love in *Chamber Music* does not come from “lightness” (Russel, *James Joyce’s Chamber Music* 17) in Elizabethan poetry but from his personal experience brought about as the result of the Irish culture, and the girl in the poems reflects the hero’s or Joyce’s feminine soul, although the mood resembles the Elizabethan old airs which Joyce loved very much.

Works Cited


SYNOPSIS

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In this paper, I would like to compare two different approaches to the question of substance in *Chamber Music*, with the purpose of proving that Tindall’s assertion concerning the influence of Irish culture on Joyce’s poems is more valid than any of the other theories.

A suite of 36 lyrical poems entitled *Chamber Music* was Joyce’s first published book. Some critics believe that the poems in *Chamber Music* are influenced by Elizabethan poetry. Actually, like Elizabethan songs, the poems in Chamber Music are set to music by various composers. Moreover, the term, “lack of substance” used by some critics is more favorably considered by others as the influence of the “lightness” in Elizabethan poems.

On the other hand, William Tindall considers that the “lightness” in *Chamber Music* is caused by his personal experience in the Irish culture rather than by the imitation of the Elizabethan diction. Moreover, Tindall considers that the girl in the poems seems to be “an embodiment of the hero's feminine soul” like Jung’s anima.

In *Chamber Music*, Joyce must have wished to describe the process of the hero’s or Joyce’s soul as an artist led into spiritual awakening by a girl. The girl in the poems is the hero’s “soul-love,” and she embodies Irishness of Nora that Joyce visualized as the ideal woman:
“Wherever thou art shall be Erin to me.” Erin is an old name given to Ireland, and it comes from the name of a Celtic goddess. Nora is considered to have inspired Joyce in his description of women, and her Irishness reflects the image of the girl in the poems. Thus the hero’s passionless love in Chamber Music does not come from “lightness in Elizabethan poetry but from his personal experience brought about as the result of the Irish culture, and the girl in the poems reflects the hero’s or Joyce’s feminine soul, although the mood resembles the Elizabethan old airs which Joyce loved very much.