

Debussy as Storyteller: Narrative Expansion in the *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*

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Every song cycle presents its audience with a narrative. Such an idea is hardly new; indeed, the idea of an unfolding plot or unifying concept (textual or musical) is central to the concept of the song cycle as opposed to a collection of songs, at least after the mid-nineteenth century.¹ A great deal of musicological literature devoted to song cycles is aimed at demonstrating that they are cohesive wholes, often connected both musically, by means of key relationships, motivic recall, and similar techniques, and textually, by means of the creation of an overarching plot or concept.² One type of narrative results from a poetic unit being set to music in its complete state, without alteration. I am interested here, however, in another type of narrative—one that unfolds when a composer chooses to link previously unrelated poems musically, or when a poetic cycle is altered by rearrangement of the songs or omission of one or more poems. This type of song cycle may create its own new narrative, distinct from its literary precursors.

In an effort to demonstrate the internally cohesive qualities of these song cycles, typical analyses assume that the narrative is contained entirely within the musical cycle itself—that is, that it makes no external references. I do not mean to disparage this type of analysis, which often yields insightful results; however, this approach ignores the audience's ability to make intertextual connections beyond the bounds of the song cycle at hand. To turn briefly to the works of Schumann as an example—which in many ways form a nexus in the study of narrative in song cycles—a number of analyses have attempted to clarify or interpret the narrative of the cycles by illustrating (with varying degrees of success) the unifying features of the works.³ David Neumeyer (1982), for example, has argued for the need to analyze the music and the text jointly in order to fully understand the way in which the narrative functions in *Dichterliebe*, and Patrick McCreless (1986) has examined the effects of Schumann's song selection and order on the Eichendorff *Liederkreis*, op. 39. More recently, in responding to the argument that the concept of an immanent narrative in most Schumann cycles is anachronistic—put forth largely by David Ferris (2000) and Beate Perrey (2002)—Berthold Hoeckner (2006) has attempted to establish anew the musical unity of the cycle.

Each of these excellent analyses focuses on the importance of the creation of narrative in these works, yet despite the extreme popularity of

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Heine and Eichendorff as poets, none of these studies seriously examines the possibility that audiences would be familiar with their works before hearing the cycle, and that such knowledge might affect a listener's understanding of the work. In cases in which well-known literary or poetic works provide the sources for the song texts, surely listeners familiar with the original would be tempted (or even forced) to project that narrative onto the song cycle, despite whatever alterations a composer might have made to the texts. In other words, while composers are indeed free to create new narratives through, for example, the selection of particular poems from a larger poetic cycle, the audience's knowledge of the original will affect their understanding of the work at hand.

This layered understanding may at first seem to limit the ability of composers to create a narrative in song cycles with preexisting texts. On the other hand, there also exists the possibility for composers to make use of the audience's knowledge. One way of doing so is to use the music composed for a song cycle to refer outside itself and beyond the text, suggesting elements of the original narrative that do not appear in the texts selected for a song cycle. Umberto Eco (2004) has explored the possibilities of a similar literary technique that he terms "intertextual irony," in which authors make frequent allusions to outside sources of which readers are aware—a play of intertextuality that often has important ramifications for the interpretation of their works (or, at least, for some interpretations). Eco goes on to demonstrate the resulting need for at least two types of idealized readers: a first-level reader, who is interested only in the actual material at hand, and a second-level reader, who is—in being interested in the nature of the narrative rather than merely its content—aware of the intertextual references in the text.⁴ Without too much work, Eco's ideas may be applied to the genre of the song cycle, especially the variety whose texts are a small portion of a larger poetic body of work. Analyses that concentrate solely on the new narrative established in the song cycle presume audiences that are first-level model listeners; that is, that audience members are unaware of poetic texts outside the context of the cycle. A different type of analysis might take into account the outside knowledge of second-level model listeners and composers who would compose music aimed at this type of audience. Composers in a way must rewrite the narrative of poems that they set to music; it is only a small step, then, to include (in both the selection and compositional aspects of the creation of a cycle) references designed specifically for listeners aware of the original narratives produced by the original literary sources of the cycle's texts.

Claude Debussy's *Trois Chansons de Bilitis* (1899) provides an ideal case study for this possibility. This short song cycle features three poems culled from Pierre Louÿs's large poetic cycle, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* (1894).

Although the three songs represent only a small fraction of Louÿs's complete work, for listeners familiar with the original literary material (which probably included much of Paris in the 1890s) Debussy's music distills the narrative of the first section of the cycle. The three songs present a core version of the overall plot, which the music serves to expand by suggesting elements of other poems in the cycle. This type of intertextuality (designed to appeal to a second-level listener), which I call narrative expansion, allows the three poems to substitute for a much longer cycle, filling in the gaps in the poetry by using musical signifiers of the absent information. Those with knowledge of the complete original narrative are able to find connections between the music for the *Trois Chansons* and poems not actually set to music (and, for that matter, listeners not acquainted with the original poetic cycle might be able to infer some general narrative developments from the music alone). In order to understand the intertextuality inherent in the narrative expansion in Debussy's cycle, we must first be familiar with the narrative structure of the literary work from which the songs' texts are drawn.

The Poet and the Poetry

Pierre Louÿs's collection of poems, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, presents the reader with a detailed autobiography of the eponymous "author," a Greek courtesan writing in the sixth century BCE. The poems are the reflections of the mature Bilitis on the events of her life from childhood to death. The narrative is organized into three sections, each corresponding to a distinct phase of Bilitis's life: her idyllic youth in Pamphylia, her young adulthood in the city of Mytilene, and her maturity as a courtesan of Aphrodite on the island of Cyprus. Each section also presents Bilitis involved in a different manifestation of love: the pastoral first section describes the youthful relationship between Bilitis and the shepherd boy Lykas, the second section details a ten-year lesbian affair in a sophisticated urban setting, and the final section explores the sexually liberated lifestyle of a metropolitan courtesan. Taken as a whole, the *Chansons* create an overarching narrative of their fascinating narrator's life.

Many readers believed that the poems had been collected and translated from Greek by the French poet Pierre Louÿs. This "translation," however, was an elaborate literary conceit; Bilitis is an entirely fictional character, and the songs were written by their supposed translator, a fact not widely known until well after the work's initial publication.⁵ Authorial confusion aside, the *Chansons de Bilitis* were a great success, and in combination with the novel *Aphrodite* (1896), they established Louÿs as one of the preeminent literary figures of fin-de-siècle France.⁶

The commercial and critical success of the *Chansons* prompted several enhancements to Louÿs's original project, including the gradual increase in the number of poems in subsequent editions of the collection from 93 to 168. The sheer size of the collection has ramifications for its musical offspring; because the literary work presents a complex tapestry-like narrative of Bilitis's life, Debussy's selection of only three poems for the songs necessarily limits the depth of the narrative. However, as we will see, through the clever choice of poems and compositional techniques, Debussy's three songs are able to reconstruct the narrative depth present in the complete first section of the *Chansons de Bilitis*.

Like many French artists of his time, Louÿs drew much of his inspiration from classical antiquity, in particular Greece. So great, in fact, was his attachment to this ancient culture that he altered his name—originally the traditional “Louis”—to make it appear more Greek.⁷ This culture came to symbolize for Louÿs a type of moral, and above all sexual, freedom. He found Parisian life far too restrictive, and through his works he presents an ideal, sexually liberated alternative to prevailing societal attitudes towards morality. Sexuality plays a major role in his writings, ranging from the stylized and elegant in *Chansons de Bilitis* to the startlingly graphic, as in *Trois Filles de leur Mère* (first published posthumously in 1926).⁸ Most of Louÿs's considerable fame stemmed from the *Chansons* and *Aphrodite*; after the turn of the century—the height of his fame—his output reduced dramatically and he largely withdrew from public life. His contribution to French literature was summarized by Fernand Gregh as “ten years, then silence for twenty years, then death” (Gregh 1956:36).⁹

Louÿs was acquainted with many of the major artistic figures of his time, most visibly in his friendships with André Gide, Paul Valéry, and Claude Debussy. Debussy and Louÿs met in 1893 and remained close until around 1904, after which time the two drifted apart. This rift between the two friends seems not to have been the result of any animosity, but rather of changes in Debussy's lifestyle: as Christian Goubault puts it, “the new life that began with Emma Bardac . . . meant a redistribution of friendships, and Pierre Louÿs had no part in the new circle” (Goubault 2002:147).¹⁰ The friendship between Debussy and Louÿs was not particularly fruitful in terms of artistic output (though mutual influence may be another story); though they frequently discussed large-scale collaborations (most often in the form of an opera based on *Aphrodite*), only the *Trois Chansons de Bilitis* and some incidental music to accompany readings of other poems in the cycle emerged explicitly as the result of combined efforts.¹¹

The three songs that Debussy set to music all originate in the idyllic first section of the *Chansons*, which describes the events of Bilitis's youth. The

tale of her early years relies heavily on the *topoi* of the pastoral genre, a debt Louÿs acknowledged explicitly by titling them “Bucoliques en Pamphylie.” The pastoral mode, in the most literal sense, is typified by a focus on the lives of shepherds. More loosely, however, the mode emphasizes some or all of the following aspects of those lives: “idyllic landscape, landscape as a setting for song, an atmosphere of *otium* [leisure], a conscious attention to art and nature, herdsmen as singers, and . . . herdsmen as herdsmen” (Alpers 1996:22). Louÿs was certainly not alone in this appropriation of such an ancient form.¹² We often encounter the pastoral and the depiction of pastoral scenes from antiquity in French art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as artists turned towards an idealized past to find a setting less morally and culturally repressive than their own.¹³ Steven F. Walker, for example, in his discussion of Mallarmé’s *L’après-midi d’un Faune* as pastoral, points to William Bouguereau’s painting *Nymphes et Satyre* (1873) as a prominent example of erotic depictions of ancient pastoral scenes in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Walker 1978:107).

Louÿs remained close to the pastoral archetype in establishing a background for the *Chansons*. For example, in the fictional biography of Bilitis included with the *Chansons*, Louÿs describes her home in Pamphylia as follows:

The country is harsh and forlorn, made somber by the darkness of an impenetrable forest, dominated by the enormous mass of the Taurus Mountains; mineral springs flow from its rocks, large salt lakes reside on its heights, and silence fills its valleys . . . In this nearly deserted land she lived a tranquil life with her mother and her sisters . . . The shepherds pastured their flocks on the wooded slopes of Taurus. She awoke every morning to the crow of the rooster and went off to the stable, led the animals out to drink, and milked them. During the day, if it rained, she stayed in the women’s quarters and spun woolen threads from her distaff. If it were a beautiful day, she would run in the fields and, with her friends, play a thousand different games about which she tells us. (Louÿs 1995:233)¹⁴

This passage describes a perfect setting for pastoral poetry, and indeed Louÿs acknowledges this fact by referring later in the biography to Bilitis’s “pastoral existence” during this time (Louÿs 1995:233). He presents Pamphylia as a kind of Arcadia—complete with requisite shepherds and nymphs—and in the beginning of the poems Bilitis seems to fit in completely with her surroundings.

The first poems of the collection focus on establishing the pastoral environment. For example, poem 1, “L’arbre,” expresses her close connection to nature in the form of sexually innocent sensual contact with a tree that she has climbed. The following poem, helpfully titled “Chant Pastoral,”

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begins “We must sing a pastoral song, calling on Pan, the god of the summer wind” (Louÿs 1995:241). Almost immediately these poems present the reader with two prominent features of the pastoral: the literal and figurative invocation of the god Pan and a close communion with the natural world. Also typical of the pastoral environment is the fact that these poems take place in what initially seems to be perpetual spring and summer. Poem 4, “Les Pieds Nus,” demonstrates another *topos* of the pastoral as Bilitis describes her distance from urban life: “If I lived in the city, I would wear jewels of Gold and tunics woven with golden thread and shoes made out of silver...I look down at my naked feet in their slippers of dust” (Louÿs 1995: 242; ellipsis in original). Many of the following poems present similar unmistakably pastoral elements, including pervasive natural imagery and frequent references to nymphs.

Completing the pastoral atmosphere, however, requires an actual shepherd. To this end, Bilitis’s first sexual attraction is to the flute-playing shepherd Lykas, and the remainder of the first section of the poems concerns itself chiefly with their developing relationship. Her attraction to Lykas begins as a sort of adolescent infatuation, as seen in poem 24, which bears his name, and in which she describes him as being as “beau comme Adônis.” The relationship becomes increasingly serious as the poems continue, with a female friend first serving as a physical substitute for Lykas in poem 26, “L’amie complaisante” (foreshadowing the second section of the poems), followed by increasing contact between Bilitis and Lykas himself, including in “La Flûte” (poem 30) and “La Chevelure” (poem 31).

After several near-misses (most notably in poem 34, “Les Remords”), Lykas initiates the first sexual liaison between the two while Bilitis sleeps (poem 35, “Le Sommeil Interrompu”). This nonconsensual act, rather than producing the animosity that one might expect, leads to the two engaging in an ongoing amorous relationship, typified by Bilitis’s comments in “La Nuit,” poem 44: “Each night, very quietly, I leave the house and I take a long path to his meadow to see him sleeping” (Louÿs 1995:261). Eventually she becomes pregnant, and apparently Lykas abandons her (though the text remains unclear on this issue). Nevertheless, the poetry leaves no doubt that their relationship ends unhappily, and in “Le Tombeau des Naiades,” the final song of the first section, the perfection of the pastoral environment dissolves into an icy winter.

The three poems Debussy selected for his brief song cycle express the major aspects of Louÿs’s narrative by invoking what Barthes (1977) refers to as the “cardinal points” of the relationship between Bilitis and Lykas: the attraction, the consummation, and the termination of the relationship. Cardinal points, as Barthes describes them, are the “real hinge points” of a

narrative, which serve “to open (or continue, or close) an alternative that is of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story” (1977:93–94). These three poems also represent the stages of this relationship symbolically through the pastoral idiom, the breakdown of which reflects the loss of Bilitis’s innocence and her initial sexual naivete. By focusing on the narrative cardinal points, these three poems distill the plot down to a highly simplified (and consequently less rich) narrative. Debussy’s music, however, offers suggestions of the missing material to those looking for it (i.e., second-level model listeners); this added music assists in the expansion of the narrative back to its original size, reclaiming the depth of the original poetic collection. A closer look at the interplay of music and poetry of the three poems themselves will demonstrate how this process takes place.

“La Flûte de Pan”

The first of the three songs of the *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*, “La Flûte” (in some editions called “La Flûte de Pan”), describes a purely pastoral scene, in which Lykas teaches Bilitis to play the syrinx, or pan flute:

For the day of Hyacinth, he gave me a syrinx made of carefully cut reeds
united with white wax that is sweet as honey to my lips.

He is teaching me to play, seated on his lap, but I am trembling a little.
He plays after me, so softly that I can hardly hear him.

We have nothing to say to each other, so near we are, one to the other;
but our songs want to answer each other, and taking turns our lips unite
over the flute.

It is late. Now comes the song of the green frogs that begins with the
night. My mother will never believe that I have stayed so long searching
for my lost sash. (Louÿs 1995:254; translation altered)

The most significant pastoral *topos* in this poem is the presence of the syrinx, an instrument with strong idyllic associations. The Greek poet Theocritus, long recognized as the originator of the pastoral genre in his *Idylls*, refers to it several times as the instrument of shepherds, as does Virgil in the *Eclogues*.¹⁵

In attempting to recreate the vision of antiquity represented by these authors, references to the syrinx also abound in fin-de-siècle France; the instrument features prominently in Arcadian visual art, poetry, and literature. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, regarded as the greatest idyllic painter of the period, highlights the image of the syrinx in his *Vision antique* (ca. 1886–88),

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Example 1: “La Flûte de Pan,” mm. 1–2. “Syrinx” motive, with modal elements.

Lent et sans rigueur de rythme

The musical score is written for piano. The right hand (treble clef) begins with a half rest, followed by a sixteenth-note flourish (marked '6') and eighth-note triplets (marked '3'). The left hand (bass clef) starts with a piano (*pp*) dynamic, playing a half note G, then moving to chords in the next measure. The piece concludes with a 3/4 time signature change.

and Henri Matisse presents the instrument in a similar way in his celebrated *Le bonheur de vivre* (1905–6).¹⁶ Similarly, Mallarmé makes extended use of the associations with the pan flute to create the pastoral atmosphere in his poem *L'après-midi d'un faune*. For these artists the instrument formed a critical part of recreating the *ethos* of the classical world. As Margaret Werth puts it, the “piper is an image of rustic innocence, adolescent sexuality, simple habitation of the natural landscape, and harmony with the animal world” (2002:151).

The syrinx is an erotically charged instrument, even from its mythological creation: the nymph Syrinx was transformed into reeds to escape the god Pan, who cut the reeds and crafted them into the flute with which he became associated. Thus, through making music he literally has Syrinx on his lips, a connection that helps to establish the sexual tension between Lykas and Bilitis, a tension already present by the physical proximity of her sitting on his lap. As it does for Pan and for Mallarmé’s faun, the flute serves here “to transform sexual frustration into art” (Wenk 1976:180).

Like Louÿs’s poem, Debussy’s setting exploits both aspects of the syrinx’s meaning, to which the composer was no stranger. Julie McQuinn points out that the “erotic power of the syrinx, its ability to seduce with its floating melody, constitutes a dominating theme in the works of Debussy” (2003:126).¹⁷ He made musical reference to the syrinx in several other compositions, most notably the *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1894) and *Syrinx (La Flûte de Pan)* (1913). The first Bilitis song begins with an initial seven-note flourish in the piano, evoking the seven tones of the traditional pan flute (see example 1). This theme recurs both at a central point in the text and at the end, becoming a type of seductive ritornello, as Steven Rumph has stated (1994:468). Even before the text begins, the presence of the syrinx suggests both an idyllic landscape and, through its association with Pan, a sexually charged atmosphere.

Karol Berger has pointed out that the function of accompaniment in vocal music “is analogous to that of the setting [in literature], namely, to

provide an environment for the personage, a background against which he may appear” (1994:419). The choice of musical material for Debussy’s “recreation” of the sound of the syrinx plays a significant role in establishing both a pastoral sense and a more general evocation of antiquity—elements that, while critical to the creation of the narrative of Louÿs’s poems as well as to the usual understanding of Debussy’s selection, are almost entirely absent from the actual text of “La Flûte.” Each time the syrinx motive appears, its florid seven-note pattern forms a Lydian scale using the raised fourth scale degree (in this case, E#). The use of the Lydian mode is not limited to the initial expression of the syrinx; the E# appears in the repeating cadential patterns, where it functions as the third of a C# Major triad (in m. 2, for example). Lydian is not the only scale suggested, however; the initial descending fifth in the bass suggest the possibility of a G# Dorian harmonic center. This use of these “Greek” modes helps to establish, if not a specifically Greek atmosphere for the piece, then at least a sense of the piece as in some way “ancient.” This technique serves to communicate a sense of the temporal (and, to a certain extent, the geographic) setting of the poems, effectively creating a musical allusion to the introductory materials to the poems, found in Louÿs’s “biography” of Bilitis. Without in some way acknowledging this allusion, listeners—those with no previous knowledge of the poems and without the aid of program notes, say—would have no background to the narrative of the cycle, which essentially begins *in medias res*.

The continued presence of the syrinx music also affects the listener’s perception of time in the song. In the poem, the verb tenses vary significantly between the stanzas, making the exact time frame for the action of the text difficult to pinpoint. Louÿs sets the first stanza in the past tense, as Bilitis identifies a specific event: Lykas’s gift of the syrinx. Following these initial lines, however, the tense switches and the ensuing action occurs in the present.¹⁸ At this point in the poetry, the passage of time becomes unclear: how long do the two young lovers continue to play the flute, “taking turns”? The verb “unite” (*s’unissent*) is ambiguous—the action may take place once or multiple times, further disorienting the temporal grounding. This confusion comes as a result of the fact that Bilitis herself has lost track of time; only in the last stanza does the poetry return to real time—the action of the poem unfolding in the same (or approximately the same) amount of time as it would in the real world—as she realizes how long she has spent with Lykas.

The music accentuates each of these features of the time frame. The repetition of the syrinx motive implies the ongoing action of exchanging the syrinx back and forth but offers no specific temporal indications other than that the action continues. It becomes symbolic of the inner world of Lykas and Bilitis, which exists outside the flow of time.

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Example 2: “La Flûte de Pan,” mm. 22–23. “Frog” motive, particularly in the left hand.

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is in treble clef, 3/4 time, and is marked "Plus lent". It contains a series of chords, each with a "3" below it, indicating a triplet. The bottom staff is in bass clef, 3/4 time, and is marked "pp". It contains a melodic line with eighth notes and a final chord. The score is for measures 22 and 23.

As in the poetry, however, the music jars us back to reality in the fourth stanza; Debussy replaces the recurring syrinx theme with a mimetic representation of the frogs' song—a reference to Bilitis's sudden awareness of the external world (see example 2). The hypnotic repetition of the syrinx motive and its accompanying musical texture give way to the almost comic music of the frogs, with the result that the listener, like Bilitis, is forcibly removed from the temporally static sense of indolence established by the piece to this point. The presence of the syrinx motive in the postlude, even after the return to real time, serves both as a reminder of the events of the night and as foreshadowing—the sexual tension established by this poem persists, since Bilitis has resisted completely giving in to the seduction of the music.

One final point regarding “La Flûte de Pan” involves the lyric aspect of the poem.¹⁹ In keeping with the lyrical tradition, the text contains no dialogue and instead represents a first-person description of events in which the speaker recalls or presents a particular moment in time.²⁰ This mode of presentation is standard for post-classical pastoral poetry, and it demonstrates Louÿs's desire to remain close to the traditions of the genre, at least initially. Similarly, the sense of temporal stasis in “La Flûte” typifies the lyric mode it adopts and binds the poem closer to the pastoral tradition on which it clearly relies. The almost stereotypically pastoral nature of this first poem makes the dissolution of lyric elements in the following songs more effective.

“La Chevelure”

From the first line of “La Chevelure,” the next poem in the poetic cycle, Louÿs departs from the lyric form established so carefully in “La Flûte.”²¹ He casts nearly the entire poem as a quotation: Lykas speaks to us through the voice of Bilitis, as she relates a dream he has described to her. The exact nature of this dream is unclear: although in the complete *Chansons de Bilitis* this

poem takes place before the two have had sexual intercourse, the context of the *Trois Chansons* suggests that Lykas may be remembering a version of past events. In any event, the relationship has advanced by this point, and the two no longer require the syrinx as a sexual mediator; it is replaced by the recurring image of Bilitis's hair (Rumph 1994:472).

He said to me, "Last night I dreamt I had your hair around my neck. I had your locks wrapped like a black collar around the nape of my neck and over my chest.

"I caressed them and they were mine; and we were bound like this forever, by the same locks, mouth on mouth, like two laurels having only one root.

"And little by little, it seemed to me our limbs were so entwined—that I became you or that you entered into me like my dream."

When he had finished, he softly laid his hands on my shoulders and looked at me so tenderly that I lowered my eyes, shivering. (Louÿs 1995:255)

As Steven Rumph points out, the two laurels allude to Daphne, Syrinx's mythological sister, who escaped the god Apollo by being transformed into a laurel tree, just as Syrinx escaped Pan by being transformed into reeds (1994:472). Thus the laurel-hair connection lends another level of sexual metaphor to the poem, though one more difficult than Pan's flute to express musically.²²

Unlike "La Flûte," this poem has a fairly straightforward time frame—on one level, the quotation occurs in real time. However, another temporal level also unfolds: although Bilitis's quotation of Lykas must, like all dialogue, take place in real time, the events she relates are less clear in their progression, a quality that finds its way into the music as well as the text. Thus, as in "La Flûte de Pan," the time for the lovers (in this case, reflected in Lykas's dream) passes at a different rate from real time. In the final stanza, the phrase "When he had finished" does not necessarily indicate an immediate action, and it suggests a sexual double entendre. As Lykas finishes telling Bilitis of his dream about a sensual union with her, have the two actually consummated the act? Is Lykas describing a desired future or reminiscing on an idealized past event? In reading the three poems selected by Debussy as a narrative microcosm of the larger poetic cycle, the latter interpretation takes on a certain measure of importance, since the sexual relationship between Bilitis and Lykas represents a cardinal narrative point. Therefore, the actions described in the final stanza (Lykas's tender touch and look, and Bilitis's response) would seem to refer to events after the two had been physically intimate and not to events after

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Example 3: "La Chevelure," mm. 18–19. Musical "climax."

The image displays a musical score for two systems. The first system (mm. 18-19) features a vocal line in treble clef and a piano accompaniment in grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The vocal line has lyrics: "ou que tu entr - ais en moi com - me mon". The piano accompaniment is marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The second system (mm. 20-21) continues the vocal line with lyrics: "son - - - - - ge." and the piano accompaniment, which is marked with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

he describes the dream to her. Bilitis, the speaker of the final stanza, joins Lykas in remembering the life-altering event.

The composer accomplishes this depiction largely through tempo, dynamic, and texture changes. The highly chromatic music focuses on creating a sense of tonal displacement and uncertainty, rather than establishing a goal-directed sense of tonality. The tempo, however, is substantially more goal-directed; marked in the beginning as *assez lent*, it increases steadily in urgency, moving through stages of *moins lent*, *en augmentant peu à peu*, *en pressant*, and *en pressant peu à peu et en augmentant*, with only a single brief interruption halting the acceleration that culminates at the fermata in m. 19 (see example 3). This measure likewise marks the high point dynamically; while the majority of the song is *piano* or *pianissimo*, mm. 18 and 19 reach *fortissimo*. In addition, the piano texture changes rather abruptly in m. 18, becoming denser and entering a higher register. The voice behaves in much the same manner, reaching up to a high F#—the highest note of the vocal part. In short, all musical elements build to mm. 18 and 19, which set the text where Lykas recounts his complete union with Bilitis, an obvious allusion to the buildup and release from sexual climax.

The idea of physical union forms the crux of the poem. As their limbs intertwine, Lykas *becomes* Bilitis, and in a certain sense, through narrating his dream to the listener/reader, Bilitis becomes Lykas as well. This union (physical and poetic) forms the central point in the cycle: the first poem leads up to it, and the third deals with its consequences. “La Chevelure” also functions as a fulcrum between the other two poems in its removal from any sense of landscape—the action could happen anywhere. This feature assumes importance for the poem’s intermediate role in the pastoral development of the cycle. Both the first and last songs in the cycle depend heavily on landscape to serve as a symbol of Bilitis’s life (as we will see later in “Le Tombeau des Naiades”). The lack of a sense of Bilitis’s physical environment in “La Chevelure” creates a point of neutrality or transition in the pastoral aspect of the song cycle; it represents neither the idyllic world of “La Flûte de Pan” nor the barren landscape we will see in “Le Tombeau des Naiades.”

The narrative function of “La Chevelure” in the *Trois Chansons* (as opposed to in the larger cycle) is to demonstrate that the relationship between Lykas and Bilitis has become physically intimate; the loss of that relationship will eventually destroy the pastoral atmosphere and force Bilitis to leave Pamphylia. As we have seen, the text of the poem is somewhat vague on this issue, but the music serves to remind the second-level model listener of this critical element of Louÿs’s plot. In order to make the point clear, Debussy’s music for “La Chevelure” must essentially narrate the sexual act.

Following these two measures, the piano returns to the placid initial figure, the tempo relaxes to *premier tempo, plus lent*, and the dynamics fall to *piano*. All three musical features then begin to die away, a process that continues through the end of the piece. Even the inexorable eighth-note pattern of the introduction falters in the last few measures, where rests and fermatas separate individual musical cells. Given an awareness of the overarching poetic narrative, the musical parallels to the physical culmination of Bilitis’s and Lykas’s relationship in “La Chevelure” are unmistakable. Debussy constructs the song so as to leave little doubt in the listener’s mind about the nature of the relationship between the two characters, even for listeners unfamiliar with Louÿs’s poetic cycle. For that matter, if the listener were unaware of the extent of the relationship between the two (if, for example, the listener were to assume that Lykas’s dream never came to fruition), then the depth of melancholy seen in the final song would be disproportionate to the relationship as Debussy frames it. Here the narrative expansion works to a certain extent on both first- and second-level model listeners; the latter are again given music that reflects the elements of the larger plot with which they are familiar, while basic elements of that same plot are, to an extent (and perhaps subconsciously), conveyed to first-level listeners in preparation for the final song of the set.

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“Le Tombeau des Naiades”

Like the first song of the cycle, “Le Tombeau des Naiades,” relies heavily on landscape imagery. In contrast to the idyllic warm summer evenings presented in “La Flûte,” however, “Le Tombeau” presents a harsh winter scene:

Along the length of the woods covered with white frost I walked; my hair before my mouth blossomed with tiny icicles and my sandals were heavy from the soiled, compacted snow.

He said to me, “What are you searching for?” “I follow the tracks of the satyr. His small cloven steps alternate like gaps in a loosely woven white cloak.” He said to me, “The satyrs are dead.

“The satyrs and the nymphs also. For thirty years there has not been such a terrible winter. The track you see is that of a goat. But let us rest here, where their tomb is.”

And with the iron of his hoe, he broke the ice from the spring where once laughed the water-nymphs. He lifted the large frozen pieces, and raising them toward the pale sky, he gazed through them. (Louÿs 1995:262; translation altered)

With this poem, Louÿs shatters the pastoral atmosphere of the first section of the *Chansons de Bilitis* beyond any hope of repair. We are told bluntly that the fantastical satyrs so strongly associated with the syrinx have died, and been replaced by a mundane goat. In addition, Louÿs upsets the standard lyric form of the pastoral through the intrusion of a significant amount of dialogue, the seeds for which he had sown in “La Chevelure.” The continued use of “He said to me” to introduce the speaker is highly reminiscent of the first line of that previous poem, but this time, Bilitis responds in her own words, not merely quoting Lykas. The apathy with which the two converse at this point suggests that the heat of their passion has become as frigid as the weather. Another break with the lyric pastoral tradition occurs in the sense of time and action in the poem. Unlike either “La Flûte de Pan” or “La Chevelure,” this poem’s events seem to occur entirely in real time, with no pauses in the action for reflection. This change in the flow of time suggests that Bilitis no longer has any reason to dwell idly on specific moments. Rather, her childhood languor has given way to feelings of loss.

In searching for satyrs and nymphs, Bilitis seeks her lost youth and innocence aimlessly, only to find them irrevocably lost. The repeated image of the hole in “Le Tombeau des Naiades” functions as a window to her happier past: the footprints of the joyful “satyr,” the vestiges of Bilitis’s halcyon days,

appear as holes in a white garment. Similarly, the ice taken from holes cut into the ice with a hoe—a pastoral tool—provides retrospective vision to the one looking through it; it is “a frozen once-present” (Wenk 1976:193–94). As Steven Rumph suggests, the music also conveys this sense of searching: “Debussy’s piano ritornello evokes Bilitis’s fragile state of mind, the indeterminate, directionless harmonies and the static repetitions of the cycling ostinato aptly portraying the numb aimlessness of her trek” (1994:480).

Aside from this evocation of Bilitis’s mournful state, however, the music for this song carries less narrative burden than the two others. In Louÿs’s *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, “Le Tombeau des Nāïades” stands apart; the poet provides little preparation for the unhappy state of affairs in which the poem finds Bilitis. The two preceding poems both adopt a largely idyllic tone, depicting happy hours spent with Lykas and the impending birth of Bilitis’s daughter. If we assume in large part that Debussy’s task in the *Trois Chansons de Bilitis* is to allow the expansion of their narrative to match the overarching narrative of the original poetic cycle, then this last song presents something of a problem. “Le Tombeau des Nāïades” is the only anti-pastoral poem in the complete collection, and so the music cannot serve to suggest plot elements from the larger collection that were left out of the *Trois Chansons*. As we have seen, the texts for the “La Flûte de Pan” and “La Chevelure” represent cardinal narrative points that Debussy’s music must expand in order to maintain the narrative from the first section of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*. The third song, however, presents a cardinal point without connection to other poems: it needs no expansion from the music, because that cardinal point, which serves to close the action of the narrative, is all the information that Louÿs gives the reader in the complete *Chansons*.

Without the need to reestablish the narrative of the complete poetic collection, Debussy writes music that in fact goes beyond the strict confines of Louÿs’s poems. Rather than filling in the gaps in the plot of the overall narrative, the music of “Le Tombeau des Nāïades” explores another important theme of the poem: reflection on the lost past. As the music approaches the place in the text where the male speaker breaks the ice with his hoe, elements of musical *topoi* often associated with the pastoral creep into the texture, emerging prominently after the key change to F# Major at m. 25 (see example 4). The repeated left-hand sixteenth and dotted-eighth pattern in this section evokes a pastoral rhythm,²³ particularly when introduced as a completely new rhythmic gesture emerging from the incessant wintry sixteenth notes found up to this point in the music (see example 5).²⁴ These pastoral *topoi* effect subtle reflection on Bilitis’s idyllic past. Just as the speaker in the text looks through the ice into the past, the music suggests Bilitis’s reflections on her lost pastoral youth. Though Louÿs’s poem provides no such indication,

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Example 4: “Le Tombeau des Nàiades,” mm. 24–27, piano part.

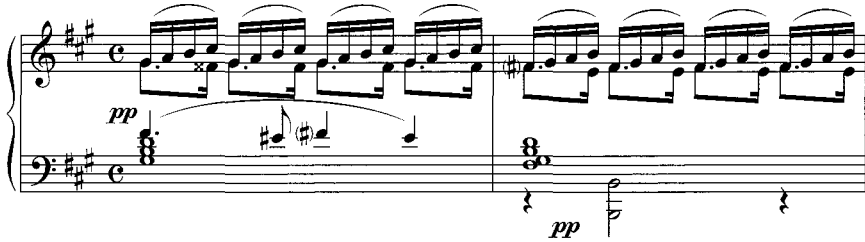
The musical score is presented in three systems, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The first system (mm. 24-25) features a complex, rhythmic texture with many sixteenth notes and chords. The second system (mm. 26-27) shows a dynamic shift to 'f' (forte) in the first measure, followed by a 'dim.' (diminuendo) marking. The final measure of the piece concludes with a rising sixteenth-note figure in the right hand.

Debussy's setting allows the listener some idea of what she sees—through the music (and *only* through the music), we also are allowed to glimpse through the ice.²⁵

Similarly, in the final measure of the piece the piano concludes with the same rising sixteenth-note figure heard in the opening of “Le Tombeau des Nàiades,” but the final iteration occurs in a higher register for the first time, suggesting the register of the “syrinx” motive from “La Flûte de Pan” with a similar rising gesture. This final statement of the cycle thus also represents reflection on the beginning of the cycle. In a larger sense both of these subtle musical references to the first song hint at a framing device for the entire narrative: the older Bilitis looking back at the events of her youth, a gesture made more explicit throughout the complete *Chansons de Bilitis*.

Regardless of the ways in which the music of “Le Tombeau des Nàiades” expands upon the themes of the poem, it is the only one of the *Trois Chansons* that has no narrative requirement to express cardinal points of the larger cycle. The text of the poem makes the plot perfectly clear. We find therefore a somewhat ironic relationship between the text and the music of the three

Example 5: “Le Tombeau des Naiades,” mm. 1–2, piano part. Opening sixteenth-note pattern.



pieces. In the purely pastoral first poem, although the text dwells lyrically on a single evening, the music is responsible for the creation of a complex narrative spanning dozens of poems in the larger collection, establishing with its *topoi* the framework of the poems and Bilitis’s childhood. Similarly, in “La Chevelure” Debussy uses the music to inform the listener about the nature of the relationship with Lykas. In contrast, “Le Tombeau des Naiades” contains the most textual action of the three, but the music has no responsibility to the narrative other than to describe the cardinal point outlined in the text of the poem.

Conclusion

Pierre Louÿs elaborates on the life of Bilitis throughout the cycle of poems that bear her name. As Stacy Kay Moore points out, she “is a clearly defined, three-dimensional, almost novel-like character, whose persona develops throughout the collection—she acquires a past, a history that impinges on later poems” (2001:162). The cardinal points—Bilitis’s infatuation with Lykas, their sexual relationship, and the loss of her innocence following her abandonment—provide a framework or “core narrative,” and in a nod to those familiar with the source poems, Debussy’s music suggests aspects of the larger narrative to savvy second-level listeners. In closing, it is important to note that no music is capable of narrating a complex series of specific events in the absence of prior knowledge on the part of the audience (i.e., program notes or at least a programmatic title). The type of narrative intertextuality that I have outlined above “privileges the more intertextually aware readers [or listeners], but it does not exclude the less aware” (Eco 2004:220). While Debussy’s cycle still provides a fascinating narrative when viewed from the perspective of a first-level model listener—a good thing, considering that the vast majority of modern audience members are unaware of Louÿs’s larger poetic cycle—readers more familiar with the *Chansons de Bilitis* are

privity to a rich web of intertextuality extending far beyond the three poems of the musical cycle. Each setting fills in the gaps for the listener, either by employing pastoral *topoi*, as in the case of “La Flûte de Pan,” or in the depiction of important events missing from the selected poems in the case of “La Chevelure.” In the *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*, Debussy demonstrates one possible way that music can contribute to the development and perpetuation of an overarching narrative that exceeds the boundaries of the texts themselves.

My reading of Debussy’s *Trois Chansons de Bilitis* presents only one possible application of narrative expansion to a relatively short song cycle. One might easily (and quite rightly) make a case that the aesthetics of symbolist poetry and of Debussy’s music lend themselves well to the sort of narrative play found in the *Trois Chansons*.²⁶ I have, however, hesitated in making this argument because I do not wish to suggest that narrative expansion is a particularly symbolist technique, or that it is in any way less applicable to song cycles from other periods and places. Numerous other cycles feature texts derived from larger poetic works: *Dichterliebe* (the texts of which are drawn from Heinrich Heine’s larger *Lyriches Intermezzo*) again stands out as a prominent example. I hope that my brief analysis of Debussy’s cycle will encourage others to explore the ways in which composers and audiences interact through this intertextual technique, which allows new interpretations (both through performance and listening) of song cycles today, while expanding our understanding of how contemporary audiences likely heard them. Certainly, for example, Debussy’s audience for the *Trois Chansons de Bilitis* was much more familiar with Louÿs’s works than are most modern audiences that hear the cycle. More generally, approaching song cycles of this nature from the perspective of narrative expansion can lead to a rethinking of the importance of the audience—and specifically their outside knowledge—in the interpretation of these works.

Notes

I would like to thank those who have read and commented on this article at various stages, in particular Jon W. Finson, Annegret Fauser, Roy Howat, and my anonymous readers for their numerous helpful suggestions. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

1. A few scholars have questioned the validity of such distinctions for the compositions of early nineteenth-century composers. David Ferris (2000:1–24), for example, has persuasively argued that scholars tend to force later nineteenth (and twentieth) century “organicist” musical ideals onto earlier music—in Ferris’s case, onto Schumann’s song cycles. See also Perrey (2002).

2. The literature on song cycles is vast, and largely centered around nineteenth-century Germany, with Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann as key figures. A few of the many excellent sources on the general concept of song cycles that, while I do not specifically cite them, have influenced my thought on the matter include: Youens (1991, 1997), Kramer (1994),

Turchin (1985), and Muxfeldt (2001). Literature on the French song cycle is less common; some notable examples include Rushton (1992) and Fauser (1994). An older though still indispensable source is Noske (1970).

3. For an excellent summary of the literature on unity in Schumann's cycles see Ferris (2000).

4. The concept of the model reader is a recurring element in Eco's writings on literature. Put simply, the abstraction of the model reader posits a reader that can perfectly understand the elements of the text within prescribed limits. For example, our first-level model readers as outlined here would perfectly understand any individual work given to them, but would view these works in a vacuum, with no reference to other literary works. Similarly, model authors are those that act perfectly within given constraints: one that, for example, intends to create every allusion that scholars might find in their works (regardless whether or not the real author did, in fact, intend them). Perhaps Eco's most straightforward outline of these ideas may be found in Eco 1994.

5. Literary fakes of this nature were not entirely uncommon, the most famous of which being James Macpherson's Ossianic poems, first published in 1763, which he claimed were written by the third-century bard Ossian. Though the true author was a mystery to no one in the twentieth century, Maurice Ravel set a similar group of literary fakes—the *Chansons madécasses traduite en français*, by Evariste-Désiré Desforges, Ritter von Parny (1787), who, like Louÿs, purported only to translate the poems.

6. For detailed examinations of Louÿs's life and works during this time, see Goujon (1988) and Clive (1978).

7. In a letter of September 16, 1890, Louÿs describes the changes to his name, which began with the substitution of the "y" in the late 1880s, but went on to include the dieresis as well: "Ce n'est pas seulement l'y grec, c'est le tréma maintenant. Un de ces jours je supprimerai l'O. Peut-être l'U aussi. Mais je laisserai le tréma" (quoted in Clive 1978:31). [It isn't only the Greek "y," it's the dieresis now. One of these days I'll do away with the "O." Maybe the "U" also. But I'll leave the dieresis.]

8. In addition to expounding upon the virtues of such a sensual utopia in his works, he appears to have applied this ideal in his personal life. Many of the *Chansons de Bilitis*, in fact, are widely thought to have their origins in his continued relationship with Meriem ben Atala, a sixteen-year-old girl Louÿs met during his extensive travels in 1894 with André Gide—and with whom both authors were sexually involved when many of the *Chansons* were written (Clive 1978:105).

9. "Dix ans, puis le silence pendant vingt ans, puis la mort" (Gregh 1956:36).

10. "La nouvelle vie qui commence avec Emma Bardac . . . est synonyme d'une redistribution des amitiés, et Pierre Louÿs ne fait pas partie du nouveau cercle" (Goubault 2002:147).

11. Other pieces are certainly indirectly related, however, including the *Six épigraphes antiques* and the piano prelude *Des pas sur la neige* (see Routley 1993).

12. It is worth noting that although the formal pastorals of antiquity blended dramatic and lyric elements, after the Renaissance pastoral poetry was typically lyric, a form Louÿs adopted in the first section of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*.

13. The influence of a return to neo-Greek pastoral images and ideology on music has been explored by Fleury (1996, chapter 8).

14. For the original French of the poems, see Louÿs (1990).

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15. See, for example, the prominent role of the instrument in both the first *Idyll* of Theocritus and the first *Eclogue* of Virgil.
16. For more on the recreation of pastoral antiquity in the work of both these artists, see Werth (2002).
17. In addition, Debussy's choice to replicate the syrinx musically is a practical one. Since, as Carolyn Abbate (1989) and others have pointed out, musical narrative functions in a mimetic (rather than diegetic) fashion, a musical instrument provides an easy source of mimesis. In other words, the fact that an instrument features prominently in the poem allows the music play a large role in contributing to the poem's narrative. John Daverio (1998) has pointed out this connection as well in noting that the musical settings of Ossianic poetry during the nineteenth century relied heavily on the frequent appearance of the harp in the poetic texts.
18. Moore provides another examination of the effect of the verb tenses in "La Flûte," from which mine has benefited significantly (2001:166–218).
19. For a thorough description of the main elements of lyric poetry, see Staiger (1991).
20. This is in contrast to the Greek pastoral tradition, which relied heavily on dialogue.
21. Though "La Chevelure" was the next poem in the cycle as eventually completed, it was not present in the original edition, but was introduced somewhat later. When Debussy suggested setting "La Flûte de Pan" to Louÿs, the poet sent him the manuscript of the as-yet-unpublished "La Chevelure." For a more thorough examination of the chronology of the songs, see Grayson (2001).
22. A connection between long hair and sex was common in fin-de-siècle Europe. In *Pelléas et Melisande*, for example, Melisande's long hair frequently serves as a symbol for her sexuality. The same idea may be seen also in, among numerous examples, Ernest Chausson's opera *Le Roi Arthur*, wherein the unfaithful Genièvre strangles herself with her long hair—the symbol of her seductive powers (see Fauser 1991).
23. Nicholas Routley also finds this rhythm to be significant in the work, but not for its pastoral associations. The dotted-eighth/sixteenth pattern occurs as an ostinato in several of Debussy's winter-themed pieces, and in particular in works related to this song (*Des pas sur la neige* and some of the incidental music that Debussy wrote for *Les Chansons de Bilitis*). However, these two analyses are not mutually exclusive. If, as Routley (1993) compellingly argues, these pieces are all related to the setting of Louÿs's text (which predates the others), then the ostinato may not simply refer to the icy landscape, but also to the poem's focus on the usurpation of the pastoral and regret for the lost past.
24. The repeated pattern of four sixteenth notes moving through a rising fourth also appears prominently as an image of frozen landscape in "The Snow Is Dancing," from *Children's Corner*.
25. Raymond Monelle, in his discussion of pastoral in music, says of Debussy's pastoral style that "the image of innocence, of happy love, is rendered crystalline, is slightly colored with risk" (2006:268). This parallels exactly the development in the *Trois Chansons*—the innocence of the pastoral is literally crystallized into the ice of the third poem.
26. Susan Youens (1987–88) has explored Debussy's creation of symbolist narrative in his *Fêtes galantes II*, drawing poems from a larger Verlaine cycle, for example, although she deals with qualities of the newly created narrative rather than examining any intertextual elements.

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