Images of the Lacanian Gaze in *Ulysses*

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Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom are both preoccupied in *Ulysses* with defining for themselves the operations of their own perceptions, and the workings of these perceptions for the two men parallel each other. Moreover, these perceptual patterns also parallel one of the best-known theories of Jacques Lacan, the theory of the split between the eye and the gaze, which appears in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis.* Lacan’s concept of the gaze can help us to see how perception is arranged for Joyce’s two protagonists, how they see the world and each other, and how they see the world through each other.

The key principle of Lacan’s idea of the gaze is that one can only see something by imagining that it is looking back at one: “this is the essential point—the dependence of the visible on that which places us under the eye of the seer.” One’s perception, even of landscapes and still lifes, must be motivated by being drawn toward its objects by desire, and desire is always based on an imagined response. This imagined response on the visual level is called the gaze and comes from a locus which is built into the structure of perception.

As perception depends on being perceived by a gaze in Lacan’s system, so does existence. Being is being seen, and seen more completely than one can oneself see: “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.” The point from which I see is the eye and the surrounding watchfulness is the gaze that constitutes me as the subject of a larger human consciousness. This view is an extension of Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, which holds that an individual’s personality is formed by the way others see him, that a child’s image of himself is a reflection of the views of others.

The structure of visual perception for Lacan, however, is more complex than this. What the eye sees is a field in which the eye itself
is an invisible center, and this field is seen by focusing on a particular point. At the same time, the subject maps himself in the picture, so that I project myself as a formal composition onto the field before me in the act of perception. At the center of the visual field or picture is a blind spot or hole, a reflection of my pupil, and behind this blind spot is situated the gaze. I can't see what is regarding me in all of my perceptions any more than I can see a person watching me by looking in his or her eyes. Lacan says, "You never look at me from the place from which I see you." The gap in the center corresponds to what Lacan calls the objet petit a, with the lower case a standing for autre. This little point of otherness is the focal point of desire.

For Lacan, the point that is the object of desire always stands for an absent phallus. Moreover, in Lacan's system, the phallus itself is absent by nature, a symbolic organ defined by negation because we first become aware of it through the sense of castration. The hole or lack which is the object of desire stands for the flaw through which the other shows its need for one. Desire, for Lacan, is always the desire of the Other, which is to say that it always comes from a source one can't locate; and the center of any pictorial composition is always the desire of the Other to show itself behind which is the power of the Other to create one's being. This power is represented by the phallus, an organ which is invisible in its fully realized state, or as Joyce describes it, put "out of sight." The implication of Joe Hynes's question, "I wonder did he ever put it out of sight" (U 12.1655), is that if he hasn’t put it out of sight, he doesn’t have it.

What can actually be seen is neither the gaze nor the subject, neither the Other nor the self, but the image or screen that mediates between them as they create each other. Lacan diagrams the eye and the gaze as overlapping cones pointing in opposite directions, an image like Yeats's gyres. The screen appears at the point where the intersecting cones of perspective—the one widening out from the eye and the other narrowing down to the gaze at the other end—have equal diameters. This screen corresponds to what Stephen calls the diaphane or veil of appearance. It manifests what is behind it at the same time that it conceals it.

Stephen has been studying perception and concerned with what is behind it ever since his theories of epiphany in Stephen Hero. On the first page of "Proteus" he conceives of the diaphane or field of vision as having an aperture, as something to be passed through:
"Diaphane, adiaphane. If you can put your five fingers through it it is a gate, if not a door" (U 3.7-9). Later, under the influence of Berkeley, the diaphane becomes a "veil of space with coloured emblems," and here again Stephen thinks of going "beyond the veil" (U 3.417, 425).

On the other side of this field of light lies the darkness which he calls "adiaphane," and when Stephen closes his eyes to escape the veil of appearances, he hopes and fears to pass beyond the diaphane into absolute darkness: "If I open and am for ever in the black adiaphane" (U 3.26). The darkness on the other side of light corresponds to outer space and the void on which the world is founded, but also to the darkness within that Stephen finds when he closes his eyes.

Stephen longs for the adiaphane because he feels trapped in his own mode of perception: the "ineluctable modality of the visible" is "thought through" his eyes (U 3.1). He derives from Berkeley the idea that the visual is a flat field and that distance is produced by forces in the mind: "Flat I see, then think distance..." (3.418). According to Lacan, distance results from a structure projected by desire.

Bloom also thinks of closing his eyes as an experiment in the course of his meditation on what perception would be like for the blind: "They say you can't taste with your eyes shut. Want to try in the dark to see" (U 1123, 1142). One of his main experiments with perception occurs when he tries to see a clock on top of a bank in "Lestrygonians":

Can't see it. If you imagine it's there you can almost see it. Can't see it.

The tip of his little finger blotted out the sun's disk. Must be the focus where the rays cross. (U 8.562-67)

Here he moves toward the conclusion that the perception of depth is subjective, shaped by the mind's patterns, and that vision is focused on a screen.

Stephen makes an extensive effort to understand where the thought of distance comes from. He recognizes that it involves the stereoscopic operation of two points of view. And as he has this recognition, he divides himself into two viewpoints, addressing himself in the second person and in the first person plural so as to recognize another within: "You find my words dark. Darkness is in our souls
do you not think?’” (U 3.420). This darkness within is equated with the soul *(anima)* as a woman: “Our souls, shamewounded by our sins, cling to us yet more, a woman to her lover clinging…” (U 3.421–23). By recognizing the other within through the reality of a woman, Stephen could see the depth of things, the reality of the world and its beauty. But he will not be ready to do so until after he makes contact with Bloom.

Bloom’s thoughts are arranged to complement Stephen’s and his equivalent of the veil Stephen wants to penetrate appears when he daydreams about meeting a girl with a veil in church (U 5.376). A few pages after this, he visualizes Molly, her darkness, her mystery, and her gaze partially covered by a linen veil: “Brings out the darkness of her eyes. Looking at me, the sheet up to her eyes, Spanish, smelling herself.” (5.494–95.) Here he puts himself into her mind as she looks at him. When he projects Molly in her most authoritative form in “Circe,” emphasis is placed on her being heavily veiled with a “yashmak” (U 15.300), and Bloom is “spellbound.” The most immediately effective form of the veil is the semitransparent hose Bloom is watching on Gerty MacDowell when he has the strongest physical satisfaction of his day in “Nausicaa”: “O, those transparent!” (U 13.1262).

On one level the veil stands for the surface of material reality, which transfixes Bloom so that he can scarcely imagine penetrating it. But Stephen is also preoccupied by such a veil, and it is debatable whether his attempts to penetrate it are any more successful. The veil, then, is a general, constitutive feature of human perception. It corresponds to the screen in Lacan that is all we can see of the interaction between what is within and what is beyond that screen. Lacan says that in order to constitute the illusion of visual reality, a screen is needed: “if one wishes to deceive a man, what one presents to him is the painting of a veil, that is to say, something that incites him to ask what is behind it.”

In traditional psychosexual terms, veils, like stockings, are fetishes, which is to say that they stand for the phallus. According to Lacan’s theory, the object of focus conceals a phallic power, and the image of Molly that draws Bloom continually conceals a dark power that is manifested by Blazes Boylan. Molly certainly would not attract Bloom as she does if she did not have the will to seek satisfaction beyond what he can provide. Stephen’s equivalent to Molly is his mother, and his preoccupation with her involves the dark powers of
the father and God, to both of whom she has given herself. These powers emerge in "Circe," where she appears in a torn bridal veil and says, "Beware! God's hand!" (U 15.4219).

In the first episode Stephen strains to see the beauty of the world, but his vision is dimmed by the thought of his mother's violation (U 1.225). When he tries to see the "great sweet mother" Mulligan speaks of, he soon perceives his mother's wound. Behind that gap at the center of his perception is his mother's lost power, which appears in Lacanian terms as an occulted phallus through the memory of his mother that occurs to him:

She heard old Royce sing in the pantomime of Turko the Terrible and laughed with others when he sang:

\[
I \text{ am the boy}
\]
\[
That \text{ can enjoy}
\]
\[
\text{Invisibility.}
\]

(U 1.258–62)

This bright, attractive moment of her life has now passed beyond the veil: "Folded away in the memory of nature with her toys" (U 1.265).

As Stephen strives to comprehend the source of depth in "Proteus" and thinks of the darkness behind light (1.409), he apparently sees a pair of gypsies watching him and this leads to a series of feelings of being watched. He thinks, "If I were suddenly naked here as I sit?" (U 3.390), and wonders, "Who watches me here?" (3.414). He also refers to himself in different persons as an object of perception: "Me sits there with his augur's rod of ash... unbeheld" (3.410–11). His efforts to perceive the visual field, in accordance with Lacan's recognition, are accompanied by a sense of being perceived, and this pattern is acted out on a more physical level by Bloom.

In "Calypso," at the butcher shop, when Bloom's senses are first stirred to excitement, the text describes "his soft subject gaze" (U 4.163). Bloom's impotence is connected to a sense of constantly being watched by the authorities who are finally manifested in "Circe." Two of the main representatives of authority there are referred to as "the watch" (U 15.276). Bloom's sex life presents a parody of the theory of the gaze because as a voyeur he likes to have the women he watches watching him. Gerty knows what he is up to in "Nausicaa," and even when he imagines himself watching through a keyhole in "Circe," Blazes and Molly know that he is
there. In fact, he needs to know that Molly knows that he knows about Blazes. Bloom’s need to be seen watching something he shouldn’t see is a need for shame, and shame may be a strong feature of all desire. It corresponds to what Lacan calls the invidious aspect of the gaze.9

The feeling of being watched that Stephen has in “Proteus” leads through meditation on the visual field as a veil to the image of the soul as a woman. Thoughts of woman evoke a longing for contact with universal humanity, the entire outside environment which the gaze that looks at one from all sides represents. The first objects through which this contact is to be made are his mother’s eyes: “Touch me. Soft eyes. Soft soft soft hand. I am lonely here. O touch me soon, now. What is that word known to all men?” (U 3.434–36). Later, when Stephen asks his mother this question again, her eyes are gaping holes and she carries behind her the power of God. Stephen tries to overcome this hidden malignance, which has really been in his field all day, by shattering the perceptual field to cause the “ruin of all space” (U 15.4245).

The “word known to all men,” which Stephen at one point thinks may be “love” (U 9.429), seems to designate a common knowledge that would bind Stephen to humanity. The only figure in the book who possesses love and could give Stephen such knowledge is Bloom. The coincidences between their thoughts that I have cited here—such as the experiments with the visual field and such images as closing the eyes, the veil, and perception returned—are part of a long series of signs that they are meant to meet. Each is designed to serve as the aim of his opposite, the ultimate limit of the other man’s perception. The constant blind spot in the center of Stephen’s vision may be associated with Bloom’s compassion, while the blind spot in Bloom’s vision is Stephen’s independence. Bloom represents the Other for Stephen and Stephen represents the Other for Bloom, and so each tends to constitute the gaze for the other.

It may seem foolhardy to suggest that all of their perceptions lead to each other, but I won’t be departing far from established perspectives if I point out that their main actions of the day prepare them to meet as they do. It is well known that Stephen’s theory of Shakespeare as a cuckold predicts Bloom, and in “Proteus,” as I have indicated, Stephen finds in himself a need for the world. If Stephen hadn’t argued with his friends, if Molly hadn’t committed
adultery, or even if Bloom hadn't masturbated with Gerty, the two men might not have met, and one can go on finding a kind of preparation in virtually any perception either man has. After all, Stephen believes in "Ithaca" that his collapse in "Circe" was caused by a cloud he saw in the morning (U 17.36-42). If he hadn't collapsed, he wouldn't have come home with Bloom, and his reason for collapsing wouldn't exist if he hadn't seen this cloud. Everything they see and do prepares Bloom and Stephen to meet with exactly the kind of uncertainty that allows for the potential of their interaction.

Stephen and Bloom draw each other, each the center organizing the other's perception, to lead themselves to realization. Lacan says that the gaze guides us through what appear to be the accidents of life: "The gaze is presented to us only in the form of a strange contingency, symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience, namely, the lack that constitutes castration anxiety." What draws us on is what we need, and whether it leads to fulfillment or failure—for the contact between Stephen and Bloom remains ambiguous—it leads us to actualize what is in us. As Stephen says in "Scylla and Charybdis," we wander through the world "always meeting ourselves" (U 9.1046).

Of course, no one person should be identified with Lacan's gaze, but Stephen and Bloom, as the prime objects for each other, tend to dominate each other's destiny. As I pointed out earlier, Molly also tends to embody the gaze for Bloom, as May Dedalus does for Stephen. If the men have the potential to complete each other, they are capable of helping each other to relate to the women in their lives. Stephen, for example, stands for and brings out an adventurous element in Bloom that binds Molly to him, while Bloom shifts Stephen from the spirit of his mother toward the earth of Molly.

The optical reciprocity of Stephen and Bloom is presented in images that extend from their meeting to their parting, and begin even before their meeting. Harry Blamires believes that the ship Stephen sees at the end of "Proteus," the Rosevean, prefigures Bloom. Blamires points out that the sense of someone behind him that the ship gives Stephen—"Behind. Perhaps there is someone?" (U 3.502)—is parallel to the feeling he later has when Bloom passes by him at the end of "Scylla and Charybdis": "About to pass
through the doorway, feeling one behind, he stood aside’’ (U 9.1197). Blamires says that the “crosstrees” of the ship foretell the crisis Stephen will encounter when he meets Bloom.11

If we accept this reading as one level of what is going on, and I do, then Bloom is first manifested to Stephen when Stephen feels something inanimate watching him, a vivid representation of the gaze. Moreover, the sense of looking back involved in Lacan’s *le regard* appears here as Stephen is described in heraldic language as “tene regardent” (U 3.503). The English *regard*, while it is still commonly used for affection, is rarely used for visual fixation, which is why *gaze* is the best translation of Lacan’s term. But our *regard* can still denote gazing in extreme and old-fashioned usages such as Stephen’s fixation on the ship and Mulligan’s ironic statement, “‘Any object, intensely regarded, may be a gate of access to the incorruptible eon of the gods’” (U 14.1166–67).

Here is the sentence in which Bloom first sees Stephen in “Hades”: “Mr Bloom at gaze saw a lithe young man, clad in mourning, a wide hat” (U 6.39). The primary meaning of “at gaze” seems to be that Bloom is simply staring, but the word *at* suggests that he is being watched. Such nondirected perception seems for Joyce to put one in touch with mental forces outside consciousness that manifest themselves as something looking back.

In “Oxen of the Sun,” the episode in which Bloom’s mental contact with Stephen is established with hardly any conversation between them, Bloom stares for a long time at a bottle of Bass ale. As he does so, a heavenly bride appears, presumably looking at Bloom: “It is she, Martha, thou lost one, Millicent, the young, the dear, the radiant. How serene does she now arise...” (U 14.1101–2).

In “Eumeus,” Bloom tells how he defeated the citizen by his mildness: “A soft answer turns away wrath... Am I not right?” After asking this question, Bloom is described as turning “‘a long you are wrong gaze on Stephen of timorous dark pride’” (U 16.1085–89). Rather than accusing Stephen, I think “you are wrong” answers “Am I not right?” and characterizes Bloom’s “timorous” self-defeating expression, “a glance also of entreaty” (U 16.1089). I believe that Bloom’s insecurity about his own authority is an important component of his appeal to Stephen. At this point Stephen, with irony, sees Bloom as an embodiment of Christ and the protagonists are described as having “‘their two or four eyes conversing’” (U 16.1091), a phrase that multiplies their visual interaction.
The imagery of the gaze in *Ulysses* reaches its climax with a description of Stephen and Bloom looking at each other on the last full page they spend together in "Ithaca": "Silent, each contemplating the other in both mirrors of the reciprocal flesh of their his-nothis fellowfaces" (*U* 17.1183-84). This occurs immediately after Bloom has "attracted Stephen's gaze" to the "screen" in the window of his house that covers the lamp that denotes Molly. "Each contemplating the other in both mirrors" means that each is seeing his own face in the other's and is seeing the other's in his own. The infinite regress of this is accompanied by the effect of fusion in the world their his-nothis. The effect of this mutual mapping of subjects in vision is to evoke the larger Otherness behind the individuals.

This is one of the chief moments at which the possibility is felt of passing beyond the visual field, as it may be argued (elsewhere) that *Ulysses* does in "Penelope." But to pass beyond the veil is to pass into the realm of dream, a realm in which, according to Lacan, the gaze shows itself.\(^{13}\) This dream vision cannot be apprehended by the organized mind of waking except in distorted, fragmented, indirect form. As personalities, Stephen and Bloom are stuck in the world of separation, of the split between the eye and the gaze.

Though Stephen feels the enclosure of the structure of perception more acutely and consciously, Bloom is enclosed more firmly by it, for he has a concrete object to fix his desire on. He is focused on Molly's *objet petit a* all day, no matter what he looks at, and his story ends with it in the form of the black dot that concludes "Ithaca."

Stephen, at odds with everyone, does not have a concrete attachment. His connection with Bloom is the closest he comes to such an attachment all day, and it remains potential. The structure of the gaze for Stephen is highly internalized, a mental system he consciously controls, analyzes, and seeks to escape. He never can escape as Stephen the attachment to desire that encloses him in a shape that screens reality and leaves him subject to the gaze of others; but he shifts or jolts this structure into new possibilities, new margins of reality, by his centrifugal dynamic of defiance. This endeavor of his is parallel to his author's. Joyce's techniques of narrative and description throughout *Ulysses* work to realize the structure of the gaze not only in the sense of enacting it, but in that of understanding it in order to penetrate it, to carry out the inevitable and hopeless, but fruitful aim of passing beyond it.
NOTES

1. Though the theory of the gaze is not one of the four fundamental concepts, it does make up one of the four quarters of the book, filling a section called "Of the Gaze as Objet Petit a." 67-119. I should point out that there are serious problems involved in translating Lacan's difficult style. For example, while Joyce's use of the word gaze often seems to have Lacanian overtones, it is only the best English translation of Lacan's term le regard.

2. Four Concepts 72. Lacan's voyant has some of the prophetic overtones of its English equivalent, seer. See the French text, Les Quatre Concepts 69.

3. The idea of being seen from all sides suggests God. Lacan says, "The spectacle of the world, in this sense, appears to us as all seeing. This is the phantasy to be found in the Platonic perspective of an absolute being to whom is transferred the quality of being all-seeing" (Four Concepts 75). I believe that in the largest sense Joyce assumes this aspect of the gaze by seeing his characters from all sides, but I will not develop this idea in the present essay.


5. This is well explained in Jacqueline Rose's "Introduction II" to Feminine Sexuality 40-44.

6. Four Concepts 102, 103, 108. Lacan makes a big distinction between the lowercase autre and the capital Autre. The little other is the object on which one focuses. The big Other is harder to define, and seems to stand for the whole idea of otherness, the total structure of language from which any signifier is distinguished. Rose comments, "Lacan calls this the Other—the site of language to which the speaking subject necessarily refers. The Other appears to hold the 'truth' of the subject and the power to make good its loss. But this is the ultimate fantasy" (Feminine Sexuality 32).


8. Four Concepts 112. The passage is about how a painting can seem real (trompe-l'oeil), but coming after discussion of the screen, it seems to apply to all visual reality.

9. Four Concepts 115. Lacan here points out that invidia, "envy" comes from videra, "to look at."

10. Four Concepts 72–73. Lacan's word for "thrust," butée (Quatre Concepts 70) involves a play on "beauty."

11. Bloomsday Book 19. Frank Budgen, Making of Ulysses 56, points out that Joyce insisted on using the word crosstrees though it was nautically inaccurate.

12. Four Concepts 75. Lacan here emphasizes that coherence and self-consciousness are impossible in a dream.

WORKS CITED

