

## Re-Joyce in Blue: Alastair Noble's *Ulixes* Greg Thomas

2022 marked the centenary year of the first edition of *Ulysses*, a text whose sonic and linguistic jouissance casts a shadow over the whole subsequent development of modernism. By chance, 2022 also marked the 50-year anniversary of the artist and curator Alastair Noble's first encounter with the book. The coincidence prompted a ritualistic re-reading of the work in conjunction with Homer's *Odyssey*, the epic that inspired it, and a quixotic erasure process that came to fruition this year in the shape of the artist's book *Ulixes*.

Noble's artistic practice occupies the thresholds between book-arts, visual poetry, and environmental installation. Over several decades, it has often returned to what we might call expanded translation processes: the editing, stripping away, or transference into new sensory lexicons, of well-known modernist texts. There is an *arrière-garde* spirit at work here, shoring up the experiments of the early twentieth century through creative dialogue, making new what has become canonical. Scrubbing off the patina of our familiarity through various processes of reencoding, Noble achieves a kind of *ostranenie* in his treatments of works by Joyce, Mayakovsky, and others. He thus reminds us how the radical formal spirit of the early avant-gardes configures the qualities of revolt and experiment that we take for granted in our present, entirely transformed, creative moment.

*Ulixes* (Gnōbilis, 2024) serves as a case in point, emerging from an ocean of research on all things Joycean and Homeric, following that 2022 re-reading. Based between New York and the west-coast Scottish town of Dunoon—where he and the artist Kathy Bruce run the text-art gallery Dunoon MOCA—Noble was able to include in his studies a trip to the Morgan Library exhibition *One Hundred Years of James Joyce's Ulysses*. That show included a good deal of material related to the publishing history of *Ulysses* which became central to the project, piquing a particular fascination with the colour blue, references to which permeate the 700-plus pages of Joyce's narrative.



From *Carbon Bodies*  
Rachel Smith



“One factor that came to light as I digested the commentaries,” Noble writes in his article “*Ulixes*: Out it Rushes: Blue” (*The Blue Notebook* 18.2, 2024), “was Joyce’s obsession not only with Homer’s *Odyssey* but with all things Greek including its flag” (31) [All subsequent quotes are from this article unless indicated]. Indeed, it was the blue of the Greek flag—possibly the specific flag hanging in the window of Sylvia Beach, the Parisian bookstore owner and first publisher of *Ulysses*—that Joyce sought to recreate on the book’s first cover. In the end, a litho-printed blue on white paper was chosen. Unintentionally but poetically, the original, deep marine tone quickly faded to an aqueous teal.

With the classical and aquatic connotations of blue in mind, Noble hatched a plan to “transform [Ulysses] and Homer’s *Odyssey* into an artist’s book offering a poetic typographical experience with the colour blue at its core” (37). Central to this was the rendering, on the cover of *Ulixes*, of the perfect, Greek-flag blue which Joyce had sought for his dust-jacket. Moreover, with own his dust-jacket, Noble literalises Joyce’s desire to recreate the appearance of the Greek flag, the title word, “Ulixes,” appearing across the cream cross of the flag’s canton, photographed close-up from a copy matching the version in Beach’s window. Whimsically, the blue of the cover is offset against the faded teal of extant 1922 editions, which is precisely reproduced on the first and last pages of the book proper.

What’s between these two turquoise markers indicates the obsessive scope of Noble’s project. The artist explains it as follows:

The word blue is mentioned numerous times in *Ulysses*, either detached or conjoined within a word. It became a mission of mine to seek out all the sentences or phrases that include the word blue. I discovered that there are 110 examples, such as *Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust : coloured signs and Test : turns blue litmus paper red*. These eventually became the main body of my text and each phrase or sentence appears on the white page in black in the same font and same position and order as they do in the first edition. Hence, the sentences appear to be scattered across the pages forming a true-blue poetic assemblage. (39)

The result is a symbolist raft-scape of sentences, adrift on white seas of pages, in which the humdrum and the mythological shift in and out of focus in flurries of contextless detail: “Her blue scarf loose,/ laughing”; “coils of bronze and silver, lozenges of cinnabar, on rubies, leprous and/ winedark stones”; “On the right (smaller) hob a blue enamelled saucepan”; “*to the tumbling waters of/ Neptune’s blue domain.*”

Encompassing this central creative gesture are others which connect Joyce’s lust for blue to his wider Philhellism. Those turquoise front- and end-pages bear the word “OUTIS,” Greek for “nobody,” the name Odysseus provides to Polyphemus to escape the giant’s cave. The O is vastly enlarged on the first page, the U on the last. Thus, as Noble puts it, “O for Odysseus and U for Ulysses bracket the content of the book” (37). The book is also punctuated with blue-green divider-pages, on which appear *Ulysses*’s many references to the “wine-dark sea,” a phrase indelibly associated with Homer’s *Odyssey*. These pages “shift from blue-green to a rich deep ultramarine over the first six,” Noble explains, “and then reverse back from the seventh page through the same blues shades back to turquoise on the twelfth,” the translucent hue overlaid with faint images of water and fluttering Greek flags (39). *Ulixes* also makes a central feature of the isolated capital Os that appear throughout Joyce’s text, which Noble believes are encoded homages to the writer’s ancient source (O for Odysseus). Many pages of

Noble's book therefore consist of single Os set loose in space; wandering, as it were, far and wide.

Other aspects of the project—whose minutiae cannot all be accounted for here—simply reflect the fevered attentiveness of Noble's Joyce-ophilia, a curious mirroring of Joyce's Homeric preoccupations. The 1934 Random House edition of *Ulysses* is a masterpiece of book design, Ernst Reichl's elongated cover-lettering creating a kind of grid pattern with a red square at bottom right containing the author's name while hinting at De Stijl minimalism. The text also contains three, distinctive interior pages, with greatly oversized capital letters. *U* for Ulysses sits on the two inside title-pages; an *S* fills page four with the remainder of the famous descriptor “-tately, plump” (as in Buck Mulligan) squeezed into a corner; and on the opposing page the *M* of “Mr Bloom” likewise fills the frame.



In homage to these bold features of the Random House edition, Noble has inserted the 18 episode titles of Joyce's book at the relevant points between his erasures (these titles were not included in the original text of *Ulysses*, only provided in a tiny number of schematic tables distributed to Joyce's friends). Each of Noble's title-pages includes a hugely enlarged first letter in homage to Reichl's design, using a modified Weiss Roman Initials Series I typeface like that which the German artist had employed for his *U*, *S*, and *M*. As these three letters were extruded and altered by Reichl to fill the page, Noble had to undertake a comparable process of alteration to find the right shape for a far wider range of letters. The laboriousness of the task is testament to the intensity of focus brought to this extended work of homage, translation, erasure, and re-presentation.

*Ulixes* is an intriguing, exhilarating work, showing us how the foundational documents of modernism live on in the collective imagination, and are the analogues for our own journeys of creative discovery as artist and writers, always there as metanarratives and ports in the storm. Moreover, in reducing Joyce's novel to a bare minimum of affective components, focusing on one precise aspect of its sensory and symbolic landscape, *Ulixes* refreshes the language of its parent text, makes it ring anew in the white and blue air.

Note. Noble has noted the importance of Cleo Hanaway-Oakley's article “Ulysses at 100: Why Joyce was so obsessed with the perfect blue cover” (*The Conversation*, 2022) to his research towards *Ulixes*.

### Good game

The last time in my life, I was burning vinyl to warm myself in the department store on Maitland where we listened to Duran Duran. Ella wouldn't believe I was leaving her so few, but I bought them at a loss, yo! We were both alive.

The last time in my life was at the mall in Antigua Guatemala. We believed in crying over the seeds, but now the lizards were back. I could see them, and perhaps she could see them too. She told me to get a guidebook to Mexico.

The last time in my life was in a stopped train in Maastricht. I was going to drive it to Schiphol, then take flight at 4 in the morning. She told me not to be so dear and she apologized for calling long distance.

The last time in my life was about me, in front of my apartment on Dundonald, after an absurd voyage to the Group of Seven's permanent monster in Smalltown. Her Dr. Seuss eyes wide. Yay us. I apologized for changing planes.

The last time in my life was in the laneway that was part of the case we shared with Palmerston. I was waiting for Starfleet. We arm-wrestled. Take care of yourself, lady.

The last time in my life was at 4 in the morning, at the cactus at Bloor and Christie. My face: mocha and tears. Her eyes: this is the last time. She said there was a storm coming and to take care.

The last time in my life was in her teepee. I was able to be sad. We made a bet: no tears. When I was Sally, I was happy. It was spring and the correct lad was following me.