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Singing “FREE”: Notes toward an iconography of songs, singers, and singing in children's fiction

In his speech at the funeral of his sister Princess Diana, the Earl of Spencer pronounced a blessing on the two young princes, William and Harry, when he declared: [May their] “souls ... sing openly,” in accordance with the wishes of their mother. His metaphor of singing captivated my imagination, for surely this is the kind of expression we all desire: the power to sing free, to express our unique, inmost self in a creative fashion. Childhood is the time to learn to “sing free” in order that the fledgling spirit may soar to its full potential.

There are countless stories for children wherein songs and singers are used figuratively, in what I like to call an iconographic manner. For example, songs and singers can capsule character or theme; can make intertextual references through verbal leitmotifs; moreover they can as D. H. Lawrence said, “perpetuate the sense of wonder, a sense that can forestall one of the effects of aging, the ‘crystallizing ... into the commonplace’ that comes with the assumption of knowledge” (Lawrence 7). My typology attempts to show how tonally sensitive writers can employ songs and singing to represent the connection between individual experience and a larger rhythm, thus creating a synchronicity between the rhythms within and without, or to put it another way, attuning the self to the social world and perhaps to the cosmos. Songs and singing have a magical power to open the heart and engender a sense of wholeness, a power sensed by even the youngest child long before the response can be verbalized. Songs and singing are used metaphorically or symbolically in a multitude of ways and for sometimes contrary purposes. Jean Perrot points out, both music and literature can paradoxically express at once the most contrary ideas [Perrot 7]. The skeletal paradigm I shall draw here will

include six types of songs, each possessing a characteristic type of singer, and some having an anti-type, in accord with Perrot's concept of contraries. The six types are:

- *Songs of Creation and Creativity*, portraying in a mythic context the birth of a world or culture, or more simply, the birth of individual creativity;
- *Siren Songs of Temptation and Songs of Destruction*, depicting the attempt to deter the hero from his/her quest, causing a fall into the netherworld, or even the ruin of an entire world;
- *Songs of Spiritual Transcendence*, expressing a mystical “unitary” experience or a vision of “epiphany” in the sense of the term employed by James Joyce in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*;
- *Songs of Praise and Faith*, expressive of a religious commitment to serving a cause larger than oneself, as well as songs celebrating life, outpourings of a pure joie de vivre;
- *“Clown” Songs and Songs of Nonsense*, including linguistic games and language play;
- *Songs of Community, Bonding, and Healing*, expressing the making of relationships and the creation or restoration of wholeness.

Excluded from consideration here are lullabies and songs of a pedagogical nature, such as counting songs, and rhymes set to music, all of which would yield material for a broader study.

SONGS OF CREATION AND CREATIVITY

Mythic Singers of the songs that shape the cosmos are exemplified by Quetzacoatl, the feathery Lord of Spirit in Mexican myth, who fetched music out of Heaven at the bidding of the Lord of Matter, Tezcatlipoca. Geraldine McCaughrean

tells of his exploits in **Myths and legends of the world: The golden hoard**. After this Promethean quest liberates the “crooner of lullabies” and the singers of ballads and of battle-songs from the tyrannical rule of the Sun, their transforming music causes sadness and discontent to cease, love to flourish, the sorrowful to find comfort. The Lords of Spirit and Matter whirl together in a dance so fast they seem to meld together in a unity of Being [McCaughrean 87-88], and peace and harmony rule throughout the cosmos.

In the Finnish epic **Kalevala**, the Singer Vainamoinen fashions magical songs through which he is able to create other beings. Norma Livo has retold the myth of this hero, “Vainamoinen, the Singer and His Harp” in her **Troubadour’s songbag: Musical folktales of the world**. After Vainamoinen loses his fishbone harp in the ocean during a huge gale, he shapes a birch into a harp frame, strings it with the tresses of a virgin, and, Orpheus-like, casts a musical charm on all the creatures of his world. Many adventures later, he departs to an unknown destination, bequeathing his harp and his great songs to the people of Finland. His valedictory song portrays him as a “wandering” meadowlark, who “blazed a trail for singers ...” [Livo 72]. This mythic hero builds a bridge from the past to the future, a power identified by Bill Moebius when he speaks of the power of songs to “reunit l’avenir et le passe” [reunite the future and the past] [Moebius 38-39].

Singers of creation can also be seen in contemporary realistic fiction for children, where they express the individual’s power to shape reality through musical speech. Two examples will serve. The first, from historical fiction, is Alice, the protagonist of Karen Cushman’s **The midwife’s apprentice**, whose most remarkable creation is herself. A homeless and nameless urchin known only as “Brat” when the reader first finds her huddled under a dungheap for warmth, then called “Dung Beetle” by the harsh midwife who takes her in, she shapes her identity largely through rhythmical work (accompanied by songs of her own making) and through finding her “voice” both metaphorically and actually. When she is accidentally confused with a mysterious “Alyce” with the magical gift of literacy, Brat becomes her own idea of Alyce, illustrating the magical power of naming. Eventually, she becomes able to affirm her own worth. The ballad she composes for the birth of the cow Tansy’s twins, “All shiny they were, / And sticky to touch./ I did not even know them,/ But I loved them so much” [Cushman 53], celebrates new animal life, but in a deeper sense her versified outpouring of love signifies the birthing of her own sense of self.

In another instance of magical song, Russel, the Eskimo boy in Gary Paulsen’s **Dogsong**, is mentored in wisdom by the ancient shaman Oogruk. The wise old man tells the boy who yearns for a song that he must become a song, not “get” one. In Oogruk’s words:

It’s not like that. You don’t get songs, you are a song. When we gave up our songs because we feared hell [with the coming of the missionaries] we gave up our insides as well. If we lived the way we used to live, mebbe [maybe] the songs would come back ... if we lived the right way again.

[Paulsen 28-29]

Oogruk’s words assert the integral connection between the indigenous songs of a culture and its spiritual health: right livelihood, clear identity, and *soul* are all the creative springs of meaningful art and in turn dependent upon it. On an individual level, Russel succeeds in becoming the *song* of himself through an initiatory heroic quest, a 1400-mile journey by dogsled through the arctic that culminates in his rescue of an Eskimo girl.

SIREN SONGS OF TEMPTATION AND SONGS OF DESTRUCTION

The Singer of this type of song, who wields a mysterious power to tempt and destroy through bringing discord into the world, has many incarnations, all descended from Mephistopheles. Closely allied with the romantic artist, this Singer often plays the role of a dangerous, marginal being, morally ambiguous, an iconoclast of established social norms. An example is the diabolical Angel of Music in Peter Neumeyer’s adaptation for children of Gaston Leroux’s **Phantom of the Opera**, though here the Angel is redeemed at last when he is able to feel compassion for Christine and their mingled tears wash evil away. Absolute examples of this type are difficult to find in children’s literature, though one might cite the Pied Piper of Hamelin, the sirens faced by Odysseus, and *La Belle Dame sans Merci* of John Keats’ poem. In all of these examples, the Singer of Destruction attempts to seduce the heroic quester and deter him (almost invariably the quester is male in classic literature) from commitment, drawing him irresistibly towards the netherworld and consequent damnation. This type of song stands at the opposite pole from the songs of the spirit that lead the pilgrim towards salvation, to be discussed later.

One of the best examples of music serving this “siren song” function is found in Natalie Babbitt’s **Tuck Everlasting**, where the leitmotif of the Tuck family signals the temptation for Winnie to choose immortality and accompanying eternal youth over a mortal human life. Although it is true, as Jean Perrot has pointed out in his analysis of Jean-Paul Noziere’s **un été 58**, that “cacophonie” can often in literature introduce a principle of “subversion *et de* destruction” (Perrot 17), the tempting melody in Babbitt’s book has an otherworldly sweetness and is, for that reason, all the more potently and deceptively seductive.

The most seductive Singer of this type in contemporary culture is not found in children’s literature to any marked degree, but — at least in the estimation of some social critics — in the medium of MTV’s hard rock music. William

Kilpatrick in **Why Johnny can't tell right from wrong** has argued that this music "plays the decisive role in the formation of a young person's character," regrettably so from a traditionalist's point-of-view, because its power to prompt young people to "throw off cultural and sexual restraints" (Kilpatrick 173-74) aligns spiritually with the dark side of the Dionysian impulse. The "states of soul" engendered by rock and its "pandering" to juvenile emotions (Kilpatrick 176), a large and important topic, must be deferred to another paper. Here it must suffice to observe that hard rock music does nothing to further the creation of community; it acts out the dark side of Romanticism in exalting the self and, far from channeling emotions, serves rather to pump them up (Kilpatrick 175). The result in iconographic terms is closer to the Dance of Death than to the Music of the Spheres.

SONGS OF SPIRITUAL TRANSCENDENCE

The mythical demi-god Pan, "Piper at the Gates of Dawn" in Kenneth Grahame's **The wind in the willows**, can exemplify the Singer of Songs of Transcendence, music that evokes a mystical "unitary" experience. Such is the state created in Rat and Mole when they encounter Pan as they seek Otter's lost son, Little Portly. The "intoxicating melody" of the "heavenly music" creates for Rat "the place of my song-dream ... a holy place ... (114-115), and for Mole, a great "Awe," a vision of the sublime (115). This state of transcendence however is short-lived and in fact all memory of it is eradicated by the demi-god, so the two can return to the mundane world with only vague intimations of loss.

In Katherine Paterson's **Jacob have I loved** this magical divine realm of blessedness emanates from a human singer, the celestial-voiced Caroline, who is the envy of her plain twin sister, Sara Louise. Early in the novel Caroline's singing at a Christmas concert of the traditional carol, *I wonder as I wander* is like "a single beam of light across the darkness," and Sara Louise is so deeply moved by such sonorous beauty that she tightens her arms against her sides "to keep from shaking, perhaps shattering" (Paterson 35). John Noell Moore has pointed out in an essay in **Interpreting young adult literature: Literary theory in the secondary classroom** how Paterson uses this song to bring the novel full circle: at the close, Sara has now reached a state of peace within herself and in relationship to her sister and society. When she hears the same song in the Appalachian setting where it originated, now her home, its simple expression of faith bridges the contrasting worlds of the novel (Rass Island and Appalachia), and connects her childhood with her adult life. Paterson ends the book with Sara repeating her earlier statement: "... I had to hold myself to keep from shattering" (244). Noell comments: "No longer in the shadow of the singer, Sara hears the song in the world to which it belongs and in which, finally, she belongs" (Noell 195). In this Joycean

epiphany, the transcendent and everyday realms are balanced and harmonized.

Sometimes this Song of Spiritual Transcendence is associated with a lived aestheticism, as in Eleanor Cameron's **Room with a view**, where Rhiannon Moore mentors Julia in the glories and limitations of the artist's life — giving her an icon for soulful dedication to art by quoting William Butler Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium* with its image of the soul's need to "clap its hands and sing," defying mortality through musical expression or — in the context of the poem, by capturing it in timeless forms (Cameron 124).

SONGS OF PRAISE AND FAITH

The archetypal Singer of Songs of Praise and Faith may well be Valiant-for-Truth as he is portrayed towards the close of the second book of John Bunyan's **Pilgrim's progress**, at the point where he sings the hymn now familiar as *To be a pilgrim* (of which I shall quote only the first verse):

Who would true valor see,
Let him come hither;
One here will constant be,
Come wind, come weather.
There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim.

[Bunyan 29]

This religious song expresses deep commitment to life as pilgrimage. Later history bears out the power of songs for creating solidarity, an *esprit de corps*, among revolutionaries: witness the roles played by *La Marseillaise* in the French revolution and *We shall overcome* in the American civil rights movement. The association of song with marching and valor in times of war and social conflict is undeniable.

If songs of commitment can serve the cause of war, they can, contrariwise, serve a domestic spirit of peace. A striking example is found in a children's book of the nineteenth century by Constance Woolson, who wrote **The old stone house** under the pseudonym of Anne March. This novel articulates, through the character called Aunt Faith, why singing matters so much:

The love of harmony kept young people together around a piano, and filled their evenings with enjoyment; it was always a resource, and opened a field of interest and employment which increased the store of life's innocent pleasures. ... Every voice, unless absolutely disqualified, should join in the praises of the Great Creator"

[March 50]

It is evident that Aunt Faith spoke for many of the children's mentors of her time, when singing together was seen as a means of cementing societal peace, shared plea-

sure, and piety. Songs of Praise survive in children's books chiefly in songbooks celebrating religious holidays, such as Nicholas Saboly's traditional **Bring a torch, Jeannette, Isabella** and the many other books honoring festivals of various faiths.

Bunyan would scarcely have understood or had little sympathy with the more secular manifestations of Songs of Praise in recent years. These flow from the tradition established by Walt Whitman in his poetry celebrating the self, most notably the *Song of myself*, opening on the line "I celebrate myself and sing myself," exalting the "original energy" he finds within himself and indeed throughout all creation. A recent manifestation of this Spirit of Praise in children's books is Karen Ackerman's **Song and dance man**, where the once-vaudevillian grandfather conveys to his grandchildren the sheer joie de vivre of rhythmical movement and vocal expression. Another children's picture book that portrays this joy in rhythm and song is Eloise Greenfield's **Nathaniel talking**, where the young boy "raps" and rhymes in an effort to figure out his world and his place in it. Some of the raps are therapeutic in nature (as the one *Missing mama*, where the boy deals with his mother's death and how he is "going to push on past this pain"), and others are a celebration of the boy's "philosophy" (Greenfield, unpagged).

"CLOWN" SONGS AND SONGS OF NONSENSE

The prime Singer of Songs of Nonsense is without question that cross between the Lord of Misrule and Harlequin, Lewis Carroll*, whose *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* epitomize his mastery of language play, satire, and the allure of the non-rational. The parodies of popular songs, such as the *Song of the Mad Hatter*, depend for their satirical and comical effect upon a knowledge of the original: "Twinkle, twinkle, little bat! / How I wonder what you're at! / Up above the world you fly, / Like a tea-tray in the sky" requires a knowledge of Jane Taylor's "Twinkle, twinkle little star" for its full effect. Indeed, the originals of many of the songs Carroll parodies are now forgotten, illustrating the irony that a song can be kept alive by being the object of derision. Carroll's songs function in an intertextual manner to raise awareness of the persistence of literary motifs across time, the textuality of texts, the arbitrary nature of language, not to mention the irrationality of rigid social customs (the obligatory six-o'clock tea time).

Playfulness in a very different context can be seen in some of the songs of Jean Craighead George's **Julie of the wolves**. Under her Eskimo name of "Miyax," the title character uses songs in a variety of ways (one of which, "bonding," will be explored below), including songs of creative fun which she invents to while away the hours when she is confined to her ice shelter by the weather. Improvising on melodies she learned in childhood, she composes rhymes about

the tundra, singing them to tunes learned at school (George 53).

SONGS OF COMMUNITY, BONDING, AND HEALING

An exemplary Singer of the Songs of Community and Bonding is Laura Ingalls Wilder in her *Little House* books. Recognizing the popularity and the social utility of these songs, Eugenia Garson has compiled them with arrangements by Herbert Haufrecht for piano and guitar. The pioneer life of the Ingalls family was an itinerant one, requiring many moves before they finally settled on a homestead near Mansfield, Missouri. One stabilizing and bonding element in their lives was music of many kinds:

The merry tunes at Grandpa's dance back in Wisconsin, Ma's gentle hymns during lonely prairie evenings, Cousin Lena's songs at Silver Lake, and the choruses at the singing class where Almanzo was Laura's escort. Church and Sunday school, revival meetings, and patriotic celebrations had their part, as did the "Literaries"—evening gatherings that took place when the little settlement of De Smet began to grow into a community

[Garson 7]

A symbol of the centrality of songs to their lives was Pa's ever-present fiddle. The songs interwoven into the series are of many kinds, many from the oral tradition. Others were singing games, patriotic songs, sentimental ballads, rhythmic minstrel-show and music-hall songs (Garson 8). Familial love and bonding are well illustrated by the song Pa chooses to play and sing just before the scene of Laura's wedding in **These happy golden years**:

Once in the dear dead days beyond recall
When on the world the mists began to fall,
Out of the dreams that rose in happy throng,
Low to our hearts love sang an old sweet song

[Wilder 278]

Given the context of the family "sing," this song of romantic love, appropriate to the impending wedding to be sure, is also a song celebrating the endurance of the family across time.

In stark contrast to the close and nurturing families of the Ingalls and Wilders, Julie-Miyax of **Julie of the wolves** experiences the fragmentation of both her family and culture. Stranded on the tundra, she seeks protection and life-support by becoming a part of a pack of wolves. Sometimes her songs are ceremonial, drawing upon Eskimo tradition, as when after killing and consuming an owlet and bunting, she sings Kapugen's (her father's) song of the Bird Feast, asking the spirit of the bird to bring the power of the sun into her body (George 47). On one level she is seeking personal en-

ergy, yet on another level she is seeking a connection to her culture and tradition.

One of the most obvious Songs of Bonding is the 'love' song Miyax sings to the leader of the wolf pack, "Amaroq," her adopted "father":

Amaroq, wolf, my friend,
You are my adopted father.
My feet shall run because of you.
My heart shall beat because of you.
And I shall love because of you.

Miyax in another scene uses a traditional shamanic healing song to dress the wound of Kapu, "son" of the now dead Amaroq who has been wounded for "sport" by the white hunters in a plane which Miyax/Julie later discovers was piloted by her father. Thus songs enable her to create and maintain a sense of "family," a link to her traditional culture, and a power of healing.

A dark reversal of the Songs of Community and Bonding can be seen in Whitley Strieber's **Wolf of shadows**, a story of post-nuclear disaster wherein a woman and child form a mysterious bond with a wolf pack in an effort to survive. Early in the novel the woman sings a "Lullaby-Deathsong" to her dying younger child as a few survivors huddle in a tent. The song she chooses is heavy with irony:

And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
It will be in the valley of love and delight.

[Strieber 32]

Love and delight, and any sort of human community, are absent from the world of this novel, and to invoke them only underlines the despair.

This brief tour through the types of songs in children's fiction only scratches the surface. Many other "embedded" songs remain to be explored. It would be fascinating, for example, to see if the "culture wars" are reflected in children's literature by a change in the ways in which songs (and music in general) are depicted over a long span of time. Is it true, as Kilpatrick has said, that whereas previous cultures have through music "found ways of helping the temperamental self keep time with the social self—that is, with the self that must live responsibly with others," but (in his belief) contemporary society has failed to engender "that synchrony," then there is a crucial cultural need to find a music that can restore the harmony between the emotional and the social self (Kilpatrick 189). Are the songs in children's literature one of the last remaining bastions of hope for restoring a balance?

Outstanding resources on music education available online are too numerous to list, but a good starting point for inspiration may be found in *The K-12 national standards, PreK standards, and what they mean to music educators*

<<http://www.menc.org/publication/books/prek12st.html>>. There is an exemplary teachers' guide, *The Mississippi: River of song*, to accompany a Smithsonian Institution series offering materials in video, CD, and book at <<http://www.pbs.org/riverofsong/teachers.index.html>>. Just to sample one of the gems to be found through The Gateway to Educational Materials, the *Teacher cyberguide* by Tara Wirtz and Kara Goodwin, based on Pam Conrad's **Prairie songs**, are available directly at <<http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/psongs/psongstg.html>>. The Gateway site provides an abundance of lessons, instructional units, and other free educational materials that can be located by topic and desired grade level at <<http://www.thegateway.org>>.

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