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‘THE WEIGHT OF SOCIAL OPINION ON [HIS] SIDE’?: ULYSSES, CENSORSHIP, MODERNISM AND CANONISATION, AUSTRALIAN-STYLE

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The earliest critical responses to *Ulysses* were highly polarised: the defending reviewers tended to prosecute aesthetic and libertarian arguments, while those who were critical raised the spectre of the novel’s being pornographic! The now-unquestionable status of *Ulysses* as a great work of art, as central to the canon of modernist writing, makes it easy to forget that its acceptance as a masterpiece in Anglophone countries was very slow, and held up by many factors, including its banning in several countries, and in Australia by the specificities of the politics of modernism, and by a doggedly Leavisite curriculum in universities in Australia. However, there are some surprising points of departure which raise some curious questions.

Before proceeding, I wish to construct an anecdotal frame which might suggest why the question of Joyce’s reception in Australia is of interest to me. 1968 was an auspicious year for revolts in places other than Paris. Anti-authoritarian ferment was very much part of the cultural context in Queensland, a state not known then for its radicalism: over Vietnam; and the ‘pill encyclical’, *Humanae Vitae*; and the right to buy Aubrey Beardsley’s prints; but also in a peculiarly Queensland inflection, over the right to protest in the streets. It was in this period of student unrest that I was approached by a sophisticated *Sacre Coeur* nun in my university college to perform a job which was beyond the ken of a convent-educated, middle-class young woman. She explained that the Federal Government
Censorship Board required a literary-educated young person to respond to literary works which might need to be excluded from circulation for the protection of such as me. I was sufficiently the product of my literary education to know that I did not approve of censorship (I had, after all, read *Moll Flanders* and *Ulysses*), and accepted the job with the proviso that the Censorship authorities accept my position on censorship. This was, apparently, no impediment. A weirdly surreal scenario ensued: of books arriving in huge black chauffeur-driven limousines; wrapped in brown paper parcels, they were required to be secreted under my bed; subsequently, over scones and tea in a Wickham Street penthouse, I had discussions with an elderly woman about books like *Portnoy's Complaint* and Akiyuki Nozaka's *The Pornographers* (a novel translated by a Jesuit). At 20, I only dimly apprehended the cultural ramifications of this scenario, and researching the reception history and canonisation of *Ulysses* in Australia serves to help gain some further purchase on this strange antipodean moment.

Two years before the publication of *Ulysses*, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice secured a conviction in 1920 against *The Little Review* for its serial publication of the ‘Nausicaa’ episode, one of the tamer chapters of the novel, its subject being (in part) mutual pleasurable masturbation. Rather than defend the novel on aesthetic grounds, defence-lawyer Quinn had argued that the novel was ‘disgusting rather than erotic, and therefore not obscene under the law’.

The first legal American edition, the Random House edition of 1934, was made possible by the scheming decision to time the case so that it could be heard by the liberal and arts-friendly Justice Woolsey in 1933 in the U.S. District Court Southern District of New York. He ruled that despite the novel’s ‘unusual frankness, I do not detect anywhere the leer of the sensualist. I hold, therefore, that it is not pornographic’.

In pursuing the question of whether or not it was obscene, he relied on the responses of two literary legal men (one of whom may have been the unsuccessful defence lawyer in the *Little Review* case), describing the effect on a ‘normal’ reader (he clearly considered himself rather superior to this class of readership) as more likely to be ‘emetic’ than ‘aphrodisiac’.

The first English edition, a limited edition of 2000 copies, underwritten by the Egoist Press (with which Joyce’s patron, Harriet

Shaw Weaver was associated) was actually published in France six months after the Sylvia Beach edition of 1000 copies. A reprint of 500 copies in January 1923 was seized by Customs and burned in ‘the King’s Chimney’. The most popular form of entry of the novel to England between 1923 and 1936 (when the first Bodley Head edition appeared) was in the corsets of lady-tourists returning from Paris, where expensive editions continued to be reprinted by Beach. Fortunately, bulk was fashionable. The limited first edition was not a small book.

In 1926, when Leavis, the arbiter of literary taste for several generations in the Anglocphone world, attempted to import it to teach to a mixed class in 20th century literature, the Director of Public Prosecutions declared: ‘any lecturer who advocated for a mixed class the use of what the Secretary of State had called a “loathsome book” must be a “dangerous crank”’. Although the book was prescribed—despite its unavailability in the early 30s—for certain Cambridge University examinations, and though it was discussed in university and literary circles and books were written about it, *Ulysses* failed to get the *imprimatur* in Britain. The highly influential *Scrutiny* school, which had Leavis at its helm, effectively erased Joyce from the canon, elevating instead Lawrence and Empson. It was a case of omission, probably unconsciously on the grounds of race, class and taste, and a failure to grasp what Leavis might have called the ‘life-affirming’ quality of Joyce’s humour. The first Bodley Head edition waited until 1936, but Joyce continued to fail to receive serious literary critical attention in England until the late 50s or early 60s; and in those outlying colonies afflicted by that version of the cultural cringe where literary values were mere reproductions of those of the metropolis.

In Ireland, the situation was anomalous. The Irish booktrade was heavily dependent on English-published texts, and so the ban in England, although it was not replicated in Ireland, nonetheless meant that the book was not freely available in Ireland. The Irish Free State, which was enthusiastic about censoring books much less provocative than *Ulysses*, did not ever formally ban it. Major figures of the Irish literary revival who substantially influenced public taste (e.g. Lady Gregory and George Russell) disliked the book, though the latter opposed censorship of it—as did the English modernists (notably Woolf and Lawrence). More effective even than official disapproval of it was the
censorship exercised by such lay Catholic zealots as the *Opus Dei* movement and the Legion of Mary. So, the novel tended to be sold in Ireland covertly by booksellers under-the-counter, and presumably at first at the high price set by the French edition.

In the Land of the Free, and its satellite state Canada, the situation was quite different. Even before Justice Woolsey declared the book to be not pornographic, it was apparently being taught at New York University, presumably on the basis of the estimated 30,000 pirated volumes which were sold to meet the curiosity aroused by the obscenity trials. Others were imported from Canada, which had no ban. The trial however turned the novel into a best-seller, a windfall from which the first legal American publisher, Random House (and presumably the Estate), profited. The American Literary establishment, the New Critics at Yale, taught the book from the 40s, and even *Finnegans Wake* figured on the curriculum. More surprisingly, at the University of Toronto, Marshall McLuhan taught *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* even to students at the Catholic College, St. Michael's (as well as those at the three affiliated colleges: Trinity [Anglican], Victoria [other Protestants] and University). Secure canonisation and appearance routinely on undergraduate courses in Modernism waited until the mid-50s.

By the 60s in America, Joyce's position was unassailable, as evidenced by the establishment of the *James Joyce Quarterly*.

Perhaps because of the ban in England, and twitchy State and Commonwealth Customs officials, Joyce’s canonisation in Australia was a much slower affair than in the U.S. and Canada. State censorship began in Victoria (where else?) in 1889, and saucy French novels (especially those of Daudet, de Maupassant, Balzac and Zola) were favourites with the Customs officials on the docks. Even Molly’s favourite, Paul de Cock, and Bloom’s *Photo Bits* which provided the salacious image of the fully-embodied but ethereal nymph which overlooked the Blooms’ nuptial bed, did not escape the vigilant Victorian Customs official’s notice. The way around was for publishers like Cole’s Book Arcade simply to republish an Australian edition of a banned book, a strategy which effectively circumvented the Customs Department which was focussed exclusively on the importation of potentially corrupting works. What the censor declared himself anxious to protect were the lower classes (cheap editions in the hands of less educated readers were deemed more corrupting than expensive ones). The test after 1929 (the period in which *Ulysses* was banned) was ‘what is usually considered unobjectionable in the household of the ordinary self-respecting citizen’ (whoever he might be—it was certainly never a she). In some applications, the relevant unit was the ‘the average householder’s family’, an example of the censor’s infantilisation of adult readers.

Although Protestants took the lead in supporting the banning of books, most notably the conservative Synod of the Anglican diocese of Sydney (11 November 1941), other Protestants (like the liberal Arthur Garnsey) also led the charge in defending liberalism; though Coleman reports that ecumenism often broke down between liberal Protestants and liberal Catholics, who might have been expected to join forces, because of the fear that the Vatican might proscribe Protestant critiques of Catholicism.

For a period between the establishment of the Commonwealth in 1901 and 1929, there was a period of ‘practically no censorship ... [and] public lists of banned books ... [were] temporarily avoided’ while policies and procedures for implementing censorship were developed. This corresponded with a tide of liberalism in Britain in the same period, but ended in Australia abruptly at the end of the Bruce-Page government and was continued under Scullin, in April 1929, after *Ulysses* had had 7 years to enter public consciousness. *Dubliners* was also proscribed at this time (the ban was lifted in 1933) because of three passages: one from ‘Two Gallants’ which tells of a girl being lured into a Donnybrook field and avoiding ‘getting in the family way’ by ‘being up to the dodge’; the second was a passage of the most exquisite irony in which Mrs. Mooney of “The Boarding House” traps Mr. Doran into marriage by masquerading as the protector of her daughter's honour; and the third was a particularly vile piece of sedition in a peculiarly Irish idiom of which double-speak is the hallmark: King Edward VII is excused as ‘an ordinary knockabout like you and me. He’s fond of his glass of grog and he’s a bit of a rake, perhaps, and he’s a good sportsman. Damn it, can’t we Irish play fair’. We do not, unfortunately, have a similar list of the Australian censor’s concerns with *Ulysses*. 
Ulysses was in August company on the censor's list of banned books: with Norman Lindsay's Redheap, Defoe's Moll Flanders, Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms, Huxley's Brave New World, and the lesbian Radclyffe Hall's Well of Loneliness. It remained on the list from 1929 until 1937; however, access was permitted, via a loophole in the law for bona fide applicants (i.e. members of the medical profession, psychoanalysts, university students and those doing physiological, social or educational research). The situation was more extreme in Canada where, according to Donald Theall, students had to certify that they were 'free of mental problems before reading works such as Havelock Ellis, de Sade and Ulysses...' in the university's Art Room, which was not closed until 1955. Booksellers in Australia, according to Coleman were 'perfunctory' in questioning clients' bona fides.

It was during this first period of censorship that the book was studied, not formally in classes, as far as I have been able to make out, but in the Australian English Association and Sydney University Literary Society in 1930, under the charismatic leadership of the Challis Professor of Philosophy at Sydney University, and President of the Literary and Freethought societies, John Anderson. He advocated Ulysses for aesthetic reasons (its Ibsenite realism, its attempt to render objectivity in point of view and its experimental manipulation of styles). Ulysses, it seems, he used as a proving ground for the elaboration of his 'realist' aesthetic theories and to critique the relativistic and subjectivist methods in use in literary criticism in the 20s. Curiously, and this has not to my knowledge been noted before, the basis of his aesthetic system was derived from the fifth chapter of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, a text he failed to problematise and certainly read un-ironically.

A.D. Hope appears to have followed Anderson in 1943, using the evidence of Joyce's Thomist-influenced aesthetic theory to defend Ulysses against the censors. Hope saw the relationship between realism and comedy as critical to its aesthetic method. Anderson had a second use for Ulysses: he deployed it to mount the case against censorship in the early 30s and again in the 40s. Libertarian as he was, he doubtless felt an affinity with its avant-garde and anti-romantic representation of sexuality and its refusal of systems of authority. Additionally, he led the Sydney literary societies in discussing Finnegans Wake as it was published serially during the 30s, though he had more doubts about its usefulness as a critique of culture.

The role of institutions like the Mechanics Institutes and their successors, and the porosity of their boundaries with the Academy, have, I think, been underestimated and certainly under-researched in Australia. An extra-curricula forum for dissemination of positive information about readings of Joyce was Prof. A.J.A. ('Johnny') Waldock's Workers' Educational Association classes at Sydney University in 1935. His approach had the virtues of being based in character analysis and hands-on modelling of Joyce's experiments with point-of-view and style. His pedagogy appears to have been genuinely enabling and far from obscurantist or elitist in the modernist tradition. The publication in 1939 of Finnegans Wake did not necessarily make the case for admiring Ulysses an easier one to make, and Waldock was unable to share the enthusiasm of the younger staff, notably Ian Maxwell and R.G. Howarth, for the more radical experiments of the Wake.

Despite these extra-curricula activities on the part of a professor and more junior members of staff, the University of Sydney English Department was very slow to take up the teaching of the novel under the influence of Prof. Sir Mungo MacCallum who, though he did research on Shakespeare, looked to the Classics for inspiration and a methodology. Waldock's becoming a professor in 1940 did not alter the situation, perhaps because Mungo MacCallum was active in the University and giving lectures until his death in his eighties in 1942. Twentieth-century texts being taught at Sydney in 1949 included: Hemingway, Huxley, Maugham, Kipling, Forster, Sassoon, Conrad, Strachey, Galsworthy and Woolf, but not Joyce, though Joyce was a possibility for Honours students. It was not until 1954, four years after the death of its early champion Professor Waldock, that Portrait figured on courses, and in examination students were asked to determine if Portrait was an imitation of Butler's The Way of All Flesh. If one can judge from University calendars, it was in this year too that Ulysses made its first appearance on a third year course.

The teaching of Ulysses at Melbourne appears to have been a trifle more enthusiastic: both Portrait and Ulysses made an appearance on the third year course in 1949, and I speculate that this may have been initiated by Ian Maxwell who took up a Chair at Melbourne in 1946. It
is interesting to note how very defensive (or posing as devil's advocate) the first examination questions on Joyce at Melbourne were in 1949, though this situation had changed by 1951 when structural, narratological or moral foci, very much in line with New Critical and Leavisite discourses, were more common. Levin's work on Joyce was clearly influential on the way the novel was taught. By 1959, Sam Goldberg, a lecturer at Melbourne from 1954, had begun the work which was to lead to the publication of probably the most important work of Joycean scholarship to be published by an Australian, The Classical Temper.

At most other Australian universities, the take-up rate of Ulysses was much slower. It appeared on the syllabus of the University of Tasmania in 1958 (though Portrait had made it in 1950). The University of Queensland seems to have begun to teach the novel to undergraduates by 1957, though, judging by the question asked in examination, without much enthusiasm: the examiner appears to consider Joyce a formidable short story writer and to have doubts about the unity of both Portrait and Ulysses.

The University of Adelaide, which had a very conservative curriculum until 1950, teaching no twentieth-century texts other than the poetry of T.S. Eliot, was, on the evidence of Calendars and Handbooks, the latest comer, with Ulysses finally making an appearance on a Modernist course in 1987 and 1988, though Portrait was being taught to third year students in 1968.

As Croft, Shapcott, Anderson, Heyward and others point out, there was a climate of resistance to modernism in Australia. Although Modernism won adherents in Australia to its themes and preoccupations (but not its styles) in the 20s and 30s (and even had some palaeo-modernist practitioners like the Irish-Australian novelist Joseph Furphy), it was not until the 50s and 60s that the formal and stylistic experimentation that we now associate with the 'movement' was engaged in.

The furor over the 'Ern Malley' hoax further entrenched conservatism. Perpetrated in 1944 by a pair of formalist poets (James McAuley and Harold Stewart), it aimed to discredit the aesthetic politics of Max Harris's Angry Penguins, an avant-garde journal committed to Surrealism and the new Apocalypse. The debate which ensued had much the same lineaments as the debate over Ulysses in its combination of stylistic and censorship issues, and served to give further impetus to the antimodernism cause in Australia, especially as it was perpetrated and supported by two major poets of their generation (McAuley and Hope respectively), who were to become professors of English with a great deal of power to shape the curriculum and the culture through their writing.

Although literary canonisation of Joyce was slow in Australia, the novel's eventual enshrinement as a centrepiece of English curriculum was inevitable. It would have been much quicker had the novel been an Australian or American text, or if, as in American universities, there had been an interest in Irish literature independent of mainstream English literature. But its acceptance outside the academy became part of a set of contestatory political discourses on censorship in Australia, with the universities being ranged on the liberal side in the debate, especially in the 60s. Although the novel had been released by the Commonwealth Censorship Board in March 1937, the Catholic Evidence Guild demanded that it be banned again. Coleman outlines the parliamentary response in words that I cannot better:

Mr E.J. Harrison, the Minister for Customs, ... decided to examine the book and what he read so shocked him that his 'hair stood on end' and he ordered the ban imposed immediately. 'This book', he said, 'holds up to ridicule the Creator and the Church. It ridicules the whole moral standard of civilization, citizenship and decency. Such books might vitally affect the standard of Australian home life. It cannot be tolerated in Australia any longer.' To drive his point home he read some passages from it to an assembly of journalists in Canberra and while he was reading the Minister for External Affairs, Sir Frederick Stewart, walked into the room. 'Words fail me', he said, 'I have not a sufficiently wide vocabulary to express my opinion of the book.' He made an attempt, however, and described it as 'a collection of unadulterated filth.' The Postmaster-General Collins was more readily articulate: 'Ulysses is a filthy book that should not only be banned but burnt'. The Attorney-General said: 'I have never read the book, but I shall certainly read it now'. According to Ross Gollan, a special typescript edition of Ulysses was produced for the information of other Ministers. It contained the alleged dirty parts only and had some eyes sticking out as if they were on stalks. It was decisive'.

... the Minister for Customs received wide support. The Catholic Evidence Guild, the Salvation Army, the Presbyterian Assembly, the Baptist Union, the New South Wales Methodist Conference, the Guild of St Luke, the Anglican Guild, Moore Theological College, the Anglican Synod, the Anglican Archbishop, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Sydney—these among others
issued statements of congratulation. ... In Victoria the Deputy Leaders of the State Parliamentary Labor Party suggested that the only way to stop the appeal of 'filthy and boldly pornographic' books like *Ulysses* was to encourage more 'early and happy marriages'.

On the other hand a number of organisations attacked the Minister.

... In Sydney the University English Department provided three speakers for a public meeting attacking the ban ... and set *Ulysses* as one of the subjects for the 1942 Beauchamp Prize Essay.

But it was, in fact, certain Anglicans who gave Minister Harrison his biggest shock—the Warden of St Pauls, the Bishop of Grafton and the editor of the *Church Standard* all attacked the ban ... all he could do was maintain the ban and challenge his critics to read out certain passages from the pulpit. 35

An entertaining footnote suggests that reading *Ulysses* aloud did not begin with Bloomsday, but rather was initiated by critics of the novel. The editor of the *Church Standard* remembered a senior politician visiting her home and, 'after professing sorrow and concern at the spectacle of a Christian priest defending an obscene work like *Ulysses*, proceeded to read to her, with evident relish, various “purple passages” as evidence of its obscenity'. 36 The book remained on the restricted list, though this would represent only a hindrance to free circulation, rather than an obstacle to a determined reader. Dutton 37 reported that as late as 1969, *Ulysses* had to be applied for at the Barr Smith because it was held in the strong room. He was apparently unaware of the existence of the Stronge Room.

It is perhaps rather too fanciful to ask the question of whether the matter may not yet be dead. In a recent letter to Ross Chambers, a Sydney Joycean, the Director of Film and Literature Classification (Commonwealth Govt. of Australia) seemed unsure when the ban was lifted in Australia but thought it was probably in the 1940s. Nonetheless, he calmly reserved the right at any time in the future to classify the novel ‘if an applicant submitted it for classification’. 38

So, to conclude, it seems to me very unfortunate that the libertarian/aesthetic agendas of Anderson and Waldock, so powerful on the margins of the academy in the 30s and 40s, took so very long (a further twenty to forty years) to come to fruition. It is, of course, to oversimplify to blame Leavis, though it is not at all harsh, I think, to be critical of the kinds of Oxbridge men who presided over a safe and stagnating curriculum. The question is how beholden were they to their political and religious masters in an era which we are now perhaps inclined to romanticise as the golden age of academic freedom?

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