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**JOYCE'S FICTION
AND
THE NEW RISE
OF
THE NOVEL**

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Franca Ruggieri*

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A MIRROR UP TO NATURE: THE ARTISTIC ROLE
OF REFLECTION IN JAMES JOYCE'S *ULYSSES*

James Joyce's *Ulysses*, like any form of artistic production, "holds a mirror up to nature," as it creates an alternative reality. The mirror as a metaphor for art is as old as it is obvious; but though a worn cliché, when deconstructed in *Ulysses* its bright surface reveals forgotten depths. While a mirror image is a direct reflection of a given scene, this reflection is inherently *not* the thing itself and so contains opportunities for obscurity, subversion, and distortion; opportunities which Joyce does not fail to employ.

Joyce uses the mirror in *Ulysses* as symbol, metaphor and object, directly alluding to the visual phenomenon of the image. The motif of the mirror is prominent throughout the novel, but in the first episode, "Telemachus", all different aspects of it are manifest, as we are introduced to the physical object of Buck Mulligan's shaving mirror; are informed of its optical characteristics; the literary allusions pertaining to it and their symbolic meanings; and the characters' personal associations and psychological reactions to the mirror.

The inclusion of optical phenomena hints at a link between Joyce's text and the visual arts. From Lessing's *Laocoon* we have been accustomed to defining visual art as working in the spatial sphere and narrative art in the dimension of time.¹ Joyce, however, did not agree with this division, as voiced by Stephen in *Stephen Hero*, who

¹ See Mitchel 1989.

“wondered how the world could accept as valuable contributions such fanciful generalization” (in Isaak 1986: 23). And indeed, many scholars view modernism in art and literature as establishing “a genuine connection with each other” (ibid.: 24) by attempting to depict the dimension of time in visual art and the dimension of space through narrative art.² In *Ulysses* Joyce stretches time almost to a standstill, writing a book of more than seven hundred pages that captures the action of a mere twenty-four hours. By pushing the boundaries of the literary genre Joyce brings the creation of illusion to the fore.

This essay is an attempt to show the affinities between Joyce’s use of reflection as symbol and technique in *Ulysses*, and a specific visual art movement, Impressionism. I will not deal with well-established influences of the Impressionists on Joyce, but with a theoretical comparison, alluding to no direct or conscious influence. However, it is instructive to point out that Joyce writes at a time of a major turning point in the plastic arts, when abstract and conceptual art begins to emerge, and his textual experiments co-occur with modernist artists’ visual ones. Nonetheless, not much has been written on the subject, perhaps partly due to Joyce’s voluble refutations of visual art, as well as his acknowledged poor eyesight. Other than Jo Anna Isaak’s study of Joyce and Cubism in *The Ruin of Representation in Modernist Art and Text*, no in-depth attempt has been made to connect Joyce and the visual arts, though there are such studies which try to find general affinities between him and different art movements from his time.³

It is also noteworthy to point out that I do not attempt to define Joyce’s text as impressionistic, but to compare it to an art form of the same name. Though literary impressionism is an interesting subject in itself, more so because it is not rigidly defined, and some of its charac-

² See Joseph Frank’s formative essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” (Frank 1945).

³ Archie K. Loss on Joyce and symbolism, and Robert S. Ryf on Joyce’s relationship with the cinema are examples of this type of study.

teristics can be usefully linked to *Ulysses*, my purpose is not a re-definition of this term.⁴

The mirror and techniques of reflection have a long history in the visual arts, perhaps the most explicit use of which was made by the Impressionists in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Impressionists' manifest agenda was to capture moments in time; in light of contemporaneous advances in technology they saw that reality can be viewed as constantly changing, and were interested in fragmentations caused by light-breaks on reflective surfaces. Most importantly, the Impressionists did not presume that reality is a normative given, that there is one objective way of viewing it, but, they supposed that by including the artist's point of view in their paintings they can get closer to a realistic portrayal of nature. Hence the Impressionists can be seen as forerunners of modernism.

Both Joyce and the Impressionists employ similar techniques, which cause fragmentation of the scene or episode they construct. They depict scenes from the artist's or character's specific point-of-view, a technique which creates obstructions and distortions. Also, they both induce a diminishing of hierarchies; Joyce's and the Impressionists' creations have no obvious centre. The painters create compositions in which there is no focal point and no defining textures, while in *Ulysses* on the textual level descriptions are sporadic, and on the story level there is no hierarchy between the sacred and the mundane. Hence there is an awareness, and a subversion, of the critical human gaze. These art forms attempt to portray reality, while reminding the viewer/reader of the impossibility of objective depiction.

An example of the double fragmentation of hierarchy, in text and content, can be seen in "Telemachus" when Stephen looks at his

⁴ An instructive summary of Ford Maddox Ford's study of literary Impressionism can be found in Max Saunders' "Modernism, Impressionism, and Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier*". Among other criteria, he defines Impressionistic writing as "writing of intense visuality; writing which moves on rapidly (by analogy with the speed of Impressionist brushstrokes) without full elaboration; a preoccupation with the processes of perception rather than the thing perceived" (18).

own image in the mirror: “Stephen bent forward and peered at the mirror held out to him, cleft by a crooked crack. Hair on end.” The hair and the crack have the same precedence in the description, though one is “really” part of Stephen, and the other is only there in the mirror image. It is the surface of the mirror that is cracked, reminding Stephen of the mirror itself, its flat surface which changes his appearance, while the alliteration “cleft by a crooked crack,” reminds the reader of the text which functions as a mirror of reality.

We can clearly see the likeness of this method in Edgar Degas’s 1873 painting *The School of Dance* (figure 1); there is no focal point on which to rest the eye as the room’s perspective is awry and asymmetrical. This indicates to the viewer that no one point is more important than any other; the dancers, the staircase, and the back wall are all equal parts of the artist’s immediate perception, and the composition does not lead the eye to one single place. The artist’s point-of-view defines what we see, and so our view is obstructed by the stairs on the left, as it is distorted by the dancers’ movement. Also, there is no illusory texture to distinguish between materials; cloth, skin, and wood are all painted using the same brushstrokes. These features make the painting seem flat, and though we may try to perceive its depths we are constantly brought back to the surface. For instance, we can see there is depth perspective by the diminishing size of the dancers and the diagonal of the right wall, but by making the farthest wall a bright yellow Degas makes it pop forward again and distorts the perspective. Also, the curve made by the dancers that diminish in size as they are farther away, completes a circle with the dancers closer to us, and again the viewer is pulled back to the surface. These techniques “flatten” the view and in so doing remind the viewer of the canvas and paint just as a reader is aware of the paper and ink; the all-encompassing mirror of illusion.

Art as mirror means art that is aware of its removal from reality; it is not a window to reality but a mirror, in which the world, depictions of it, and the mirror itself, are reflected. This is enacted in the story when Stephen “swept the mirror a half circle in the air to flash the tidings abroad in sunlight now radiant on the sea” (*U.* 1.129). The

mirror captures light reflected from the sun on the sea and flashes that light back towards the air; all is reflected in the mirror and is generated outwards again by the medium of light, but what we are left with is the blinding reflection of the mirror's surface.

Joyce reminds the reader of the text's materiality, much in the same way as Degas reminds the viewer of the canvass by revealing the artist's brushstrokes. The author writes the first chapter in a style that mimics a young, self-important writer.⁵ This makes the reader constantly aware of the text. There is no delving deeply into a fictitious world as one is always diverted back to the surface. For instance, such phrases as "pain that was not yet the pain of love fretted his heart" (*U.* 1.103); "with anxiety and growing fear" (*U.* 1.60); "He shaved evenly and with care, in silence, seriously" (*U.* 1.99); and others, overburdened by adverbs or reeking of cliché, give the effect of "pushing" the reader out of the imagined reality of the novel, out of the looking-glass, and back to the text's surface.

Inclining towards the promised fantasy world and being pushed out again and again, the reader of *Ulysses* is kept in a state of constant frustration. As the curved line made by Degas's dancers brings us into the dressing-room's interior only to be thrown out again by the back wall's bright color, Joyce pushes and pulls his readers from illusion to text. This is repeated at a symbolic level as well, as Joyce notoriously uses immense quantities of encumbering symbolical allusions which all relate to each other beautifully, building a paradoxical structure that remains erect, but as in an Escher print, can never be constructed in reality. The mirror serves as different symbols which reflect upon each other, so to speak, until meaning is deconstructed; as Carl Jung put it, "what is so staggering about *Ulysses* is the fact that behind a thousand veils nothing lies hidden" (124).

Another important motif which also serves as a reflective surface in "Telemachus" is the sea, which is variously associated with the

⁵ Termed "narrative (young)" in the Gilbert schema (Gifford and Seidman 1988: 12).

different mirrors introduced the episode. Buck Mulligan's mirror is first introduced to the reader while lying on a bowl of lather, which associatively reminds Stephen of the vomit-filled bowl from his sick mother's bedside. The mirror is then linked to the sea as both reflect sunshine, and so sea and bile become associated:

The ring of bay and skyline held a dull green mass of liquid. A bowl of white china had stood beside her deathbed holding the green sluggish bile which she had torn up from her rotting liver by fits of loud groaning vomiting. (*U* 1.106-8)

The sea is connected to Stephen's mother not just by the visual feature of colour, but also symbolically by Mulligan's invocation of a passage from Swinburne: "great sweet mother,"⁶ There is no distinction between the "great sweet mother" and the "green sluggish bile" as all is reproduced impressionistically, and indiscriminately; the mother's aging and grotesque body is no less central than the sublime heights of poetic association. The seeming randomness of description, seen as though through spontaneous vision and suggestive memory, is repeated in the irreverent lack of hierarchy in the content of the following passages which describe Mulligan's mock mass and shaving "ceremony." This is significantly typified here when he makes "rapid crosses in the air, gurgling in his throat and shaking his head" (*U* 1.12).

The sea symbolism is expounded further, used by the author as a reflective surface, a mirror, but one which is susceptible to frequent change and obscurity. The sea is termed by Mulligan as "the snotgreen sea" (*U* 1.74), a phrase connecting the colour to that of Stephen's dirty handkerchief, his "nosserag" (*U* 1.76), and again to the mother's "greenish bile." Mulligan states that snotgreen is "a new color for our Irish poets" (*U* 1.80), and so the "nosserag" serves as the author's palate which then colors the sea as well as Stephen's memories of his mother's sickness. Mulligan confounds art and poetry by referring to

⁶ As interpreted in the Gilbert schema (Gifford and Seidman 1988: 15).

color as the medium of poets, and “our new Irish poets” might clearly include Joyce himself. Mulligan then cries out “Epi oinopa ponton” (*U* 1.78), which in Greek means the wine-dark sea, an ambiguous epithet used in *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*. Mulligan, here, alludes to the way poetic imagery functions. The wine-dark sea is a description of colour in text and its meaning has been much debated. Whether the Aegean Sea was painted red by marine algae, the Greek’s wine dyed blue by tinted water, or the language lacked words for colors, the use of words to describe images is seen here as problematic. Described as “wine-dark” or “snotgreen,” the sea in “Telemachus” is colorless text.

The “snotgreen noserag” is only one of the artist’s tools used by Joyce, through Mulligan, to “paint” this episode. I wish to argue that the shaving episode is a portrayal of the process of artistic creation, not a metaphor for creation, but the thing itself. Firstly, Mulligan’s actions are compared to painting when he “dipped the brush in the bowl and lathered cheeks and neck” (*U* 1.10). The young man sitting on the parapet, looking out at the view, places his props, dips his brush and begins painting. But he does not paint the bay; Mulligan paints himself. Through each of his actions we discover a new part of his face: his right cheek, his chin, the hollow under his lip (*U* 1.11, 1.50, 1.56, 1.115), parts we never dreamed of imagining had his brush not touched them. Mulligan is actually painting himself with shaving cream, while Joyce creates the character by writing him. The character, unbeknownst to himself, is participating in a mock performance of creation.

More obviously, Mulligan is mocking another performance; this time in full awareness, he mimics the Catholic mass. The mass is a description, as well as recreation, of the sacrifice of Christ, just as Mulligan shaving is both a description and creation of himself. The scene mimics mimicry, but the mimicry of the mass is believed by those who participate in it to actualize itself in the process – the wine and bread do not represent, but actually become the blood and flesh of Christ. Simultaneously, the shaving episode is also a mimicry of painting or creation. While the character mimics mass, the author uses him to mimic creation. But, as the narrative describes Mulligan shaving it

is also creating the scene – so Mulligan’s shaving is *really* a scene of creation. The mirror serves both creation and mimicry; the surface as the thing itself.

I turn again to the obscure surface of the sea, the distorting “mirror of water” which, unlike a “real” mirror, has both apparent and actual depth. This surface is susceptible to light and movement, as in “Telemachus” we see, “inshore and farther out the mirror of water whitened, spurned by the lightshod hurrying feet. White breast of the dim sea” (*U* 1.243-4). The sea changes as Stephen looks at it, and though called a “mirror of water,” it becomes a white, rippling surface which reveals neither its own depth nor the reflected height of the sky. Here, again, we are reminded that this is a text representing a mirror which in itself reflects obscurity; the rippling waves are actually “wave-white wedded *words* shimmering on the dim tide” (*U* 1. 246 - my emphasis). This is the texture of the text.

When employing the technique of reflection, both Joyce and the Impressionists distort view as they display it. The Impressionists were fascinated with water because it induces reflection and the fracturing of light, which alter perception and portray movement. In Alfred Sisley’s 1885 *Saint Mammes, Ducks on Canal* (figure 2) the sea reflects the sky while distorting and obscuring it at the same time, and the rapid brushstrokes on the water are an enactment of the ripples which create a white, obscuring layer, making the objects reflected in the water difficult to identify. This naturalistic rendering of movement on water, by its very commitment to reality, obscures the depicted object. It is, so to speak, a realistic depiction of obscurity. Also, the realistic rendering of the water which creates this obscuring surface emphasizes the materiality of the canvas and paint and so flattens the three-dimensional illusion to the two-dimensional reality of the painting. The light-breaks in the mirror fragment reality, as the brushstrokes of the Impressionists diminish naturalism to the point of incomprehensibility. The reflective surface of the sea functions like the novel in its entirety, by portraying the many fragments of “nature” while leaving it incomprehensible. As Isaak writes, “fragmentation is one of the keys to this central aesthetic paradox of certain modernists works, that is,

their non-mimetic, yet intensely realistic nature” (4). Reflections as technique in Impressionism as well as in *Ulysses* cause confusion which results in a constant reminder that this is a (distorted) reflection of reality.

Joyce and the Impressionists are comparable in their attitude to perception as well as depiction; both art forms induce the reader or viewer to ask questions about the objectivity of vision. The Impressionists explicitly claimed to depict reality *as they see* it, which is an admission of subjectivity in perception. But they also understood that reality is *always* subject to perception, hence there is no one objective view of it, and their artworks are an attempt at an oxymoron – an objective impression. *Ulysses* also contains this conflict, as its protagonists’ stream-of-consciousness flows from the cold observation of facts, to inner associations and memories which colour and alter them, while it is at no point clear which is the “true” reality, or which its most important fragment.

The Impressionist paints his own physical point of view, as in Degas’ painting the view of the dancers is obscured by the staircase, and in Renoir’s emblematic painting of the Impressionist movement, the 1876 *Bal du moulin de la Galette* (figure 3), the entire scene is distorted by multiple overlapping. While impressionistic colors are also susceptible to the artist’s viewpoint, it is important to note that they are not an unrealistic expression of feeling or imagination, as in Fauvist or German Expressionist renderings, but are distorted by the fast painting process which tries to capture changes in light. In Joyce’s stream-of-consciousness there exists a similar inclination as the portrayal of the “reality” of the novel is produced through, and altered by, the consciousness of its protagonists. Even when looking directly at the world, we always see it “through a glass darkly.”

In “Telemachus” we receive Stephen’s point of view, which is not just physical and cognitive, but also emotional. For instance, when Stephen looks at the sea after his dispute with Mulligan, it is described as mirroring his anger:

Stephen stood at his post, gazing over the calm sea towards the headland. Sea and headland now grew dim. Pulses were beating in his eyes, veiling their sight, and he felt the fever of his cheeks. (*U* 1.223-4)

Stephen's focalization is both emotional and perceptible, but he does not "color" the landscape expressionistically with his emotional associations; the sea is colored by Stephen's anger as it changes his *physical* eyesight (pulses beating in his eyes). Joyce still depicts a specific reality, but one visually altered by emotion.

It is helpful to look at Joyce's own theory of aesthetics, his "applied Aquinas" as he refers to it in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Stephen Hero*.⁷ Aquinas explains that the observer perceives an object and imprints it on the mind, which receives the form of the object but not its matter. This process involves both the senses that perceive the object and the mind which contemplates it. Hence, beauty is "objective" as its qualities are contained in the form of the object; nonetheless it is processed in the individual mind which contemplates it as beautiful (see O'Rourke 2011). Thus, beauty is in a sense both objective and subjective, for it exists in the object itself, but can only be perceived by the subject-observer. A similar relationship of objectivity-subjectivity exists in Joyce's narrative style and in Impressionism, which seek to capture reality, and not the artists' feelings. But the Impressionists explicitly refer to their own specific consciousness and thus create an impression of reality. They "were well aware that what they painted was not reality, but the appearance of reality" (Venturi 1941: 36).

Issues of realism, mimesis, and illusion are discussed directly in *Ulysses* through literary allusions. Mulligan holds a mirror up to Stephen and says: "the rage of Caliban at not seeing his face in a mirror... If Wilde were only alive to see you" (*U* 1.143). Oscar Wilde borrowed Shakespeare's Caliban as a metaphor for the bourgeois who refute Re-

⁷ See Phillips (2004) for an interesting study on Joyce's reading of Thomas Aquinas.

alism in art because it reflects their own life, and Romanticism because it does not (Wilde 1993: vii).⁸ Joyce has Mulligan take up this critical debate as regards the object of the mirror. The text itself is asking the reader to question its relationship to reality; it is as if Joyce is asking his readers if art can be a “mirror up to nature.” This phrase, mentioned explicitly in the “Circe” episode in *Ulysses* (*U* 15.3820), and hinted at throughout the book, is another allusion, this time to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (Gifford and Seidman 1988: 512-13). By evoking this famous play Joyce reminds the reader of the illusory nature of the novel, as in *Hamlet* the action of the play is mirrored in a further play within the play, and the audience is reminded that what they are watching is also a representation of reality; a mirror is held up to nature.

This is repeated in the further deconstruction of the mirror in “Telemachus,” as Mulligan’s mirror is said by Stephen to be “a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant” (*U* 1.146). Joyce reminds us through Stephen that the mirror is a metaphor for mimesis in art, and it is apparent therefore that the “symbol of Irish art” can refer in some degree to the book itself. Here we return to the mirror as metaphor, the painting itself, in which further reflections and fragmentations of nature are portrayed.

Modernists consider art as an object in itself – the art-piece is no longer valid as an image of reality but has its own functionality in the world. To be considered as such, art consciously shies away from realism. As Isaak notes, “it is an era of high aesthetic self-consciousness, and nonrepresentationalism, in which art turns from realism and humanistic representation towards style, technique or form” (3). This is what Joyce does in *Ulysses*, mirroring real and unreal to infinity, until all that we are left with is the mirror itself, “cleft by a crooked crack” (*U* 1.135). Joyce looks closely at the world and renders its particulars so thoroughly that it is left fragmented.

⁸ See Gilbert’s schema (Gifford and Seidman 1988: 16).

Unlike Joyce, the Impressionists' explicit agenda is to copy nature, to document its movement and change. But by over-awareness to movement and reflection in nature they disintegrate it in their paintings. The outcome is a mirror of mirrors; a painting reflecting reflections. Like Stephen waving the small looking-glass around to capture the fragmented whole, the Impressionist is "as one who takes a mirror and turns it round in every direction" (Venturi 36). After Impressionism, art gradually moves away from realism,⁹ but the Impressionists, perhaps unawares, look at the world and create a distorted image of it. Their emphasis on the artist's point-of-view renders a subjective image of reality. Modernist art

is not the possessing or attaining of a "truth" so that it is finished, no longer to be considered, because owned and "in the bag," but the realizing of the 'known' so that it becomes again the 'given,' thereby not arresting reflection, but renewing and stimulating it.

(Isaak 1986: 20)

A further study could peruse the affinities between Joyce and ready-made art or hyper-realism, and the way in which getting too close to "the real thing" creates a distance from reality. Or a comparison could be made with such postmodernists as Blinky Palermo and Gerhard Richter, and their induced leakage from content to form, from painting to frame. But the study of Joyce and Impressionism does something that these hypothetical (and interesting) investigations do not, precisely because Impressionism is not yet modernism "proper." Because of the naiveté that can be seen in the Impressionists' attempt to "really" depict nature, the inherent problem of perception and depiction comes to the fore, and this is how the metaphor of the mirror serves us – by directly tackling the awareness that every depicted reality is "merely" a mirror, and not the thing itself.

⁹ Of course, there is a constant shift back and forth from realism to abstract art, but the fully abstract, once achieved by Kazimir Malevich in 1918, was never completely abandoned.

While speaking of any concept in Joyce many things must be left unsaid and the analyses of the motif of the mirror in *Ulysses* can take many different turns. What I have tried to show in this paper are the visual qualities of the novel and their relation to the question of art, which, implicit in all art, becomes explicit in Joyce and in modernism in general. The mirror is a metaphor for art, but also for vision, in its obvious qualities of reflection. It is used by Joyce to symbolize that aspect of his writing which fragments reality. The Impressionists thought of light as the medium of vision, and their paintings conveyed the fragmentation of reality in their levelling brushstrokes, which like Joyce's spiralling symbolism, deconstruct the hierarchies we assert that we perceive in nature. As too-bright rays of sunlight illuminate to the point of blindness, the illusion is broken at every turn, the mirror is cracked. Like every symbol in Joyce, the mirror is part of an ever-spiralling fractal, which by infinite meaning (or reflection) becomes meaningless. The supposed depth of perspective constantly returns to the glassy surface.

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Figure 1. Edgar Degas, *School of Dance*, 1873. Oil on canvas, 62.5 cm x 48.3 cm Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, USA.



Figure 2. Alfred Sisley, *Saint Mammes, Ducks on Canal*, 1885, Oil on canvas, 73 cm x 54 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, US.



Figure 3. August Renoir, *Bal du moulin de la Galette*, 1876, Oil on canvas, 131 cm × 175 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

