"A Would-Be-Dirty Mind": D. H. Lawrence as an Enemy of Joyce

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You know that I need to go away, away, away: yes, yes, I can't go on here any­
more. You know there are always the angels and the archangels, thrones, pow­
ers, cherubims, seraphims—the whole choir there. But here these baptised
beasts always make themselves heard, these and nothing else. I'm going away
from here. Walking one arrives: if not to the grave, at least a little bit outside
this human, too human world. (Lawrence, Letters IV 185)

D. H. Lawrence wrote these words on 2 February 1922, when he was prepar­
ing to pack up his home in Sicily, turn his back on Europe, and sail around the
world. I think they are a good entry into the question of why Lawrence and
Joyce must be counted among the great pairs of literary enemies; for what di­
vides them, finally, is their differing attitudes to “this human, too human world” below, and to “the angels and the archangels” above.

A few notes, first, on how much these adversaries knew about each other's
work. Joyce was certainly prejudiced against Lawrence, both as a writer and
as an Englishman, but probably knew more of him by hearsay than by close
reading. In June 1918 he asked his agent, J. B. Pinker, to get him a copy of the
American edition of The Rainbow (Letters I 115). The publisher, Huebsch, was
being very careful about distributing copies, and Joyce may never have re­
ceived the copy he ordered (Delany 166–167). The only other Lawrence book
we know Joyce looked at was Lady Chatterley's Lover, and he probably did not
look at it for very long (SL 359). Lawrence does not seem to have taken any
interest in Joyce before 1922, and there is no sign that he ever read Dubliners
or Portrait. Then the publicity surrounding the publication of Ulysses caught
his attention and in July 1922, while living in Australia, he wrote to S. S. Koteliansky that “I shall be able to read this famous Ulysses when I get to America. I doubt (i.e. I suspect) he’s a trickster.” Lawrence was writing Kangaroo at the time, and said of it, “but such a novel! Even the Ulyssesians will spit at it” (Letters IV, 275). He finally got hold of a borrowed copy of Ulysses in New Mexico in November 1922, and sent it back eight days later with the comment: “I am sorry, but I am one of the people who can’t read Ulysses. Only bits. But I am glad I have seen the book, since in Europe they usually mention us together—James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence—and I feel I ought to know in what company I creep to immortality. I guess Joyce would look as much askance on me as I on him. We make a choice of Paola and Francesca floating down the winds of hell.”  

The needle of personal rivalry is already evident, reflecting Lawrence’s uneasiness that he and Joyce had become strange bedfellows as the two most notorious banned authors in English. Lawrence’s literary judgement of the novel was guarded: “Ulysses wearied me: so like a schoolmaster with dirt and stuff in his head: sometimes good, though: but too mental” (Letters IV, 345). Lawrence would return regularly to this criticism of Joyce as someone who achieved his effects in too conscious a way. Two months after reading Ulysses he wrote “Surgery for the Novel—or a Bomb,” and spoke of the “death-rattle” of the “serious” novel:

“Did I feel a twinge in my little toe, or didn’t I?” asks every character of Mr. Joyce or of Miss Richardson or M. Proust. . . . Through thousands and thousands of pages Mr. Joyce and Miss Richardson tear themselves to pieces, strip their smallest emotions to the finest threads, till you feel you are sewed inside a wool mattress that is being slowly shaken up, and you are turning to wool along with the rest of the woolliness. It’s awful. And it’s childish. It really is childish, after a certain age, to be absorbedly self-conscious. (Selected Literary Criticism 114–15)

When Lawrence came to read part of “Work in Progress” in the summer of 1928, he felt that Joyce was going much further down the wrong path: “Somebody sent me Transition—American number—that Paris modernissimo periodical, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein, etc. What a stupid olla podrida of the Bible and so forth James Joyce is: just stewed-up fragments of quotation in the sauce of a would-be-dirty mind.” 3 Early in 1929 Harry Crosby tried to arrange a meeting between the two men, but Joyce refused. In whatever circle they inhabit on the opposite shore, presumably they are still passing each other without the tribute of recognition.

It would need a book to do justice to the rivalry between these two near-contemporaries whose literary careers and personal histories have so much in common, yet who remain so deeply opposed. In this brief essay I attempt only to identify two major points of contention: realism as a method and sexuality as a subject.
Much in Lawrence's judgment of Joyce derives from the assumption that Joyce was the inheritor of nineteenth-century realism. Lawrence's most eloquent statement on this tradition comes in his discussion of Flaubert:

Realism is just one of the arbitrary views man takes of man. It sees us all as little ant-like creatures toiling against the odds of circumstance. . . . I think the inherent flaw in Madame Bovary is that individuals like Emma and Charles Bovary are too insignificant to carry the full weight of Gustave Flaubert's profound sense of tragedy. . . . Emma and Charles Bovary are two ordinary persons, chosen because they are ordinary. But Flaubert is by no means an ordinary person. Yet he insists on pouring his own deep and bitter tragic consciousness into the little skins of the country doctor and his dissatisfied wife. . . .

. . . the human soul has supreme joy in true, vivid consciousness. And Flaubert's soul has this joy. But Emma Bovary's soul does not, poor thing, because she was deliberately chosen because her soul was ordinary. . . .

[Yet] Even Emma Bovary has a certain extraordinary female energy of restlessness and unsatisfied desire. So that both Flaubert and Verga allow their heroes something of the hero, after all. The one thing they deny them is the consciousness of heroic effort. (Phoenix II 281–282)

Now if you substitute Molly and Leopold for Emma and Charles I think you have essentially the same point, though Lawrence would not be so generous to Joyce as to Flaubert. And how might one respond in Joyce's defense? First, that Joyce's "profound sense" is comic rather than tragic, and that Ulysses is not a nihilistic work, as Madame Bovary perhaps is. Second, that ordinary life is quite heroic enough for Joyce, provided one pays sufficiently close and respectful attention to it. Bloom may not be much bigger intrinsically than Charles Bovary, or Bouvard and Pécuchet, but he is imagined with affection rather than scorn, and that makes all the difference. Third, that the special effect of Ulysses depends on Molly and Bloom having "something of the hero" without being conscious of it, as Lawrence would want. Their greatness lies, in other words, precisely in their lack of consciousness—we see the classical parallel, but they mustn't.

When we turn to the sexual opposition between Joyce and Lawrence, we need to fill in the background of the former's sly deflations and the latter's dismissive outbursts. Lawrence was two years dead when Joyce called the ending of Lady Chatterley's Lover "propaganda in favour of something which, outside of D.H.L.'s country at any rate, makes all the propaganda for itself" (SL 359). What Joyce did not know was that Connie Chatterley seems to have been conceived deliberately as the antidote to Molly Bloom! "The last part of [Ulysses]," Lawrence burst out, "is the dirtiest, most indecent, obscene thing ever written. Yes it is, Frieda. It is filthy. . . . This Ulysses muck is more disgusting than Casanova. I must show that it can be done without muck" (Mackenzie 167). One can make a joke of this, saying that Lawrence liked the idea of Ulysses—
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"lusty woman has impotent husband, takes lover"—but not the way it was written up. But there is a serious point at issue, concerning the treatment of sexuality in nineteenth-century realism. Lawrence found that treatment a deliberate narrowing of human potential; whereas Joyce accepts realism's fundamental project of documenting, without moral preconceptions, people's everyday behavior.

Joyce regards with equanimity every possible sexual act that is freely chosen; but he does not stop there. His interest in the body is also a moral stance, taken up against the orthodox Christian hostility to "mere" flesh. More heretic than scientist, Joyce becomes a Manichean in reverse, preferring the flesh that affirms to the spirit that denies. Courting Marthe Fleischmann, he reminds her that "Jésus Christ a pris son corps humain: dans le ventre d'une femme juive" (SL 233). It is by woman's flesh, and especially her secret inner parts, that a world fallen into negation can be redeemed. At the same time, Joyce is fascinated by woman's double nature, combining the carnal with the transcendent. His sexual epiphanies are moments when the woman displays both qualities intensely and simultaneously. The whore in Portrait, for example, is a priestess of the body. A real priest would raise the host up to heaven then bring it down into the mouth of the communicant, who kneels below him. But the whore puts something even more potent into Stephen's mouth: her own tongue, in a direct communion of flesh with flesh.

In the vision of the bird-girl, and in the erotic letters to Nora, Joyce excites himself with a sacred love-object who displays for him her profane functions of excretion; the most intense sexual experience is one that mingles, sacrilegiously, the most exalted with the most vulgar. Yet Joyce's sexuality remains catholic, in the sense of universal: it includes every possible means of communion between men and women, whether high or low. His letter to Nora of 2 December 1909 is a classic expression of his need to reconcile sacred and profane love: "side by side and inside this spiritual love I have for you there is also a wild beast-like craving for every inch of your body, for every secret and shameful part of it, for every odour and act of it."5

For Joyce, then, the spiritual idea adds spice to the raw hungers of sensuality; and this is precisely what offends the Lawrentian sexual ethic. The episodes I have discussed would be for Lawrence prime examples of "sex in the head," the subordination of the physical act to a sophisticated consciousness of it. In Women in Love, Birkin tells Hermione: "You don't want to be an animal, you want to observe your own animal functions, to get a mental thrill out of them" (41). The Lawrentian ideal of immediacy is the opposite of Joyce's "working up" of sexuality within a cultural and religious symbolic system. Hence Lawrence's complaint that Ulysses was "too mental." In Finnegans Wake he found a progression of the disease "too terribly would-be and done-on-purpose, utterly without spontaneity or real life" (Letters VI 548).

"Real life," for Lawrence, means striking through the mask of culture to get
as close as possible to "the thing itself." Joyce, on the other hand, accepts that reality is inescapably textual. Stephen's maxim that absence is the highest form of presence argues that representations are more potent than whatever they are taken to represent. In sexual relations, Joyce dwells obsessively on indirect or incomplete modes of consummation; he is fascinated by everything that may intervene between desire and performance. A partial list of these intermediate conditions would include idealization (of the woman), fantasies of the inaccessible other, voyeurism, fetishism (of garments, symbols, the written word), fear of exposure, surrogate or vicarious satisfaction, complaisance, jealousy, the incest taboo, impotence. Most of these conditions can be found also in Joyce's personal sexual history.

Lawrence did not read Joyce closely enough to appreciate the full extent of his rejection of sexual immediacy. But he read enough to support a psychic indictment: that in Joyce the worm of consciousness preys on the living flesh of desire. To this Lawrence adds a moral judgement, directed against the demotic quality of sex in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. When Lawrence was twenty-two, he told a congregational minister that he had "believed for many years that the Holy Ghost descended and took conscious possession of the 'elect'—the converted one" (*Letters* I.39). Lawrence ceased being a chapel-going orthodox Christian in his late teens; but there persisted in his emotional makeup much of the Calvinist division of mankind into the elect and the preterite (those who are without grace and rejected by God). Not unlike Joyce, Lawrence dares to be a heretic by making sexual union the center of his heterodox religion. But Joyce makes all sex sacramental in some degree—even, and especially, such stigmatized practices as prostitution or masturbation; Lawrence makes distinctions and excludes. In Lawrence's neo-Calvinist morality, sex becomes the predominant means and sign of grace; but, by the same token, the wrong kind of sex is the mark of preterition. From this comes Lawrence's preoccupation with the signs of sexual grace, such as the proper correspondence between the man's and the woman's desire. And just as in the orthodox Calvinist tradition, determining the exact degree of grace in the soul becomes an esoteric art. There is also a Calvinist anxiety about salvation, though now associated with sexual instead of explicitly religious consciousness.

My general point here is that sexuality in both authors demonstrates the subtle complicity between Modernism and religion; Modernism might even be considered a religious revival, challenging the Victorian idea that religion would wither away and be replaced by science. Yet Joyce and Lawrence are firmly heterodox; it almost seems that they preserve religion because it enables heresy, perversion, and sacrilege. Within Catholicism, the use of ritual for profane purposes goes back to medieval love poetry and reaches its formal limit in the Marquis de Sade; Joyce's erotic letters to Nora continue and extend this tradition. For Joyce, before there can be sweets there must be sin. Calvinism has a different interplay between rule and transgression. There, Lawrence is
best understood as an antinomian: one who believes that the elect are incapable of sin, following Titus 1:15: "Unto the pure all things are pure." In the antinomian system, the same act may be sinful or blameless; it all depends on whether the person acting is in a state of grace. Lawrence applies a similar rule to sexual acts. His antinomianism is most evident in his treatment of extreme or "unnatural" practices, such as anal intercourse. This can be sign of preterition, for acquaintances like J. M. Keynes (Letters II 320-21) or for the decadent Loerke in Women in Love. But for Will and Anna in The Rainbow, or for Mellors and Connie in Lady Chatterley's Lover, it is the most forbidden acts that confirm their love and raise them above the common run of humanity (Rainbow 218–20; Lady Chatterley 258–59).

When Lawrence says, "I hate sex, it is such a limitation," I think he is concerned with the unequal distribution of grace: sex is the most promising way of escaping this "human, all too human world," yet it too often fails to provide enough lift. Hence Lawrence's obsession with distinguishing between good sex and bad sex—that is, between the sacred and the profane. Joyce, on the other hand, wants the sacred and profane to merge, in bed, chamber pot, or individual pair of trousers. By Lawrence's standards, all of Bloom's sex is spectacularly bad—and Molly's, too, if for different reasons. But Joyce, like Father Conmee (U-GP 10:184–205), blesses on regardless; and this Lawrence cannot forgive.

NOTES

1. Letters IV, 340. The reference to Dante's Paolo and Francesca (Inferno V) is unclear. They are still united in death; Lawrence must have been thinking either of Francesca's hatred for the husband who murdered them, Giovanni da Malatesta (who was still alive when Dante composed the episode), or of some other pair who keep up their rivalry beyond the grave, such as Ulysses and Ajax (Odyssey, book II).

2. The Rainbow was banned in 1915; in 1921 it was reissued in the United States by subscription. Women in Love was privately published in the United States in 1920; an expurgated English edition appeared in the following year. In July 1922 copies of Women in Love were seized from the New York office of Lawrence's publisher, Thomas Seltzer, though in September the book was cleared for sale.

3. Letters VI, 507. Olla podrida: a spicy stew of meat and vegetables. The issue was presumably Transition 13 (Summer 1928), containing "Continuation of a Work in Progress," revised as Finnegans Wake III.ii.

4. I am assuming here that the bird-girl encourages Stephen to watch her urinate. See Joyce's confession to Gertrude Kaempff er that his first sexual experience was similarly provoked; also H.C.E.'s "sin in the park" (Ellmann 418–19).

5. SL 180–81. For Lawrence, Joyce's scatological interests prove his disgust with the body: "And now, man has begun to be overwhelmingly conscious of the repulsiveness of his neighbour, particularly of the physical repulsiveness. There it is, in James Joyce,
in Aldous Huxley, in André Gide, in modern Italian novels like Parigi—in all the very modern novels, the dominant note is the repulsiveness, intimate physical repulsiveness of human flesh” (Criticism 410–11). But I think Lawrence fails to see that the repulsion he feels in reading Joyce is his own, rather than the author’s. Seated “above his own rising smell,” Bloom remains “calm” (Ulysses 56). Joyce, too, relishes the body as it is—whereas Lawrence, much of the time, wrinkles his nose.

6. See, e.g., Compton Mackenzie’s testimony: “What worried him particularly was his inability to attain consummation simultaneously with his wife, which according to him must mean that their marriage was still imperfect in spite of all they had both gone through” (167–68). Mellors makes a similar complaint about his first marriage.

WORKS CITED


