Ulysses and the Visual Arts: 
Irish Painting, Impressionism, and Modernism

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1. Introduction

In September of 1899 James Joyce, who was a student at University College Dublin at that time, wrote an essay on a painting, entitled, “Royal Hibernian Academy ‘Ecce Homo.'” In April of the same year, the exhibition, Modern Paintings had been held in Dublin. S. B. Kennedy describes the exhibition in his Irish Art & Modernism 1880-1950 as follows:

In all eighty-eight works were shown by French, Dutch and English painters of whom the best remembered are Corot, Millet and Daubigny, representing the French landscapists; Courbet and Clausen for Realism; Leighton, Millais, Orchardson and Watts for the Pre-Raphaelite influence; and Degas, Manet, Monet, Wilson Steer and Whistler for Impressionism. . . . This was the first time paintings by the better known Impressionists were shown in Ireland and the public and press delighted in them. (6)

The introduction of the Impressionists’ paintings to Ireland was followed by the first decade of the twentieth century, which was also important for the history of Irish painting. According to Kennedy,

The first decade of the twentieth century, stimulated by the work of Sir Hugh Lane, saw growing interest in what was regarded as a need to establish a distinct Irish school of art concomitant with that of the Literary Revival. But Lane’s efforts, which brought about the Dublin Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, paradoxically emphasized the divergence of opinion between the Modernist viewpoint and that of the more nationalist elements in the community. (2)

In the Dublin of 1904, which Joyce depicts in Ulysses, the painting circles in Ireland must have been confronted with three streams: Impressionism, Irish national painting, and Modernism.

It may indeed be true that Joyce was not particularly interested in painting, as Peter Costello observes:

Joyce was not much interested in art, though he owned a well-marked copy of the catalogue to the National Gallery which he and Stanislaus still visited from time to time. (162)
Moreover, in *Ulysses* we can find very few references to paintings and painters, compared to the numerous references to music. The names of painters mentioned in *Ulysses* are only six, namely, “Gustave Moreau” (U9.50), “Leonardo” (U16.887), “Michelangelo” (U7.757), “Michelangelo Hayes” (U12.189), “Patricio Velasquez” (U12.191-92) and “George Russell,” who appears mainly in the ninth episode as a character. Nevertheless, during the period when Joyce was striving to create his own literary art, Irish painters were also trying to establish the foundation of their national art. It is well-known that at that time Irish writers such as W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, George Moore and George Russell had a deep interest in painting. Therefore, while it may indeed be true that Joyce assumed an attitude of indifference to painting, it is unlikely that Joyce, as an Irish writer of that time, could have created his literary work without taking into account the drastic shift in visual art from the latter half of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. If we read Joyce’s text closely, we should be able to find connections with painting, especially Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, Irish national painting, and Modernism. This paper seeks to clarify the significance of Irish, Impressionist, and Modernism painting in Joyce’s work, especially in the reading of *Ulysses*.

2. “Nausicaa” and Impressionism

As Frank Budgen points out, “*Nausikaa* is the one pictorial episode” (216), the thirteenth episode has many pictorial elements. The word “*Tableau!*” (13.486, 815), which means “picture,” is repeated twice, and we can easily find pictorial descriptive passages in the episode. One example is the visual reverie of Gerty MacDowell:

> She [Gerty] gazed out towards the distant sea. It was like the paintings that man used to do on the pavement with all the coloured chalks and such a pity too leaving them there to be all blotted out, the evening and the clouds coming out and the Bailey light on Howth and to hear the music like that and the perfume of those incense they burned in the church like a kind of waft. (U13.406-11)

Maurice Beebe, in his *The Portrait as Portrait: Joyce and Impressionism,* one of the few studies on the relationship between Joyce’s works and painting, explains some of the characteristics of Impressionism, citing William Fleming:

> According to William Fleming, the early Impressionists liked to paint scenes of water because of “its fluidity, its surface reflections, the perpetual play of changing light”; and with the help of new technical theories about color, they were able “to step up the luminosity of their canvases so as to convey the illusion of sunlight sifted through a prism.” (19)

The seaside, the setting of the episode, would be an ideal location for Impressionists, who “liked to paint scenes of water.” The beam from the lighthouse would likewise be among their favorite subject matter. In this episode Leopold Bloom also thinks of the beam from Bailey lighthouse in Howth:

After this scene, Bloom thinks about separation of light into its spectral components, a reference to the seven prismatic colors in which Impressionists took particular interest:

Red rays are longest. Roygbiv Vance taught us: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. A star I see. Venus? Can’t tell yet. (13.1075-76)

For Joyce, one of the sources of knowledge about Impressionists must have been the writings of George Moore, an Irish author who stayed in Paris at the end of the 19th century (1873–1880). Among Moore’s close friends was Edgar Degas, one of the first Impressionists to achieve recognition.

3. Degas’ Painting in “Nestor”

“Nestor” the second episode of *Ulysses* mainly presents a conversation between Stephen Dedalus and Garret Deasy, headmaster of Dalkey school, which employs Stephen. Their main topics are horses and the problems of the Jews in Europe. During the conversation, Stephen often recollects his stay in Paris from December of 1902 to April of 1903.

Images from the paintings of Degas seem to be associated with their conversation. Degas often painted pictures of horses and the Jews. At that time in France, the controversial Dreyfus Affair was still unfolding. In 1894 Alfred Dreyfus, a French army officer of Jewish descent, had been falsely accused of providing military secrets to the Germans; his trial and imprisonment caused a major political crisis in France. He was eventually rehabilitated in 1906. As Ira Nadel points out, “In France in December 1902 and again from 23 January 1903 to 10 April 1903, Joyce could not avoid the furor still echoing around Dreyfus” (68). Regarding the influence on the painting circles in France, Linda Nochlin comments,

At the time of the Dreyfus Affair, many members of the artistic avant-garde took sides: Monet and Pissarro, with their old friend and supporter Zola, were pro-Dreyfusard, as were the younger radical artists Luce, Signac, and Vallotton and the American Mary Cassatt; Cézanne, Rodin, Renoir, and Degas were anti-Dreyfus. (141)

In the second episode of *Ulysses*, Deasy comments, “England is in the hands of the jews. In all the highest places: her finance, her press. And they are the signs of a nation’s decay. Wherever they gather they eat up the nation’s vital strength” (U2. 346-49). Stephen then recalls a scene where the Jews in Paris swarmed on the steps of the Bourse, the Paris stock exchange:

— They sinned against the light, Mr.Deasy said gravely. And you can see the darkness in their eyes. And that is why they are wanderers on the earth to this day.

On the steps of the Paris stock exchange the goldskinned men quoting prices on their gemmed fingers. Gabble of geese. They swarmed loud, uncouth, about the temple, their heads thickplotting under maladroit silk hats. Not theirs: these clothes, this speech, these gestures. Their full slow eyes belied the words, the gestures eager and unoffending, but knew the rancours massed about them and knew their zeal was vain. Vain patience to heap and hoard. Time surely would scatter all. A hoard heaped by the roadside: plundered and passing on. Their eyes knew their years of wandering and, patient, knew the dishonours of their flesh. (U2. 361-72)
Peter Costello explains that in Paris Joyce had to pass the Paris Stock Exchange, to reach the Bibliothèque Nationale (205). However, the painting *At the Stock Exchange* (Plate 1) painted by Degas in 1879, might be much more revealing in understanding the passage above. About this painting, Nochlin observes, “It represents the Jewish banker, speculator, and patron of the arts Ernest May, on the steps of the stock exchange in company with a certain M. Bolâtre” (146). Not only does she identify the two Jews in the picture, she also affirms that the setting of the picture is “on the steps of the stock exchange.” The setting happens to be the same one Stephen recollects above. Furthermore, Nochlin points out, “This is, in effect, the representation of a conspiracy” (148), which corresponds with the description of the Jews above: “their heads thickplotting under maladroit silk hats”(2.366-67). What was depicted in the painting was a financial conspiracy by the Jews in the late 19th century, when it was thought that Jewish financiers engaged in monetary manipulation for their profit. It is well known that Degas hated Jews because his family, who engaged in the banking business, was forced into bankruptcy. Of course we can comprehend this scene in *Ulysses* apart from the painting by Degas. However, if we keep the painting in mind, this scene in the second episode becomes much more vivid and the text becomes much more multilayered with its connection to the problem of anti-Semitism in Europe, especially during the Dreyfus Affair.

4. George Russell

Gustave Moreau, a French painter in the symbolist movement in the late 19th century famous for fantastic and mystical paintings, is one of the very few painters mentioned in *Ulysses*. In the following passage from the ninth episode, Joyce has George Russell mention Moreau:

> Art has to reveal to us ideas, formless spiritual essences. The supreme question about a work of art is out of how deep a life does it spring. The painting of Gustave Moreau is the painting of ideas. The deepest poetry of Shelly, the words of Hamlet bring our minds into contact with the eternal wisdom, Plato’s world of ideas. All the rest is the speculation of schoolboys for schoolboys. (U9. 48-53)

Why did Joyce have Russell refer to Moreau on the 16th of June in 1904? One reason could be that the Gustave Moreau Museum had just opened in Paris in 1903, and Moreau was attracting attention in the world of art. Yet much more importantly, at that time Russell was actually drawing mythical paintings under the strong influence of Moreau. One example is *The Winged Horse* (Plate 2), which was exhibited in Dublin two times in 1904. *Images and Insights*, a catalogue of Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art\(^1\), which possesses the picture now, gives the following commentary:

> The powerful image of the winged horse surges through a watery universe in which a godlike rider is the source of a radiating light pouring over the entire canvas. The style, and more particularly the imagery, of AE’s work was that of the Symbolists. He used his painting to express literary, philosophical and visionary ideas and in many ways it was for him an extension of his literary activities. (80)

According to this commentary, Russell or AE (Russell’s pseudonym) painted in the manner of the

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\(^1\) The gallery was later renamed the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art in recognition of the large collection of modern art that Hugh Lane, a wealthy Dublin merchant, left to the city. The gallery played a significant role in the development of the modern art scene in Dublin in the early 20th century.
symbolists, and expressed literary, philosophical, and visionary ideas in his art. This gives us a clue in understanding Russell’s discourse in the ninth episode of *Ulysses*.

5. **Irish Painting in *Ulysses***

   In *Ulysses*, we can find the names of two Irish painters, one being “George Russell” and the other “Michelangelo Hayes” (U12.189). The name of the latter appears in the list of “Irish heroes and heroines of antiquity” (U12.176) in the twelfth episode. Michelangelo Hayes or Michael Angelo Hayes is a rather minor artist in Irish art history, and is “best known as an equestrian watercolourist, specializing in military subjects” (*A Time and a place* 67). What is important here is that Joyce did not neglect Irish painters in *Ulysses*.

   Irish paintings can be very helpful in understanding the visual images in *Ulysses*. At the end of the fifth episode, Leopold Bloom thinks about “Donnybrook fair” (U5.561), which was notorious for its “debaucheries and brawls” (Gifford 99). If we see the panoramic painting *Donnybrook Fair* (1859) (Plate 3) by Erskine Nicol, we can comprehend a realistic image of the festival.

   The following passage from the twelfth episode is thought to describe the area around St. Michan’s Church in Dublin.

   In Inisfail the fair there lies a land, the land of holy Michan. There rises a watchtower beheld of men afar. There sleep the mighty dead as in life they slept, warriors and princes of high renown. A pleasant land it is in sooth of murmuring waters, fishful streams where sport the gurnard, the plaice, the roach, the halibut, the gibbed haddock, the grilse, the dab, the brill, the flounder, the pollock, the mixed coarse fish generally and other denizens of the aqueous kingdom too numerous to be enumerated. (U12. 68-74)

   The visual image evoked in the passage also overlaps with the painting, *The Pattern at Glendalough* (Plate 4), which Joseph Peacock drew in 1813. This painting minutely portrays a religious folk festival at Glendalough, a holy place in County Wicklow. In the center of the picture, the tall round tower lifts its head dramatically and a stream flows at its foot.

   The actual area around St. Michan’s church in Dublin was famous for the Dublin City Fruit Vegetable and Flower Market and the Fish Market. In addition, in Smithfield, an area very close to St. Michan’s Church, was a public square for an open market. After the passage above in *Ulysses*, Joyce goes on to describe a scene from a market:

   And there rises a shining palace whose crystal glittering roof is seen by mariners who traverse the extensive sea in barks built expressly for that purpose, and thither come all herds and fatlings and firstfruits of that land for O’Connell Fitzsimon takes toll of them, a chieftain descended from chieftains. Thither the extremely large wains bring foison of the fields, flaskets of cauliflowers, floats of spinach . . . (U12. 87-92)

   In the details of the painting by Peacock, we can also find a scene of an open market selling pottery, kettles, hats, and so forth. About the painting Crookshank and the Knight of Glin note, “In the background is a vigorous faction fight in full swing . . . “ and “The rumbustious behaviour at fairs and
patterns led to their suppression, and the Glendalough pattern was abolished in 1862 by hierarchy” (193). The depiction of “a vigorous faction fight” can also call to mind an association with the twelfth episode, which mainly involves a fight between Leopold Bloom and the Citizen, an Irish chauvinist.

5. Painting in Relation to “Telemachus”

It is in “Telemachus” the first episode of Ulysses that the interconnection with painting becomes particularly important. The setting of the first episode is at the Martello tower at Sandycove, which commands a view of Dublin bay. We can find various picturesque images in the episode. Brendan Rooney, administrator of the Centre for the Study of Irish Art at the National Gallery of Ireland, explains the importance of Dublin Bay as follows:

Dublin Bay was widely admired by writers and celebrated similarly by artists, who worked in a variety of media and produced both panoramic views and scenes of specific locations on the north and south shores. (105)

The story in the first episode unfolds based on the conversations between Stephen Dedalus and Buck Mulligan. Let us examine the following passage:

He [Mulligan] mounted to the parapet again and gazed out over Dublin bay, his fair oakpale hair stirring slightly.

--God! he said quietly. Isn’t the sea what Algy calls it: a great sweet mother?
The snotgreen sea. The scrotumtightening sea. Epi oinopa ponton. Ah, Dedalus, the Greeks! I must teach you. You must read them in the original. Thalatta! Thalatta! She is our great sweet mother. Come and look.

Stephen stood up and went over to the parapet. Leaning on it he looked down on the water and on the mailboat clearing the harbourmouth of Kingstown. (U. 75-84)

At the end of this passage, we find a description of the mailboat which departs from the harbor of Kingstown for Holyhead. Such mailboats were often taken up as a subject of Irish painting. One of the most famous examples is Richard Brydges Beechey’s The Royal Mail Packet “Leinster” outside Kingstown Harbour (1868) (Plate 5), which presents a realistic and detailed depiction of the mailboat, though Joyce’s description of Dublin Bay is very different from the scene painted by Beechey. Let us examine the following passage in the first episode:

Woodshadows floated silently by through the morning peace from the stairhead seaward where he gazed. Inshore and farther out the mirror of water whitened, spurned by lightshod hurrying feet. White breast of the dim sea. The twining stresses, two by two. A hand plucking the harpstrings, merging their twining chords. Wavewhite wedded words shimmering on the dim tide.

A cloud began to cover the sun slowly, wholly, shadowing the bay in deeper green. (U. 242-49)

What is depicted in this passage is the view of the sea visualized internally in Stephen’s mind. The shadow of the woods is unified with the surface of the sea, white wave crests move rhythmically, and
the sea changes color into darker shades of green. Such depictions of the sea recall the sea portrayed by Georges Seurat, a Neo-Impressionist. Among the landscape paintings of the sea of Normandy, *Les Bas-Batin, Honfleur* (1886) (Plate 6) in particular is very much similar in composition to the scene described in the following passage in the first episode, in which Haines from Britain, “the seas’ ruler,” gazes over the sea: “The seas’ ruler, he gazed southward over the bay, empty save for the smokeplume of the mailboat vague on the bright skyline and a sail tacking by the Muglins” (U.1.574-76).

Joyce does not describe the beautiful aspects of the sea only. The sea of green is not only connected with the sea of Northern France which Seurat painted but also with the deathbed of Stephen’s mother, after he has just returned from Paris.

The ring of bay and skyline held a dull green mass of liquid. A bowl of white china had stood beside her deathbed holding the green sluggish bile which she had torn up from her rotting liver by fits of loud groaning vomiting. (U.1.107-10)

The first episode begins with the scene at Martello tower, the residence of Stephen. Buck Mulligan pretends to be a Catholic priest and celebrates the Mass. The scene of the Mass at a private residence reminds us of *Mass in a Connemara Cabin* (1883) (Plate 7) by Aloysius O’Kelly. This picture was exhibited in the Royal Hibernian Academy in February and March 1889. Regarding this picture, Claudia Kinmonth’s commentary merits attention:

The painting may be interpreted as a rare view of the widespread practice of holding mass and then confession in a private farmhouse. This custom was known as ‘The Stations’, and still survives in some rural areas. It originated as a way of enabling Roman Catholics to practice their religion during times of oppression when they were forced to meet in secrecy. (77-78)

Martello Tower, where Stephen and Mulligan are living, is not a purely Irish space like the cabin in the Connemara district in Western Ireland, because Haines, an Englishman from Oxford, has been living there and the tower has become a metaphor for Ireland colonized by England.

While the residents in the tower are having breakfast, a milkwoman visits them. According to Harry Blamires, “Stephen sees her as a symbol of poor sterile, subjected Ireland” (6). Stephen thinks about her in the following way:

Old and secret she had entered from a morning world, maybe a messenger. She praised the goodness of the milk, pouring it out. Crouching by a patient cow at daybreak in the lush field, a witch on her toadstool, her wrinkled fingers quick at the squirting dugs. They lowed about her whom they knew, dewsilky cattle. Silk of the kine and poor old woman, names given her in old times. A wandering crone, lowly form of an immortal serving her conqueror and her gay betrayer, their common cuckquean, a messenger from the secret morning. (U.1.399-406)

Stephen thinks of the old milkwoman as if she were a witch. In Irish paintings, old women were often portrayed as witch-like. For example, in Frank O’Meara’s *October* (1887) (Plate 8) and Henry Allan’s *The Rag Pickers* (1884-5) (Plate 9), we can see the figures of old women wearing black cloaks, like
witches. The image of an old woman surrounded by cattle may also recall Augustus Nicholas Burke’s *A Connemara Girl, with Goats* (1880s) (Plate 10), in which a girl is portrayed with two goats. Motifs such as Irish girls or old women in rural areas were often taken up in the Irish Revival movement. It is also well known that Stephen Dedalus assumed a critical attitude toward the movement.

7. James Joyce and Mainie Jellett

In considering the relationship between *Ulysses* and the visual arts, the following words of Stephen cannot be ignored: “It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant” (U. 146). Various interpretations have been offered about these words. Declan Kiberd’s is provocative:

The problem seems clear enough: the narrow-gauge nostalgia of the Irish revival, whose adherents fail to realise that a cracked mirror, like a cubist painting, projects a multiple, not a singular, self. Fragmented, maybe, but also authentic. Instead of sincere devotion to a single self-image, it calls for a recognition that every person has several selves, which it is the labour of a lifetime to be true to. In being true to a single image, the romanticist is inevitably being false to several others. Modernist art, at the promoting of Wilde, recognised that the only way to intensify personality was to multiply it. (45)

Kiberd observes that “the cracked lookingglass of a servant” projects a multiple self like a cubist painting and that the narrow-minded Irish revival failed to recognize that each person has several selves. The opposition between the Irish revival and Cubism recalls the incident involving Mainie Jellet, one of the first Cubists in Irish art. When Jellett exhibited her two cubist paintings (Plate 11) for the first time in Dublin in 1923, her works were severely criticized by George Russell. Bruce Arnold quotes Russell’s comment about Jellett’s works as follows:

We turn from Clarke’s pictures and find Miss Jellett a late victim to Cubism in some sub-section of this artistic malaria. She seems as heartily as any of the cubists to have adopted as motto Fuseli’s famous outburst, ‘Damn nature. She always puts me out.’ The real defect in this form of art is that the convention is so simple that nothing can be said in it. (80)

Joyce is said to have been strongly influenced by the Cubists’ paintings, such as Picasso’s, while conversely, Jellett seems to have had a deep understanding of Joyce’s work. Some of the essays in her *The Artist’s Vision: Lectures and Essay on Art* (1958), contain comments that shows a keen appreciation of Joyce’s work.

Both Joyce and Jellett found a source of inspiration for their art in *The Book of Kells* (Plate 12), a masterpiece of ancient Celtic culture. In his biography of Joyce, Richard Ellmann, explains Joyce’s enthusiasm for *The Book of Kells* as follows:

When Arthur Power confessed to Joyce he would like to write but did not know how to proceed, Joyce urged him to study *The Book of Kells*, saying, ‘In all the places I have been to, Rome, Zurich, Trieste, I have taken it about with me, and have pored over its workmanship for hours. It is the most purely Irish thing we have, and some of the big initial letters which swing right across a page have the essential quality of a chapter of *Ulysses*. Indeed, you can
compare much of my work to the intricate illuminations. I would like it to be possible to pick up any page of my book and know at once what book it is.’ (545)

Interestingly, Jellett was also attracted by The Book of Kells, and connected it with Cubist painting. In her essay, “A Word on Irish Art,” she wrote as follows:

The similarity of ideals between much present-day non-realistic art and the Celtic art of the Book of Kells, the metal work and the High Crosses is very striking. The sense of filling and decorating a given space rhythmically and harmoniously, one of the first principles of Cubist painting and subsequent non-realistic schools, is clearly shown in Irish work. The forms are all enclosed and held within the limits of their outside shape; there is a wonderful play of interlaced rhythmically-organized movement running through all. The realism, if any, is secondary to the element of form considered in pure relation of one shape to another. (103)

“The cracked lookingglass of a servant” seems to represent a characteristic of Irish art which begins in The Book of Kells and is linked to Cubist painting. This characteristic represents not just the indigenous culture of Ireland but the vision of the universe invented by the “Celtic=Irish” method of art.

8. Conclusion

We have been attempting to examine the possible links between the text of Ulysses and Irish painting, Impressionism and Modernism. In studies focused on the relationship between Joyce’s literary works and the visual arts, Pablo Picasso’s works have been much noted. Such scholars as Robert Scholes and Wendy Steiner published papers of great interest in relation to this topic. At the same time, papers about the connection with Impressionism are rather difficult to come by. Maurice Beebe’s paper, “The Portrait as Portrait: Joyce and Impressionism” is a superb study in this area and contains a minute textual analysis of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. However, there appear not to have been any studies about the relation between the text of Ulysses and Impressionism.

As for the relationship between Joyce’s work and Irish painting, we lack any previous studies. One reason may be that in the records of Joyce’s actual life, such as his biographies and collected letters, there are almost no references to Irish painting. Therefore, most Joyce scholars may not have paid any attention to Irish painting. Nevertheless, as we have seen, in addition to Impressionist paintings, there are certain Irish paintings that are extremely useful in conceiving the visual images depicted in Joyce’s work.

The present paper has attempted to simply show the potential relation between Joyce’s text and painting during his lifetime. If we continue to engage Joyce’s text carefully, we will probably discover many more connections with the visual arts. Such discoveries must surely make our reading of Joyce more vivid and fruitful.

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Notes
1. The gallery has been renamed “Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane.”
2. Russell’s comment was originally published in Irish Statesman, 27 October 1923.

Works Cited and Consulted

Plates


Plate 2  George Russell, *The Winged Horse*. Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane.
Plate 3  Erskine Nicol, *Donnybrook Fair*. Tate Collection.


Plate 7  Aloysius O’Kelly, *Mass in a Connemara Cabin*. The National Gallery of Ireland  
(On loan from the people of St. Patricks, Edinburgh and the Trustees of  
the Archdiocese of St. Andrews, Edinburgh)

Plate 8  Frank O’Meara, *October*. Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane.

Plate 10  Augustus Nicholas Burke, *A Connemara Girl, with Goats*. National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.
Plate 11  Mainie Jellett, Decoration. National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

Plate 12  Chi Rho monogram in the Book of Kells. Trinity College Library, Dublin.