Decoding Dedalus: Ineluctable Modalities

Feb 18

> The first phase of apprehension is a bounding line drawn about the object to be apprehended. An esthetic image is presented to us either in space or in time. What is audible is presented in time, what is visible is presented in space. - Stephen Dedalus, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*
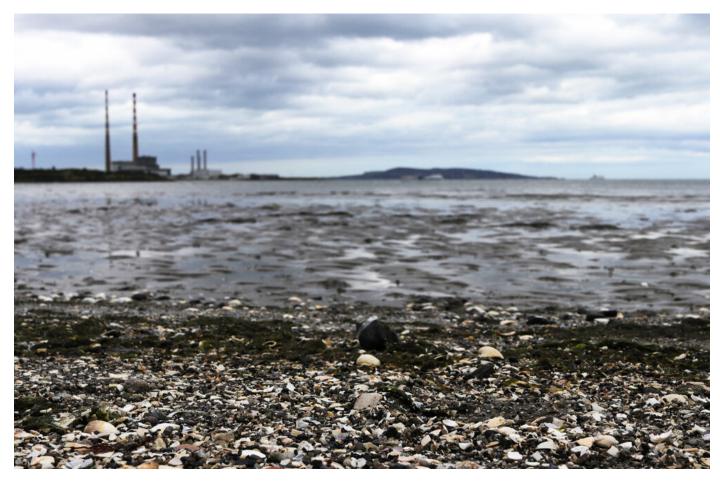
This is a post in a series called [Decoding Dedalus](#) *where I take a paragraph of Ulysses and break it down line by line.*

The passage below comes from "Proteus," the third episode of Ulysses. It appears on page 37 in my copy (1990 Vintage International). We'll be looking at the passage that begins "Ineluctable modality of the visible" and ends "world without end," roughly the first five paragraphs of the episode.

To listen to a discussion of this topic, check out the podcast episodes here *and* here*.*

So begins my attempt to translate "Proteus" into plain English and offer analysis. Hopefully this doesn't turn me (any more) insane.

There are two ways to tackle these first five paragraphs, which are important paragraphs indeed. They seem to be some of the most quoted lines in "Proteus," though I suspect that may be because that's when many of us stopped reading. Or it's just the right amount to quote to make it seem like you read the rest. Kidding, kidding. These first five set the stage for Stephen's increasingly meandering musings as the episode progresses. They're also a prime example of Joycean stream of conscious. However, they are as shifty as the sand and tides on Sandymount Strand and slippery as a Greek god eluding capture.

Sandymount Strand, August 2018

The basic thrust of Stephen's thoughts here is experimenting with sense perception and what it can reveal about [truth](#) as we experience it through those senses. I actually find Stephen's thoughts here quite playful in their own way. He's testing out, in the real world, a mélange of mystical and philosophical notions he's only experienced on the page, playing with language as he goes. He's reveling in being lost in his own little world after being mired in [Deasyville](#) and [Mulligantown](#) all morning. This is Stephen at his Stephen-est, though unfortunately his happy place doesn't remain totally untrammeled by ideological boogeymen.

To reside in Stephen's mind for even a moment is just enough to remind you how well-read you aren't. I've had to pick and choose which allusions to focus on here because there is enough material to fill a graduate seminar in just these five paragraphs. I'll include links to longer articles on specific topics and original works if you want to follow any particular rabbit hole deeper. The "further reading" section at the end will also offer some links to scholarly articles.

The two big players in this passage are Aristotle and Bishop George Berkeley and their personal conceptions of human perception with Dante thrown in for flavor. I'll focus on the dueling philosophies of the first two. If you want a more detailed Dante analysis, [Ernesto Livorni in *James Joyce Quarterly*](#) will have to scratch that itch.
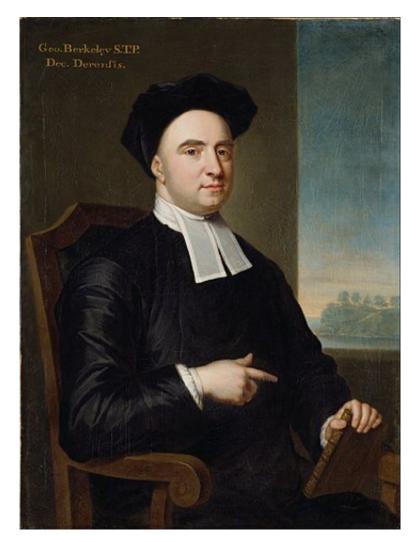
> Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes.

Stephen opens the chapter playing with the relationship of visual perception and thought, and their ability to deliver truth. Most people experience the world most immediately through sight. The other senses play a role, naturally, but if I asked you to describe the room you're sitting in, you'd probably given me a visual description before you described that funky smell coming from the corner. Stephen uses this inescapable (ineluctable) mode of experiencing reality to begin exploring the environs of Sandymount

Strand. Two issues, though: how does sight actually work and how reliable is it when describing reality? These must have been nagging questions indeed for someone like Stephen (and Joyce) who suffered from weak eyes most of his life.

> Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs.

For both Aristotle and Berkeley, visual perception starts with color. In the treatise *De Anima* (*On the Soul*), Aristotle says, "Whatever is visible is color and color is what lies upon what is in its own nature visible." The way vision worked was a particular point of interest for Aristotle. It was apparent enough to him that the ear interacts directly with a sound once it is produced and that the tongue interacts directly with the things it tastes. A sound enters the ear canal, and then hearing occurs; a food touches the tongue and then taste occurs. But vision was a puzzle. It wasn't clear to Aristotle how the eyes perceived something they did not directly contact. He suspected that color was one of the keys to this mystery.

No doubt due to the order and discipline learned through his [Jesuit education](), Stephen begins systematically isolating his sense perceptions by reducing the detritus of the strand to "colored signs." The colors themselves are signatures being read, leading Stephen's mind down previously unseen paths. It's not immediately clear what each color refers to in the environment, but the word "[snotgreen]()" will jump out to careful readers, since that's the word that Mulligan used to describe the waters of Dublin Bay as seen from atop the Sandycove Martello tower a few hours before. Stephen is walking beside these same waters now in Sandymount, though with a different point-of-view. Mulligan had joked that the sea was snotgreen in contrast to his beloved poet, Algernon Swinburne a.k.a. Algy, who called the sea a "grey sweet mother." Briefly, Stephen's [guilt over his mother]() creeps in at the edges.
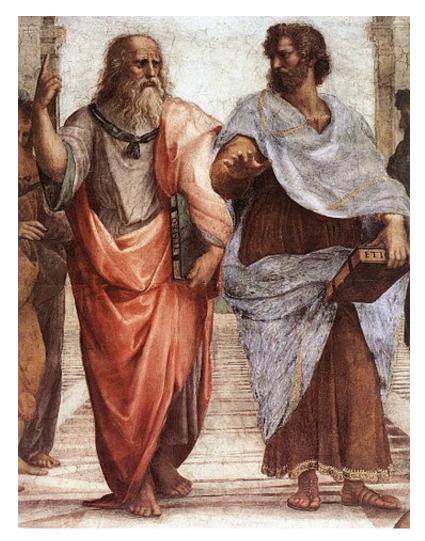
Bishop George Berkeley, John Smybert, c. 1727

Stephen senses Sandymount Strand through sight, he attaches meaning to the colors, but how do we know that his perception is accurate? Enlightenment philosopher [Bishop George Berkeley](#) said that sense perception was inherently unreliable since there is no way to distinguish between external reality and the version of reality built by our thoughts, a concept also explored in the parable of Plato's Cave. It is impossible to experience reality outside of the influence of our thoughts; our conception of the world is entirely constructed of ideas based on unreliable, ineluctable sense perception. As a result we can't even be sure that the world exists based on our thoughts, much less anything or anyone in the world. Therefore, a man walking along the strand encountering seawrack and rusty boots and snotgreen seas is encountering only his ideas of those things based on his unreliable sense perception. He may see the sea, but his idea

of the sea is not the same as the sea. Even if he kicked off his borrowed boots and splashed in the sea, he couldn't be totally sure because the salty smell of the air and the sting of cold water on his feet are still just signatures drawn by his senses; they not the true air and salt sea water.

Additionally, *The Signature of All Things* is a book by German mystic Jakob Boehme that Joyce had on his shelf in Trieste. Boehme describes [the law of signatures](#) (sometimes called the doctrine of signatures) which states that the mere shape of an object can reveal its spiritual affinities. To reach those deeper truths that are often the goal of philosophy, one must begin with the visual experience, where the signatures of the inner world manifest. As within, so without. Though Stephen [has cast off his Catholic identity](#), his desire for spiritual enlightenment remains. Without the framework of Catholicism, he must start over somewhere. Thus, he starts by contemplating the seawrack and the rusty boot on Sandymount Strand, a thoroughly mundane locale.

> Limits of the diaphane. But he adds: in bodies. Then he was aware of them bodies before of them coloured. How? By knocking his sconce against them, sure. Go easy. Bald he was and a millionaire, maestro di color che sanno. Limit of the diaphane in. Why in? Diaphane, adiaphane. If you can put your five fingers through it it is a gate, if not a door. Shut your eyes and see.

Plato & Aristotle, detail from *The School of Athens*, Raphael, 1509

Aristotle developed his theory of vision in a treatise called *De Sensu et Sensibilibus* (*On Sense and the Sensible*). Vision was a remarkable sense to Aristotle - somehow affecting our senses without interacting directly with our sense organs, and yet there were transparent (diaphane) substances through which other objects (bodies) and colors could be seen. What's more, through vision, one can perceive objects and colors localized at a distance; not just one big blur, but can pick out individual objects. Because of this, Aristotle felt that colors were the boundaries (limits) of visible substances, but that it was due to transparent substances that visible bodies, and the colors that delineated their shapes, were carried. St. Thomas Aquinas, writing many centuries later on Aristotle's ideas, saw the limits of the transparent as being qualitative, that is dependent on shifting size, density, etc., while the physical body was quantitative, dependent on its

amount or quantity. The relationship between these two are what produces the visible. There's WAY more to it than this, but I think this gives the reader an idea what Stephen is thinking about.

The unnamed "he" in this paragraph is revealed to be Aristotle as more information is meted out by Stephen. While this feels murky the first time you read the passage, it shows the purity of stream of consciousness employed by Joyce here. When you're lost in your own thoughts, you probably don't stop to clarify your pronouns because *you know* what you're talking about. Clarifying is for communicating with other people. One clue this mysterious "he" is Aristotle is the phrase "bald he was and a millionaire," as this description was a medieval conception of Aristotle, embellishing his scant biography. The Italian phrase "maestro di color che sanno," meaning "master of those that know," is how Dante referred to Aristotle in *The Inferno*.

"Knocking his sconce against" or tapping physical objects was proof enough for Aristotle of their existence. Bishop Berkeley was more skeptical, though Dr. Samuel Johnson allegedly refuted the bishop's uncertainty about the nature of existence by kicking a large stone and stating, "I refute it thus." Stephen's phrase also conjures to mind the walking sticks used by blind people, who perceive the world quite differently than their sighted neighbors.

> 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 problem of whether or not the blind "see" vexed philosophers for centuries. While some believed that it was through an innate sense of geometry that the blind sensed the world, Berkeley refuted this idea, instead stating that distances are judged or suggested by interacting with the environment, not through an innate sense, making a case for creativity. In any case, Stephen tries this method out in the next few lines. It also foreshadows the blind stripling that Bloom meets later in the day.

> Five, six: the nacheinander. Exactly: and that is the ineluctable modality of the audible. Open your eyes. No. Jesus! If I fell over a cliff that beetles o'er his base, fell through the nebeneinander ineluctably! I am getting on nicely in the dark. My ash sword hangs at my side. Tap with it: they do. My two feet in his boots are at the ends of his legs, nebeneinander.

If you shut your eyes while strolling up Sandymount Strand, the ineluctable modality of the audible takes over. A well-ordered, [Jesuit-trained](#) mind must examine this modality systematically as well. Without the distraction of inescapable visual input, your mind is free to interact with audio input more vibrantly, those crunching and cracking wrack and shells. Stephen describes the movement of his feet in German: *nacheinander* (one in front of the other) and *nebeneinander* (side by side). Joyce associated the modalities of audio and visual perception with these two positions respectively. The passage of time is nacheinander, progressing linearly, one moment following another. Space is a nebeneinander experience, objects being one beside another. Or over, under, etc. All these arrangements of space and time and their accompanying sensory stimuli occur simultaneously, and occur they do as Stephen traverses the strand, tapping his ashplant like a blind stripling.

A "cliff that beetles o'er its base" is Elsinore, the castle in Hamlet which [Haines](#) had compared the [Martello](#) tower to that very morning. Urrrgghhh, and he's wearing boots borrowed from Mulligan, too, that jerk... Don't fall over that cliff of distraction, Stephen!

> Sounds solid: made by the mallet of Los Demiurgos.

Stephen taps something solid with his ashplant and wonders if it were made by Los, the Demiurge (Demiurgos) in William Blake's *The Book of Los*. The Demiurge, in Plato's view, is the creator of the world. In gnostic philosophy, the Demiurge is a second, subordinate god who created the physical universe and stands in opposition to the spiritual world. Tapping on mundane wrack and stones in search of their spiritual opposites may be yielding results.

> Am I walking into eternity along Sandymount strand?

Berkeley felt that leaving behind one sense could lead to trouble perceiving the physical world. Stephen, unmoored from the ineluctable modality of the visible, is losing his sense here of his surrounding. Since he has no perception of space at the moment, he may be experiencing an infinite space - how would he know?

> Crush, crack, crick, crick. Wild sea money.

Stephen's having fun with his little thought experiment. "Shells" is a slang term for money, and he's found their natural, "wild" source on Sandymount Strand. Shells connect his memory back to the dish of dusty seashells and coins on Mr. Deasy's desk.

> Dominie Deasy kens them a'.

Meaning "Mr. Deasy knows them all" in the Scots dialect of English, Stephen jokes that Mr. Deasy knows all the types of shells (money) upon the shore. See, Stephen does have a sense of humor after all! The Scots dialect is a connection to Mr. Deasy's [pride for his Ulster roots,](#) a part of Ireland where "[true blue" Scottish Presbyterianism](#) was once the dominant religion. I think he's still marveling at [how little Mr. Deasy knows about Irish history.](#)

> Won't you come to Sandymount,
>
> Madeline the mare?

If you're playing with words anyway, why not write a poem? Madeline the mare isn't another of [Mr. Deasy's race horses](#). I think the reference here is that Madeline is the French name for Mary Magdalene, Mary is the mother of Jesus, the sea is a "grey sweet mother" according to Mulligan and Algy, mother in French is mère, which sounds like "mare" (a female horse) and "mer" (the sea, also in French). Word play!

> Rhythm begins, you see. I hear. Acatalectic tetrameter of iambs marching. No, agallop: deline the mare.

The blog Modernist Maundering has an excellent [post](#) on how the meaning of this passage has been obscured over the years by an error. In some editions (including mine), the word is spelled "acatalectic" when really it should be "a catalectic." The change is related to the prosody (poetic rhythm) of this poetic passage.

> Open your eyes now. I will. One moment. Has all vanished since? If I open and am forever in the black adiaphane. Basta! I will see if I can see.

Stephen decides to end his experiment. However, he's worried that the world has disappeared during the interval when he wasn't directly experiencing it, thrusting him into the black adiaphane of eternity. "Basta!" ("Enough!" in Italian), he says.

At first pass, it may seem narcissistic on Stephen's part to assume the world must have disappeared if he wasn't personally experiencing it, but this was a real quandary examined by Bishop Berkeley. If our reality is built out of ideas only, how do we know it's not just a fantasy inside a child's snowglobe?

> See now. There all the time without you: and ever shall be, world without end.

Phew, the world is still there! "As it was in the beginning and ever shall be world without end" is a line from a prayer called the [Glory Be](#) that Catholic children memorize and pronounce as "Asitwasinthebeginningisnowandevershallbeworldwithoutendamen."

This final passage illustrates one, final, Berkeleyan idea. How do we know the world isn't a fantasy inside our minds? It's because there is a universal, omniscient mind watching over the world and perceiving all things at once. This is why there exists an objective, natural order that can be measured by

science. While this idea had existed since ancient Greece, it was the Bishop's proof for why God was a necessary component in the natural order at a time when atheistic Materialism increasingly accompanied enlightenment scientific thought.

In Stephen's case, we know that there is an omniscient mind perceiving his every thought and movement. It's none other than James Joyce, Stephen's Creator. Stephen's thoughts exist because they exist in Joyce's mind as well, so the perception of Stephen's thoughts and movements are not mere illusions. After all, Stephen proclaims later in the National Library, "After God, Shakespeare created most." Why not apply the same logic to Joyce?

Further Reading:

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