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### Parallax in *Ulysses*

The Lestrygonians episode of *Ulysses*, involved though it is with the senses of smell, taste, and time, has also as one of its underlying themes questions related to the sense of sight. Strolling along the Dublin streets at the lunch hour, Leopold Bloom observes his fellow Dubliners and mulls over what he observes until, near the end of the episode, he comes to question seeing itself. Joyce begins the portrayal of Bloom's fascination with vision and with what and how one sees subtly: with the drop of a word. Staving off thoughts of Molly and Boylan, Bloom raises "his troubled eyes," notices that the "Timeball on the ballast office is down," recalls the "Fascinating little book," *The Story of the Heavens*, by Sir Robert Ball,<sup>1</sup> and remarks to himself, "Parallax. I never exactly understood" (*U*, 154).<sup>2</sup> He ponders the word's etymology for an instant: "Par it's Greek: parallel, parallax." But Bloom gives up, and just as he had resolved to "Think no more" about Molly's infidelity, so he tries to dismiss parallax from his mind. He recalls Molly's view of such complexities: "She's right after all. Only big words for ordinary things on account of the sound" (*U*, 154).

But parallax is not forgotten; it makes a comeback moments later. As Bloom stands before the shop of Yeates and Sons, "pricing the field glasses," he remembers that he must get his own old glasses "set right" (*U*, 166). He notices the "little watch up there on the roof of the bank to test those glasses by", and tries to see it, but fails:

His lids came down on the lower rims of his irises. Can't see it. If you imagine it's there you can almost see it. Can't see it. (*U*, 166)

This experiment is soon followed by another. Like Berkeley's man who has just learnt to see,<sup>3</sup> Bloom tries to block out the sun:

He faced about, and, standing between the awnings, held out his right hand at arm's length toward the sun. Wanted to try that often. Yes: completely. The tip of his little finger blotted out the sun's disk. Must

be the focus where the rays cross. If I had black glasses. Interesting. . . . (U, 166)

He then immediately wanders in thought from the promise of total eclipse that autumn to realizing that the timeball on the ballast office measures Greenwich, not Dunsink, time (as he had thought). These musings lead him back to the word whose meaning he had begun searching for earlier. He imagines himself visiting the Dunsink observatory and clumsily blurting out the question uppermost on his mind: "what's parallax." And the feared response? "Show this gentleman the door" (U, 167). The threat of embarrassment leaves him resigned and again he withdraws: "Never know anything about it." Anyway, he decides, it's a "Waste of time": "Gasballs spinning about, crossing each other, passing. Same old dingdong always" (U, 167).

But Bloom's thoughts about parallax are not confined to the lunch hour. Late that night, the word returns to haunt him, this time in the guise of a living form, as is undoubtedly appropriate in a maternity hospital and an episode portraying birth. Now, too, it is accompanied by images of time passing, personal isolation, and ultimately despair. Bloom imagines himself as a child, adult, and father, but the narrator admonishes him:

No, Leopold! Name and memory solace thee not. That youthful illusion of thy strength was taken from thee and in vain. No son of thy loins is by thee. There is none now to be for Leopold what Leopold was for Rudolph. (U, 413-414)

Suddenly, however, the perspective alters: we are wrenched out of Bloom's head and his sorrow at the death of his son into the "infinite of space," into regions "of cycles of cycles of generations that have lived." The narrator portrays a phantasmagoria where voices "blend and fuse in clouded silence" but where "all is gone":

Agendath is a waste land, a home of screech owls and the sandblin upupa. Netaim, the golden, is no more. And on the highway of th clouds they come, muttering thunder of rebellion, the ghosts of beast Huuh! Hark! Huuh! Parallax stalks behind and goads them, the lacinating lightnings of whose brow are scorpions. (U, 414)

The unconscious exacts revenge for Bloom's hopes; his fantasies are beset by a host of "Ominous, revengeful creatures" who do not much block out the sun (son?) as do it (him?) in altogether:

the trumpeted with the tusked, the lionmaned and giantantlered, snouter and crawler, rodent, ruminant and pachyderm, all their moving moaning multitude, murderers of the sun. (*U*, 414)

It is Bloom's own father Rudolph, in the hallucinatory Circe episode, who next mentions parallax. Railing against the sensual world in the form of woman's "meretricious finery" which is "designed only to deceive the eye," Rudolph exhorts his son to "Never put on you tomorrow what you can wear today. Parallax!" (*U*, 512). And it is parallax, according to the intergalactic narrative voice of the Ithaca episode, that informs Bloom's meditations as he and Stephen, together in the garden, share a vision of the sky where "so-called fixed stars" are "in reality evermoving":

Meditations . . . of the parallax or parallactic drift of so-called fixed stars, in reality evermoving from immeasurably remote eons to infinitely remote futures in comparison with which the years, threescore and ten, of allotted human life formed a parenthesis of infinitesimal brevity. (*U*, 698)

As these excerpts indicate, parallax, from its first mention in the Lestrygonians section onward, is associated with visual perception, the experience of time, sexuality, familial relationships, our vision of the heavens, and, finally, with *perspective* in its broadest sense. Critics have regarded it as a possible "Word Ineffable," for which Bloom eternally searches;<sup>4</sup> as a potentially profound "symbol of Relativity";<sup>5</sup> as a technique through which Joyce juxtaposes generations,<sup>6</sup> or questions the nature of identity itself<sup>7</sup>, but its overall function and thematic significance in *Ulysses* have yet to be fully explored. Parallax, I believe, shapes and gives meaning both to specific events within the novel as well as to entire chapters; the concept of parallax, I shall argue, is central to our comprehension of *Ulysses* as a whole and to our understanding of the relationship of the reader to the book.

"What's parallax"? Parallax, to begin with, is the "apparent displacement, or difference in the apparent position, of an object, caused by an actual change (or difference) of position in the point of observation" (*OED*). Importantly, parallax is involved with stereoscopic vision: the two-and-a-half inch separation between the eyes means that the right eye and the left, different points of observation, perceive different aspects of the "same" reality. These two views are fused by the brain so that rather than seeing double, we see one image in stereoscopic depth.<sup>8</sup> Sir Robert Ball's "fascinating little

book," to which Bloom refers, uses this disparity between what each eye sees to explain astronomical parallax. It is the definition which follows, from *The Story of the Heavens*, that Bloom probably "never exactly understood":

We must first explain clearly the conception which is known to astronomers by the name of *parallax*; for it is by parallax that the distance of the sun, or, indeed, the distance of any other celestial body, must be determined. Let us take a simple illustration. Stand near a window from whence you can look at buildings, or the trees, the clouds, or any distant objects. Place on the glass a thin strip of paper vertically in the middle of one of the panes. Close the right eye, and note with the left eye the position of the strip of paper relatively to the objects in the background. Then, while still remaining in the same position, close the left eye and again observe the position of the paper with the right eye. You will find that the position of the paper on the background has changed. As I sit in my study and look out of the window, I see a strip of paper, with the right eye, in front of a certain bough on a tree a couple of hundred yards away; with my left eye the paper is no longer in front of that bough, it has moved to a position near the edge of the tree. This apparent displacement of the strip of paper, relatively to the distant background, is what is called parallax.

Move closer to the window, and repeat the observation, and you will find that the apparent displacement of the strip increases. Move away from the window, and the displacement decreases. . . . It is this principle, applied on a gigantic scale, which enables us to measure the distances of the heavenly bodies. . . .<sup>9</sup>

What Sir Robert Ball does with his strip of paper, James Joyce does with his characters: he regards them now from one point of view, now from another; he moves so close to them that his own voice, as narrator, often merges with theirs,<sup>10</sup> or so far from them that they become, as in the Ithaca episode, merely a "duumvirate" with "quasisimultaneous volitional quasisensations" (*U*, 689). And as Sir Robert Ball, describing "The Distances of the Stars," depicts the changes in viewpoints toward the stars at different seasons of the year and during different years, as well as from different observatories, so Joyce works with constantly shifting perspectives of time, as well as of space, to produce continually altering pictures of Bloom and Stephen. The paths that Joyce lays out for Bloom and Stephen that day in Dublin are not parallel to one another, for then they would never meet. They are parallaxic: his characters, unbeknownst to themselves, meet the same issues which themselves assume different appearances as they are differently perceived and experienced in the context of the two men's separate lives.

What is notable, too, about the concept of parallax is its seeming mutuality. It refers to a process whereby the object of perception is seen to alter as the perspective of the perceiver alters; reality as we experience it is viewed as a reciprocity between the perceiver and the perceived. In this sense, as well, parallax is a powerful metaphor for Joyce's technique in *Ulysses*, for as Goldberg repeatedly points out in discussing the "Structures and Values" of the book, no simple division between "subjective" and "objective" reality is possible there, and terms like "objective narrative" and "subjective monologue" belie its texture. This is especially true of the monologues, according to Goldberg:

Once we ask why Joyce presents his characters' streams of consciousness, on what plane of activity their presented gestures cohere, and what symbolic relationships are established between them and other aspects of the book—particularly with the elaborately suggested temporal perspectives past and future—it becomes impossible to take *Ulysses* simply as the representation of social, cultural, psychological or metaphysical reality as we know it already. . . . To regard (the characters') monologues as simply the representation of a passive receptivity to the 'objective' world or of 'subjective' reactions to it, is to see only their function as representatives of predetermined reality and to miss their crucial activity altogether. For the monologues also . . . express their acts of understanding—including their focal acts of self-understanding—in which the enacting personality expresses its own life while the reality it confronts is at the same time also revealed and defined. . . . What meanings are enacted by *Ulysses* are rooted in the life enacted in it, the activity by which humanity apprehends its world and so informs it with significance.<sup>11</sup>

Expressing their individual visions in terms of realities which are thereby revealed and defined, the characters are thus engaged in a parallax situation; both the perceiver and the object perceived become known by and in the act of perception. And just as parallax defines the manner in which Joyce relates his characters to one another and to the perceived world, so it also describes the reader's experience of the book. Working always, as he said, "through suggestion rather than direct statement,"<sup>12</sup> and constantly altering the reader's point of observation by shifting the narrative voice, Joyce makes his reader part of the very process his fiction records. Like the characters, we as readers are implicitly regarded not as mere recipients of experience, passively registering the objects of experience; rather, we are asked by Joyce's suggestiveness to play an active role in shaping the object. We do so in two senses: by integrating in an

encompassing vision all of the points of view contained in the novel, including those of the characters and those of the various narrators, and, secondly and simultaneously, by assimilating that encompassing vision to our own. But this assimilation again invokes a reciprocal process, for just as the reader shapes the object, so s/he in turn is shaped by it. Our sense of the characters, and our experience of the shape and meaning of *Ulysses*, are constantly altering as we move through the book. Our conception of the possibilities of literary discourse, representations of reality, and reality itself alters through our reading and re-reading of the book. As the stars 'crossing each other, passing' is a metaphor for the relationship of the characters to one another, so the "fixed stars" which, as Bloom intuits, are "In reality ever-moving," are a metaphor for our consciousness of total meaning. Sir Robert Ball noted that the strip of paper seems to change "relative to the background" in *Ulysses*, not only the "strip of paper," but also the "background" continually shifts.

It is eminently Joycean to present parallaxically the act and meaning of seeing itself. The characters, as Tindall points out, change "with time of day and circumstance," but so does Joyce's presentation of the nature and limitations of visual perception. Joyce initiates the subject as Stephen strolls along the Strand in the morning light; that afternoon, we see Bloom contemplating the meaning of parallax at the same time as he is testing his own sight. We return to the Strand at twilight, this time forced by the author's manipulation of perspective to confront the partiality of our own vision. Only as night falls and Stephen and Bloom come to the same place at the same time is parallax expanded from the realm of human relationships to become a feature of the "fixed stars".

The "Ineluctable modality of the visible," Stephen announces to himself in the famous opening of the Proteus episode, "at least that if no more" (*U*, 37). In accord with his protean nature in this chapter, Stephen moves from one understanding of the nature of visible reality and vision to another.<sup>13</sup> He regards the act of seeing first as "Thought through my eyes" (and which word, of this phrase, are we to emphasize? "Thought"? "my"? "eyes"? or even "through"? Is Stephen hinting, like Blake to whom he immediately alludes, that "We are led to Believe a Lie/ When we see not Thro' the Eye"?<sup>14</sup>). To see through the eyes rather than with them is to reject the appearance of phenomena; thus Stephen, literary man that he is, immediately transforms the reality he perceives into "Signatures of all things I am here to read." But Stephen closes his eyes, as if indicating he is still

unready to read those signatures, or as if only the vision of the inner eye matters: "Shut your eyes and see." Closing off one sense, however, awakens another; Stephen reconceives himself in the context of the audible:

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 . . . . A very short space of time through very short times of space . . . the ineluctable modality of the audible. (*U*, 37)

After dramatizing Stephen's relation to the faculty of sight—"Eyes through his thought"—Joyce later offers us Bloom's version of vision. Moments after thinking about parallax, admitting he must get his own glasses "set right" and seeing that he "Can't see. Can't see" the "watch up there on the roof of the bank to test those glasses by," Bloom meets a blind boy trying to cross the street. Characteristically, Bloom's initial impulse is to help the youth. First reluctant, and then apparently appreciative, the blind young man is guided across the street, his whereabouts described for him. Bloom reacts to the boy's blindness with pity and wonder: how did he know the van was there? He becomes speculative: "See things in their foreheads perhaps" (*U*, 181). He briefly ponders a blind man's experience of the city: "Queer idea of Dublin he must have." He becomes practical: "Look at all the things they can learn to do." The practical part of Bloom is also Bloom the breadwinner, and it is as such that he relates to Molly. As so frequently throughout the book, he thinks in terms of what he can give her. Since "People ought to help," he will give his wife a workbasket woven by the blind. But Molly doesn't like to sew and might "take an objection": She would find the gift useless, possibly offensive, associating it with the "Dark men" rather than with a humanitarian gesture of Bloom's.

Thoughts of Molly awaken the sensual in Bloom. He briefly meditates the nature and quality of a blind man's sensory experience ("Sense of smell must be stronger too") and of his sexuality: "As with a woman for instance." But then, as if thoughts of Molly and his own now aroused sensuality inevitably remind him, consciously or not, of his sexual inadequacy, he begins to fantasize: "That girl passing the Stewart institution" (*U*, 182). Poldy becomes Henry Flower; he is reminded of his relationship with Martha, the very basis of which is il-

lusion, sexual fantasy, and, of course, the avoidance of a face-to-face encounter: "Post office." These fantasies take him back, inexorably perhaps, to his own body. With no one about, he furtively slides his hands between his waistcoat and trousers to feel "a slack fold of his belly." "But I know it's whiteyellow," says Bloom to himself. "Want to try in the dark to see."

What, in sum, has been the shape of Bloom's experience? He has moved from an experience with an "other" back upon himself, to his own inadequacies, his own fantasies, and ultimately to his own body, from which, the passage as a whole seems to imply, there is no escape. Or is there? As the reader is made aware, the movements of Bloom's consciousness mirror his reactions to the blind boy himself. Having himself tried "in the dark to see" (remember Stephen's "Shut your eyes and see"), Bloom thinks of how the *boy* is caged in a world of his own: "What dreams would he have, not seeing? Life a dream for him. Where is the justice being born that way?" (*U*, 182). It is not surprising that the boy reappears to him in the Circe section as "My more than brother" (*U*, 485); more than a blood connection through their bodies is the psychic link between them.

Pondering the boy's sense of the city, experience of sexuality, and unseeing awareness that "the van was there" ("and ever shall be world without end"), Bloom intuits the relativity of the visible to the viewer and the relativity of reality both to the mode of perception and to the particular perceiver, aspects of that parallax he "never exactly understood." In what is an almost Blakean way, he comes to see, as Stephen did earlier, how one's mode of perception differs from another's and how for each of us there are different modes of perception each of which reveals its own portrait of reality. Or as Blake succinctly says:

The Sun's Light when he unfolds it  
Depends on the Organ that beholds it.

Every Eye sees differently. As the  
Eye, Such the Object.

The Eye altering alters all.<sup>15</sup>

Through an eye that cannot see, Bloom gains an expanded perspective, and the reader, recognizing his kinship with Stephen, an even wider one. For the reader can see what Bloom cannot: Bloom is not only perceiving, but being perceived. We see Bloom in relation to



Stephen and Bloom in relation to the blind boy. Knowing Bloom's failures of vision—his literal short-sightedness evident earlier in the chapter, his dependence upon *not seeing* in his sexual relationships (Martha, Molly in bed with Boylan)—we recognize that he and the boy are, as it were, aspects of one another, the same "object", blind human beings, viewed from different angles of vision. If the blind boy looking "like a young fellow going to be a priest" and tapping his way around Dublin with a cane just as Stephen makes his way with an ashplant, recalls that younger hero,<sup>16</sup> he is also, indeed, *Bloom's* "more than brother".

What Bloom's encounter with the blind stripling hints at, the Nausicaa section drives home. It has often been noted that Nausicaa is dominated by eyes,<sup>17</sup> but the full implications of that dominance have not been sufficiently explored. Crucially, Joyce structures this episode to create no illusion of an "objective" reality; rather, we first see Bloom and Gerty from Gerty's point of view, and then we see her (and Bloom) from his own. Their experiences of the encounter are not told con-jointly, but consecutively, the narrator assuming the voice he thinks appropriate to each character's "world-view", refusing to be omniscient and refusing to let the reader be. In other words, Gerty MacDowell and Leopold Bloom are presented not only as perceivers but also as percepts whose nature alters as the point of observation alters, as that is to say, the narrator shifts from Gerty's world to that of Bloom and shifts the reader's stance as well.

For we, as readers, are also caught up in the parallaxic process, made to contemplate the modality of the visible on the same stage we were that morning—Sandymount Strand—but now in different light and with different companions. Indeed, looked at another way, it is the Strand itself being viewed parallaxically; we saw it, earlier, through Stephen's eyes in morning light, and now it is being presented to us through the angles of vision defined by Bloom, Gerty, the two narrators—one with the obtrusive voice of a lady's magazine, the other with scarcely any voice at all—and the twilight. At once enriching and expanding our sense of the "modality of the visible," Joyce is also symbolically preparing us for the meeting of Stephen and Bloom that night.

More baldly than anywhere else in the novel, Joyce positions us, in the Nausicaa section, to face the relative nature of our own perceptions. What we perceive, or are permitted to perceive, radically alters as our point of observation is altered: we are nottold that the object of Gerty's fantasy—the "manly man . . . sterling man . . . man of inflex-

ible honour to his fingertips"—is Bloom (he remains as hazy to us as he is to her, and only later do we learn those fingertips were masturbating) until her fantasy reaches its fireworks-accompanied climax and, most tellingly, we learn that Gerty is lame (despite earlier hints we are in no position to recognize as such on first reading) only when Bloom himself does. As Gerty draws herself up to her full height in response to Cissy's call, she is described as walking

with a certain quiet dignity characteristic of her but with care and very slowly because Gerty MacDowell was . . .

Tight boots? No. She's lame. O!

Mr. Bloom watched her as she limped away. Poor girl! That's why she's left on the shelf and the others did a sprint. . . . Glad I didn't know it when she was on show. (*U*, 367-68)

Rudolph is right on the mark: woman's "meretricious finery" is designed only to "deceive the eye. Parallax!". "Glad I didn't know it when she was on show," Bloom comments to himself, for, like the blind boy, what dreams Bloom had, "not seeing"! But just as Gerty's lameness is pivotal, so to speak, in terms of the structure of the episode—Joyce abruptly switches to Bloom's voice at this moment—so her lameness is pivotal to the thematic content of the episode. Gerty is physically crippled. Bloom is emotionally and sexually crippled. *His* "lovely seaside girl", whose passion is born of her impending menstruation, is associated throughout with the Virgin Mary. But no matter: the only sexual act of which Bloom is capable is masturbation, the only contact that available to a voyeur. Even his watch, which has stopped at the very moment of Molly's infidelity—Joyce's ironic version of the timelessness of *Phaiaikia*—is broken. But if Gerty is physically lame and Bloom emotionally and sexually so, all of us—Gerty imagining her "distinguished-looking gentleman," Bloom, and we as readers—are visually crippled. As Gerty rises, Bloom's "O!" of surprise might be ours as well. No wonder that the description of her departure echoes that of the blind boy's earlier ("Mr. Bloom walked behind the eyeless feet, a flatcut suit of herringbone tweed. Poor young fellow. . . ."), for the incident here, a play on the complications of visual perception and a revelation of the varieties of blindness and lameness, is a parallaxic version of Bloom's encounter with the boy. That Joyce draws our attention to what we have not been seeing at the same time as he reveals Gerty's lameness to Bloom—a narrative

equivalent to a verbal icon—makes us full participants in this human comedy. Discovering her lameness, we are made to discover, *mutandis mutandum*, our own. “Think you’re escaping,” as Bloom comments later, “and run into yourself”. (*U*, 377).

Parallax makes its final appearance in the Ithaca episode, as Bloom meditates that night “the parallax or parallactic drift of so-called fixed stars, in reality evermoving. . . .” Here, as earlier, Joyce does not merely mention the term, he uses it both technically and symbolically to define the reader’s relation to the characters and his or her sense of the meaning of the book as a whole. On a literal level, Bloom and Stephen gaze at the heavens, thereby embodying two points of observation from which, hypothetically at least, the distance of the stars can be measured. As perceivers, never have Stephen and Bloom been closer to one another, nor the angle of parallax so small. Despite the darkness, or perhaps because of it, the two men finally *see* one another and see themselves in each other. “Each contemplating the other in both mirrors of the reciprocal flesh of theirhisnothis fellowfaces” (*U*, 702), it is as if they met not in words, but with eyes, intuiting themselves and each other as different aspects of a single being. Their role as percepts is another matter, however.

If, as we make our way through *Ulysses*, we come closer and closer to knowing the two heroes, “seeing” them with progressively increasing clarity and depth, we are also, in this penultimate chapter, taken as far from them as the narrator can manage to take us. Joyce called his technique here a “mathematical catechism,”<sup>18</sup> designed to bring about a “mathematico-astronomico-physico-mechanico-geometrico-chemico sublimation of Bloom and Stephen.”<sup>19</sup> A catechism, by its nature, implies two points of view, that of the questioner and that of the answerer (however pre-determined, by the question, the answer may be). In the Ithaca episode, however, it is clear that neither partner to the catechism represents the reader, for there is an obvious disparity between, on the one hand, the kinds of questions we would ask at this moment and the manner in which we would either answer them or wish them to be answered, and, on the other, the questions the narrator poses and the answers he provides. Indeed, because we have come so far with Bloom and Stephen and are, in this sense, so close to them, perhaps never before have we and the narrator been quite so far apart. But our point of view ultimately encompasses that of the narrator, too, so that we are positioned to be at once most intimate with Bloom and Stephen and most remote from them. “You will find,” says Sir Robert Ball, “that the apparent displacement of

14. "Auguries of Innocence," in *Blake: Complete Writings with variant readings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 433.
15. From "For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise," Keynes, p. 760; annotations to Reynolds, Keynes, p. 456; "The Mental Traveller," Keynes, p. 426.
16. Helen Whaley, in "The Role of the Blind Piano Tuner in Joyce's *Ulysses*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 16 (1970), pp. 531-35, explores the echoes among Bloom, Stephen, and the blind boy; her points support my argument here. See also Tindall, *Reader's Guide*, p. 170, who points out the boy's connection with Stephen, though not with Bloom. Erwin Steinberg, in "Lestrygonians' A Pale 'Proteus'?", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 15 (1969), pp. 73-86, does likewise (p. 82), although he shows that, in the Lestrygonians episode, Bloom "is concerned with many of the same matters that Stephen is" in the Proteus section.
17. See Gilbert, p. 278; Tindall, p. 194, and especially Fritz Senn, "Nausicaa," in Hart and Hayman, p. 292, for an important comment on the relationship between seeing and the Biblical notion of "knowing" in the Nausicaa section.
18. Quoted by A. Walton Litz, "Ithaca", *Hayman and Hart*, p. 392.
19. Quoted by Litz, p. 394.
20. Quoted by Litz, p. 393. Although I have taken a somewhat different point of view toward the use of parallax in this episode, I am in substantial agreement with Litz, who points out, without further comment, that the "macrocosmic-microcosmic point of view" taken in this episode is an achievement of "parallax."