

Ulysses and Les Demoiselles d'Avignon: The Interplay of Text and Painting¹

“That’s what I complain of”, said Humpty Dumpty, “Your face is the same as everybody has – the two eyes, so – (marking their places in the air with his thumb) nose in the middle, mouth under. It’s always the same. Now if you had the two eyes on the same side of the nose, for instance – or the mouth at the top – that would be some help”.

“It wouldn’t look nice” – Alice objected. But Humpty Dumpty only shut his eyes and said “Wait till you’ve tried”.

(Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*)²

As Humpty Dumpty suggests, an object has to be unique and different in order to have its own identity. In emphasizing difference, as the necessary condition for avoiding repetition, Humpty’s words literally define the aesthetic changes introduced by modernist artists.

According to Lessing, artistic creation tries to imitate reality, seeking in that recreation an ideal of beauty (Lessing 1879). The poet works with the visible and the audible. The painter and the sculptor only deal with the visible. Some fundamental differences are established by the materials used in that “imitation”: painting and sculpture use figures and colours in space, while literature and music use sounds in time. The first is eminently spatial; the second necessarily implies a sequential structure. Both touch the reader’s or the spectator’s sensibility offering absent things as present, appearance as reality, causing pleasure with the illusions

¹ This paper is based on the MA dissertation: *Joyce and Picasso: the Interplay of Text and Painting* (Universidade de Coimbra, 1997).

² Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland / Through the Looking-Glass / The Hunting of the Snark* (New York: Random House, n.d.) 254-5.

created. However, as we have seen, the formal restrictions defined by these theories already admit the sensual nature of art and the time-space conditions underlying perception.

The exploration of forms and materials, in an attempt to transcend the constraints of verbal and pictorial language, achieves a striking expressiveness in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*. By interweaving styles, these innovative works subvert conventional modes of representation, putting them in dialogue with each other, and producing a synthesis of aesthetic evolution in painting and in literature. Traditionally perceived as something atemporal, painting breaks with the Renaissance model and becomes an art of *durée*, taking account of the temporal dimension by multiplying perspectives and juxtaposing planes. Literature, for its part, becomes an art of *stasis*, exploring the spatial dimension of language, suspending narrative sequence, fragmenting points of view, juxtaposing elements, and giving the impression of simultaneity.

The painting

Before looking at “a picture of Dublin”, I will suggest a brief reading of *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Indeed, it seems to me that the word “read” is particularly suited to the circumstances of decoding and interpretation required by a painting as a set of signs, an analogical code of forms and colours organized in space and apprehended as a sequence in time.

Let us begin with the title, for we tend to believe that titles explain paintings and provide the clues needed for the meanings of the aesthetic object. When Picasso showed the painting for the first time to a group of friends in 1907, Apollinaire named it “Le Bordel Philosophique”, perhaps an allusion to Sade's homonym work induced by the “hatched” forms of “les demoiselles” (Rubin 1988: 376). Later, at the first public exhibition in 1916, at “Salon d'Antin” in Switzerland, André Salmon changed it to *Les Femmes d'Alger* suggesting analogies with Velázquez's famous painting “Las Meninas”. When Kahnweiler asked Picasso about it, he exclaimed: “That name really teases me. It was invented by Salmon. You know it was ‘Le Bordel d'Alger’ since the beginning”. And he also explained that *Alger* was just a reference to the street in Barcelona where he used to buy his brushes and colours in his youth (Seckel 1988: 642).

The painting is conceived as a performance, a baroque *mise-en-scène*, showing characters and forms on a fragmented surface. Blending

different styles, such as El Greco's and Cézanne's, the pink and blue space is dominated by five naked women whose eyes insistently look into the spectator's eyes, causing a strong impression only comparable to the intense effect of Velázquez's "Las Meninas". We see ourselves "seen".

On the left side of the canvas, holding a curtain as if opening the scene, a woman in profile looks straight at us with her Egyptian eye. In a traditional pose of seduction, the central characters look intently at us, their large eyes and ears evoking Iberian sculpture. On the right, between blue curtains, as she has just arrived, a mask-face keeps watching us with her black eye, while with the other she looks towards the left side of the composition. Defying the logic of traditional perspective, the last demoiselle stares outside the painting, her African mask placed at the top of her back.

Often considered to mark the beginning of the aesthetic movement later called Cubism, this painting was subjected to radical changes during the last stage of its composition: the final two demoiselles became deformed by the juxtaposition of different planes, mimicking our virtual movement around them and thereby adding a temporal dimension to the painting.

Reinforcing intimacy with the spectator, a half-table, boat-like, offers up a plate of fruit and establishes the contiguity between the space inside and outside the canvas, as if inviting us to sit down and enjoy the trip.

The sketches and studies produced before and during the composition of the painting describe the different steps taken towards the development of this new visual language. The early studies included two male figures, a student and a sailor. The first held the curtain open, and held a book and a crane in his right hand – before being changed into the Egyptian demoiselle; the second sat amongst the women, eating and drinking, before growing old and disappearing, leaving his place to us. The final version shows, as a palimpsest, the changes that occurred since the beginning.

The spectator or reader is a sort of Ulysses, who is supposed to face these sirens' silent eyes and assume his role as an active participant, instead of trying to escape from their charms. One must adopt the rule enounced by Stephen Dedalus in "Proteus": "Shut your eyes and see" (*U* 3:9). And what are we supposed to see? Perhaps, the equivalent in the text to the "fourth dimension" in painting:³

³ In a letter to Kahnweiler, Picasso claimed that when Leo Stein saw "Les Demoiselles" for the first time, he said mockingly, "That's the fourth dimension" (Cousins/Seckel 1988: 567).

Signs on a white field. Coloured on a flat: that's right. Flat I see, then think distance, near, far, flat I see, east, back. Ah, see now! Falls back suddenly, frozen in stereoscope. Click does the trick. (*U* 3: 418-420)⁴

The text

James Joyce seems to have been keenly aware of the questions raised in the visual arts by the modernist revolution, and especially their implications for the novel. Although he once said “Painting does not interest me”, the truth is that Joyce used to take photographs of certain paintings so he could observe them attentively “up near a window like a myope reading small print” (Budgen 1972: 189). “At the end of his examinations he would always attribute to the painting the qualities it in fact had” (Budgen 1972: 190), concludes the artist Frank Budgen, one of Joyce’s closest friends, and the only one with whom he discussed *Ulysses* in detail. He even gave Budgen a copy of the *Futurist Manifesto* and introduced him to Wyndham Lewis’ painting. Furthermore, one of the sources through which Joyce made contact with modernist aesthetic changes was certainly *The Egoist*, the magazine where *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was periodically published.

Thus, when he set out to parody romance in “Nausicaa”, he also parodied the conflicting pictorial norms of his day. His scheme for *Ulysses* designates painting the “art” of this chapter. It is not only because of the elements marked with the exclamation “Tableau” or the fact that the heroine, Gerty McDowell, likens the sea to chalk painting on pavement. These and the few other pictorial references in chapter hardly warrant its dedication to the art of painting. Rather, the entire structure of the chapter “evokes the situation of pictorial perception, and explores this situation in the light of the modernist ‘shift’ in norms” (Steiner 1991: 124). “Nausicaa” is essentially pictorial because we are always made to feel conscious of the ambient around Bloom, Gerty and her friends.

Playing with concepts of time and space, with polyperspectivism and the effects of light and colour, the text acquires a plastic and dramatic unity. Strategies and characters explored before and after this chapter converge here: Stephen’s thoughts about time and space, and the visible

⁴ The abbreviations of Joyce’s works used here are those commonly adopted in specialist studies.

and audible in “Proteus”; the fragmentation of space, effects of collage, and combination of forms and colours to “catch the eye” of “Aeolus”; the weaving of labyrinthine notions of time and space and parallaxic vision of “Wandering Rocks”; the parody of literary models and pastiches of styles developed in the “Oxen of the Sun”; and the display of polymorphic tableaux of “Circe”.

Several sketches and studies preceded “Nausicaa”, not to mention the changes that occurred during the composition of this chapter. It is worthwhile, I think, to consider here the impressionistic moment presented at the end of the fourth chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist*, because the two episodes are made up with the same touches. “Nausicaa”, says Fritz Senn, “continues the familiar technique of *A Portrait*, the repetition of an earlier event in a rearrangement, with a change of tone and a new slant” (Senn 1977: 286). In a similar seaside scenario painted with the changing colours of dusk, Stephen watches a girl wearing a blue dress, idealizing her simultaneously as a “madonna” and as a siren. Moreover, Stephen’s contemplative ecstasy leads him to a vision of a fragmented and distorted image of vibrations of light and colours, a “new” world announced as theory and expression of a new textual and pictorial language: “His soul was swooning in some new world, fantastic, dim, uncertain as under sea, traversed by cloudy shapes and beings. A world, a glimmer, or a flower?” (*P* 157).

“Nausicaa” is dominated by the interplay of *durée* and stasis: time is represented by the changing colours of dusk and Bloom’s stopped watch. Space is composed of other spaces: the beach, the chapel, and other spaces evoked either by Gerty or Bloom. And light, on which depends the visibility of space and objects, “Colours depend on the light you see” (*U* 13: 1132), is also the reference to calculate the time, “he thought it must be after eight because the sun was set” (*U* 13: 547-548).

The plot of “Nausicaa” is an interchange between an observer and a subject, the components of the traditional model; however, Joyce shows that the two roles are interchangeable. “It was a kind of language between us” (*U* 13: 944). Bloom watches Gerty seated on the beach. Gerty watches Bloom watching her. Each creates the other by creating the other’s response, inducing him or her to display or to desire. And the reader is given the privilege of having a multiple perspective of characters and spaces, but also the responsibility of completing the panel, assuming his role as an active participant, like the spectator before *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*.

In a sort of paradise scene, we find our Ulysses facing the charms of a Nausicaa, after having escaped from the hostile atmosphere of “Cyclops” by ascending to heaven as a messiah. Several demoiselles are gathered here, “the lovely seaside girls” (*U* 13: 906): Gerty, Cissy, Edy, Martha, Molly and Milly, the last three brought to action by Bloom’s memory. There is also a sailor and a student. The first, almost invisible at the beginning, is represented by Bloom. The second, Stephen, is virtually present through the paper he left on the beach, in the morning, in “Proteus”, found by Bloom by the end of the chapter, as if answering Stephen’s questions: “Who watches me here? Who ever anywhere will read these written words?” (*U* 3: 414-415).

But the parallelism between “Proteus” and “Nausicaa” goes far beyond the coincidence of space, Sandymount beach. In the first one, devoted to philology, Stephen shuts his eyes to the morning light to see the essence of things, exploring the temporal and spatial dimensions of textual language. And Bloom, in the second one, wonders about visual language and the combination of colours, forms, light and framing. Both concentrate on the girls present on the beach at different moments, but only Bloom embarks on the erotic mirages displayed by Gerty. Stephen’s “pale vampire” incarnates on Gerty, “A vamp on her stockings” (*U* 13: 1022).

“But who was Gerty?” (*U* 13: 78) asks the conspicuous “arranger” (Hayman 1970: 70-78), playing the narrator and imitating her style. The first close-up gives her the status of heroine. Long and detailed descriptions lampoon old-style romance and traditional pictorial models: “a fair specimen of winsome Irish girlhood”. Thus, when we move from distance to closeness, as if a spectator before a painting, we have a general view before seeing any particular details: her *pose* “lost in thought, gazing far away into the distant sea”, “a languid queenly *hauteur*”; her silhouette “slight and graceful”; her face “almost spiritual in its ivorylike purity”; her mouth “a genuine Cupid’s bow”; her eyes “the bluest Irish blue, set off by lustrous lashes and dark expressive brows” (*U* 13: 79-113).

Beginning as examples of art as imitation, Gerty’s portraits gradually become illustrations of art as illusion and spectacle, while Bloom’s creations evolve from art as illusionism to a distorted and composite mirror, like “the cracked looking-glass of a servant” imagined by Stephen (*U* 1: 146).

The images displayed in Gerty's mind dramatize the ideal moments of her story: "her day dream of a marriage" and honeymoon, her husband, "tall with broad shoulders", "glistening white teeth under his carefully sweeping moustache", her ideal home, and a perfect domestic life in Victorian style (*U* 13: 238-242). We are made to see Gerty's collage of romance clichés as both ridiculous and pathetic. Her images emerge as pastiches of stereotyped heroines of popular novels or inspired in women's magazines of the time. In fact, during the composition of this chapter Joyce asked Mrs. William Murray to send him "a bundle of other novelettes and any penny hymn-book you can find as I need them" (*SL*: 247).

Transferring to Bloom the role of spectator, first idealized to be performed by Reggy Willy, she also transfers her dreams, turning him into a mixture of clichés: "Here was that she had so often dreamed" (*U* 13: 427-428): "dark eyes", "pale intellectual face", "moustache", "a foreigner" like "the photo she had of Martin Harvey, the matinee idol" (*U* 13: 415-416).

Gerty's romantic readings of her hero ironically depict the modes of pictorial representation centered on the "arrested moment", "a story of a haunting sorrow was written on his face" (*U* 13: 429):

There was the all important question and she was dying to know was he a married man or a widower who had lost his wife or some tragedy like the nobleman with foreign name from the land of song had to have her put in a mad house, cruel only to be kind.

(*U* 13: 656-659)

As the emotional intensity grows, the syntactic structure becomes more fluid, affected by the juxtaposition of different elements. Fragments of images from the ritual inside the chapel, sights of Gerty's companions and, obviously, of Bloom, create a composite surface producing the effect of parallax vision. The fireworks not only stress the climax as an orgasmic metaphor, but they also symbolize the fusion of sound, image, time and space. For a while, the voices of the "arranger", Gerty and Bloom congregate, till the moment the heroine offers her last "tableau" showing in movement a facet invisible in static poses: "Tight boots? No. She's lame! O!" (*U* 13: 771).

The vision of her "jilted beauty" ends suddenly the enchantment produced by the illusions when she was on show. As a consequence, it makes Bloom ponder on the way he was induced to idealize the model

and how he helped, as a spectator, in the cobuilding of mirages. Turning from his visual possession of Gerty, Bloom remembers his courtship of Molly and wishes he had a full length oil-painting of her then. So, he recreates a portrait of Molly adding facets of Martha, Milly, Gerty, Edy, Cissy: “All tarred by the same brush. Wiping pens on her stockings” (*U* 13: 949-950), “Same style of beauty” (*U* 13: 1222). Past, present and future converge “frozen in stereoscope”:

Open like flowers, know their hours, sunflowers, Jerusalem artichokes, in ballrooms, chandeliers, avenues under the lamps. Nightstock in Mat Dillon’s garden where I kissed her shoulder. Wish I had a full length oilpainting of her then. June that was too I wooed. The year returns. History repeats itself. Ye crags and peaks I’m with you once again. Life, voyage round your little world.

(*U* 13: 1089-1096)

History repeats itself “with a difference”: we are allowed to see Bloom’s fragmentary recreation of events and how he helped in the composition of his image anticipating the effect he would like to produce. “Ought to attend my appearance my age. Didn’t let her see me in profile” (*U* 13: 836). Making a self-portrait, he imagines himself the hero of the story amazingly identical to the one idealized by Gerty, “like the nobleman with a foreign name”, “The Mystery Man on the beach, prize titbit story by Leopold Bloom” (*U* 13: 1060):

Here’s the nobleman passed before. Blown in from the bay. Just went as far as turn back. Always at home at dinnertime. Looks mangled out: had a good tuck in. Enjoying nature now. Grace after meals. After supper walk a mile. Sure he has a small bank balance somewhere, government sit. Walk after him now make him awkward like those newsboys me today. Still you learn something. So long as women don’t mock what matter? That’s the way to find out. Ask yourself who he is now. See ourselves as others see us.

(*U* 13: 1053-1059)

For Gerty, he was her “dreamhusband”. For Bloom, she was “a dream of wellfilled hose” (*U* 13: 793). Considering women and the art of seducing, he compares to pictorial language the effects of light, colour and perspective “to catch the eye”. The result seems a curious version of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*:

Must have stage setting, the rouge, costume, position, music. Name too. *Amours* of actresses. Nell Gwynn, Mrs Bracegirdle, Maud Branscombe. Curtain up. Moonlight

silver effulgence. Maiden discovered with pensive bosom. Little sweetheart come and kiss me.

(U 13: 855-859)

Art as imitation or mirror is transformed into a distorted and composite image of the model or reality being represented. “I want (...) to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book”, said Joyce to his friend Budgen (Budgen 1972: 69).

Characters and spaces made up of a mosaic of details and facets oblige the reader to shift from closeness to distance and to establish relations and meanings between the various elements in order to achieve a global vision, similar to that required of the spectator before a cubist canvas. The intense visual impact turns the reader into a spectator, underlining the return to the concept of art as spectacle and epiphany.

Words? Was it their colours?

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