The Scandal of Ulysses

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The historical scandal of James Joyce's Ulysses may be past, but as a work of literature, a piece of writing, it remains a scandal every time we open it to read or think about what we have read or intend to read of it.

It is a scandal first of all because of its sheer size - not merely its length, but the complexity it compounds and the effort of reading it demands. Jacques Derrida, a writer who has heard the Joycean laughter, likens the reader of the novel to the glimpse we are given of Bloom on the telephone.[1] Through the phone, he plugs into a network of infinite scope and complexity, but at the same time his editor can expunge its messages from his pages, and so from our consciousness, our knowledge. Similarly, when we open Joyce's novel, we are hooked into a world that compounds all knowledge, all time, all languages, and which requires us to accept its offer and demand, to answer with Molly Bloom's great affirmation, "yes I said yes I will Yes". But this affirmation, this yes, is, to continue following Derrida, in itself meaningless. Its only reference, its only signification, is to itself, to the question it has demanded, to the past and future of the speaker and of the novel and of history. And to join in the affirmation is to be ourselves swallowed by Molly Bloom and by Joyce and by his world of words. For, as he is said to have remarked, his ideal reader is an obsessive insomniac who will devote his whole life to reading the author's words. No wonder we back away, in our need, like Stephen Dedalus, to save our selves from the demands of history and allegiance. The book is a moral scandal, demanding no less than our lives.

It is little wonder that the novel caused such scandal at the time of its publication. Its author told his friend, Frank Bugden, that he intended in his novel to present a hero shown from all sides, who would be "all-round" in the sculptor's sense, but also "a complete man . . . a good man."[2] To show such a complete man would necessarily be scandalous.

This hero is not Stephen, for we come to know him from the inside out - a quite different matter. We share with Stephen the attempt, begun in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man - and the last four words are important - to find the authentic freedom of the artist, to reconcile the demands of mind, body and spirit. To do this he must first free himself from the vague pieties of his elders, and the crippling loyalties they imply. When Mr Deasy, his headmaster, remarks sentimentally that "We are a generous people but we must also be just," Stephen responds with the acknowledgement that he fears "those big words . . . which make us so unhappy."(p. 38) Scandalously, he rejects not only sentiment, but the sentimental nationalism that underlies it. His central quality is an honesty with himself that refuses to either to bend to the feelings of others or to deny his own impulses. The novel scandalises the respectable public partly with Stephen's frank recall of his adventures in Paris and his acknowledgement of his lusts. Even the less respectable may be scandalised by his refusal to bend his atheism to give comfort to his mother's dying moments. These were certainly the matters that led to the book's suppression public in England, America, Ireland or Australia at the time of its first publication. Although today this response seems disproportionate to the offence, we can still feel there is an insensitivity, a cruelty, about Stephen that we had not seen in the Portrait. He may be more independent in his mind, but he is less sociable, less attractive to the reader.

In this first movement of the novel, at the beginning of Bloomsday, Stephen is in a state of crisis. His mother is dead, his need to keep his precarious integrity has forced him to fail her on her death-bed, his friends combine superiority with censoriousness, he does not even own the clothes he wears. We walk with him from the Tower to the school to the beach of Sandymount, from stately, plump Buck Mulligan to the harlot's cry and Sandymount beach, with the dead dog and the living dog burying his grandmother and furiously vulturing the dead. We leave him looking backward, where he sees "Moving through the air highspars of a threemaster, her sails braided up on the crosstrees, homing, upstream, silently moving, a silent ship." If the crosstrees suggest the

cross of Christ, the ship and its silence symbolise a voyage nearing completion, a past whose meaning is yet to come. For all the technical brilliance of the language, we are in the familiar world of bildungsroman, the coming of the individual into mature being. Unlike the sententious Buck Mulligan, we can forgive the scandal of Stephen's behaviour by admiring his honesty with himself.

The first sentence of the next section takes us to a different character and a different order of fiction. We are back at the beginning of the day and with the novel's true hero, Leopold Bloom. The theme of death, which we have seen Stephen confronting, also surrounds Bloom. Bloom, however, deals with it very differently. For him, it is a part of life, along with the eating and sleeping, sex, fidelity and faithlessness, that constitute his day. Bloom has reached the stage of authentic being that enables him to accept death as the horizon of significance that gives life its meaning. This in itself is upsetting in a culture that seeks to deny death, either through the elaborate rituals of the church in Joyce's deathbound native Ireland, or through the clinical avoidance that marks contemporary urban societies. Bloom's day, however, begins as he feeds on the deaths of small animals, and continues through signs and reminders of death to a funeral where he joins the friends of his present and encounters constant reminders of his past. This past includes the apostasy and later suicide of his own father, and the death of his own infant son, whose memory continues to haunt him.

These matters are introduced to us with Joyce's account of Bloom's relish of "the inner organs of beasts and fowls", and especially the "grilled mutton kidneys which gave his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine." We are not allowed to separate mind from body. As Bugden reports, Joyce, referring to a later repast, explained:

> "Among other things . . . my book is the epic of the human body. . . In my book the body lives in and moves through space and is the home of a full human personality. The words I write are adapted to express first one of its functions then another. In the Lestrygonians the stomach dominates and the rhythm of the episode is that of the peristaltic movement."

"But the minds, the thoughts of the character," I began.

"If they had no body they would have no mind . . . It's all one. Walking towards his luncheon my hero, Leopold Bloom, thinks of his wife, and says to himself, "Molly's legs are out of plumb." At another time of day he might have expressed the same thought without any underthoughts of food. But I want the reader to understand always through suggestion rather than direct statement." (p. 21)

Here we have two reasons for scandal - the refusal of any dualistic view of the human, and the refusal to do the readers' work for them. The bewilderment induced among the book's first readers made it easy for the straighteners and the censors to have their way.

We need to remember that the book appeared at an unhappy time. The world was still recovering from the ravages of the Great War and the following influenza epidemic. Joyce's own native land was rent by a civil war that made it impossible for him to return for the holiday he had hoped to take while working on Ulysses.[3] Most importantly, the war seemed to have destroyed hope in human society, a feeling expressed in the work of such of Joyce's contemporaries and supporters as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In contrast to these writers, Ulysses is hopeful, as is suggested by Joyce's own remark that Bloom is "a good man" and by the realisation by some critics from its first publication that the work is an example of Rabelaisian comedie humaine.[4]

The hope, however, is hard won. While Joyce's technique is modernist, his vision is primarily realist, motivated by his determination to see and describe every element of his hero's experience. His modernism enables him to see that this experience is itself understood through the history and legends that Bloom shares, as well as the particular events in his life, but in showing this fully to the reader he undermines the heroic qualities that the title of the book might have led us to expect. The narrative, by showing us the details of how a life is actually experienced, denies us the satisfactions of suspense and revelation that we find in even the greatest of the nineteenth

century realists. The novel may end with an affirmation, but this moment leaves all the problems of the day where we began with them.

This apparent lack of art left readers bewildered, and allowed the authorities to seize on the only parts of thenovel they could comprehend: its refusal to acknowledge common pieties and proprieties. Effectively, the censors condemned Joyce for the same fault Buck Mulligan found in Stephen Dedalus - a refusal to bend the truth. Behind both condemnations lurks the jealousy of the mean-minded who seek to destroy what they can neither match nor understand. The judge's words in the eventual decision of the American court in favour of Joyce deserve to be quoted briefly, as they proves that the law can comprehend literary values. In concluding his judgement, John M. Woolsey explained:

> I am quite aware that owing to some of it scenes, 'Ulysses' is a rather strong draught to ask some sensitive, though normal, persons to take. But my considered opinion, after long reflection, is that whilst in many places the effect of 'Ulysses' on the reader undoubtedly is somewhat emetic, nowhere does it tend to be aphrodisiac.
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> 'Ulysses' may, therefore, be admitted to the United States. [5]

The judge's finding that the author's "intention and method required frankness, and without it would have been dishonest" recognises that the work of art may have to scandalise if it is to awaken us into awareness. The verdict both vindicated Joyce and, with the repeal of Prohibition in the same year, marked a maturing of the American mind that, I regret to say, seems to have been lost again in recent years.

Yet we might argue that the verdict, while acknowleging the necessity of frankness, failed to recognise that the scandalous is itself contained in a mytholgical framework that transcends it. The 'Oxen of the Sun'episdoe sets the drunkeness and bawdiness of men, the makers of society, against the suffering of the women who bear its successive generations. The 'Circe'episode shows both men and women reduced to the bestial, but also restored by Bloom's acceptance of a

universal fatherhood that encompasses the merely biological human responsibility. His acceptance of Stephen as his son is also an acceptance of Molly as a universal wife whose love is not diminished by its sharing.

While the United States may have been deemed ready to face these mysteries, Australia preferred to remain in a state of mean-mindedness. This, no doubt, was partly due to the puritanism it shared with Ireland, although in our case rooted in Protestant as much as Jansenist influences. The book was banned in the interwar years, and I am not sure when the ban was actually lifted.[6] Certainly by 1946, because it figured then in the Robert Close case. Close was then on trial for an obscene libel in his Love Me Sailor, a romantic realist novel about sailors and a woman on a sailing vessel beating up the west coast of the Americas, where it was plying the guano trade. The novel would no doubt have pleased Stephen Dedalus in his lighter moments, but it has nothing in common with Joyce other than its ability to upset the authorities. It was this issue the defence counsel had in mind when he pointed out that, at the very time Close was n trial, the very respectable Melbourne firm of booksellers, Robertson and Mullens, had filled their window with a display of that far more reprehensible book, James Joyce's Ulysses. Whereupon the judge, Sir Edmund Herring, leaned across the bench and enquired, "Oh, is it a translation?"[7] Robertson and Mullens removed their window display the same day, but the book must have remained on legal sale, because I bought a copy a few years later when I became a student.

This edition, presumably the Bodley Head 1937 edition, had the singular advantage of having an appendix devoted to the trial, with page references to all the allegedly obscene remarks. This made it very popular with my fellow students, but my residual puritanism insisted that I should read it as a whole or not at all. As it turned out, it was not at all, because the book was decisively borrowed before I got around to my reading, which had to wait until I could buy a later edition, without that useful appendix. I can only hope that the original borrower profited from his

unlawful acquisition - certainly, the only scandal Joyce would have found in the episode would have been if he had failed to read what he had so deftly acquired.

Yet these scandals of esteem and reputation lead us away from the true scandal of the book. It affronts not our morality, but our sense of what the world is. It takes the name of one of the most revered figures in western culture and uses it as the title of a book that purports to be a rewriting of a foundation epic of that culture, only to present us, when we read it, with an apparently aimless tale of an atheist, a Jew and a tart. Ulysses, in the words of Homer inscribed by Joyce on his sketch of his hero, was "a man skilled in all ways of contending",[8] who by his counsel held together the Greek armies and successfully plotted the downfall of Troy. He subsequently endured ten years of wandering, lived with goddesses and defeated the mob of suitors who tried to usurp his wife and kingdom at home. Leopold Bloom by contrast is a mere salesman of advertising space, a cuckold whose wanderings lack purpose or direction. But Joyce saw the personality underlying the hero, the everyday roles that he played alongside his epic feats. As he told Frank Bugden,

> Ulysses is son to Laertes, but he is father to Telemachus, husband to Penelope, lover of Calypso, companion in arms of the Greek warriors around Troy and King o Ithaca. He was subjected to many trials, but with wisdom and courage he came through them all. Don't forget that he was a war-dodger who tried to evade military service by simulating madness. He might have never taken up arms and gone to Troy, but the Greek recruiting sergeant was too clever for him and, while he was ploughing the sands, placed young Telemachus in front of his plough. But once at the war the conscientious objector became a *jusqu'auboutist*. When the others wanted to abandon the siege he insisted on staying till Troy should fall. (p. 16)

Just as in these words Joyce shows us the ordinary man within the Homeric hero, so in Leopold Bloom he shows us the hero in the ordinary man. The reader who failed to see the hero saw only the "foul rag-and-boneyard" in which he contended, and was scandalised.

Not only the upholders of bourgeois morality, but even the guardians of the revolution that was to place the ordinary man and woman in the centre of history were scandalised. Radek, ideologue of Soviet culture, described Joyce's novel as "a heap of dung, crawling with worms, photographed by a cinema apparatus through a microscope," the product of a "rotting capitalist monopoly".[9] To be fair, this is an accurate enough description of one aspect of Joyce's Dublin, and interestingly enough recalls the kind of abuse heaped on modernism in Australia by Norman Lindsay from the right in the 1920s, and even the criticism of Patrick White by David Martin or Judah Waten from the left in the 1960s.[10] For Joyce's Dublin is the product of capitalism and a decaying imperial order. But whereas romantics and sentimentalists would prefer to ignore the signs of decay, and socialists and radical nationalists would demand revolutionary heroes to show the reader the way beyond them, Joyce, the supreme realist, is content to note them with, as Radek recognised, cinematic accuracy.

This accuracy takes us beyond the imagery and discontinuities of the cinema, into the minds of those who perceive this world and construct their own means of finding truth within it, of constructing beauty from the elements of decay. Although the participants in the drama of the day are all drawn from the same lower middle classes that Joyce himself sprang from, Stephen and Bloom both perceive, as they go about their business, the representatives of the imperial rule and examples of the extreme poverty that exists alongside it. Prostitutes, bare-footed newsboys, street urchins, weary labourers and poverty-stricken housewives thread through their streetscapes and punctuate their conversations. In the conversations, political nationalists and philosophical idealists offer their contesting realities. Stephen, the would-be artist, responds to these by endeavouring to impose his own authoritative edifice of words in which he becomes Hamlet the

son and father of his own drama. Bloom, the much enduring man and patient listener to other peoples' fables, is content to remember the lost satisfactions of his past, to attend to the present satisfactions of food and friends, and to wait on what his homecoming may offer - if not this day, then one day - from Molly Bloom's inexhaustible bounty. When, in the 'Circe'episode, Bloom himself drifts into a vision of revolution and his assumption of benevolent power, his dream ends in disaster. The novel, in its sardonic dismembering of the pretensions of Stephen and his intellectual and political friends, and even of the single utopian dream of its modest hero, is indeed a scandal to those who seek solutions. Yet it offers us no escape from politics into either a religious or an aesthetic realm. The political problems are, like the religious, insistent. It is just that the author offers no answers.

An exception to this can of course be found in Molly Bloom. As the book's Penelope, she seems to offer both the remembrance of past delight and an assurance of a future home. She may take lovers, she may be wantoning with Blazes Boylan even as Bloom thinks of her, but she says yes to life with such energy that she sanctifies all and leaves room for all. Her plenitude justifies all. Yet this very plenitude offers us a problem. Does she really combine in herself the beings of goddess of love and earth mother, at once source and object of life, or is she merely a figure of masculine fantasy? Certainly, if we may believe Frank Bugden, Nora Barnacle seemed very doubtful of the merits of the book of which her alter ego constituted the centre.[11] It may be that, despite the breadth and depth of her panegyric to life, Molly Bloom remains beyond our comprehension. In the economy of the novel, Stephen betrays his mother, and then seeks to destroy her by making her Hamlet's mother or Shakespeare's wife, both of whom, in his argument, betray the writer. Bloom, however, is an observer and listener, not a writer. Molly remains beyond him, a principle to which he aspires, which gives meaning to his life, but which he can never possess, even in imagination. Her words which conclude the book constitute, therefore,

an Ithaca that must exceed any possible revolution, socialist or nationalist, and which can only be betrayed by confining it within politics or religion or even art.

It remains for us to consider the scandal the novel may represent in Australia today. Certainly, there is no Australia work to compare with it, for fortunately Joyce has had no Australian imitators, although, as Jack Hibberd will no doubt demonstrate, he has directly influenced a number of Australian writers. But Hibberd's own work is too various and has a too distinctive voice of its own to be considered merely in relation to Ulysses. The only classic Australian novel that may bear comparison is Joseph Furphy's Such Is Life, which has a similar peripatetic scope and anti-heroic stance. Like Joyce, Furphy was sceptical of politics and religion, scathing of human pretensions, and a keen observer of the human comedy. His novel however, is in the tradition of Sterne rather than of Shakespeare. His characters lack the inwardness we find in Ulysses, and, unlike Joyce, he fails to investigate the source of the misogyny that Tom Collins, like Stephen Dedalus, displays. His novel, published in the year before the first Bloomsday, could perhaps be best described as an extended anticipation of the 'Wandering Rocks' sequence in Joyce.

But the greatest relevance of Ulysses to us today becomes clear if we remember that it was published in another mean and nasty decade. Although Joyce himself seems to have had no political opinions, believing that the artists betters the world directly through his work,[12] Ulysses is filled with men of ardent political opinion. Like the Dublin Joyce remembered, or the Europe in which he wrote, Australia is full of people seeking answers, and some only too ready to proclaim that they have found them.

In Dublin, Bloom encounters Parnellites still mourning their lost leader, Fenians preaching rebellion, patriots condemning England and all her works. Bloom admires Parnell, has assisted Sinn Fein, but he gives his allegiance to none. As Frank Bugden remarked, "The one-eyed man may be king in the realm of the blind, but the two-eyed man is nothing but a nuisance in the

kingdom of the one-eyed."(p. 148) Leopold Bloom, the two-eyed man, encountered the one-eyed Dubliners at Barney Kiernan's in the Cyclops episode of his day's journeyings. Trying to be the reasonable man, he succeeded only in arousing antagonism to himself as a Jew and had to be hurried off the premises as the angered Citizen tried to attack him physically. Rqather than face the complexities of history, the patriots in Barney Kiernan's, like our present Prime Minister and the Member for Oxley, who echoes some of his less well-chosen words, are so afraid of the present that they retreat to a mythical past and try to cast the blame for our present predicament on an outcast minority, just as the Jews were asked to bear the blame for the troubles of Europe. Those who, like Joyce, would tell the truth, are a scandal and an affront to them. The lasting scandal of Ulysses is that the zealots and preachers of hatred do not allow its words to enter their minds and blow away their cobwebs with its blast of compassion and understanding, its great belly-laugh of comedy and its tribute to an absurd, levelling and ennobling eroticism that, yielded to, sweeps all lesser joys and fears away in its path.

A version of this essay was delivered a the Bloomsday celebrations in Melbourne, June 1997.

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[1] In '"Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce", in A Derrida Reader: between the blinds, edited by Peggy Kamuf, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, pp. 571-98.
[2] Frank Bugden, James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1960, p. 17.
[3] Richard Ellmann, James Joyce, new and revised edition, OUP, Oxford, 1983, p. 476.
[4] Bugden, p. 17; Ellmann, p. 527.
[5] Ellmann, p. 666.
[6] Francis Devlin Glass suggsts the Customs ban was lifted in 1937, but it may have rmained banned under state jurisdictions.
[7] Robert Close, Of Salt and Earth, Nelson, Melbourne, 1977, p.246.
[8] Ellmann, Plate XXXVII. I have preferred Robert Fitzgerald's translation of Joyce's Greek inscription.
[9] Quoted in Maxim Gorky et al, Soviet Writers' Congress 1934 The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1977, pp. 19 and 42; my attention was drawn to this by Paul Adams in his unpublished PhD D thesis, Monash, 1997.
[10] Norman Lindsay, 'Foreword' in each of Vision IV, 1922, and Vision III, 1924. David Martin, 'Among the Bones', Meanjin 18, 1, 1959; Judah Waten, 'Australian Literature in 1962', Realist Writer, 12, 1963.
[11] Bugden, pp. 36-37. Cf. Ellman, pp. 525-26.
[12] Bugden, pp. 187-88.