

The Optic Nerve : Seeing James Joyce Seeing

A paper written by Philip Harvey for the Bloomsday in Melbourne seminar held on the feast day, 16th June 2015. Read at Library at the Dock, Docklands, Melbourne with Philip reading the Harvey bits and Liam Gillespie reading the Joyce bits (marked thus >>).

The Optic Nerve 1: 1914-1922 (Ulysses)

James Joyce was near-sighted. He suffered eye problems from early childhood. Most photographs and portraits of Joyce have him wearing glasses. Richard Ellmann says that nearsightedness became part of his personality, for rather than staring or putting on glasses, he assumed a look of indifference. [Ellmann 64] James Joyce had strong prescription glasses all his life.

Had he performed any special corporal work of mercy for her? He had sometimes propelled her on warm summer evenings, an infirm widow of independent, if limited means, in her convalescent bathchair with slow revolutions of its wheels as far as the corner of the North Circular road opposite Mr Gavin Low's place of business where she had remained for a certain time scanning through his onelensed binocular fieldglasses unrecognisable citizens on tramcars, roadster bicycles, equipped with inflated pneumatic tyres, hackney carriages, tandems, private and hired landaus, dogcarts, ponytraps and brakes passing from the city to Phoenix Park and *vice versa*.

[U 796]

Joyce spent much of his life “scanning through his onelensed binocular fieldglasses”. When we read Ulysses an observable majority of visual descriptions are close-ups. Long distance is often a blur and with landscapes Joyce turns to parody and other literary forms, more often than not, rather than trust his own powers of observation.

Why could he then support that his vigil with the greater equanimity?

Because in middle youth he had often sat observing through a rondel of bossed glass of a multi-coloured pane the spectacle offered with continual changes of the thoroughfare without, pedestrians, quadrupeds, velocipedes, vehicles, passing slowly,

quickly, evenly, round and round and round the rim of a round precipitous globe.

[U 796]

In Trieste James Joyce suffered intense attacks of inflammation of the iris. Sometimes he had to rest his eyes for a month, the attacks were so bad.

Houses of decay, mine, his and all. You told the Clongowes gentry you had an uncle a judge and an uncle a general in the army. Come out of them, Stephen. Beauty is not there. Nor in the stagnant bay of Marsh's library where you read the fading prophecies of Joachim Abbas. For whom? The hundredheaded rabble of the cathedral close. A hater of his kind ran from them to the wood of madness, his mane foaming in the moon, his eyeballs stars. Houyhnhnm, horsenostrilled.

Attacks of glaucoma and synechia threatened blindness if not attended to. Blindness, the fear of going blind or imagining oneself blind, hover at the edges of many jokes and passages in Joyce's writing. "Shut your eyes and see."

Ulysses is a supreme act of memory of anything in Dublin Joyce saw and remembered. It is a sustained work of visual memory, written at some distance from the locations it so lovingly describes, perfected in time by right placement of the right words.

Under the upswelling tide he saw the writhing weeds lift languidly and sway reluctant arms, hissing up their petticoats, in whispering water swaying and upturning coy silver fronds. Day by day: night by night: lifted, flooded and let fall.

Ulysses is from the opening line a creative testimony to how the eye sees the world. Stately plump Buck Mulligan is not just a signal of the rampant comedy to follow, it is a description that causes us to see the character instantly, due to the incongruous juxtaposition of the word 'stately' with the not very stately epithet 'plump'. The whole book brims with visuals, almost invariably in surprising forms.

Ulysses is especially notable for close-ups, the sort of appearances a near-sighted man would see, whether in the immediate here and now of Trieste where the book is being written, or in endless memories of Dublin, recalled at will and with extraordinary verbal accuracy.

The cat mewed in answer and stalked again stiffly round a leg of the table, mewing. Just how she stalks over my writingtable ... Mr Bloom watched curiously, kindly, the lithe black form. Clean to see: the gloss of her sleek hide, the white button under the butt of her tail, the green flashing eyes.

[U 65]

Ulysses is run through with visual descriptions of the world and of the people in the world. We know that Joyce uses *Ulysses* as a celebration of all the senses and this includes the most immediate and powerful of the five senses: sight.

What a time you were, she said.

She set the brasses jingling as she raised herself briskly, an elbow on the pillow. He looked calmly down on her bulk and between her large soft bubs, sloping within her nightdress like a shegoat's udder. The warmth of her couched body rose on the air, mingling with the fragrance of the tea she poured.

A strip of torn envelope peeped from under the dimpled pillow.

Stephen Dedalus's morning walk down Sandymount Strand is Joyce's main deliberate and overt description of the experience of perception.

Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. But he adds: in bodies. Then he was aware of them bodies before of them coloured. How? By knocking his sconce against them, sure. Go easy. Bald he was and a millionaire, *maestro di color che sanno*. Limit of the diaphane in. Why in? Diaphane, adiaphane. If you can put your five fingers through it, it is a gate, if not a door. Shut your eyes and see.

This is a rehearsal of St Thomas Aquinas' theory of vision, which Joyce would have learnt from the Jesuits at school.

Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells. You are walking through it howsomever. I am, a stride at a time ... Open your eyes now. I will. One moment. Has all vanished since? If I open and am for ever in the black adiaphane. Basta! I

will see if I can see. See now. There all the time without you: and ever shall be, world without end.

Ulysses is a huge casebook of the psychology of perception, “thought through my eyes”. Joyce’s pet theory of epiphanies goes exponential as he cunningly arranges words to make us see the everyday objective reality of the city, so that it becomes a main character.

But epiphany is only one method of revelation of the visual.

The stylistic variations that constitute *Ulysses* cause the creation of many more kinds of visual effect in words than are found elsewhere in a work of fiction. The opening of the Sirens episode at the Ormond Hotel on the River Liffey is an extensive soundscape of aural and visual effects, a beautiful cacophony that draws us siren-like into the interior drama to follow. It is a picture poem, one of the great poems of modernism.

Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing.
Imperthnthn thnththn.
Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips.
Horrid! And gold flushed more.
A husky fifenote blew.
Blew. Blue Bloom is on the
Gold pinnacled hair.
A jumping rose on satiny breasts of satin, rose of Castile ...
A sail! A veil awave upon the waves.
Lost. Thristle fluted. All is lost now.
Horn. Hawhorn.
When first he saw. Alas!
Full tup. Full throb ...
The spiked and winding cold seahorn. Have you the?
Each and for other plash and silent roar.
Pearls: when she. Liszt’s rhapsodies. Hissss.
You don’t?
Did not: no, no : believe Lidlyd. With a cock with a carra.
Black.

While all of this visual description helps toward the verbal recreation of one day in Dublin, it serves other purposes as well. It serves to confirm the shared sense of the universe. It creates the sense of a complete physical world in which the action, what there is of it, takes place. It operates mimetically to affirm the reality of the world as being looked upon.

What did Stephen see on raising his gaze to the height of a yard from the fire towards the opposite wall?

Under a row of five coiled spring housebells a curvilinear rope, stretched between two holdfasts athwart across the recess beside the chimney pier, from which hung four small-sized square handkerchiefs folded unattached consecutively in adjacent rectangles and one pair of ladies' grey hose with lisle suspender tops and feet in their habitual position clamped by three erect wooden pegs two at their outer extremities and the third at their point of junction.

Joyce presents his visuals without comment, hanging there as it were, or erect as it were, leaving the reader to see anew.

What did Bloom see on the range?

On the right (smaller) hob a blue enamelled saucepan : on the left (larger) hob a black iron kettle.

And revelation through the visual, "thought through my eyes", raises our sense of the states of the characters. By the time we reach Molly Bloom's monologue we have experienced many different kinds of visuals, and Molly herself is not backward in coming forward.

I love to see a regiment pass in review the first time I saw the Spanish cavalry at La Roque it was lovely after looking across the bay from Algeciras all the lights of the rock like fireflies or those sham battles on the 15 acres the Black Watch with their kilts in time at the march past the 10th hussars the prince of Wales own or the lancers O the lancers theyre grand

Molly's monologue is a sustained exercise in memory, reliant for its impact on countless visual cues.

James Joyce endured pain from his eyes his whole life, but half way through the composition of *Ulysses*, in Switzerland in 1917, he suffered an attack of glaucoma so serious that his ophthalmologist decided to operate. The doctor performed an iridectomy on Joyce's right eye. Richard Ellmann says: "As so often happens, the exudation from the eye flowed over into the incision and reduced the vision permanently." [E 417]

Years later Joyce would joke that a person can see as well with one eye as two, but the reality of being half-blind affects him for the rest of his life. Eye operations of different kinds become common. He would argue with friends about how many operation he had had, no doubt making a point.

The Optic Nerve 2: 1922-1941 (Finnegans Wake)

In 1922 Joyce was confronted with a challenge: what to do next?

What does he write to follow something as vast, new, and different as *Ulysses*?

It would have diverted, if ever seen, the shuddersome spectacle of this semidemented zany amid the inspissated grime of his glaucous den making believe to read his usylessly unreadable Blue Book of Eccles, *editions de ténèbres* ...
[FW xxxii]

Ulysses and *FW* are alike in their uniqueness, unlike in their literary intentions.

The two novels are similar in their scale of ambition, dissimilar in palpable verbal appearance.

Ulysses is an extended conversation. *FW* is expression at cross-purposes.

Ulysses would wish to escape the book. *FW* has its face pressed close to the page.

Ulysses is a narrative storybook about the physical place Dublin and the intimate lives of a handful of its citizens. *FW* is a non-narrative book, where Dublin is locus for an allegory about all human experience and history.

Ulysses is an extended exercise in cross-reference. *FW* tests our bearings on every page.

Ulysses goes outward. *FW* dwells inward.

Ulysses is written by someone opening his eyes to everything in existence. *FW* is written by someone who is going blind.

Ulysses is a new Odyssey written by another blind Homer. *FW* is a new *Paradise Lost*, written by another blind John Milton.

The novel he writes for the next seventeen years is again set in Dublin.

What Irish capitol city (a dea o dea!) of two syllables and six letters, with a deltic origin and a nuinous end, (ah dust oh dust!) can boost of having a) the most extensive public park in the world, b) the most expensive brewing industry in the world, c) the most expansive peopling thoroughfare in the world, d) the most phillohippuc theobibbous paupualtion in the world: and harmonise your abecededd responses?

[FW 140]

Answer Dublin, though the landmarks of the city are not easily recognisable nor named as directly as in *Ulysses*. One landmark described in some detail is the Book of Kells.

Starting with old Matthew himself, as he with great distinction said then just as since then people speaking have fallen into the custom, when speaking to a person, of saying two is company when the third person is the person darkly spoken of, and then that last labiolingual *basium* might be read as a *suavium* if whoever the embracer then was wrote with a tongue in his (or perhaps her) cheek as the case may have been then; and the fatal droopadwindle slope of the blamed scrawl, a sure sign of imperfectible moral blindness; the toomuchness, the fartoomanyness of all those fourlegged ems: and why spell dear god with a big think dhee (why, O why, O why?)

[FW 122-123]

These passages tell us a lot about the visual world of the author. He is fixed on words, his eyes are close up to the words, he lives inside them, they in him. He lives in the world of the page. This is not surprising when we consider that *FW* was written using only one eye, usually inside with sunlight and lamplights, in small apartments, bookshops and libraries. He wore a white jacket while writing, better to reflect light onto the written page. And what he does in *FW* is transform words. They transmute, compound, elongate. There are puns and inventions and linkages. And we are made to look at these visual things in order to decipher them and see their meanings. All words become objects to re-organise into new shapes and appearances. Joyce plays around with letters, makes endless pun with

many languages, turns words and letters into actual characters in the story. Joyce makes us look at words.

Wipe your glosses with what you know.

[FW 304]

They are themselves characters with a life of their own, certain to grow and change, put on appearances, act out roles. And their visual shapes, not just their singular musical sounds, are a matter for constant creative play. Joyce's daily business of writing, that ancient human art, is tested and questioned, is visualised into life and even put back to bed.

The use of the homeborn shillelagh as an aid to calligraphy shows a distinct advance from savagery to barbarism. It is seriously believed by some that the intention may have been geodetic, or, in the view of the cannier, domestic economical. But by writing thithaways end to end and turning, turning and end to end hithaways writing and with lines of litters slittering up and louds of latters slettering down, the old semetomy place and jupetbackagain from tham Let Rise till Hum Lit. Sleep, where in the waste is the wisdom?

[FW 114]

Joyce extends this, takes the visual inventions of the modern and turns them into modes of expression, be they newspapers, telephones, recordings. He takes the essentials of that most popular form of twenties entertainment, the silent cinema, and utilises them for his own ends.

The movibles are scrawling in motions, marching, all of them ago, in pitpat and zingzang for every busy eerie whig's a bit of a torytale to tell.

[FW 20]

FW is packed with slapstick Keystone Kops smash-up language. The hundred letter thunder words that punctuate FW remind us of Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin falling down a staircase.

Bothallchoractorschumminaroundsansumuminarundrumstrumtrum
inahumptadumpswaultopoofoolooderamaunsturnup!

[FW 314]

Chaplin himself is mentioned several times, if you are watching closely.

Now there can be no question about it either that I having done as much, have quite got the size of that demilitary young female (we will continue to call her Marge) whose types may be met with in any public garden, wearing a very “dressy” affair, known as an “ethel” of instep length ... when she is not sitting on all the free benches avidously reading about “it” but ovidently on the look out for “him” ... or at the movies swallowing sobs and blowing bixed mixcuits over “childe” chaplain’s “latest”.

[FW 166]

“It’ in that passage a reminder of *The It Girl*, Clara Bow. The book’s characters are archetypes, typical of those in silent movies. And Joyce borrows the essential key to silent movie acting – mime – in several sequences of *FW*, including *The Mime of Mick, Nick, and the Naggies*.

Time: the pressant. With futurist one-horse balletbattle pictures and the Pageant of Past History worked up with animal variations amid everglaning mangrovemazes and beorbtractors by Messrs. Thud and Blunder. Shadows by the film folk, masses by the good people. Promptings by Elanio Vitale. Longshots, upcloses, outblacks and stagetolets by Hexenschuss, Coachmaher, Incubone and Rocknarrag ... Jests, jokes, jigs and jorums for the Wake lent from the properties of the late cemented Mr. T. M. Finnegan, R.I.C. ... Accidental music providentially arranged by L’Archet and Lacorde. Meliodiotiosities in purefusion by the score.

[FW 221]

FW is Joyce’s book of the night, just as *Ulysses* was his book of the day. It is a dreambook, and dreams are when our eyes are closed and then see. James Joyce needed sleep a lot, in his state of half-blindness and mental stress.

But, vrayedevraye Blankdeblank, god of all machineries and toimestone of Barnstaple, by mortifisection or vivisuture, splitten up or recompounded, an isaac jacquemin mauromormo milesian, how accountibus for him, moreblue?

Because the night is dark, where we do not see things clearly, where things change appearance, where we see everything in a new way.

Oasis, cedarous esaltarshoming Leafboughnoon!
Oisis, coolpressus onmountof Sighing! ...
Oasis, phantastical roseway anjerichol! ...

Oisis, plantainous dewstuckacqmirage playtennis!

Although the pain caused by his eyes must have been unbearable inside his head, incessantly and repeatedly, Joyce wrote all his life. As he and his family travelled from one city to another, famous now but still largely reclusive, he would put his own problems aside by referring to himself as “an international eyesore.” The particular French white wine he drank most evenings is now believed to be only secondarily for the purposes of getting tipsy but because it was the one wine he knew that effectively anaesthetised the eye.

There is no end to FW, it starts and ends anywhere in the book, but the printed version handed down to us through the generations ends with the river Anna Livia Plurabelle returning to the sea.

O bitter ending! I'll slip away before they're up. They'll never see. Nor know. Nor miss me. And it's old and old it's sad and old it's sad and weary I go back to you, my cold father, my cold mad father, my cold mad feary father, till the near sight of the mere size of him, the moyles and moyles of it moananoaning, makes me seasilt saltsick and I rush, my only, into your arms.

“The *near sight* of the mere size of him.” In conclusion Liam will read a fascinating family portrait of someone called ‘A Dayfather’. This man works in the newspaper office’s of the Freeman’s Journal, where Leopold Bloom sees him sitting setting galleys. This brief picture could be of James Joyce himself, in Paris writing FW every week, his eyes fixed on making new words out of old letters.

(Liam, read this very slowly) A DAYFATHER He [Leopold Bloom] walked on through the caseroom, passing an old man, bowed, spectacled, aproned. Old Monks, the dayfather. Queer lot of stuff he must have put through his hands in his time: obituary notices, pubs’ ads, speeches, divorce suits, found drowned. Nearing the end of his tether now. Sober serious man with a bit in the savings-bank I’d say. Wife a good cook and washer. Daughter working the machine in the parlour. Plain Jane, no damn nonsense.