Stephen Dedalus and the Astro-Artistic Mentality: *Ulysses* as Creation *Ex Nihilo*

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In both *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus frequently ponders the cosmos. Scholars often contextualize their studies of astronomy in *Ulysses* with the 'amateur astronomer' Leopold Bloom.[1] However, Stephen's thoughts in both *Portrait* and *Ulysses* evoke astronomical concepts and language, which inform this aspiring artist's ideas of creation. Stephen's cosmic thoughts in both texts encourage a notion of artistry that draws upon articulations of various simultaneously remembered personal, collective, and cosmic histories in order to establish a distinct, modernist notion of creation *ex nihilo*. That is, Stephen's notion of artistry as articulated through astronomical language posits *Ulysses* as a unique artistic creation that draws from countless pasts that merge to form no one, particular past.[2] In fleshing out this conception of artistry, *Ulysses* itself becomes a platform to represent what might be called Stephen's 'astro-artistic' notion of creation *ex nihilo* generated through an atemporal register. The term 'astro-artistic' denotes a view of artistry that relies upon the duration, importance, and natural qualities embodied by astronomical concepts like stellar lifecycles. Simply put, it is a shorthand for a type of artistry that reaches for astronomical scale and endurance—in other words, cosmic human artistry.[3]

Joyce scholars have long debated the likelihood and implications of Stephen as the author of *Ulysses*, which demonstrates that Stephen's role as an aspiring artist is important to the plot

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[1] For pertinent scholarship on Bloom's relation to astronomy see, for example, Katherine Ebury (2014), Justin Kiczek (2011), David Ben-Mere (2009), David Chinitz (1991), and Mark E. Littmann and Charles A. Schweighauser (1965). Scenes in *Ulysses* in which Bloom contemplates astronomical concepts include 8.110-2 (when he states, "Fascinating little book that is of sir Robert Ball's. Parallax."), 8.564-70, 10.527-8, 10.567-74, and 17.1040-56.

[2] In other words, Stephen's notion of artistry positions *Ulysses* as creating its own unique past—stitched together from many pasts—from which the text originates.

[3] This thesis addresses Stephen's notions of his own *human* artistry/artistic potential, and the term 'astro-artistry' is my attempt to articulate how Stephen attaches natural, cosmic importance to his distinct view of mortal artistic creation. For Stephen, past instances of individuals whose work approaches or reaches the realm of astro-artistry include Shakespeare and Milton, who will reappear for deeper study later in this paper.

and genesis of *Ulysses* as a whole.[4] While I do not argue here for either side of the 'Stephen as author' debate, such scholarly discussion opens up the possibilities for exploring the nature and implications of Stephen's position as an artist figure in relation to how *Ulysses* articulates and embodies artistic creation. Margaret McBride considers *Ulysses* an "*autological*, […] self-reflexive system dramatizing its own conception and development" (Ulysses *and the Metamorphosis of Stephen Dedalus* 30, italics in original). McBride's writing inspires further conversation regarding how Stephen posits artistic duration and originality; as well as how Stephen's astro-artistic mentality informs how *Ulysses* handles and relates to pasts and histories versus complete originality. I posit that astronomical motifs and language allow Stephen to create a sense of histories and artistic duration that etches out a way for *Ulysses* to embody a new—characteristically modernist—type of creation *ex nihilo*, generating an atemporal quality in combining, remembering, and drawing from countless pasts. These pasts include the personal, like the memories of the death of Stephen's mother; the collective literary, like the widely read and recognized works of Shakespeare and Milton; and the cosmic, like stellar lives and deaths. Joyce's juxtaposition of Stephen's personal histories; literary histories that prove focal as inspirations for Stephen; and cosmic lifecycles reimagines the possibilities for scale, duration, and importance of human artistry.

When Joyce composed *Portrait* and *Ulysses* in the early twentieth century, astrophysics and conceptions of the universe underwent massive developments, which shaped the views and

[4] For example, in Ulysses *and the Metamorphosis of Stephen Dedalus*, Margaret McBride traces the extensive arguments that scholars have made in positing Stephen as the author of *Ulysses* (29-30). She notes that such scholarship "rel[ies] heavily on autobiographical interpretations which, as they focus on affinities between Stephen and Joyce, overlook the intricate voices and narrative structures that shape the novel and define its essence" (30).

mentalities of scientists, writers, and the general public.[5] In *Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science*, Holly Henry explains:

> […] in the early decades of the twentieth century […], popular audiences were awed by the immensity and seeming lifelessness of the universe. Earth, by comparison, was depicted by [James] Jeans to be no more than a granule of sand, whirling blindly through the vast and uninhabitable vacuum of space. Popular science writers […] explored the implications of the advances in astronomy that had effected what I call a modernist human decentering and re-scaling. (3)

Henry's "modernist human decentering and re-scaling" (3) intimates the degree to which astronomical and technological advancements affected both scientists and the public. In delving into Joyce's notes and drafts, scholars such as M. Keith Booker (1990), Ray Mines and Reed Way Dasenbrock (1997), and Ebury find concrete evidence that Joyce had extensive technical knowledge and interest in current scientific and mathematical developments,[6] thus imbuing an intellectual depth to the ways in which astronomical language shapes Stephen's notion of human artistry. Henry's modernist decentering further informs the distinctly *modernist* quality of the creation *ex nihilo* that *Ulysses* fashions, as the conglomeration of histories that the text adapts distances its narrative from siding with one particular human/societal history. Finally, the modernist decentering contextualizes Stephen's tendency to think of human life in relation to the cosmos. Stephen, like the general public living in the early twentieth century, reacts to these astronomical advancements, and his conception of artistry reflects newfound knowledge of the scale and endurance of the universe.

Tim Conley's recent scholarship provides further context for how language of astronomy defines notions of history, atemporality, and artistry in the 'Telemachiad' of *Ulysses*. In

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[5] The works of Katherine Ebury (*Modernism and Cosmology: Absurd Lights*), Anna Henchman (*The Starry Sky Within: Astronomy and the Reach of the Mind in Victorian Literature*), and Holly Henry (*Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science: The Aesthetics of Astronomy*) trace the impacts of early twentieth-century scientific advancements on culture and society.

[6] For example, Ebury writes that "Joyce made extensive notes for 'Ithaca' on the non-Euclidean geometry of Riemann and Lobachevsky as well as on high mathematics and astronomy" (66-7).

"Endlessnessnessness: Joyce and Time without Measure," Conley traces Joyce's ability to create iterations of atemporality in *Ulysses* by employing many, often conflicting, verb tenses and abundant temporal details (73-8). His study represents a contemporary facet of scholarship termed the 'nonhuman turn,'[7] in which scholars distance their work from anthropocentric studies of literature.[8] Conley specifies that while modernists characteristically experiment with nontraditional treatments and conceptions of time, Joyce stands out for his attention to vast stretches of time that are humanly incomprehensible. Joyce depicts "time out of experience and immeasurable, spans of time of which we cannot conceive […] a time outside of history" (Conley 69). Considering Conley's claim that Joyce's writing embodies stretches of time that exceed the human limits of understanding and importance then encourages an exploration of how the cosmos fits into these (a)temporalities as they apply to Stephen's notion of artistry, as well as pondering just what a cosmic mentality allows Stephen and *Ulysses* to accomplish.

In both *Portrait* and *Ulysses*, Stephen pays particular attention to the light and shadows of his surroundings (weather, sunshine, interior lighting, etc.), which further characterize and describe his moods, emotions, and thoughts. Stephen's thoughts of brightness and shadow are often grounded in cosmic bodies like the sun as well as cosmic-centered myth like the 'morning star,' Lucifer, falling from heaven (*P* 126).[9] As these motifs recur throughout both *Portrait* and *Ulysses*, thoughts of the cosmos, the 'heavens,' and the vast stretches of the universe inform the ways in which Stephen sees himself as a potential artist in relation to the cosmos in both texts. For Stephen, cosmic language yields the possibility for a notion of human artistry that creates

[7] For recent scholarship reflective of the nonhuman turn, see *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015), edited by Richard Grusin.
[8] The nonhuman turn is important to acknowledge in this project, as modernism's human decentering (Henry 3) and Stephen's recurrent thoughts of the cosmos push artistry in *Ulysses* beyond the realm of the strictly human.
[9] Here and throughout, '*P*' and '*U*' are used as a shorthand for *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, respectively.

seemingly infinitely enduring creations—which is to say that these artistic creations supersede a mortal lifespan and approach the much longer cosmic lifespan of bodies such as stars—and that blurs the boundary between human-made and natural. Within the context of *Ulysses* as a seminal modernist text, Stephen's astro-artistic mindset illuminates how the text handles, relates to, and creates pasts/histories in its own trajectory to become a distinct, enduring work of art.

Beginning with Stephen's childhood, the cosmic imagery in *Portrait* establishes how the young character's notion of artistry is shaped by language of light, shadow, and the cosmos. *Portrait* situates the nature and importance of the cosmos in the early artistic mind of Stephen, demonstrating how cosmic thoughts play a significant role for him as he matures, realizes his mortality, and begins to form his artistic aspirations. Stephen's artistry and cosmic language then continue in the 'Telemachiad' of *Ulysses*, which is the final instance of Stephen as the lone protagonist before Joyce introduces Leopold Bloom in episode four. As Stephen has matured since his younger years in *Portrait*, his astro-artistic aspirations find their way into the workings of the text of *Ulysses*. Specifically, the motif of the human shadow conflates mortal, cosmic, and artistic registers in Stephen's mind. Stephen's cosmic, artistic mentality then inspires questions concerning the conceptions of histories and creation *ex nihilo* as they pertain to him and the modern epic, *Ulysses*. Stephen's conception of artistry then expounds upon the relation between *Ulysses* and the histories it details, sparking a consideration of how this modernist text poses its originality, or genesis *ex nihilo*, and fate/endurance while simultaneously remembering histories personal, collective, and cosmic.

"You could die just the same on a sunny day": Mortality and Artistry in *Portrait*

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man fleshes out Stephen's personal history and also traces his early conceptions of human life in relation to the cosmos. His artistic education and maturation in *Portrait* establishes that his fascination with both astronomy and artistry has been present throughout his young life—language of light, shadow, and the cosmos aids Stephen in articulating his thoughts of artistic creation as he matures. Furthermore, *Portrait* accounts for a detailed personal history of Stephen; his family; and his religion, including his ultimate rejection of the Catholic Church (*P* 178-9, 260), that later carries through to the slightly older Stephen in *Ulysses*. This personal history becomes one of the crucial pasts that haunt Stephen in the 'Telemachiad'[10] while he simultaneously contemplates his potential future as an artist and grapples with collective, cultural histories. Stephen's maturation is marked by his realization of his own mortality, which he comprehends through comparing his human existence to the spatially vast, temporally rich cosmos. In these connections between human life and the universe, *Portrait* poses a relationship between humankind and the seemingly endless stretches of the universe that Stephen then applies to his understanding of artistry. Occurrences of astronomy and artistry in *Portrait* further portray that Stephen's astro-artistic mentality consists of a fading, finite creator and a cosmically long-lasting creation.

Even at a young age, Stephen's thoughts regarding his own mortality are intertwined with the world beyond his individual body, locating the origins of his cosmic curiosity at the beginning of his character arc. Early in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen's classmate Wells shoves him into a puddle of dirty water (7). Stephen subsequently falls ill, and as he sits in the infirmary, he ponders the possibility that he will die from this sickness: "There was cold sunlight outside the window. He wondered if he would die. You could die just the same

[10] Stephen most explicitly addresses history in 'Nestor,' but personal memories—e.g. his mother's death—mark the text throughout the 'Telemachiad.'

on a sunny day" (21-2). In this early recognition of his mortality, Stephen thinks of his ineluctable death in relation to the sun and its brightness; the realization that he could die regardless of whether or not the sun shines begins to articulate the cold indifference of the cosmos (*P* 187) in which he believes in greater depth as he matures. However, despite his belief in the universe's indifference to mortal life, he continues to think of the universe in connection to his individual, human life, bolstering a relationship between humankind and cosmic order.

As Stephen ages, he recalls this traumatic childhood experience, confirming the importance and intertwinement of the cosmos and his mortality in his mind. Stephen's sustained devotion to connecting his mortal existence to the sun and the universe plays a large role in informing his conception of artistry. He thinks:

> But he had not died then. […] He had not died but he had faded out like a film in the sun. He had been lost or had wandered out of existence for he no longer existed. How strange to think of him passing out of existence in such a way, not by death but by fading out in the sun or by being lost and forgotten somewhere in the universe! (99)

Stephen looks back at his childhood illness with the artistic analogy of a photograph overexposed by the sun, connecting his past and future in the motif of this cosmic body. Stephen's solar metaphor implies that some part of himself—e.g. his childhood innocence—has been lost or has died with this illness. Though he as a physical entity did not die, this passage expands upon his earlier meditation that he "could die just the same on a sunny day" (22). Indeed, part of him *did* die, and he relates this to the notion of his childhood fading through overexposure to sunlight. But his thoughts expand beyond the solar system as he imagines "being lost and forgotten somewhere in the universe" (99). He further marks an awareness of his individual place within the universe in writing his 'address' in a geography lesson, zooming out from his specific physical location to his place within the entire universe: "*Stephen Dedalus / Class of Elements /*

Clongowes Wood College / Sallins / County Kildare / Ireland / Europe / The World / The Universe" (12, italics in original). Thus, as Stephen ages, he continues to consider his individual life, maturation, and mortality in relation to a larger cosmic order. He also supports this mode of thinking in his remark that, "His childhood was dead or lost […], and he was drifting amid life like the barren shell of the moon" (102), which compares him to a lifeless cosmic satellite.

Such reflections on Stephen's artistry are a facet of a broader cosmological imaginary that scholars have identified. Ebury explores language of light, heat, and fire in *Portrait* with comparisons between Stephen and the entropic lifecycle of a star ("Joycean Cosmologies" 73). Her work illustrates a further connection between Stephen and the cosmos—namely, that even though the cosmos is larger in scale, temporal duration, and importance than mortal life, Stephen is able to relate to the stars in that they are born and will die, like him. However, Ebury's argument concludes without a full consideration of what Stephen's artistic role and entropic character arc mean and communicate about the ways in which *Ulysses* embodies and defines artistic creation.

Although scholars such as Ebury remain primarily philosophical with their claims, these views in fact intersect with Stephen's aspiration toward aesthetic self fashioning. As he grows in *Portrait*, Stephen's thoughts of himself and the fading nature of parts of his identity over time echo in his views of the figure of the creator in relation to his creations. In debating artistry, aesthetics, and beauty with his peers, he states:

> The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak. The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination. The mystery of esthetic like that of material creation is accomplished. The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails. (*P* 233)

Hence, as Stephen imagines parts of himself "passing out of existence" (99) in the sun, so his imagined God-like artist figure becomes "refined out of existence" (233), remaining "within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork" (233) while the creation itself becomes the central demarcation of the artist. Although he does not employ explicitly cosmic language in this definition of artistic creation, his continued engagement with language of light draws further connections to the cosmos and contributes to how Stephen figures artistry. Words like 'lambent' and 'reprojected' conjure images of sunlight and brightness that are continually present in Stephen's mind throughout *Portrait*, allowing Stephen's artist-figure to take on a shadow-like existence or influence in relation to his completed creation. The act of (cosmic) fading is gradual[11] and spectacular, generating a creative tension that perhaps serves to reconcile Stephen's reluctant acceptance of mortality by attributing the artist figure with a slow and memorable 'exit' scheme, or death.

However, the final pages of *Portrait* demonstrate that Stephen has only begun to set out towards fulfilling his creative aspirations; he has yet to reach this ideal relation between himself as a creator and his (not yet created) creation. Joyce writes the majority of the novel in the third person, but shifts to a diary-like first person at the end: the switch occurs noticeably with the correction "Stephen's, that is, my" (271). Stephen then states in the final journal-like entry, "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (275-6). Both the abundance of first person pronouns and

[11] In *The Story of the Heavens*, Robert S. Ball acknowledges the long duration of the cosmos: "Though this epoch [of the life of a star] is incredibly more remote than any historical record, it is perhaps not incomparable with the duration of the human race […]. By the aid of our knowledge of star distances, […] we can make the attempt to peer back into the remote past, and show how great are the changes which our universe seems to have undergone" (453). In the 'Ithaca' episode of *Ulysses*, Joyce lists *The Story of the Heavens* as a book that Bloom owns (*U* 17.1373). Ball's text highlights that scientists who Joyce read discussed the long lifespans of stars, proving the relevance and centrality of stellar timescales to Stephen's interest in astronomy.

Stephen's focus on his artistic future reinforce that he as an individual has not yet achieved the form of artistry he seeks to accomplish. As noted with the continued appearances of and metaphors pertaining to light (here with the imagery of sparks in a smithy),[12] Stephen has not yet 'faded' beyond an artistic creation. The novel's end positions the older Stephen of *Ulysses* to progress as a creator with his own sense of artistry as defined notably through languages of light, shadow, and the cosmos.

"Why not endless till the farthest star?": Mortality and Artistry in *Ulysses*

As Stephen articulates notions of the mortal self and artistry in terms of light, shadow, and the cosmos in *Portrait*, so these motifs continue to develop in the 'Telemachiad' of *Ulysses*. Episode three, 'Proteus,' expounds upon the motif of the human shadow, which conflates mortal, cosmic, and artistic registers in Stephen's mind, and also illustrates Stephen's complex relation to history. 'Proteus' particularly highlights Stephen's artistic beliefs as they relate to astronomy and histories, as it is the first episode in the epic novel in which Stephen is physically alone for an extended period of time.

Throughout 'Proteus,' Stephen conflates distinct scales of time and space in his mind, fostering a mentality that embraces great spatiotemporal variation. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Proteus is a sea deity who frequently changes form (Blamires 14), and Joyce's episode echoes this essence of Proteus formally with Stephen's thoughts that flow into and connect with each other. The aqueous flow of Stephen's thoughts fluctuates between his present, physical surroundings

[12] In his annotations to *Ulysses*, Don Gifford explains that many nineteenth-century theosophists believed that the *omphalos*, or the Greek word for navel that traditionally denotes human origins, is the "astral soul of man" (Gifford 17). This passage from *Portrait* demonstrates that Stephen imagines the soul as an 'artistic center' of sorts, providing a type of relation between artist and artwork that mirrors the conception of the *omphalos/*navel as the "center of self-consciousness and the source of poetic and prophetic inspiration" (Gifford 17).

and to more spatiotemporally remote locations: his past, his memory-based dreams, and his hopes of becoming an impactful artist in his future. The spatiotemporal breadth of Stephen's thoughts yields instances in which he directly ponders the cosmos:

> His shadow lay over the rocks as he bent, ending. Why not endless till the farthest star? Darkly they are there behind this light, darkness shining in the brightness, delta of Cassiopeia, worlds. Me sits there with his augur's rod of ash, in borrowed sandals, by day beside a livid sea, unbeheld, in violet night walking beneath a reign of uncouth stars. I throw this ended shadow from me, manshape ineluctable, call it back. Endless, would it be mine, form of my form? Who watches me here? Who ever anywhere will read these written words? Signs on a white field. (3.408-15)[13]

Here, Stephen turns his back to the sun in order to write, and he notices his shadow in front of him—seeing that it is not finite, he wonders why it is "not endless till the farthest star" (3.408-9). The cosmos litters his thoughts throughout the episode, as evidenced in the passage's previous paragraph when he thinks of planets (3.403).[14] His wonderment as to why his shadow does not continue on to the stars further grounds the connection between his immediate physical surroundings and grander universal scales that float through his mind. Instead of maintaining sustained focus on his physical present, remote past, or the vast cosmos, Stephen instinctually fluctuates between these registers as they remain inseparable in his mind, all influencing his notion of artistry.

Stephen's further reflections on the constellation Cassiopeia meld historical, artistic, and cosmic contexts. In the above quote from 'Proteus,' he notes that even though he cannot see the stars right now because it is daytime, they are nevertheless still lurking behind the shining sun. He thinks particularly of the Delta of Cassiopeia (3.410), a binary star system[15] within the

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[13] Unless otherwise specified, all citations of *Ulysses* correspond to the episode and line numbers of the Gabler edition.
[14] Stephen thinks, "roar of cataractic planets, globed, blazing" (3.403).
[15] As Justin Kiczek points out, Joyce's knowledge of binary star systems stems, at least in part, from Robert Ball's *The Story of the Heavens* (292).

constellation Cassiopeia, which holds significance throughout *Ulysses* as a connection to Shakespeare[16]—Cassiopeia is shaped like a 'W,' marking the first letter of Shakespeare's first name in the stars. Additionally, around the time in which Shakespeare was born, light from a supernova explosion in this constellation reached earth,[17] making this part of the constellation appear abnormally luminous in the night sky. Stephen later considers the significance of this connection as a sign of Shakespeare's brilliance.[18] Stephen's brief mention of Cassiopeia in this section connects to later sections of *Ulysses* in which he and others discuss Shakespeare and the cosmos. Furthermore, as the stars evince Shakespeare's artistic brilliance in Stephen's mind, the cosmic register becomes intimately intertwined with Stephen's conception of human artistry.

The implied reference to Shakespeare in this passage hints at the importance of the past and old artist figures to Stephen's own image of himself. That he acknowledges the invisible, yet still present, Cassiopeia while pondering his ended shadow on the beach in 'Proteus' alludes to the nature of Shakespeare's artistic influence on Stephen. Furthermore, in admiring Ben Jonson's writing in *Portrait*, Stephen remarks, "My soul frets in the shadow of his language" (205). A contemporary of Shakespeare, Jonson similarly acts as an artistic inspiration from the past for Stephen. That Stephen considers the impact and influence of Jonson's language in terms of shadow connects to the way in which Stephen thinks of his own shadow and Shakespeare on the beach in 'Proteus.' Shakespeare continues to inspire individuals like Stephen despite being long dead, which conjures the image of Shakespeare's shadow, or influence, as seemingly endless,

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[16] Stephen has a theory that "proves by algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father" (1.555-7), and his thoughts often connect back to Shakespeare, Hamlet, and ghosts.

[17] Astronomers knew of the vast distance of stars from Earth (Ball 442). Joyce, in reading contemporary astronomical publications, was therefore aware that it took many years for the light of this supernova explosion to reach human eyes. Elongated stellar distances and light-year travel times thus add another dimension to the spatiotemporal breadth of Stephen's thoughts.

[18] For further discussion of Shakespeare and Cassiopeia in relation to this scene in 'Proteus,' see Littman and Schweighauser (239).

unlike Stephen's own human form in the present of *Ulysses*. Additionally, with Stephen's likening of Jonson's writing to shadows, the inked words on a white page become shadowlike. Thus, language of shadows connects both to creator and creation, specifically in reference to literary histories like the writings of Shakespeare and Jonson that influence Stephen.

After acknowledging the sky and the stars, Stephen focuses back on his words on the page and his artistic potential, an act that further defines the creative questions that Stephen seeks to resolve in his developing notion of artistry. Thinking of his ashplant with supposed mystical, prophetic powers (Gifford 62) leads Stephen to imagine accomplishing an impossible feat of separating himself from his shadow. But in calling his shadow back, he re-grounds himself in his earthly surroundings. He wonders if he could even plausibly call an endless shadow his own, following up on his earlier question as to why his shadow does not stretch on endlessly. In asking "Who watches me here?" and "Who ever anywhere will read these written words?" (3.414-5), he ponders his own potential significance and wonders if his artistic creations will ever reach anyone besides him. The final sentence, "signs on a white field" (3.415), positions his written marks on the scrap of paper as abstract, unspecified shadows—the page as field continues this passage's thread of landscapes that range in scale and significance from a singular scrap of paper to the beach before him to the seemingly endless stretches of the universe.

This scene is important considering Stephen's abundant thoughts of himself as a creator or artist throughout *Ulysses*—it provides an actual moment of Stephen composing a potential literary work. That he writes on a scrap of paper torn from Deasy's writing suggests a microcosmic iteration of the artist's creation as connected to or stemming from past creations. In this case, *Ulysses* itself is the corresponding macrocosm as a unique modernist text that draws

from countless other preexisting texts including Homer's *Odyssey*, Shakespeare, and Milton, among others.

Stephen's thoughts in 'Proteus' also consider the role of the creator in relation to his creation, demonstrating how he has sustained and refined his ideas of artistry since his childhood in *Portrait*. Looking at his ended shadow on the beach, his symbolic acknowledgement of human finitude, relates to the words on the page and his curiosity as to whether his work will carry on his legacy. When Stephen wonders if he could possibly consider his shadow (or his creation) to belong to or originate from him if it were endless, the question hints at a broader creative problem of Stephen's: can he, a mortal being, possibly create an immortal or infinite creation? That his thoughts here oscillate between the immediate surroundings of the beach and the grand stretches of the cosmos further articulates the degree to which Stephen ponders just how far his creation can go while still remaining recognizably his own. Furthermore, that Stephen speaks of the work of artistic inspirations including Shakespeare and Jonson in terms of lingering shadows hints at how his own shadow on the beach signifies that anything he creates will inevitably be influenced by past creations and history.

"It seems history is to blame": Creation *Ex Nihilo* and the Nightmare of History

Throughout the 'Telemachiad,' Stephen's notions of artistry are guided by considerations of his own mortality, a history of the master artists whom Stephen aspires to reach or surpass in creativity one day, and memories of his mother. Stephen's extensive meditations on many histories position the whole of *Ulysses* as continually addressing and drawing from various pasts—personal, collective, and cosmic. As Conley claims that Joyce obtains a timelessness in *Ulysses* through employing jumbled, varied, and inconsistent temporalities (69), can Stephen

(and, by extension, *Ulysses*) then detach his notion of artistry from the past—*one specific* past—by living with constant reminders of countless pasts? If this is so, then Stephen's nightmare of history allows for his sustained artistic commitment to a new creation *ex nihilo* while he is forced to remember and recognize a seemingly infinite number of different pasts that then amalgamate into a distinct history from which *Ulysses* is born.

Not only do cosmic language and motifs inform Stephen's notions of mortality and artistry, they also engage with the various pasts in the 'Telemachiad.' More broadly, the cosmos and its interaction with histories also informs the structure and implications of *Ulysses* as a modernist creation *ex nihilo*. While there are countless histories about which Joyce writes in the epic novel, the three that pertinently connect to astronomy and artistry are the death of Stephen's mother, the literary creations of Shakespeare and Milton, and long lifecycles of stars. These pasts—Stephen's personal history, collective literary histories, and cosmic lifecycles—meld together in the 'Telemachiad' to generate an atemporal register that positions *Ulysses* as a creation *ex nihilo*.

The memories and personal past of Stephen's life that run through the 'Telemachiad' mainly concern the death of his mother, May Dedalus, placing the importance of his past on his own sense of creation and his maternal creator. As Stephen ponders his place in the universe and his potential to become an artist in the 'Telemachiad,' his ideas of artistry connect to mortality and creation, both of which are demonstrated through memories of his mother. Stephen's memories and reimaginings of May serve as the personal past that haunts him throughout the 'Telemachiad,' adding significance to the physical, mortal body and its ability to (pro)create within Stephen's overall conception of artistry.

From the beginning of *Ulysses*, many of the appearances of May Dedalus occur through Stephen's recounting his dreams in which she haunts him from beyond the grave—these dreams articulate the persistent, nightmarish qualities of Stephen's personal memory throughout the novel. He first recounts these dreams in the early lines of episode one, 'Telemachus,' stating, "Silently, in a dream she had come to him after her death, her wasted body within its loose brown graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath, that had bent upon him, mute, reproachful, a faint odour of wetted ashes" (1.102-5). The dreams are grounded in lived memory, as he goes on to recount the white bowl filled with his mother's green bile next to her deathbed (1.108-10). As he looks out at the sea from the Martello tower in 'Telemachus,' he describes the water as "a bowl of bitter waters" (1.249), connecting it to his mother's bowl of bile at the scene of her death. The extent to which such memories and dreams of May Dedalus affect Stephen at the beginning of *Ulysses* is demonstrated, for example, by the ways in which he likens his physical surroundings to the remembered and dreamed death of his mother. The darkness and bitterness with which Stephen reimagines his personal past sets a grim, nightmarish tone for the mortal aspects of Stephen's notion of artistry.

As Stephen continues to remember his mother, he divulges further details of his haunting dream that attribute a malicious intent to May Dedalus's ghost and uncover the dark import of this line of Stephen's personal history to his present experiences in *Ulysses*. After repeating the beginning of his dream later in 'Telemachus,' he continues, "Her glazing eyes, staring out of death, to shake and bend my soul. On me alone. The ghostcandle to light her agony. Ghostly light on the tortured face. […] Her eyes on me to strike me down" (1.273-6). In his dream, he attempts to stop her from harming or killing him by exclaiming, "No, mother! Let me be and let me live" (1.279). This nightmarish scene illuminates Stephen's still-present preoccupation with

his mortality and his active desire to avoid death, both of which he establishes early in his childhood as seen in *Portrait*. Furthermore, his fascination with light and shadow continues throughout these passages regarding May, with words like 'glazing,' 'ghostcandle,' and 'ghostly light' providing a subtle connection to cosmic language of the "births and deaths of stars" (*P* 110) that also swirls in Stephen's mind.

When discussing the concept of history, Joyce scholars often gravitate towards Stephen's utterance that history is "a nightmare from which [he is] trying to awake" (2.377).[19] Stephen's nightmare of history unfolds in episode two of *Ulysses*, 'Nestor,' and is grounded in multiple cultural and literary histories including those of Pyrrhus (2.14-53), the oppressed Ireland under British rule (2.248), and Catholicism (2.380-90). While countless histories surface throughout the 'Telemachiad' and, more broadly, *Ulysses*, two literary histories serve particular importance to Stephen's artistry: those of Pyrrhus and Milton's pastoral elegy "Lycidas." Both of these histories meld with personal pasts and cosmic motifs, becoming one thread of the unique 'history' that forges the text of *Ulysses*.

The story of Pyrrhus illustrates qualities of Stephen's relation to success and failure, particularly as he attempts to become a 'successful'[20] creator figure. In 'Nestor,' Stephen teaches a lesson on Pyrrhus to his students in the school at which he works. Pyrrhus was a Greek general whose victories in battle took such a toll on his armies that they ended up being losses (Gifford 30-1).[21] While his students try to remember who Pyrrhus was, Stephen considers how history appears to him as a nightmare, illustrating the burden that he feels regarding his past throughout the 'Telemachiad.' Pyrrhus's brief appearance in *Ulysses* echoes in Stephen's continual—though

[19] For scholarship on Joyce and the nightmare of history, see Robert Spoo (1994), Richard Ellmann (1977), Gian Balsamo (2004), and Frank Budgen (1967).
[20] In an 'astro-artistic' sense, a successful creator attains an enduring and influential creation.
[21] Thus Pyrrhus's unfortunate end gives way to the popularized term 'Pyrrhic victory.'

seemingly unsuccessful—attempts to become an important creator figure. No matter the degree to which he refines his artistic ideas and his beliefs of what constitutes art and artistry, he falls short of true success in the 'Telemachiad,' as he does not create anything in the timeframe of these episodes that then definitively reaches cosmic importance or scale for the society in which he lives. Stephen's youthful 'failure'—or, at least, artistry that he has not yet attained—then poses the question of whether *Ulysses*, which McBride deems an autological text (30), serves as what a successful iteration of Stephen's artistry might look like.

Though only a fragment of Milton's poem "Lycidas" surfaces in Stephen's lesson (2.64-6), the poem's story—with which Milton elegizes a young friend who drowned—and significance weave through the text of *Ulysses* and apply to Stephen's thoughts henceforth, demonstrating how one distinct past intertwines with others in Joyce's work. As Stephen walks on the beach in 'Proteus,' he thinks about a recently drowned man whose corpse for which Stephen knows others are currently searching on the Dublin strand (3.321-9). Just as the 'Telemachiad' frequently melds language of water with that of motherhood,[22] so Stephen applies references to "Lycidas" to describe both the drowned man on the Dublin strand and also memories and dreams of his deceased mother. While Stephen watches the corpse get pulled out of the water, his present experience is mixed with a direct quote from Milton's poem: "A corpse rising saltwhite from the undertow, bobbing a pace a pace a porpoise landward. […] *Sunk though he be beneath the watery floor*. We have him. Easy now" (3.472-5, italics mine to denote Milton's line). Earlier, Stephen's thoughts of this drowned corpse blend with his dreamt image of his mother's corpse: "A drowning man. His human eyes scream to me out of horror of his death. I … With him together down …. I could not save her. Waters: bitter death: lost" (3.328-30). These recurrent references to and quotes from "Lycidas" provide examples of one historical

[22] See particularly 1.80, 1.248-53, and 3.35-40.

context in *Ulysses*, illustrating the ways in which Joyce adapts collective, cultural pasts to blend with the particular present of *Ulysses*. In the instance of Milton's "Lycidas," the motif of drowning connects in Stephen's mind to the anonymous drowned man on the Dublin strand, Stephen's mother, and his sister Dilly (*U* 10.870-80, Blamires 102), to name a few. The mentions of drowning, water, and mortality that occur throughout *Ulysses* carry many meanings and significances. "Lycidas" begins in *Ulysses* as its own distinct artistic work, but in Stephen's connecting the poem to many other contexts, it becomes one iteration of a multifaceted preoccupation as he considers what it means to become an artist with cosmic aspirations that exceed his own mortal durability.

While language of light and astronomy continually allows Stephen to articulate his thoughts of himself as an artist and his notions of artistry, cosmic metaphors serve two further stylistic purposes in *Ulysses*. First, cosmic scales allow Stephen to extend his creative imagination further than the mortal limits of humanity. Second, just as light from stars appears to shine from a human's viewpoint on Earth for long after a distant star has died, maintaining a cosmic mentality allows Stephen to imagine a form of human artistry that yields a product that endures far beyond the creator's lifespan. For example, Stephen's connection between Shakespeare and the constellation Cassiopeia through language of shadows and finitude (3.409-10) highlights the centrality of the cosmos to Stephen's conceptions of artistry. While personal and literary contexts—like that of drowning in "Lycidas" and on the Dublin strand—already meld without necessarily always including cosmic references, Stephen's continual engagement with cosmic language and motifs attributes a vaster scale, importance, and endurance to his notion of artistry.

In harkening back to the language he uses in *Portrait*, in 'Nestor,' Stephen continues to think of himself as an artist in cosmic terms. As a young Stephen studies his math notes, the equations he sees connect to the cosmos and his own soul:

> The equation on the page of his scribbler began to spread out a widening tail, eyed and starred […] the eyes opening and closing were stars being born and being quenched. The vast cycle of starry life bore his weary mind outward to its verge and inward to its centre […]. The stars began to crumble and a cloud of fine stardust fell through space. […] It was his own soul going forth to experience, unfolding itself […]. A cold lucid indifference reigned in his soul. […] The chaos in which his ardour extinguished itself was a cold indifferent knowledge of himself. (*P* 110)

This establishes the ways in which Stephen relates his own thoughts to the cosmos, as the equations on the page transform in his mind to represent lifecycles of stars, then these stars transform further to represent his soul. Such transformations show how Stephen's thoughts of the cosmos often mix with the ways in which he understands his humanness—the cosmic and the mortal are, for him, inseparable.

Later, in 'Nestor,' in a scene that echoes *Portrait*, Stephen helps a student with his math homework. As he watches the student write, the way in which he describes the scene carries similar cosmic undertones:

> Across the page the symbols moved in grave morrice, in the mummery of their letters, wearing quaint caps of squares and cubes. […] Waiting always for a word of help [the student's] hand moved faithfully the unsteady symbols, a faint hue of shame flickering behind his dull skin. […] Like him was I, these sloping shoulders, this gracelessness. My childhood bends beside me. Too far for me to lay a hand there once or lightly. Mine is far and his secret as our eyes. (*U* 2.155-6, 163-5, 168-70)

As in *Portrait*, Stephen's imagination flows as he gazes at the equations on the page. This time, however, Stephen focuses on his maturation and distance from his childhood. Just like his shadow before him on the beach in 'Proteus' (*U* 3.408), so his young student bends over the work before him. Stephen sees his younger self in this student, whose equations Stephen

significantly describes with language of light and the cosmos with words like ‘faint hue’ and ‘flickering,’ along with a noteworthy attention to eyes that connect back to the eyes of the equations that become stars in *Portrait* (110). The final lines of this passage evoke Stephen’s simultaneous attention to temporality and space, as he describes his childhood as both spatially—‘too far’—and temporally—‘once’—distant from his present self. This passage further contextualizes Stephen’s thoughts of himself as an artist particularly in the context of stars that are born and fade over a long period of time, as his childhood self is incomprehensibly distant from him both in time and space.

“Dead breaths I living breathe”: *Ulysses* as a Modernist Creation *Ex Nihilo*

The various scales, endurances, and histories that comprise Stephen’s notion of artistry serve in defining and articulating how *Ulysses* as a whole creates a modernist imagining of creation *ex nihilo*. Considering *Ulysses* as a creation *ex nihilo* positions it as a text that forges a new way of considering and interpreting a literary work in relation to personal and collective histories. No matter Stephen’s personal emotions regarding his mortality, his extensive meditations of the limited endurance of the mortal creator demonstrate that he knows all too well that he, a mere human, will die. In this way, the medium of the work of art becomes his hope to achieve significance and endurance on a cosmic—superseding the mortal—scale.

Before *Ulysses* shifts focus to Bloom in the ‘Calypso’ episode, the ‘Telemachiad’ concludes with a continuation of Stephen’s curiosity regarding the future of his creations to come, this time with a bodily creation: snot (3.500). As he leaves his snot “on the ledge of a rock, carefully” (3.500-1), he thinks to himself that he is leaving this bodily byproduct for others to see: “For the rest look who will” (3.501). The language that describes the scene evinces the hope and care with which Stephen seeks to create artwork that will reach a spatiotemporally

diverse audience. His care further articulates itself as he turns around to see if anyone is there, spotting no one but a ship in the distance. The final image of the ship ends the 'Telemachiad' in the water, connecting to imagery regarding the drowned man in the Dublin strand, "Lycidas," and motherhood that occurs throughout the three episodes. However, this time, the water image is importantly at a *distance* from the aspiring artist. In its distance, the ship marks the episode's concluding tone with ambiguity: Stephen hopes to create something impactful that will reach others, but just as he cannot see the people on the ship and proceeds to fade from the narrative center with Bloom's introduction, so he cannot know the details of his own artistic future.

The larger structure of *Ulysses* beyond the 'Telemachiad' also embodies the elongated, cyclical nature of stellar lifecycles in the metaphorical 'burning and fading' of characters. Stephen 'fades' from the narrative center as the story turns to Bloom in 'Calypso.' When Stephen returns later in *Ulysses*, he is no longer the sole protagonist but instead shares this role with Bloom. After Stephen walks with Bloom back to the latter's home and Bloom falls asleep, he too falls from the narrative center as the epic's final episode, 'Penelope,' is narrated by Molly Bloom.[23] Thus *Ulysses* articulates many such cosmic-like character 'lifecycles' in their appearances and disappearances within the text. As these characters come and go, they become part of the history that *Ulysses* builds simultaneously with its genesis. The intricate experiences and histories both lived and remembered by the text's characters constitute its own past, unbound from specific spatiotemporal limits—with an astro-artistic creator's hope that *Ulysses* itself may reach a cosmic level of endurance and sustained importance.

[23] Bloom's story ends with a large dot at the end of 'Ithaca,' which some scholars interpret as representing a cosmic image like earth from a distance or a star. For an overview of criticism on this dot, see Austin Briggs's "The Full Stop at the End of 'Ithaca': Thirteen Ways—and then Some—of Looking at a Black Dot."

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