CHAPTER 7

“The True-Born Englishman” and the Irish Bull: Daniel Defoe in the “Oxen of the Sun” Episode of Ulysses

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In the “Oxen of the Sun” episode of Ulysses, Joyce stages a high-spirited historical pageant of English prose style through the ages, synthesising the voices of celebrated male writers to produce the impression that the narrative is recounted from successive period points of view. The performance of English prose style reaches back as far as its origins in Latin and Anglo Saxon, surging forward all the way to the late nineteenth century, only to be followed by an eruption of male oral culture and the drunken vernacular of Dublin circa 1904. Joyce explained how he envisaged this stylistic evolution would unfold in a frequently quoted letter of March 1920, addressed to Frank Budgen:

Am working hard at Oxen of the Sun, the idea being the crime committed against fecundity by sterilizing the act of coition. Scene, lying-in hospital. Technique: a nineparted episode without divisions introduced by a Sallustian-Tacitean prelude (the unfertilized ovum), then by way of earliest English alliterative and monosyllabic and Anglo-Saxon [...] then by way of Mandeville, then Malory’s Morte d’Arthur [...] then the Elizabethan chronicle style [...] then a passage solemn, as of Milton, Taylor, Hooker, followed by a choppy Latin-gossipy bit, style of Burton-Browne, then a passage Bunyanesque [...] after a diarystyle bit Pepys-Evelyn [...] and so on through Defoe-Swift and Steele-Addison-Sterne and Landor-Pater-Newman until it ends in a frightful jumble of Pidgin English, nigger English, Cockney, Irish, Bowery slang and broken doggerel. This progression is also linked back at each part subtly with some foregoing episode of the day and, besides this, with the natural stages of development in the embryo and the periods of faunal evolution in general [...] Bloom is the spermatozoon, the hospital the womb, the nurse the ovum, Stephen the embryo.

How’s that for high?

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Notably, this giddy exposition of the guiding technique and theme was written at an early stage in the episode’s genesis, several months before the first part of
“Oxen” was ready for publication in the September-December 1920 issue of *The Little Review*. Earlier critics worked assiduously and ingeniously to interpret the episode in accordance with this germinal outline, failing to appreciate that it was an exuberant statement of work in progress.¹

In 1921 Joyce prepared a revised schema for *Ulysses*, designating the ‘technic’ of “Oxen” to be “embryonic development”.² This conceit accords well with the elaborate gestational parallels set out in the letter to Budgen, linking the stylistic evolution to the episode’s ostensible subject (Mina Purefoy’s labour and the meeting of the “embryo philosopher” (U 14.1295) Stephen with the fatherly Bloom). The correspondence between the “natural stages of development in the embryo and the periods of faunal evolution in general” has a basis in the cutting-edge scientific thinking of the day. Following Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), the German freethinker Ernst Haeckel formulated the now discredited biogenetic law that ontogeny (the embryological development of the individual organism) recapitulates phylogeny (the evolutionary history of the species), a theory that was also applied to the origin and development of human language.³ Applying this biogenetic law to “Oxen”, the notion that the individual’s development from embryo to adult passes through successive stages in the evolutionary development of the species strongly implies that Joyce achieves a mature style representative of a new stage in the evolutionary process by recapitulating the styles of the past.⁴ This reading accords well with the biological metaphors for literary lineage that Stephen develops as he articulates his theory of *Hamlet* in “Scylla and Charybdis”, whereby artistic paternity is modelled as “a mystical estate, and apostolic

² The English-language schema was produced in advance of Valery Larbaud’s public lecture on *Ulysses*, which was held on 7 December 1921. One copy, the so-called ‘Beach Schema’ (Buffalo V.A.1.b.i), is reproduced on JJA 12:174b.
³ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (London: John Murray, 1859); Ernst Haeckel, *The Riddle of the Universe at the Close of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Joseph McCabe (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1900). See, for instance, Haeckel’s comment: “I established the opposite view, that this history of the embryo (ontogeny) must be completed by a second, equally valuable, and closely connected branch of thought – the history of race (phylogeny). Both of these branches of evolutionary science, are, in my opinion, in the closest causal connection; this arises from the reciprocal action of the laws of heredity and adaptation.” *The Riddle of the Universe*, 80. For a fuller discussion of Joyce’s use of *The Riddle of the Universe* in *Ulysses*, see Geert Lernout, *Help My Unbelief: James Joyce and Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 68, 77, 158.