

“Signs on a White Field”: The Shadow of *Ulysses*

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Abstract: This essay employs a poststructuralist approach to James Joyce’s *Ulysses* through affect: the dynamic method that considers bodies and their sensory experiences alongside the emotionally-formed forces that motivate them into relation. Through the examination of my own encounter with the Robert Amos painting, *Dedalus on the Shore* (2016), and the Proteus episode of *Ulysses* it depicts, I advocate for the novel’s endurance as a global cultural monument beyond its high-literary disposition. Utilising Rita Felski’s discussion of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, I explore reproductions of *Ulysses* that shift focus from the novel’s stature in literary history to the influential power engendered by its essence, and our delight in its stylistic whims.



Figure 1. The shadow of Stephen Dedalus, from Robert Amos’s *Dedalus on the Shore*.

Let the reader meet me in my cacophony of Joycean inquiry, beginning with the title of this essay, “The Shadow of *Ulysses*.” What I refer to throughout this paper as the shadow of Joyce’s preeminent work is a metaphorical mechanism describing a residual *Ulysses*—a theoretical resimulation of the text. This does not describe a physical revision of *Ulysses* through the manipulation of text. I point to an abstract re-rendering of the novel produced by each reader, as the reader’s individual experience guides the experience of the novel, extracting it from its context and generating new meaning. My encounter with a *Ulysses*-inspired artwork compelled me to modify my perspective of Joyce’s century-old monument of the literary canon: the shadow of Stephen Dedalus, illustrated by Robert Amos (see figure 1). Stephen’s shadow is a small fragment of Amos’s large, unfolding work, *Dedalus on the Shore* (2016), a contemporary reimagining of a modernist moment. The painting depicts Stephen traversing the Sandymount Strand in “Proteus,” the closing chapter of “The Telemachiad”—the novel’s first part. Struck by poetic epiphany, an amateur poetic Stephen begins scrawling on a paper scrap. He glimpses his own shadow in the sand and ponders its limits, simultaneously contemplating the limits of his metaphysical shadow—the possibility of an undying intellectual splendour he longs to achieve. I consider the image of Stephen as not the man but the shadow, and then contemplate *Ulysses* as not the novel (the object within its context) but as the abstract imprint cultivated through the novel’s gyration through ever-evolving contexts. As Stephen contemplates the limitations of his own shadow, I explore the expansion of *Ulysses*, liberated from the search for employed meaning within its referentially rich pages, instead reproduced through the possibility engendered by the reader’s transformative reception of the text. I assert *Ulysses* as an intuitively powerful work, not alone an intellectually reverberant one.

My perspective of Amos’s illustration converges with my experience of *Ulysses*. I view Amos’s depiction of the closing “Proteus,” and am transported to the nearly final moments of the labyrinthine episode stimulated by the in-

trospective journey of Stephen. I consider the intimacy of my own relationship to the text that forms the painting, and the knowing power I possess over a viewer unfamiliar with the Joycean context. Amos's work coagulates from the literary canon; arguably, so does its meaning. But the so-called power I contemplate barricades the aesthetic experience, and the possibility of meaning, with cultural capital. To greet Amos's work strictly as an appendage of *Ulysses* is to stifle inspired artistic engagement with the false conception that all there is to gain from the painting has already been extracted from *Ulysses*. Without its literary context, the painting remains a work of art that is subject to consideration and the desire to find meaning within it. After all, the painting is entitled *Dedalus on the Shore*, yet it does not picture Stephen in physical form. The work pictures Stephen's shadow moving along the unravelling parchment shore, and a vaguely man-shaped form composed of blue watercolour (reproduced here in black and white). Not Stephen himself, but his imprint; the implication of him unbound by the limitations of form. In truth, the shadow is a better indication of his rootless identity and consuming trajectory of densely saturated thought than any rendering of his actual form could have expressed. Ineluctable modality of the visible: I retrace Amos's work, lending my experience of *Dedalus on the Shore* to my experience of visual sense. Minimal. Focality concentrated in near-translucent man-shapes and ink splatterings, the rest deflected by negative space. Without the scatterings of text from *Ulysses*, the imagery does not divulge its context. Independent from the conception of a Stephen, without swarming fragments of *Ulysses* composing interpretations of the work, the contextual gap endues a possibility created in the impact of an interpreter's experience with a work of art.

Throughout the portions of *Ulysses* stimulated by Stephen's internal monologue, we see a character devised referentially, and a mind formulated from second-hand thoughts. "Proteus" depicts Stephen at his most emotionally vulnerable, and *Ulysses* at its most abandonable. In a *New York Times* article, J. D. Biersdorfer quotes Irish filmmaker

Eoghan Kidney stating, “people tend to put the book down during the first few episodes because it’s quite heavy with Stephen’s consciousness, which can be obscure” (Biersdorfer 2016). Those who abandon *Ulysses* during this episode are discouraged by the opaque expression of Stephen’s thoughts, and the perception that Joyce’s work is reserved for those select literary elites equipped with the canonical knowledge to decode the novel’s context. However, the form Stephen recognises in the sand is intellectually energetic, but not yet singularly impressive. The endless impression Stephen longs to envision can only be projected from the residue of his form by an interpreter. In relation to her application of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, Rita Felski criticises literary and cultural studies’ tendencies to embellish the facts of experience with mystifying qualities, rather than address that semi-conscious perception is the reality of everyday aesthetic experience. In “Everyday Aesthetics,” Felski posits the following:

What renders phenomenology a still timely framework is not Husserl’s attempt at a transcendental reduction—one more expression of a recurring philosophical ambition to escape one’s own shadow—but the gaze of wonder it directs at ordinary objects and mundane forms of feeling and thought. Its aim is to really see ordinary structures of experience—not in order to celebrate them or to trumpet their authenticity, but to gain a surer grasp of the ineluctable nature of our first-person relation to the world. (174)

I extend Felski’s assertion of a commonplace aesthetic experience to Amos’s painting, then further from the shadow of Dedalus to the shadow of *Ulysses*. From structural cultivation through the epic form of Homer’s *Odyssey* to thematic substance garnered from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the text is formed through an explosion of literary and historical allusion. Joyce’s dense saturation of high literature weaves his modernist work into the catalogue of high-literary history that moulds it. Analysing the frames of reference within the text allows us to find hidden meaning, but is not neces-

sarily the meaning of the text. In accordance with Felski's assertion that art is "worldly, not otherworldly: not ineffable, untranslatable, or other" there is a vitality to *Ulysses*, unbridled by cultural capital, that is active and regenerative (171). This vitality is not elusive, or arduous to identify—it is not shrouded by belletristic projections decrypted through the literary canon, or else auspiciously unveiled in dreams. It can be named, and is named in representations of the text that are not centred around the dissection of the text's contents; rather, that are centred around what the reader makes of the novel and what the novel makes of its reader.

The shadow is the nexus between the physical and the mythical: it is one object's residual imprint onto another. It is not an original object, but an indication of how objects exist in overlay. The shadow is immaterial, phantasmagorical—a mirage beholden to the swift transfusion of time and light from an object to an observer. It is inseverable from and dependent upon the existence of a material object, which exists in some form of the present. We cannot completely interpret a shadow without the acknowledgement that it has an original form; however, we can acknowledge a shadow as a singular thing. We see the shadow of Stephen and know that there exists a Stephen that is the shadow's original context. However, as Amos illustrates, we do not have to examine the body of Stephen to make something of his shadow, born from yet independent of his original body. A freshly cultivated image, simultaneously dispatched from and true to the original form. Exposed through transformative receptions of *Ulysses*, the forms and frameworks through which we derive meaning from the text are susceptible to regeneration and decay, and the ability to derive meaning from the text expands and endures.

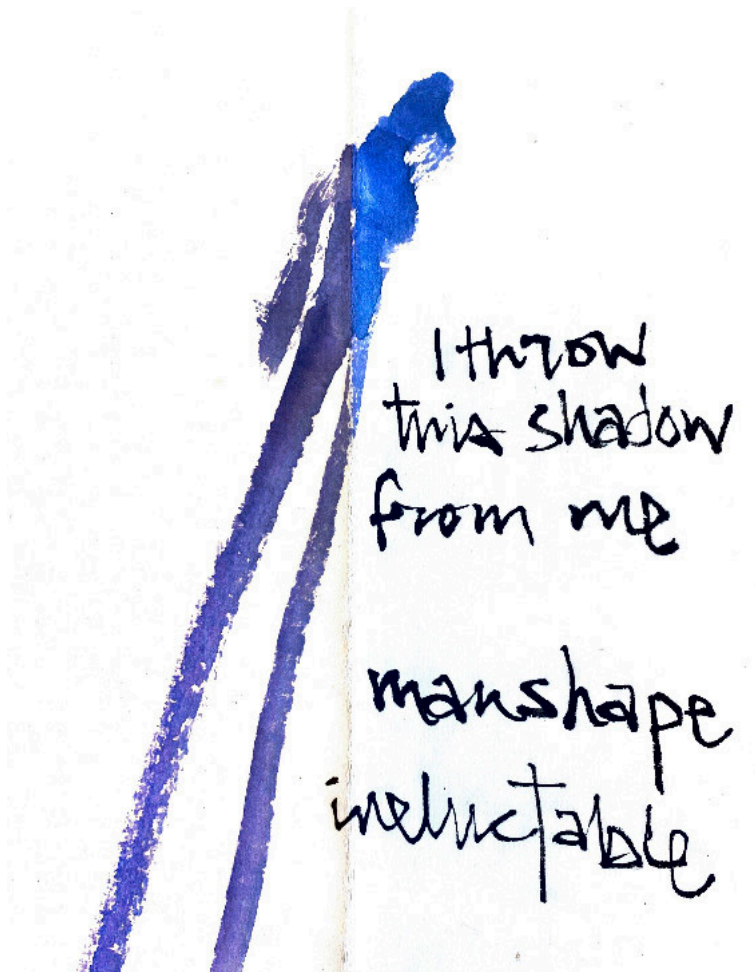


Figure 2. From Robert Amos's *Dedalus on the Shore*.

Through the genesis of a residual *Ulysses*, the catalyst of my swarming reflections on Amos's work, I meet Dedalus on the shore. Upon viewing his shadow, Stephen's internal monologue is propelled by the recognition of his physical

form's imprint before him. He calculates, "manshape ineluctable" (see figure 2). Stephen's shadow, as he perceives it in his present experience, is limited. It is reduced to a mark on the ground determined by the confines of his shape. It is inseverable from his present form and therefore inevitably restricted to his own perception. Stephen moves from calculations of the tangible and present sensory experience to ponder potentiality: "Who watches me here? Who ever anywhere will read these written words?"(see figure 3). Stephen hypothesises a viewer of his present moment. His shadow is immovable in the sand, impressed into the Sandymount Strand beyond his expedition across it. In an attempt to redirect my view of *Dedalus on the Shore* from the context of *Ulysses*, I inadvertently exposed the contextual vacuum between myself and the novel I love. I illuminated the divergence of my own experience from the world of Joyce and his modernist work in an effort to immerse myself in a discussion of context and affect. Here is an illustration of personal context, emblems on a page that convey the form of my experience, albeit void of the substance of character: I am an Albanian settler on unceded Canadian soil, a queer woman, a contemporary. I hold my own context up to that of *Ulysses* and examine: an English novel composed in Paris, Zurich, and Trieste, by a heterosexual, male, Irish author, officially published in 1922. The distance between myself and *Ulysses* is expounded by geography, identity, ideology, and a century. Where contextual commonality propels aesthetic pleasure, here is a chasm. Yet, my affection for the novel is irrefutable. I love it. Further, I see myself within it.



Stephen's shadow is equated to his poetic scraps, a formal element extending from his person, composing a residual Stephen. Markings reduced to physical shapes and ended by the momentary measurement of their composition. Stephen unites his actuality with his potential, liberating his thoughts from a hopeless destiny, expressing "Endless" (Joyce 48). With a breath of the word, he endows his world with a vision of the possible contained within the image impressed in the material: an endlessness empowered by

Stephen's relinquishing of power, or rather an acknowledgment of nonpossession over the transcendence of his ineluctable manshape into an endless form of his form. The possibility of "Endless," Stephen recognises, is realised by a viewer. I observe Stephen's emission of endlessness, facing his inquiry in retrospect, as a viewer intimate with the realisation of the novel's lasting impression. Though augmented through allusion to preceding canonical works, a reading of *Ulysses* is not ultimately fulfilled through the exhumation of its references. The novel lends the reader its experience through the reader's intuitive experience. This is the imperishable quality of *Ulysses*, evidenced by Amos's contemporary painting, and the regeneration of the text through intuitively transformative reception.

An immersion in affect extends beyond an exploration of my personal context in relation to that of the text: defining the shadow of *Ulysses* requires exploration of the readership onto which images of *Ulysses* are cast, and whose individualised extrapolations of meaning render *Ulysses* an intuitively powerful work. Through the following literary review, I assert the existence of a residual *Ulysses*—the vision of the novel that is rendered through the convergence of the reader's experience with the text.

In *The Illicit Joyce of Postmodernism: Reading Against the Grain*, Kevin J. H. Dettmar reassembles the works of Joyce through a postmodern lens. Dettmar indulges in the mystery of Joyce rather than the mastery. He states, "*Ulysses* is certainly a modernist classic," yet centres his discussion of the text on "its playful unwillingness to take itself or its modernist devices too seriously" (Dettmar 11). Rather than extrapolating the meaning of *Ulysses* from the fragments of

literary history or evidence of Joyce's voice within the text, Dettmar regenerates a personalised *Ulysses* that is "less interested in philosophical consistency than in discovery and delight" (2). Dettmar's warping of theoretical lenses is less advocating for a postmodernist *Ulysses* than it is exemplifying the vibrant and varying impressions of *Ulysses*. He demonstrates that while the physical text of *Ulysses* is unchanging, the meanings extracted from the text are unlimited, placeless, and subject to constant change.

Through similar mechanisms of manipulated perception, scholars such as Eishiro Ito and Krishna Sen regenerate *Ulysses* through ethnographic reception. They reclaim the text and unveil impressions which can be credibly excavated, but neglect secluded, traditional examinations. Eishiro Ito's article "United States of Asia: James Joyce and Japan" depicts a Joycean Japan, exposed through "the Japanese reception of Joyce from a postcolonial perspective" (Ito 194). Similarly, Krishna Sen unveils "ancient Indian philosophical and aesthetic systems" through expressions of epiphany in *Ulysses* (Sen 213). Both Ito and Sen briefly touch upon the relationship between Joyce's European modernism and Japan and India during the fabrication of *Ulysses*. However, the *Ulysses* made perceptible through their expositions is rendered through their transformative receptions of the text.

Ira Torressi's "Polysystems and the Postcolonial: The Wondrous Adventures of James Joyce and his *Ulysses* across Book Markets" contemplates the cultural journey of *Ulysses* from censored obscenity to undisputed masterwork of the literary canon. Torressi distinguishes the extensive translation of the text as the enabling instrument for the repossession of a distinctly Irish and modernist cultural marker

across the globe, unravelling the novel's migration "from the periphery to the centre of polysystems worldwide" (Torres-si 217). "Translation," she states, "can be a powerful actor of change in the original polysystem from which a work and/or author originate" (220). This *Ulysses* does not belong to a nationality, but to a possibility generated through diverse dispersion.

The shadow of *Ulysses* liquifies as individual illustrations of extrapolated meaning dilate into reimaginings of the text. In "Seeing James Joyce's *Ulysses* into the Digital Age," Hans Walter Gabler reflects on the fabrication of *Ulysses: A Critical and Synoptic Edition* (1984). It is an exercise in textual criticism and genetic editing that erupted tempests over the constituents of a "definitive" edition of *Ulysses*, determined by a replication most authentic to original form. In defence of the edition, Gabler contends the following:

It is the edition's underlying conception that the text of the work *Ulysses* extends in time over the range of its material inscriptions. Hence, the edition offers the text of *Ulysses* in two guises: as a reading text, yes; but mainly as an edition text to be experienced diachronically, that is, in its temporal depth. (30)

Stephen's ruminations are gratified by the various modes of transformative receptions of *Ulysses*, but I do not hope for my reflections on *Dedalus on the Shore* to end with assessments of *Ulysses's* consumption. The shadow of *Ulysses* is not merely an encapsulation of the novel's varied reception throughout its unfolding in time, but a statement about the possibility of seeing oneself within the vortex of reflections. In "Interpreting as Relating," Felski writes, "what

we choose to decipher, how we decipher it, and to what end—these decisions are driven by what we feel affinity for, what resonates” (128). The act of transformative reception is a testament to the endless quality of the novel, one mode through which *Ulysses* is stripped from its ended context, engendering its enduring imprint. We do not absorb and regurgitate *Ulysses* in commemoration of its literary stature, but because we are capable of deriving individualised meaning, and despite the illusory confines of context.

I am moved from the markings on Stephen’s paper to the markings on my own page: “signs on a white field” (Figure 4). My own context far removed from that of Joyce’s modernist world, I meet my intimacy with *Ulysses*. To name every impression the text has made on my experience would be to dissect every word from the pages of *Ulysses*, but what I make of these impressions is visible here. Like anyone who’s motive engine is an ambition to create, I interpret the immutable manshape of Stephen, and the ended text of *Ulysses*, and encounter myself. Calculating the confines of potential, wondering if I might ever be seen.



Figure 4. From Robert Amos's *Dedalus on the Shore*.

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