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Joyce's Modernist Gesamtkunstwerk: *Ulysses* and Wagnerian Total Art

ჯოისის მოდერნისტული Gesamtkunstwerk: *ულისე* და ვაგნერისეული ტოტალური ხელოვნება

1. Introduction: Joyce, Wagner, and Modernism's Musical Ambition

Few artistic concepts cast a longer shadow over European modernism than Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk.* First coined by the German philosopher and theologian Karl Friedrich Eusebius Trahndorff in his 1827 essay *Ästhetik oder Lehre von Weltanschauung und Kunst* (*Aesthetics, or Doctrine of Worldview and Art*), it was later adopted and developed by Wagner in his 1849 essays "Die Kunst und die Revolution" (*"Art and Revolution")* and "Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft" "*The Artwork of the Future").* In the latter, Wagner theorized a unification of music, poetry, and visual design into a single, holistic aesthetic experience. As Alex Ross observes, "Wagner's reach extended far beyond opera: he offered modern artists a model of boundless ambition" (Ross 2020: 12). This ambition is nowhere more evident than in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), a novel that aspires to encompass the world in textual form, fusing narrative with music, myth, philosophy, and the quotidian rhythms of Dublin life.

Richard Ellmann famously described Joyce's achievement as "the most universal novel in Western literature" (Ellmann 1982: 521). Yet universality here is not mere encyclopedism; it resembles Wagner's dream of artistic synthesis, reimagined in literary terms. Joyce's appropriation of musical form, particularly in the "Sirens" episode, reveals how he pursued a modernist *Gesamtkunstwerk.* Timothy Martin, in *Joyce and Wagner: A Study of Influence,* has shown that Joyce was deeply familiar with Wagner's operas and his theories of leitmotif, orchestration, and dramatic unity (Martin 1992). Joyce's engagement with Wagner is thus not mere imitation but transformation: Wagnerian strategies are reworked into a modernist idiom—fragmented, ironic, and intermedial.

This essay will argue that *Ulysses* functions as a literary total art—a novel that aspires to the scope and intensity of Wagnerian opera while critically reworking its premises. After tracing Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and its reception in modernism, I will explore Joyce's

musical aesthetics, with emphasis on the "Sirens" episode and leitmotivic structures. Ultimately, Joyce's parody of totality exposes the limits of Wagner's dream within the fractured modern condition.

2. Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk and Its Modernist Legacy

When Richard Wagner coined the term *Gesamtkunstwerk*—literally "total work of art"—in his 1849 essay *The Artwork of the Future*, he set forth one of the most audacious artistic ambitions of the nineteenth century. Wagner's ideal was not simply a blending of art forms, but a new synthesis that would subsume all the arts into a single, organic unity. As he wrote, "the perfect artwork of the future is an indivisible whole, which knows no boundaries between its various components" (Wagner 1993: 40). In practice, this meant that music, poetry, gesture, and staging would all converge in opera, creating an overwhelming sensory and intellectual experience for the audience. Wagner sought nothing less than to restore the communal, ritualistic power of ancient Greek tragedy for modern times. But Wagner's idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* was never merely technical. It was also philosophical, aesthetic, and political. The total work of art promised an ideal of wholeness at a historical moment when modernity seemed fractured by industrialization, secularization, and political upheaval. As James Rubin notes, Wagner was responding to "the crisis of disunity in mid-nineteenth-century art" by proposing a radical reintegration (Rubin 2011: 110). The appeal of this ideal was not confined to music; it reverberated across the arts, inspiring writers, painters, and later modernists who shared his longing for synthesis.

2.1 Wagner, the Ideal of Totality, and Its Critics

To understand Wagner's legacy for modernism, it is essential to grasp the radical scope of his ambitions. *The Artwork of the Future* declares that "art is one, indivisible" (Wagner 1993: 55). Poetry, music, and dance are not separate but interdependent; only in their unity can art realize its true essence. For Wagner, music held a privileged position as the medium most capable of expressing the ineffable, but it was incomplete without the dramatic and visual. This is why he reinvented opera, fusing symphonic complexity with mythic narratives and elaborate stagecraft. Alex Ross, in *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*, emphasizes how Wagner's operas presented themselves as "total environments," immersing audiences in an all-encompassing aesthetic world (Ross 2020: 19). The famous Bayreuth Festspielhaus, with its darkened auditorium and hidden orchestra pit, was designed to erase distractions and focus attention on the drama. Wagner wanted spectators not just to watch but to be absorbed—indeed, engulfed—by the performance.

This ambition carried ideological implications. Wagner envisioned the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as the aesthetic correlate of a new social order. In the revolutionary context of 1848–49, he saw art as a means of communal regeneration, binding individuals together through shared myth and feeling. As Charlotte De Mille observes in her introduction to *Music and Modernism, c. 1849–1950*, Wagner's aesthetic program "spoke to a profound desire for unity at a time when European

societies were increasingly marked by fragmentation and alienation" (De Mille 2011: 2). Yet the very totality Wagner envisioned also provoked criticism. Many contemporaries and later commentators worried that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* risked collapsing the autonomy of individual arts into an overpowering spectacle. James Rubin suggests that Wagner's operas "threaten to overwhelm the viewer with their sheer excess" (Rubin 2011: 116). Rather than balance, the total work of art could become domination—music subordinating drama, spectacle consuming subtlety.

Modernists inherited both Wagner's expansive ambition and his contradictions. Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* (1903), a book Joyce read, epitomized one strand of critique by associating Wagnerian music with sensual excess and femininity, qualities opposed to rational clarity (Weininger 2005: 247–49). Even as artists admired Wagner's power, they remained wary of its implications.

2.2 Modernist Appropriations of Wagner: Joyce's Wagnerism in Context

The twentieth century transformed Wagner's legacy. Instead of imitating his operas, modernist writers and composers appropriated his ideas in new, often ironic ways. Emma Sutton, writing on Virginia Woolf, describes how *The Waves* rewrites Wagner's *Ring* cycle, not by reproducing its mythic grandeur but by translating its structures into a modernist meditation on subjectivity (Sutton 2018: 18). Similarly, Jamie McGregor notes that Joyce, Woolf, and Wagner all grappled with the theme of eternal recurrence, though Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* parodies rather than reveres the cyclical myth (McGregor 2018: 49).

The attraction of Wagner for modernists lay not only in his operatic technique but in his insistence on art as synthesis. Zbigniew Granat has shown how composers like Pierre Boulez, as well as literary modernists like Joyce and Mallarmé, sought to blur the boundaries between music and literature, echoing Wagner's drive toward integration (Granat 2009: 34). The modernist "music of language" that Marc Derveaux identifies—language used not only semantically but as sonorous material—owes much to Wagner's example (Derveaux 2009: 5). Yet this modernist Wagnerism was always self-aware and ironic: the dream of total art persisted, shadowed by the impossibility of totality in a fragmented age. As Katherine O'Callaghan writes, "modernist engagements with music and language are often characterized by tension: between the desire for synthesis and the awareness of fragmentation" (O'Callaghan 2018: 5). Wagner's dream of unity became, for modernists, an aspiration always shadowed by impossibility.

James Joyce exemplifies this paradoxical inheritance. He knew Wagner's operas well and alluded to them throughout his works, from *Chamber Music* to *Ulysses*. Timothy Martin argues that Joyce was "deeply engaged with Wagner both as a composer and as a theorist of total art" (Martin 1992: 7). In *Ulysses*, Wagnerian influence surfaces in the leitmotif-like recurrence of themes, the fusion of myth and realism, and above all the musical structuring of episodes like "Sirens". As Ellmann observes, Joyce "was too ironic to be swept away by Wagner's mysticism" (Ellmann 1982: 245), instead appropriating and parodying Wagner's devices. Where Wagner sought mythic grandeur, Joyce gave us Bloom; where Wagner wanted unity, Joyce multiplied perspectives and styles. In this sense, *Ulysses* is a modernist *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a literary total art

that simultaneously enacts and critiques the Wagnerian ideal. Wagner's total art became, in Joyce's hands, a modernist experiment—ambitious yet self-critical, total yet fractured, ironic yet encompassing.

3. Joyce's Musical Aesthetics: Language as Sonority

If Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* provided Joyce with a conceptual precedent for artistic totality, Joyce's own response was to relocate the Wagnerian ideal within the medium of prose itself. Where Wagner fused music, drama, and visual spectacle into opera, Joyce sought to transform the very texture of language into a musical instrument. In *Ulysses*, sound—whether in the form of onomatopoeia, rhythm, or leitmotivic repetition—becomes inseparable from meaning. Joyce's novel is not merely about music; it is music, or at least aspires to be read as music.

3.1 Language as Sound. Polyphony and Counterpoint

Joyce's understanding of language was never confined to semantics. As Marc Derveaux insists, modernist literature demonstrates a "sonority of language" that parallels developments in music (Derveaux 2009: 5). For Joyce, words resonate not only through their denotations but through rhythm, pitch, and timbre. This awareness pervades *Ulysses*, where language often becomes performative sound rather than transparent medium.

The opening of "Sirens" epitomizes this sonic experimentation: "Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing. Imperthnthn thnthnthn" (Joyce 1986: 210). The words are not arranged for semantic clarity but for acoustic effect. "Hoofirons" echoes metallic percussion; "steelyringing" mimics cymbals; the nonsense syllables "thnthnthn" approximate both a stutter and a trumpet's muted vibration. Harry Levin long ago pointed out that *Ulysses* employs "musical structures in prose, using repetition and variation of motifs, rhythms, and tonalities" (Levin 1960: 43). The "Sirens" overture foregrounds this technique by presenting readers with a sonic score, inviting them to listen as much as to read.

Joyce's sensitivity to sound was cultivated early. Richard Ellmann notes his youthful training in singing, his fascination with opera, and his belief that literature should aspire to the condition of music (Ellmann 1982: 85). Joyce did not merely admire music; he inhabited it, practicing its cadences and patterns in his prose. His encyclopedic ambition was also acoustical: to orchestrate Dublin's everyday noise into art.

One of the most striking musical features of *Ulysses* is its polyphonic structure. Just as Wagnerian opera weaves together multiple leitmotifs in counterpoint, Joyce arranges his narrative as a polyphony of voices, registers, and discourses. As Zbigniew Granat observes, modernist writers like Joyce "internalized musical procedures such as counterpoint, fugue, and variation" to create textual equivalents (Granat 2009: 37). This polyphony operates on both macro and micro levels. On the macro level, the novel as a whole orchestrates different stylistic "movements"—epic, naturalist, romantic, parodic—that function like symphonic variations on a theme. On the micro level, the prose constantly juxtaposes voices: interior monologues intersect with narrative

commentary, scraps of song mingle with street chatter, liturgical chant collides with advertising slogans. The result is a constant contrapuntal tension, a "music of chaos" that nonetheless achieves coherence through recurrence. For example, in the "Wandering Rocks" episode, the narrative cuts rapidly between nineteen different scenes across Dublin, each with its own rhythm and diction. The effect resembles orchestral counterpoint: a multiplicity of lines coexisting, colliding, and finally converging in the viceregal cavalcade, a kind of orchestral tutti. Levin aptly compares this to a symphonic movement, noting that Joyce "constructs his narrative as a complex interplay of motifs that recall Wagnerian leitmotifs as much as symphonic development" (Levin 1960: 97).

3.2 Leitmotif and Repetition. Musico-Literary Analogies

The Wagnerian concept of leitmotif—the recurring musical phrase associated with a character, object, or idea—finds its literary analogue in Joyce's use of repeated verbal motifs. Bloom's refrains like "poor Dignam" and "Met him pike hoses" recur in varying contexts, just as leitmotifs reappear in different harmonic guises. Molly's "Yes" in the final episode echoes earlier affirmations, functioning as a cumulative resolution of the novel's motifs.

Timothy Martin emphasizes that Joyce's use of repetition is not simply ornamental but structural: "the recurrence of motifs in *Ulysses* serves to bind disparate episodes into a larger whole, echoing Wagner's strategy of unifying the sprawling *Ring* cycle" (Martin 1992: 105). Yet where Wagner's leitmotifs aim at mythic unity, Joyce's often destabilize, parody, or ironize their subjects. For instance, the recurring image of the potato, Bloom's talisman, recalls Wagnerian motif-work but grounds the mythic in comic materiality. Leitmotif in Joyce thus becomes both homage and subversion.

Joyce's musicality is not abstract but deeply embodied. Katherine O'Callaghan, in her essay "'That's the Music of the Future': Joyce, Modernism, and the 'Old Irish Tonality'", argues that Joyce's engagement with music is rooted in bodily and cultural experience (O'Callaghan 2018: 33). Songs in *Ulysses* are not mere symbols; they are performed, hummed, whistled, remembered, and felt in the body. Bloom hears the "jingling" of coins as music, associates Molly with the sensuous "Là ci darem la mano", and imagines the bodily vibrations of sound.

Enrico Terrinoni goes further, suggesting that Joyce often composes "silent music" (Terrinoni 2009: 176)—patterns of rhythm and repetition that operate without explicit notation, yet resonate in the reader's inner ear. This silent music is most evident in the onomatopoetic passages of "Sirens", where language vibrates between meaning and sound, creating a bodily response. As Terrinoni notes, Joyce "forces us to hear with our eyes" (Terrinoni 2009: 178).

Rodrigo Guijarro Lasheras has theorized "imaginary content analogies" between music and literature, whereby readers perceive musical qualities in prose not because they are literally present but because literary devices evoke analogous effects (Lasheras 2019). *Ulysses* abounds in such analogies: fugue-like structures in "Sirens", symphonic development in "Wandering Rocks", aria-like soliloquies in Molly's "Penelope". These are not direct imitations but literary re-creations of musical effects.

This experimentation typifies a broader modernist impulse, as O'Callaghan observes, to

use music as a means of expressing affect and temporality beyond the limits of prose (O'Callaghan 2018: 6). Joyce's language, when words fail to signify, begins to sing.

Despite these affinities, Joyce's Wagnerism remains ambivalent. His musicalized prose echoes Wagnerian aspiration to total art, but his irony undermines any illusion of unity. Wagner sought transcendence; Joyce revels in the mundane. The musical form of "Sirens" is countered by its setting—a Dublin bar, filled with comic puns, bodily noises, and banal chatter. As Richard Ellmann reminds us, Joyce was a master of "deflating high art with low" (Ellmann 1982: 246). His Wagnerism is therefore double-edged: he imitates the master only to parody him.

This ambivalence has political as well as aesthetic dimensions. Wagner's total art aimed at communal regeneration, but Joyce's total art resists ideological closure. Mark Wollaeger's study of modernist propaganda highlights how Joyce used polyphony to resist the homogenizing forces of mass media (Wollaeger 2006: 211). By refusing a single authoritative voice, *Ulysses* transforms the Wagnerian total work into a modernist anti-totality: expansive yet open-ended, orchestrated yet unresolved. In sum, Joyce reimagines Wagner's total art within language itself—turning prose into music while continually fracturing its unity through irony and parody.

4. The "Sirens" Episode as Modernist Opera

If *Ulysses* as a whole may be described as a literary *Gesamtkunstwerk*, then the "Sirens" episode constitutes its most explicit experiment in Wagnerian form. Set in the Ormond bar, "Sirens" dramatizes the entanglement of music, desire, and language in ways that both echo and parody Wagner's total art. Joyce explicitly structures the episode around musical principles: an overture, leitmotifs, onomatopoetic sound effects, and contrapuntal layering of voices. At the same time, the content of the episode deflates the grandeur of high opera into the banality of a Dublin pub, filled with flirtation, gossip, and bodily noises. In this juxtaposition of sublime form and comic substance, Joyce reveals both the power and the limits of Wagnerian ambition in modernist literature.

Critics have long debated whether "Sirens" is modeled on a fugue, a sonata, or an opera. Levin argues for operatic structure, noting the overture, arias, choruses, and recitatives (Levin 1960: 149). Others, like Terrinoni, emphasize its fugue-like layering of motifs (Terrinoni 2009). Regardless of precise classification, the point remains: Joyce has transposed musical form into narrative structure.

The "Sirens" episode begins not with narrative but with what critics have called its "overture"—a sequence of fragmented words and phrases, apparently nonsensical yet charged with acoustic and thematic significance. Lines such as "Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing. Imperthnthn thnthnthn" (Joyce 1986: 210) function like musical motifs introduced at the start of a symphony. Harry Levin describes this overture as "an instrumental prelude to the drama, presenting motifs that will later reappear in varied contexts" (Levin 1960: 137). The overture's syntax resists conventional reading; instead, it demands to be heard. Onomatopoeia ("thnthnthn," "jingling") simulates instrumental timbres, while alliteration and rhythm evoke melodic patterns. Enrico Terrinoni argues that this is an example of Joyce's "silent music"—a

textual composition designed to resonate in the reader's inner ear (Terrinoni 2009: 176). Just as Wagner's operas often begin with extended orchestral preludes, Joyce begins with a purely sonic field, establishing a musical framework before narrative action commences.

Throughout "Sirens," Joyce deploys leitmotifs that function analogously to Wagner's system in the *Ring*. The recurring words "bronze by gold" evoke the barmaids Miss Douce and Miss Kennedy, shimmering like operatic sirens; the motif "tap" recalls the piano and Bloom's restless fingers; "jingle" accompanies Blazes Boylan, Molly's lover, his imminent seduction announced by the sound of coins and carriage bells. Each motif recurs in varied contexts, sometimes reinforcing its association, sometimes ironically displaced. Timothy Martin notes that Joyce was acutely aware of Wagner's leitmotivic technique, but he used it with parody: "Where Wagner's motifs aim at mythic elevation, Joyce's motifs often deflate their objects by attaching them to trivial details" (Martin 1992: 143). Thus, Boylan's "jingle" is less heroic theme than comic signal of adultery; Bloom's potato talisman recalls not heroic destiny but culinary comfort. Joyce's leitmotifs expose the materiality of life, even as they mimic Wagner's grandeur.

The setting of the Ormond bar provides a natural stage for contrapuntal layering. Different conversations, songs, and noises overlap, creating a polyphonic texture. Patrons sing "The Croppy Boy," the barmaids banter, Bloom muses internally, and the piano tinkles in the background. As Marc Derveaux emphasizes, Joyce's language becomes musical precisely through this polyphonic structure, meaning emerging less from sequential logic than from simultaneous sonorities (Derveaux 2009: 7). One striking moment occurs when the blind piano tuner, returning for his tuning fork, accidentally becomes part of the sonic fabric. His disability transforms him into both subject and metaphor: he cannot see, but he hears the world with amplified acuity. Joyce underscores the irony by presenting him within a text that itself foregrounds listening. This moment crystallizes what Zbigniew Granat calls the "literary transposition of musical perception"—a modernist strategy whereby the act of reading imitates the act of listening (Granat 2009: 39).

The barmaids Douce and Kennedy, described in sensuous and metallic imagery, function as the "sirens" of the episode. Their laughter and flirtation entice the men, while their association with "bronze by gold" recalls both Homeric enchantresses and operatic heroines. Yet Joyce parodies their allure: their giggles are more irritating than sublime, their seductions petty rather than mythic. Ellmann observes that Joyce deliberately collapses the distance between myth and triviality: "Where Homer had sea sirens, Joyce had barmaids" (Ellmann 1982: 443). Here, Wagnerian opera is transposed to a Dublin tavern: Brünnhilde and Isolde become waitresses armed with puns and innuendo—a comic parody of mythic grandeur.

At the center of the episode stands Leopold Bloom, listening rather than participating, his thoughts wandering amid the musical atmosphere. If Wagnerian opera revolves around heroic figures whose destiny is sung in soaring leitmotifs, Bloom embodies the anti-hero: passive, comic, reflective, and domestic. Richard Ellmann remarks that Bloom "is no Parsifal but a patient, humane Everyman" (Ellmann 1982: 444). Bloom's interior monologue transforms the music around him into subjective reverie. Hearing "The Croppy Boy," he recalls political violence; listening to

"M'appari," he associates it with Molly's infidelity. His consciousness becomes a filter, weaving external sounds into private meanings. In this way, Joyce internalizes Wagnerian spectacle: the opera no longer unfolds on stage but inside Bloom's head. The episode's climax, Boylan's jingling entry and departure, replaces Wagnerian catharsis with anticlimax—deflating mythic resonance into ordinary pain.

One of Joyce's most radical innovations in "Sirens" is his insistence that music can be evoked without being heard. Enrico Terrinoni describes this as "silent music," whereby textual rhythms and repetitions create a sonic experience in the reader's imagination (Terrinoni 2009: 180). For example, the repetition of "Tap. Tap. Tap." mimics the piano and Bloom's tapping foot; the reader hears the rhythm internally, even in silence. Rodrigo Guijarro Lasheras would describe this as an "imaginary content analogy": the text generates the sensation of music without literal notes (Lasheras 2019). Wagner's operas engulfed the audience in sound; Joyce's prose demands that the reader produce the music internally. In this sense, Joyce radicalizes Wagnerian immersion: the total artwork now resides not on stage but in the reader's mind.

"Sirens" also engages the political dimension of Wagnerism. Wagner envisioned the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a communal art that dissolved individuality into collective myth. Joyce, however, foregrounds fragmentation and private subjectivity. The bar's polyphony does not merge into choral unity; it remains a cacophony of competing voices. As Mark Wollaeger argues, Joyce's polyphony resists totalizing ideologies, offering instead a model of heterogeneous discourse (Wollaeger 2006: 213). This has particular resonance in colonial Ireland, where imported cultural forms like opera intersect with nationalist songs and everyday vernacular. Bloom's response to "The Croppy Boy" demonstrates the tension: a popular ballad recalls revolutionary sacrifice, yet in the pub it becomes entertainment. The musical totality is fractured by history, politics, and individual memory.

The "Sirens" episode is Joyce's most direct engagement with Wagnerian aesthetics. Its overture, leitmotifs, polyphony, and operatic parody exemplify the ambition to create a literary *Gesamtkunstwerk.* Yet Joyce simultaneously undermines Wagnerian grandeur: heroic figures become barmaids and adulterers, arias give way to puns, leitmotifs ground themselves in jingles and potatoes. By staging opera in a Dublin pub, Joyce exposes the impossibility of pure total art in modernity. What remains is a parody of Wagnerian ambition, transformed into a new kind of totality: one that embraces fragmentation, irony, and everyday life.

6. Conclusion

From Wagner to Joyce, the dream of total art undergoes a profound transformation. Wagner sought mythic unity; Joyce produced ironic multiplicity. Wagner envisioned communal redemption; Joyce offered individual perspectives and urban cacophony. Wagner's operas aimed at seamless immersion; Joyce's novel insists on difficulty and estrangement. Yet Joyce retains Wagner's ambition—to encompass all human experience—while dismantling the very notion of totality. For Joyce, the only way to inherit Wagner's dream is to resist it: parodying and fragmenting totality while acknowledging the enduring human desire for wholeness.

James Joyce's *Ulysses* emerges as both an heir to and a critique of Richard Wagner's dream of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In its musical structures, leitmotifs, and parodic operatic textures, the novel reveals Wagner's profound impact on Joyce's imagination. Yet Joyce consistently ironizes and dismantles Wagnerian ambitions: where Wagner sought seamless unity, Joyce insists on fragmentation; where Wagner aimed for mythic redemption, Joyce revels in quotidian parody; where Wagner dreamed of a communal artwork, Joyce affirms polyphony, heterogeneity, and individual voice. Through this dialectic, Joyce transforms the Wagnerian project: *Ulysses* becomes a "modernist total art" grounded in multiplicity and irony, an anti-totalitarian response to aesthetic absolutism. Joyce's reconfiguration of Wagner's legacy reveals modernism's central paradox: the yearning for unity amid inevitable fragmentation. His literary Gesamtkunstwerk—both homage and critique—redefines total art as irony, freedom, and multiplicity.

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