MODERNISM AND
“THE PLAIN READER’S RIGHTS”:
DUFF-RIDING-GRAVES
RE-READING JOYCE

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I will once more explore the map of modernism provided by Graves and Riding in their celebrated *Survey of Modernist Poetry*, with a precise question in mind: since Graves and Riding mention Joyce a few times, one can wonder how his works fit within their picture of modernism, a picture determined from the beginning by the point of view of the reader and the issue of obscurity.¹ If one wants to establish a bill of “rights” granted to the “plain reader”, can Joyce be called a true “modernist”? Can Joyce’s intractable difficulty appear as a stumbling block for critics intent on presenting as broad and ecumenical a picture of modernism as possible? Is the (by now dated, or at least historical) picture of a “plain reader” helpful in negotiating with Joyce’s general strategies of writing and reading?

We know that, after a successful *On English Poetry* (1922), Graves decided to present modern poets to a broad British audience, and then enlisted Eliot’s contribution to collaborate on a book provisionally called *Untraditional Elements of Poetry*. Laura Riding soon replaced Eliot as collaborator on the volume, which was renamed *Modernist Poetry Explained to the Plain Man*. It was finally

published in 1927 under the title *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*. Since the focus of the book is poetry, it is perhaps understandable that Joyce should not figure in it prominently, or that the name of Bloom should even be misquoted. In a critical discussion of the myth of originality that flaws modernism according to the two critics, Joyce’s *Ulysses* is mentioned fleetingly: “But obviously the invention of an original type in personal embodiments can get no further than an earnest caricature of the ordinary, as in Joyce’s Leopold Blum [sic], or T.S. Eliot’s Prufrock and other low types” (SMP pp.277-78). Joyce’s stylistic games are alluded to several times in the context of an analysis of “verbal disintegration” (SMP p.202) or presented as simple “satire” (SMP p.107). A passage from “Scylla and Charybdis” is quoted less disapprovingly as a “deliberate untidying of language to give it more meaning, more history, more dramatic excitement” (SMP p.288), but nevertheless contrasted with the way Gertrude Stein “sterilizes” words and “tidies” language. However off-hand or reductive all these comments may be, they nevertheless show that Joyce belongs to the loose group of the Modernists sketched by the *Survey*, and that he is not seen as better or worse than the others. He is not singled out for his verbal dexterity (Cummings and Stein seem to fare better) nor for the originality of his themes, but rather for embodying all the paradoxes and hindrances of modernism: he believes in originality while describing commonplace occurrences, and uses an opaque style in such a way that the “normal reader” risks being alienated. The question that remains implicit is whether Joyce’s obfuscation stems from a legitimate agenda or is to be blamed on extraneous limitations. Such a question would, of course, have to be posed not by an “ideal reader” (seen as the omniscient critic Joyce often seems to have in mind) but by the “plain reader” himself or herself.  

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