Several Points in Response to Your Inquiry Concerning Shadowism

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1. The Way I Understand It

In response to your recent inquiry:

First, let me say this: The breakthrough in Shadowism (not to be confused with the minor Hindu movement in the 1930s bearing the same name, of course) apparently came to Professor Botofovich in late 1958 or early 1959—the way I understand it.

2. Some Essentials

After his years of barking up the wrong research tree, so to speak, with the book-length study of the nineteenth-century Brazilian Machado de Assis, seriously marred by Botofovich's inability to read the novels in the original Portuguese, and then the monograph on Verlaine, more seriously marred, maybe, by his taking as the real thing the ten forged poems supposedly "discovered" in the 1920s (which, in Botofovich's defense, for a long while did seem authentic to many, including the legendary rare books and manuscripts dealer Marcel des Esseintes of Rue Censier in Paris), yes, after those failures, some believe that Botofovich had all but given up on validating Shadowism as a meaningful theoretical approach to literature. I might add that there are several oral reports concerning Botofovich from the period after he had been dismissed—canned?—from his tenured position at Columbia, the result of the situation with the undergraduate twin sisters from Barnard, and then when he was taken on by the small state teachers college in northern Vermont, probably the only employment he could find by that point. People have said that, in truth, he seemed like a man who had given up on most everything at that stage—stoop-shouldered, balding, baggy-eyed, a grumbling bachelor known principally to his colleagues at the teachers college (whom he looked at with utter disdain) for his constant complaint of the lack of proper heating in the drafty classrooms, Botofovich apparently insisting on wearing a rumpled horse blanket of a rust-red wool overcoat and chocolate fedora while lecturing; most of what was contained in those lectures themselves was usually near incomprehensible, several of his former students report today. (Interestingly enough, the undergraduate twins involved in the scandal in New York, the Mahoney Sisters, who went on to appear in dance numbers in several Hollywood films and are now spryly approaching their eighties, recently told a researcher in 2007 that they clearly remember Botofovich as anything but boring when he had been their professor at Columbia—and also, needless to add, a bit more than that in his relationship with the pair—there in New York. They claim that he cut a figure indeed in the Times Square nightclubs of the early 1950s, even if "the guy wasn't any Vic Damone when it came to looks, if you know what I mean," as Molly Mahoney noted; her sister Maggie added, "Yeah, he might have loved books, was crazy about them. But we probably knew him as a different guy. I mean, you should have seen him behind the wheel of that big baby-blue Buick convertible he bought, maybe just to show those stuffed shirts in the Columbia Literature Department that a professor like him didn't care if he looked like a bona fide pimp driving it there along Forty-Second Street and grinning such a big smile when at the wheel, happy as a clam at high tide. It was a real nice machine, all right, a model called a Roadmaster or something, with sharp whitewall tires and those four chrome holes on each side of the long hood, which weren't real holes, of course, they were just supposed to look like holes. Jesus, how we all laughed about that—*four holes!* The life in him, a real swell! What a guy!")

Truth of the matter was that Botofovich himself is said to have all but slapped his head like some oaf in a cartoon to think how maybe stupid he had been not to realize that when it came to Shadowism, he not only had been barking up the wrong tree but had most likely missed the entire leafy forest altogether, you might say, in not recognizing that he should have gone right to the top for a fitting subject of study, to seek a true understanding. And the top at the time, the revered pinnacle for analysis in the literature department of every campus across the country, was James Joyce. Of course, it is painfully difficult to tell

anybody today the stature that Joyce once commanded in academia, and if dissertations are done on him at all nowadays, they merely veer toward a consideration of his work solely in terms of colonial/post-colonial tenets, Joyce as a rather primitive and exotic politically oppressed islander, let's say, or Joyce solely in terms of gender, and usually one *hell* of a thoroughly complicated gender study at that. (OK, he did have impish Bloom fantasizing about putting on women's underclothes in *Ulysses*, liking their essential frills, also their silly silky feel, I suppose, so maybe Joyce let himself in for that one.) Joyce as the Artist has become completely passé, and while approaching him and his work through Shadowism would never come to constitute the book that Botofovich perhaps *should* have written, there is no arguing with the clues that are to be found concerning Joyce in Botofovich's notebooks and letters, as well as, and especially, in his extensive conversation with the sole faculty member at the state teachers college he did converse with, the wealthy dabbler Addison Merritt, black sheep in the family of the American industrial-ball-bearing-manufacturing tycoon and somebody who also oddly ended up teaching literature in Vermont for several years. Indeed, it does seem that a breakthrough had been made regarding Shadowism with the life of Joyce. Shadowism, after all, is at heart a biographical approach.

Also, that the two items that obsessed Botofovich in Joyce's biography could, in a way, be seen as the two last major events in Joyce's life—or beyond that life and therefore fully appropriate for Shadowism, I again suppose—figures in here.

3. The Book Beside Joyce's Deathbed

When Joyce passed away and was found dead in the bedroom of the Zurich hotel suite he was living in at the time, not long after a stomach operation and having fled with his family from a Paris that was about to fall prey to the growling tanks of the Nazi armored divisions entering, it was noticed, even before a death mask was prepared of such gooey white plaster, that there was a book on the night table. (Botofovich accepted this reported version, not that Joyce had died in a recovery room in the hospital.) True, he had died in his sleep and on the small table beside the sagging bed in the hotel was the novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* by Flann O'Brien, pen name of Brian O'Nolan—specifically, the first printing of the hardbound Dublin edition, with a marbleized moss-green cover and distinctive yellow art-deco lettering for that jacket. This fact struck something deep in Botofovich, but not for obvious reasons. Actually, after reading *At Swim-Two-Birds*, later often celebrated as a notable work of innovative, very experimental literature in its own right, Botofovich dismissed it as mere "whimsical Gaelic mish-mash, enough to give blarney a bad name," wondering if Joyce himself had simply closed the book—on page one-hundred-twenty-eight, as biographers point out, a seagull feather being placed as the bookmark—deciding either exactly that himself or wondering about just how much later literature, entirely and badly imitative, would be spawned by his own several modern masterpieces. But of more importance, in terms of Shadowism, was the way that the book, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, would go on to hold a lofty place as valid literature for the simple reason that it might have been the last thing that Joyce's weary, failing eyesight managed to set gaze upon, which led Botofovich to pronounce that the key to all biographical literary study might, in turn, be a full investigation into, and scouring analysis of, the last thing that any author was, in fact, reading right before his or her death.

Or to look at it another way, the words in such a book became more than simply words because the author of several very great books, and an undeniable master of words, stepped over to the other side after having processed them—or almost trying to hang onto them, you might say.

4. A Coffin Window

And apparently that premise obsessed Botofovich, until he discovered a note in the life of Joyce possibly much more revealing.

Joyce had been laid to rest rather quickly, and there was the considerable controversy about whether a priest should preside at the internment, as his wife Nora remained firm in her nixing of any talk of that and surely figured that an expeditious burial would best solve the problem. The coffin that was selected by the Swiss undertaker Hiltz was inarguably a top of the line one, fine polished black-lacquered ash with gilt trim and ornate, gleaming nickel handles, and set into the lid was a small window of thick glass, a horizontal rectangle, for the face of the deceased to be viewed through—or to *look out* through, so it would seem, granting that Joyce's eyes, clouded iridescently gold-and-purple since early middle

age, had now been shut forever; in other words, while such an aperture was in those days sometimes built into a coffin to ensure, as said, a final viewing by those at the burial site, Botofovich believed that because there was a window, that in itself became something that demanded further probing examination. Botofovich could not get it out of his mind, apparently. Addison Merritt, the wealthy colleague Botofovich did confide in at the college in Vermont, stated in a 2003 interview (conducted at Merritt's villa high on the Upper Corniche in Monaco, where Merritt quite happily spent the last years of his own life with his fifth wife) that there was the reported incident when Botofovich showed up for a class in one of those ill-heated rooms on a snowy afternoon far north in the Green Mountains, a session in which he was supposed to be lecturing on how to establish a clear opening thesis sentence in any composition (the gist of the instruction at a teachers college like that was understandably basic, the place being by definition pedagogically oriented); Botofovich did attempt to begin the planned lecture on how to construct a thesis sentence, but soon enough forgot about that and, increasingly animated, refused to speak of anything other than Joyce's coffin window. Botofovich recreated vividly for the couple of dozen uninterested students what it must have been like that day in 1941 at the burial in Switzerland, with sunshine ducking in and out between dark charcoal clouds above the Zurich municipal cemetery there on its rolling hillside beside the spacious grassy park that to this day still also provides a home for, strangely, the Zurich municipal zoo. And Botofovich later told Professor Merritt directly: "Think about it, man. Think about the sturdy rope cords slowly easing the wobbly coffin down, lower and lower, into the ground. Think about Joyce himself, laid out in a proper suit and good white shirt and four-in-hand cravat, his face framed by that glass rectangle, and think about the first spray of dark earth thrown from the silver trowel and tinkling across the glass. It was as if Joyce didn't want to look away, and he wanted to open those undertaker-shut eyes and hope for—even after having suffered such failing eyesight in life—a last and final glimpse of . . . of . . . of. . . ."

But the elderly Merritt told the interviewer that Botofovich just trailed off in the telling and never did quite get to the end of that declaration, and he, Merritt, has pondered for years what it might have been.

Though I'm not sure that either of Botofovich's fixations of the time—Joyce's coffin window or the book found beside his deathbed—really helps all that much in explaining the scene when Botofovich did rush the dais and attempt to physically commandeer the microphone during the keynote address at the general opening session of the Modern Language Association Meeting at the Sieur de Cadillac Hotel in downtown Detroit in 1961, raving about what hopeless idiots English professors were, what plodding, parasitic, self-satisfied bores, and didn't they see what sheer foolishness their discipline was inevitably and rapidly turning into, he demandingly asked of the audience, as he was roughly escorted away—arms flailing, still shouting loud—by several burly hotel attendants and at least one uniformed police officer summoned from the street just outside the hotel.

There was an aneurysm in the course of the scuffle, and Botofovich expired in the ambulance en route to the emergency room of the St. John Riverview Hospital.

5. Shadowism

In any case, it was there in that hotel, the Sieur de Cadillac on December 28, 1961, that Shadowism maybe did finally assert itself, make its strongest essential point, and perhaps literature never will be the same.