

'Let All Malthusiasts Go Hang': Joyce's 'Oxen of the Sun' and the Economists

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Up to this point in time, there has been a remarkably limited amount of substantial, rigorous, scholarly, historical study of Joyce and his work; that is, if one assumes that the crucial context for understanding both is, not a more or less abstract or generalized 'modern Europe', nor a peculiar, modernist composite of Dublin, Trieste, Zürich and Paris, but the history, politics and culture of the colonial Ireland (and therefore also the Britain) into which Joyce was born and where he grew to adulthood.¹ Such comparative neglect might seem astonishing, not least, given the vast size of the international Joyce industry. In fact, there are obvious reasons for it, and those reasons are themselves precisely historical and political. Joyce's work is a special case in that it gains an international reputation at a time when his native country has no relevant developed tradition of academic historiography or historical scholarship of a kind that might to some extent protect him from, fend off, guide or at least set certain limits to the incursions of non-native scholars. Together with other contemporary cultural pressures, this means that, almost at once, Joyce's work is stripped of its specific historical determinations and becomes a supreme exemplar of 'international modernism' (and later, quite uniquely amongst literary *oeuvres*, an object of legitimized, critical free-play or free association). This process takes on a new dimension with the marked postwar expansion of American power in research in the humanities in Europe. Anglo-Irish literature is notably open to capture, here, and an Irish Catholic novelist is perhaps uniquely vulnerable, particularly when there is very little serious, scholarly interest in his work in either Britain or Ireland, if for very different reasons. Thereafter,

whatever the proliferation of its branches in Europe and indeed elsewhere, the ever-growing multinational James Joyce Corporation always has its headquarters in the United States. This has profound consequences for the hermeneutics that is its product. The investment in an 'international' Joyce at the expense of a 'local' Joyce, one solidly lodged, above all, in a highly specific, historical culture, has seemed justified by the trajectory of the Joycean biography. It is a massive investment, and continues today.² It is heavily bolstered by the tacit assumption that the 'local' perspective is in principle a parochial or benighted one. This essay is a small attempt to begin to rectify the balance in one very particular area of Joyce's work. I also offer it as an instance, not of course of a definitive historical interpretation, but of the kind of areas of historical debate that currently need to be opened up in Joyce studies.

There has been very little plausible or useful historical work on Chapter 14 of Joyce's *Ulysses*, 'The Oxen of the Sun'. The lack is evident, for instance, in critical accounts of the chapter's concern with Irish medicine and the history of Irish medicine. It is equally evident in accounts of the famous array of styles in 'Oxen', where much needs to be done to historicize Joyce's use of contemporary prose anthologies. I shall be addressing both issues elsewhere.³ But it is perhaps in accounts of the chapter's treatment of the sexual theme – or better, the theme of reproduction, of Irish propagation – that the absence of the historical perspective can be most keenly felt. Commentators on 'The Oxen of the Sun' have tended to agree that, in some sense, it is at least partly the work of what the scholar who has worked hardest on the chapter, Robert Janusko, calls an 'advocate of fertility'.⁴ Some critics, of course, have taken the 'advocacy' in question much less seriously than others.⁵ But the centrality to the chapter of this particular concern can hardly be doubted. Yet this central place raises another question. The issue of how far 'Oxen' is genuinely committed to the cause of fertility arguably sidesteps another, even more important issue, which is why Joyce bothered with the theme at all. Even if we admit the force of Richard Brown's argument that Joyce ironizes the fertility-theme in the interest of expressing a different and more progressive conception of sexuality, the problem still remains as to why the expression requires so oddly indirect a vehicle. Why should Joyce's supreme modernist achievement include a chapter given over partly to a celebration of procreation, whether serious, ironic or mock-heroic? The question is not idle. For *Ulysses*, the theme seems faintly stuffy and banal, anachronistic, even unmodern. This is all the more the case, given the emergence in Europe, in the period in question, of what economists call the 'fertility transition': the modern turn, both public and private, to a preoccupation with the regulation of fertility by birth control. In the opening decades of the century, this turn was steadily transforming the population debate. Indeed, to some extent, its effects were being felt even in Ireland.⁶ Seen in this context, far from being recklessly avant-garde, 'Oxen' might appear to be almost anti-progressive.

The principal insistence underlying this essay is that the answer to the question I have raised – like the answer to many other questions about Joyce to which we have either imperfect answers, or none at all – is historical. More precisely, it lies in setting ‘Oxen’ as solidly as possible in a specifically English and Irish historical and discursive context. It thus also involves a recognition of the specificity that the fertility-theme takes on in an Irish context; a recognition, that, here as in so many other respects, the Ireland Joyce grew up in and with which his fiction is so concerned constituted ‘a special case’ of a particular issue. The assimilation of such cases to their modern European or English version repeatedly turns out to be problematic.⁷ The discourses of nineteenth-century English political economy – in particular, classical economy and, above all, the Malthusians – provide a strikingly significant context for Joyce’s chapter.⁸ If ‘Oxen’ is much concerned with fertility and population increase, insofar as the chapter refers to theoretical discourses on these themes, it is notably to economic rather than the psychological or sociological ones that were replacing them in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁹ The connection, however, is hardly surprising. Crucially, for the economists, Ireland was a key instance.¹⁰ In his oft-cited letter to Budgen of 20 March, 1920, Joyce described the beginning of ‘Oxen’ – for example – as a ‘Sallustian-Tacitean prelude’.¹¹ ‘Sallustian-Tacitean’ or not, however, one principal point of reference for the chapter’s first passage of connected prose is precisely nineteenth-century economic discourse.¹² The vocabulary of one or other and sometimes a number of the economists – ‘continuance’ (14.15), ‘bounty’ (14.21), ‘increase’ (14.21), ‘abundance’ (14.30), ‘prudence’ (14.49) and, above all, ‘subsistence’ (14.56) – is evident throughout the passage. The same is true of habits of style – tricks of phrasing which may have a particular ideological implication – attributable to one economist or another. Some of the more cumbersome sentences and *recherché* Latinisms in the passage, for example, read like a parody of the Thomas Newenham whom Malthus took to task.¹³ Indeed, that the passage begins with the adverb ‘universally’ probably constitutes an ironic homage to Malthus himself, in whose *Essay on Population* it is frequently found, and who liked beginning sentences with it.¹⁴ Nor is the connection between the passage and the economists’ discourses simply localized or a particular bit of fun. Rather, the opening of ‘Oxen’ advertises its relationship to a set of historically specific English (and sometimes Anglo-Irish) discourses that were, politically, highly charged, above all, in an Irish context. These discourses are sporadically if usually briefly alluded to elsewhere in ‘Oxen’, and constitute a kind of base against which much of what is going on in the rest of the chapter can be more precisely understood; a ground against which, as it were, the treatment of the fertility-theme can be ‘read off’.

Two points need to be established at the outset: in the first instance, however much their full impact is still debated, the importance of the discourses of political economy to nineteenth-century British thought and culture is

immense. Indeed, Boylan and Foley have recently suggested that political economy has claims to being 'the master public discourse of nineteenth-century Britain'.¹⁵ At the same time, however – and this is my second point – political economy has a specific character and set of functions and meanings in relation to Ireland. In the nineteenth century, in Clarkson's phrase, the 'Malthusian spectre' hung heavily over 'popular perceptions of Irish history', in more senses than one.¹⁶ The place to start is the 1780s. In that decade, Ireland begins to undergo a rapid increase in its population which more or less continues until the Famine and finally amounts to four million.¹⁷ The increase was sharply in excess of the comparable increase in England.¹⁸ It was also chiefly associated with Catholic Ireland: indeed, from the seventeenth century, English and Anglo-Irish observers had been noting that the Irish Catholics appeared to have 'a general custom (which has been of vast Service to repair the great Loss in this Island by War etc.) of marrying very early, and consequently breeding fast'.¹⁹ The growth in population from the 1780s onwards, however, is not only remarkable. It also specifically coincides with a marked growth in English attention to the 'Irish problem'; not least, to the extremely low standards of living prevailing in most of Ireland. It was principally this combination of factors that attracted the attention of the economists. Malthus himself toured Ireland in 1817, and other economists had more direct connections with the country: Ricardo, for instance, served as M.P. for Portarlington. The crucial point here, is that, from Malthus onwards, classical economics identified the growth in the Irish population as the fundamental cause of Irish poverty.²⁰ The classical school was virtually unanimous in this view of Ireland until the later writings of John Stuart Mill. In Ireland, the economists asserted, population increase had far outpaced the growth of capital, so that the average wage had fallen to the level of minimum subsistence and, combined with the absence of any other than agricultural work, created intense competition for land and resources. For many economists, a fundamental condition of Irish economic development was therefore an alteration of the arithmetical ratio of population to capital, through either an increase in capital, a reduction in population or a combination of the two (Boylan and Foley, p. 141). To liberals and humanitarians, at least, this looked like a promulgation of 'the revolting doctrine' that the Irish poor 'should be left to starve, lest they should propagate their numbers too rapidly' (Collison Black, *ETIQ*, p. 95). In practice, though, the economists' case more often led to arguments for emigration.²¹ Indeed, bolstered by economic thought, assisted emigration became one of the three major planks in British government policy regarding poverty and what was called 'surplus population' in Ireland (Daly, *FI*, p. 43). Not surprisingly, perhaps, the case for such a solution was endorsed with particular ardour by Anglo-Irish enthusiasts for political economy, like Richard Whately, as indeed it was by many Irish landlords.²² As matters turned out, Ireland was ultimately to witness an unparalleled and unplanned reduction of population through a

combination of famine, wholesale emigration and the practice of Malthusian 'moral restraint' to 'a degree far exceeding Malthus's most optimistic expectations' (Collison Black, *ETIQ*, p. vii).²³

To see Malthus as 'the arch-apologist of the ruling classes' is too simple by half.²⁴ In England, the political economists were often regarded as the champions of the urban middle class, as radicals. But there is also at least some truth in Harold Boner's assertion that Malthusian theory was seized on 'by a privileged class who, having been stripped bare of rational justifications by the philosophers of the eighteenth century, saw in it an almost miraculous restoration of their position'.²⁵ This was notably the case in Ireland – or in an Irish context – where the proposals of the economists appeared to coincide with the interests of the landlords and the ideological positions of the Tories and older Whigs (Collison Black, *ETIQ*, p. 243). Furthermore, there is another covert political concern to discussions of population levels in Ireland that actually went back well before the nineteenth century and has continued on well beyond the heyday of political economy, and which Malthus himself makes explicit. Malthus did not to any extent discuss Ireland in the *Essay on Population*. But in two essays for the *Edinburgh Review*, he expressed an alarm at Irish fertility rates which was very precisely political. Following Newenham, he was particularly concerned to emphasize the fact that the growth in the Irish population meant an increase in Catholic relative to Protestant numbers. Since Irish Catholics were much more fertile than Protestants, so too the 'physical force' of the former was 'rapidly increasing', which would logically mean a growing threat to the Union and an increasing chance of insurrection. 'The increasing strength of Ireland', he wrote, in a phrase that, if it does not very smoothly accord with other aspects of his thought, has a certain significance for 'Oxen', 'is the increasing weakness of England'.²⁶ This concern was frequently intrinsic to the economists' anxieties about Ireland, particularly in the case of the Anglo-Irish economists.²⁷ Furthermore, by implication, at least, in Malthusian terms, the growth of the Catholic population even spelt the possible triumph of barbarism. To deploy a key term in the economists' discourse, in a context that may cast an interesting light on its importance in *Ulysses*: civilized man was *prudent*. He knew how to control himself and the size of his family. It was barbarians who multiplied heedlessly.

So brief an account of the relationship between political economy and Ireland may seem to put matters too simply to be of great value. Was not Malthusianism always a contested doctrine? There were certainly fierce critics of Malthus and the Malthusians from early on: various poets and novelists, for example, from Coleridge through Byron to Dickens; Godwin, of course, and the splendid Cobbett. In an Irish context, there were also more humanitarian and unorthodox economists, both English and Anglo-Irish, who took 'a rejection of the Malthusian doctrine as their starting-point'.²⁸ The critics, however, frequently gave with one hand only to take away again with

the other. In dealing with Ireland, for example, the economists usually automatically assumed the desirability of the Union. Their argument depended on the assumption of the importance of a closer assimilation of the less to the more developed economy (Collison Black, *ETIQ*, p. 240). This assumption was frequently shared even with those who opposed them. Thus Carlyle and Mill's critiques of the Malthusian case on Ireland, for example, are problematized if not vitiated by their unquestioning acceptance of the necessity of maintaining the Union.²⁹ Nonetheless: was not the authority of Malthusianism being pushed back for decades before the time in which 'Oxen' is set, let alone that at which it was written? Boner has demonstrated, for instance, the extent to which the cultural power and discursive prestige of Malthusian economics were under pressure in England from the mid-nineteenth century on and decisively in retreat by 1860 (Boner, *HG*, p. 128). Yet the question of authority is one thing, that of currency another: Boner also shows how far important elements of Malthusian doctrine remain perceptible in later work by Mill and Carlyle, in Arnold (to whom I shall return), in Spencer, and even in Wells. Darwin clearly emerges out of an intellectual context that is still profoundly Malthusian. He described his own thought as 'the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms', establishing connections between his work and Malthus's and referring to Malthus as 'ever memorable' as late as the 1870s.³⁰ Vulgarizations of Malthus, moreover, were common currency, demotic versions which clung on well into the early twentieth century. Most importantly, however, the mid- and late nineteenth-century status of Malthusianism in England was by no means the same as its standing in Ireland, where the political stakes were higher, or rather, perhaps, more immediate. *The Character and Logical Method of Political Economy*, for instance, by John Elliot Cairnes, one of the string of Professors of Political Economy at Trinity, was in many ways ultra-Malthusian, and appeared as late as 1857. John Stuart Mill supplies clear evidence of how strong the Malthusian view of Ireland still was in the late 1860s.³¹ Most revealing of all, perhaps, is the fact that, in 1867, Isaac Butt was attacking a Viceroy for publicly declaring – after the Famine and decades of accelerating emigration – that the Irish population was 'somewhat in excess' of what 'the rules of economic principles allow'.³² In Collison Black's words, there can be no doubt that the Malthusian attitude to Ireland 'played a significant part in forming the social policy [in Ireland] of the whole period from 1817 to 1870 and beyond' (*ETIQ*, p. 94).

From the Famine onwards, however, a strain of resistance to Malthusianism is evident in Ireland, perhaps in particular, in relation to its Anglo-Irish proponents.³³ The 1840s see the emergence of what its authors themselves refer to as an Irish political economy that picks its quarrel principally with the English economists. Obviously enough, in a famine-stricken or post-Famine Ireland, the crucial issue is a population decline presented as so dramatic as to spell the end of a people. In its protectiveness, the concern is

remote from Malthusianism. Isaac Butt, for instance, explicitly defied the ‘unsound political economy’ of the Malthusians and asserted the political urgency of the issue of the continued existence in their own land of a race seemingly threatened in itself by Famine and emigration.³⁴ At the extreme end of the spectrum, John Mitchel stridently denounced both the British government and the landlords as aiming to ‘extirpate the Irish nation.’³⁵ For Mitchel, that project was inseparable from the perversions and misapplications of economics practiced by ‘English professors of political economy’.³⁶ For Lalor, too, post-Malthusian political economy was ‘quackery’ (Lalor, *CW*, p. 152). What is crucial in the discourses on population in the work of Lalor, Mitchel, other Young Irelanders and Butt, however, is the fact that they argue for the priority of political over economic conditions. The key assertion is that Ireland’s problems are not primarily economic but political and social, and attributable to the colonial power on the one hand and the landlord class on the other.³⁷ The increased hostility towards England engendered by the Famine produces an attitude which holds England and Anglo-Ireland responsible for the Irish plight and is, at the very least, impatient with the arithmetical ratios of the Malthusians. In Lalor’s writings, in particular, this comes close to producing an argument for the repopulation of Ireland, rather than the depopulation favoured by many Malthusians. Lalor characteristically asserted that, for Ireland to undergo economic reinvigoration, ‘the powers of vitality but require to be set in movement, and the contrivances of nature left free to act’ (Lalor, *CW*, p. 10). Beneath the Victorian reticence, this is evidently enough an anti-Malthusian argument, and one that clearly forms part of a discourse of which ‘Oxen’ must surely be thought of as in some sense a continuation.

Ireland had to wait until the 1880s, however, for a cogently argued and amply elaborated opposition to English political economy. The key figure was not in fact Irish but American: the popular economist Henry George. George was a progressive and in some ways socialistic thinker who saw his work as a radical challenge to what he took to be the dominance of classical economics and Spencerian social thought in the 80s. Above all, he presented himself as a fierce opponent of Malthus and Malthusianism, which he understood to be a doctrine that was still enjoying ‘general acceptance’.³⁸ Boner has shown that, in fact, George held ‘a singularly exaggerated notion of the prevalence of Malthusian views’ (Boner, *HG*, p. 188). But this was not how he was thought of in Ireland, a country which he ‘electrified’ when he arrived in it in the early 80s. This was soon after the publication of his best-known book, *Progress and Poverty* (1879).³⁹ George’s Irish reception was in some measure connected with his view of Malthus as having furnished a philosophy ‘by which Dives as he feasts can shut out the image of Lazarus who faints with hunger at his door’ (George, *PP*, p. 87). It also had a good deal to do with the fervently Christian principles explicit in much of George’s writing. It was certainly partly due to his vigorous denunciations of British rule in

Ireland – ‘the most damnable government that exists outside Russia’⁴⁰ – and his casting himself as fiercely opposed to a specifically English form of thought. It likewise owed much to his insistence on ‘the wrong-headedness of Englishmen who attributed mischief in Ireland to some inherent racial or national characteristics’ (Barker, *HG*, p. 361). But by far the most important factor was the determination with which George insistently linked the population issue to the question of landlordism. In Ireland, George wrote, in *The Irish Land Question*, ‘the bounty which the Creator intended for all’ had become ‘the exclusive property of some’.⁴¹ It was this fundamental injustice that was the source of Irish poverty and misery. By ‘property’, George meant land. Insofar as property was a question of land – and only to that extent – a redistribution of wealth was essential. The simplicity of such a position brought a curt dismissal from Karl Marx (‘Theoretically the man is utterly backward’).⁴² But it was also a particular reason for George’s huge popularity in Ireland. As Steven Cord puts it, ‘the headline-making ‘land for the people’ agitation that had just begun in Ireland ... served to make *Progress and Poverty* appear very timely indeed’.⁴³ George and – most importantly – George’s assault on what he took to be English political economy were precisely right for the mood of the times.

George’s Irish connections initially developed in America: *The Irish Land Question* was serialized in *Irish World*, the leading American Irish newspaper. It was *Irish World*, too, that invited him to go to Ireland as its correspondent. Once in Ireland, George quickly established connections with many of the leading political figures in the 1880s. He met and (initially) much admired Parnell, whom he visited during his imprisonment in Kilmainham. He established contact with Anna Parnell and the Ladies’ Land League. His work was widely available: free copies of *Progress and Poverty* and *The Irish Land Question* were circulated to Land League organizations, working-men’s clubs, newspapers and elsewhere (Barker, *HG*, p. 354). Most importantly of all, George became a friend and ally of Michael Davitt. The two men first met in America in 1880, and Davitt promised to promote *Progress and Poverty* on his return to Ireland. George’s influence on Davitt’s work and thought was substantial. It is perceptible, not least, in Davitt’s *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* (1904), a book Joyce had on his shelves in Trieste, and which includes an account of George’s arrest and ‘trial’ at Athenry which appears to take it for granted that any reader will know who George is.⁴⁴ Through Davitt and the Irish land agitation in the 1890s and on into the early years of the twentieth century – in Griffith, for example – an anti-Malthusian position confirmed and developed by George is sustained and indeed extended within Irish nationalist discourse. So, too, is George’s insistence on a bountiful nature whose operations have been impeded by the injustice of colonial social structures.

There are several key emphases to the fledgling discourse of an Irish political economy whose genealogy I have all too briefly sought to trace. It thinks

the Irish economic situation in directly political terms, as the classical English economists commonly did not. It understands that situation – if crudely – in terms of power, class, distribution of wealth, colonial occupation. Most importantly of all for ‘Oxen’, it refuses to accept the Malthusian analysis of the Irish predicament, according to which over-population becomes a crucial determining factor. Rather, it suggests that an Ireland free to arrange its own affairs might indeed be empowered to feed its own; that, potentially, at least, Ireland in itself has the necessary resources. Above all, the discourse edges towards an argument for the replenishment of a decimated people. That it does so hesitantly and ambivalently is hardly surprising, given both the traumatic of reproduction that followed the Famine and the dominance, in the same period, of a peculiarly puritan form of Victorian Catholicism. What I have described nonetheless constitutes a tradition: one, moreover, that gains an additional momentum from its conflation with an older tradition which I shall be discussing elsewhere, and which presented fertility and an abundant population precisely as a trope for Irish political power, self-confidence and independence. It is in this context that I would want to locate some of the most important emphases and strategies developed in ‘Oxen’.

In the first instance, Joyce’s treatment of the population- and fertility-themes clearly connects up with the Irish tradition I have identified with the work of Lalor, Mitchel, Butt, Henry George and his influence, and Davitt. This is particularly clear early in the chapter. It is evident, for example, in the argument that

by no exterior splendour is the prosperity of a nation more efficaciously asserted than by the measure of how far forward may have progressed the tribute of its solicitude for that proliferent continuance which of evils the original if it be absent when fortunately present constitutes the certain sign of omnipollent nature’s incorrupted benefaction. (14.13–17)

This, of course, is as light-hearted as anything in ‘Oxen’. At the same time, the equation of populousness with ‘prosperity’ both directly and specifically addresses the question of the state of the Irish nation and is blatantly opposed to the principles of nineteenth-century English political economy. The case in ‘Oxen’ is actually closer to that of the late seventeenth-century mercantilists. The same voice goes on to present the issue as urgent enough for it to behave ‘every most just citizen to become the exhortator and admonisher of his semblables’ in the service of ‘abundance’ and in defiance of ‘diminution’s menace’ (14.22–23, 30–31). Actually, in its assumptions and general drift, the passage is closer to George’s thought than to that of any of the Irishmen I have mentioned. So, too, in the chapter as a whole, whilst hardly amounting to specific allusions, the recurrence of the word ‘bounty’ and the references specifically to nature’s (in context, beneficent) ‘ends’ (14.228),

'nature's benefaction' (14.17) and 'the bounty of the Supreme Being' (14.879) all recall the founding premise of George's anti-Malthusianism. There is none of the cheerful levity to the case for procreation in George that we find in 'Oxen', however. My point is that Joyce's chapter not only connects up with the tradition I have specified in placing the population issue in an Irish political context and in producing an anti-Malthusian discourse. It also massively *supplements* or radically extends the tradition, most of all precisely *in its playfulness*. The crucial observation is that – in more ways than one – Joyce injects a new and assertive buoyancy into a kind of thought about Ireland and its people that, in historical terms, had only recently begun to take its first, faltering steps. In this respect, the breezy, insouciant cockiness, the cavalier offhandedness to much of 'Oxen', its ease with itself and ability to have fun with itself, is a large part of the point. In Joyce's hands, a discourse that in some sense connects up with that of Irish political economy suddenly becomes so self-confident that it can afford not to take itself very seriously at all.

The emphasis I have just been discussing is there, above all, at the start of the chapter. Once it has been established, it serves as a kind of containing structure for much of what follows. The chapter touches, for example, on the stark historical context which the subject of population in nineteenth-century Ireland was bound to summon up: on Ireland as a country of 'lean kine' (14.1476) with but a 'fraction of bread' for 'them that live by bread alone' (14.283–84). But it also refuses to dwell on such matters. So, too, there are a lot of allusions to a range of issues discussed, connections established, points made and themes developed by either the English or the Irish political economists, and often by both, in relation to the population issue: Irish dietary habits (14.281–85); infant mortality (14.1240ff.); poor sanitary conditions (14.1243–50); infanticide (14.962, 1261); 'neglect private or official' (14.1259); medical provision, of course. There are also a number of casual little sideswipes at some of the emphases to be found in the Malthusian tradition of thought about population: its concern with voluntary sexual restraint (14.669–70); its frequent racism (14.671, 1250); the connection between it and the doctrine of natural selection (14.1277–85). Through Stephen in particular, Joyce also raises one or two of the contexts that the Irish writers thought were crucial to any adequate understanding of the population question in Ireland: colonial injustice (14.624–25); English checks on the development of Irish agriculture (14.609–18); emigration as the result of colonial rule (with Church connivance, the young men add, 14.639–46).

Yet such touches are usually small. The connections are often indirect, and the tone is light. 'Oxen' does not systematically 'parody' the discourses of English political economy. Rather, having established a comic and ironic but vigorous insistence opposed to those discourses, Joyce reworks, recontextualizes and redistributes a scattering of items that can be associated with or seen as deriving from them. For systematic parody would grant the discourses

themselves too much importance. Here, as so often in *Ulysses*, Joyce both admits the power of a set of historical circumstances and, at the same time, relativizes and laughingly displaces it. The key point is that the material I have just discussed is contained within a practice that is consistently affirmative and – crucially – future-oriented. The discourse on fertility in ‘Oxen’ is pointedly connected to the fortunes and, crucially, the prospects of the nation. In Stephen’s terms, the discourse looks forth ‘unto a land flowing with milk and money’ (14.377). For Dixon, ‘right reverence ... to mother and maid in house of Horne’ is significant for ‘the future of a race’ (14.833–34). The chapter returns repeatedly to the theme of the new beginning (e.g. 14.1379–90). It is therefore important that Lynch should argue that both ‘natality and mortality’ are ‘subject’, not to the iron laws of Malthusian arithmetic or the Malthusian ratio, but to ‘laws of numeration *as yet unascertained*’ (14.1273–74, my italics).

What Joyce does, in fact, is not just to produce a confidently light-hearted addition to an Irish tradition, but also to modernize the latter. On the one hand, to put it crudely, ‘Oxen’ may be thought of as playfully arguing for an increase in population as part of a drive away from the trauma of the Famine and its aftermath and towards modern independence and modern political and cultural health. Its own playfulness is to some extent an index of what might be involved in such a recovery. On the other hand, Joyce pointedly brings economic discourses about population levels and fertility into contact with historically immediate, practical questions about how to nurse, tend and aid the population in question. He equally brings those discourses into contact with new, offhand, secular, modern attitudes to sex and reproduction as expressed above all by the students at the centre of the chapter. Part of its modernity lies precisely in its comic mode as I have described the latter here. Equally, what is modern about the chapter is partly its art of so-called ‘parody’ (for which ‘travesty’ is actually at least a slightly better word), the disrespectful treatment it metes out to a range of English styles and discourses during the chapter, the hilarious insolence with which – for instance – it mocks fustiness, ponderousness and solemnity.

Two principal examples of relevance to the Malthusian theme, here, would be the references to or reworkings of Carlyle and Arnold. For Joyce, one of the chief points of transmission of economic doctrine would probably have been the ‘soft Malthusianism’ which emerges towards the end of *Culture and Anarchy*, a book he had on his shelves in Trieste. Arnold’s is a Malthusian argument against liberals and free-traders who have suggested that an increase in population is a sign of social and economic health. Not so, says Arnold. The ‘real truth’ is that

the enlarged conception of what is included in subsistence does not operate to prevent the bringing into the world of numbers of people who but just attain to the barest necessities of life or who even fail to attain them.⁴⁵

It is surely this passage and not Sallust or Tacitus that principally lies behind Joyce's evocation of an Irish tradition according to which care was provided not solely 'for the copiously opulent' mother 'but also for her who not being sufficiently moneyed scarcely and often not even scarcely could subsist' (14.46–50). The insinuations of 'Oxen', however playful, are strikingly anti-Arnoldian. The 'increase of population', Arnold argues, 'must not be mechanically pursued' like a 'fetish' (CA, p. 128). 'Oxen' treats it like one, if humorously. According to Arnold, a growing population is no 'absolute proof of national prosperity' (CA, p. 131). Joyce reverses the argument. Most tellingly of all, Arnold suggests that one 'ought not to call the State well-managed and prosperous merely because its manufactures and its citizens multiply' (CA, p. 131). 'Oxen' proposes something close to the opposite point of view. What Arnold's case leaves out, of course, as is particularly clear once Ireland is brought into the picture, is that the caveat that he enters in the name of sweetness and light is only possible when a certain level of prosperity has already been achieved. Once again, 'Oxen' sets itself directly in opposition to *Culture and Anarchy*, not least by virtue of its irony, its refusal of Arnoldian seriousness and pompousness.

But what I want particularly to emphasize is the actual, fleeting echo of Arnold at 14.46–50. For Joyce is turning Arnold's own language against him. With 'Oxen' in mind, John Eglinton argued that

Joyce nurses an ironic detachment from the whole of the English tradition. Like a devil taking pleasure in forcing a virgin to speak obscenely, so Joyce rejoiced darkly in causing the language of Milton and Wordsworth to utter all but unimaginable filth and treason.⁴⁶

Overstated though this undoubtedly is, it contains the germ of a crucial truth. In 'Oxen', Joyce revels in twisting English discourses to the chapter's own ends, ends those discourses could never have countenanced themselves. In effect, he injects them with an auto-destructive principle. Thus, as we have seen, the discourses of political economy are precisely turned against themselves. Indeed, once we recall how far political economy actually informed nineteenth-century British government policy in Ireland, 'treason' may not be altogether remote from the point. So, too, with Carlyle. Carlyle, of course, was genuinely and bleakly horrified at what he saw of the Famine. But his attitudes to Irish Catholics were not uplifting. He loathed O'Connell, for instance: 'haranguing his beggarly squad', O'Connell was 'perhaps the *most* disgusting sight to me on that side of the water'.⁴⁷ For Carlyle, as his sympathetic biographer points out, Catholicism was 'a religion of sloth and mediaeval corruption, and the Irish were a race of inferior Celts' (Kaplan, *TC*, p. 343). Carlyle's views on Ireland were always rooted in a staunch Unionism, and his solution for the famine was emigration. By contrast, Joyce's 'Carlyle' is a rumbustious figure who cheerily dismisses 'Malthusianism'

(14.1415) and argues that one should drink one's 'udderful' of 'mother's milk' (14.1433). The 'Carlyle parody' (14.1407–33) is both remote in tone from the oracular *gravitas* so common in the work of the Victorian sage, and concerned to produce an argument directly opposed to his.

I have argued that one key feature of 'Oxen' is the extent to which it works as a resistance to nineteenth-century English political economy and the intellectual, political and cultural influence of the latter. I have suggested that, in its opposition to the tradition of political economy, the chapter connects up with a tradition of writing in Ireland, apparent from the late 1840s, which was similarly opposed. I have also indicated what might be thought of as a 'retaliatory practice' or set of practices in 'Oxen' whose target is the discourses of political economy. The most important point about 'Oxen', however, in relation to all these issues – in relation to what is at best a sober and often a strikingly sombre, even apocalyptic set of discourses – is its truly vital element, its laughter. It is in its laughter that the chapter most decisively separates itself off, not just from the Malthusians, but from Lalor's sullen wrath, Mitchel's screams of rage, Davitt's stern anger; from a tradition characterized, above all, by a ferocious obsession with a history of wrongs. 'You have spoken of the past and its phantoms', says Stephen to Costello. 'Why think of them?' (14.1112–13). The question could have been directly addressed to the political culture represented by the Irish economists. 'Oxen' recognizes the burden of but refuses to array itself in 'the piteous vesture of the past' (14.1354–55). It is as much bent as is 'Sirens' on bringing about a release from 'congenital defunctive music' (14.1428). It precisely *contains* the bitter, melancholic, Daedalian mode of thought. The fact that it can both grant a certain space to and contain the frivolity of Mulligan's project for a 'national fertilizing farm' (14.684) is also indicative. 'Oxen's' is a discourse that is magnanimous enough frankly to foreground a parodic version of its own theme. What Joyce's chapter designates in its very playfulness is its modern independence. It partially exorcizes a host of spectres. It is about settling accounts, but also about getting matters in proportion, however problematic the question of proportion and however arduous the struggle. The chapter insists that, in declaring its allegiance to a tradition, and in enacting a cultural revenge on behalf of that tradition, it has the pride, strength, courage and exuberant self-belief to tread lightly, where the tradition cannot, and thus to surmount the tradition itself.

Notes

1 There have, of course, been some very distinguished exceptions. See for example Len Platt, *Joyce and the Anglo-Irish* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, 1999); Vincent J. Cheng, *Joyce, Race and Empire* (Cambridge, 1995), and Mary Lowe-Evans, *Crimes Against Fecundity: Joyce and Population Control* (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1989). Lowe-Evans's ground-breaking study draws attention to the importance of Malthus for 'Oxen'. Her emphases are different to mine, but we share some of the

same concerns. Otherwise, my larger assertion may seem the more remarkable in that there are some who would claim that one perceptible trend in Joyce studies over the past ten or fifteen years has been towards more historical work. For the most part, however, whatever its merits and the (sometimes prolific) insights it has had to offer, the 'historical' approach in question has been determined by a theoretical fantasy of the relevant history which has precisely refused a precise and rigorous thought of Ireland, England and the colonial relation. See for instance Cheryl Herr, *Joyce's Anatomy of Culture* (Urbana, 1986) and Margot Norris, *Joyce's Web* (Austin, 1992). It would be absurd to attempt comprehensively to disparage such criticism. Norris's work has much to recommend it. So long as one accepts his assumptions with regard to the historical contexts most relevant to Joyce, for instance, Robert Spoo's *James Joyce and the Language of History: Dedalus's Nightmare* (Oxford, 1994), hereafter Spoo, *JJLH*, is a very good book. My argument is simply that there is something else that Joyce scholars should be doing too, or doing more often. It's hard not to feel that a lot of Joyceans have little interest in Ireland, its history and politics in themselves. Not surprisingly, by and large, the scholars and critics who have recently been pointing in the most important directions have been Irish: Seamus Deane, Declan Kiberd, Emer Nolan, Luke Gibbons. But there is an immense amount of scholarly work that still needs to be done along the kind of lines of inquiry that they have begun to indicate.

2 This is not to say that the concept of an 'international Joyce' has no validity. On the contrary: Joyce himself clearly wanted to see it emerge and promoted it. But to restrict one's attention to this Joyce is precisely to ignore what motivated its creation and always underlies it.

3 See my *Joyce's 'Ulysses': History, Politics, Aesthetics* (Oxford: forthcoming).

4 Robert Janusko, *The Sources and Structures of James Joyce's 'Oxen'* (Ann Arbor, 1983), p. 55.

5 In particular, Richard Brown has expressed surprise at 'the ease with which it is assumed that Joyce means contraception to be understood as a "crime"'. Brown argues that, 'on the contrary, Joyce's purpose seems to be to give us a strong taste of militantly and rather oppressively "reproductive" doctrines and show sympathetic characters like Bloom and Mina Purefoy on the receiving end of such views'. Richard Brown, *James Joyce and Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 70, 77. Mark Osteen argues that 'Oxen' 'critiques the ideology of proliferation' on a literal level 'only to reinstate it on another level as an economic principle of artistic composition'. The related assertion, however, 'that the episode covertly critiques the excess proliferation that impoverished Irish families like the Dedaluses' seems obtuse to the Irish social, cultural and economic determinants of which Joyce was so conscious. See Mark Osteen, *The Economy of 'Ulysses': Making Both Ends Meet* (New York, 1995), hereafter Osteen, *EU*; pp. 247–48. Robert Spoo reads 'Oxen' as ironic at many levels and in many ways, and refers in particular to the early 'Sallustian-Tacitean' passage of which I make much, here. See *JJLH*, pp. 145–46.

6 On the 'fertility transition' with specific reference to Ireland, see Cormac Ó Gráda and Niall Duffy, *Fertility Control early in Marriage in Ireland c.1900: Some Local Contrasts* (Dublin, 1983), for example, at pp. 1–7; and Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine: Explorations in Economic History 1800–1925* (2nd ed., Manchester, 1993), hereafter Ó Gráda, *IBAF*; p. 197.

7 One good example of an awareness of this question would be Mark Finnane's *Insanity and the Insane in Post-Famine Ireland* (London, 1981). Finnane asserts the need for a recognition of the specificity of the discursive construction of insanity in post-Famine Ireland as opposed to elsewhere (particularly England and Scotland). Note in particular the argument that 'while in the early 1900s Britain was stirred by a new discourse of the relation between society and the insane, Ireland remained

unmoved' (p. 15 and *passim*). My own case, here, with regard to the discourses of political economy in and relative to Ireland, is very similar in its assumptions to Finnane's. There is, I think, a pressing need for research that is both historically *and culturally* more specific with regard to a range of discursive contexts for Joyce's work. Such discursive contexts are only incompletely given if understood as 'British' or 'European'.

8 Osteen has given a brief but interesting account of the relevance of Malthus to 'Oxen', pointing out, for instance, that the *Notesheets* show Joyce to have been familiar with Malthus and concerned with his thought as he composed the chapter. But Osteen's argument is theoretically abstracted and indifferent to the historical particularity of the connection between Malthusianism and Ireland. See Osteen, *EU*, pp. 237–39.

9 D. E. C. Eversley, *Social Theories of Fertility and the Malthusian Debate* (Oxford, 1959), hereafter Eversley, *STF*, p. 12.

10 On this point, see Eversley, *STF*, pp. 60–61.

11 James Joyce, *Letters*, Vol. I, ed. Stuart Gilbert (London, 1957), p. 139.

12 Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler, with Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior (New York and London, 1984, 1986), 14.7–70. References throughout are to episode and line number.

13 See Thomas Newenham, *A Statistical Inquiry into the Progress and Magnitude of the Population of Ireland* (London: C.& R. Baldwin, 1805). Compare for instance pp. 1 and 103 with *Ulysses* 14.7–70. On occasions, the vocabularies are strikingly close.

14 T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London, 1890), *passim*.

15 Thomas A. Boylan and Timothy P. Foley, 'A Nation Perishing of Political Economy?', hereafter Boylan and Foley, in Chris Morash and Richard Hayes (eds), *Fearful Realities: New Perspectives on the Famine* (Dublin, 1996), pp. 138–50, p. 138.

16 L. A. Clarkson, 'Famine and Irish History', in E. Margaret Crawford (ed.), *Famine: The Irish Experience 900–1900: Subsistence Crises and Famines in Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1989), p. 220.

17 Recent work, however, has in fact shown that 'Irish birth rates were dropping in the twenty years before the famine'. Mary Daly, *The Famine in Ireland* (Dublin, 1986), p. 34.

18 F. H. Connell, *The Population of Ireland 1750–1845* (Oxford, 1950), p. 1.

19 Samuel Madden, *Reflections and Resolutions Proper for the Gentlemen of Ireland* (Dublin, 1738), p. 38.

20 R. D. Collison Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*, with a foreword by Jacob Viner (Cambridge, 1960), hereafter Collison Black, *ETIQ*; pp. vi–vii.

21 Ricardo did not agree with this particular case, however, and nor, initially, did Malthus, though he was later converted to it. See Collison Black, *ETIQ*, pp. 203, 209.

22 On the landlord response, see Collison Black, *ETIQ*, p. 213. Whately was a sufficiently ardent supporter of political economy to found a Chair in it at Trinity College in 1832. Trinity College was crucial to the promotion of political economy in Ireland. Along with Whately himself, some of the former holders of the Chair even defended Malthusian principles during the Famine (Boylan and Foley, p. 139). Of the opposing arguments, one worth noting is that of the *Nation* and the *Freeman's Journal* in the 1850s: mass emigration was symptomatic of the British government's failing Ireland (Collison Black, *ETIQ*, p. 236).

23 For evidence of the voluntary practice of 'restraint', see Ó Gráda, *IBAF*, especially p. 193.

24 Eversley makes this point convincingly. See *STF*, p. 256.

25 Harold A. Boner, *Hungry Generations: The Nineteenth-century Case against Malthusianism* (New York, 1955), hereafter Boner, *HG*; p. vi.

26 T. R. Malthus, *Occasional Papers on Ireland, Population and Political Economy*, ed. with an introd. by Bernard Semmel (New York, 1963), pp. 40–46. It is important not to demonize Malthus himself relative to Ireland. Although a clergyman of the established church and opposed to the relief of the Irish tenantry from exorbitant rents, he recognized that political oppression was the original source of the predicament he described, supported Catholic emancipation, argued that landlords should be taxed rather than tenants, and wanted to see an end to restrictive legislation subordinating Irish commercial enterprise to England. In some respects, his views on Ireland were in advance of his time, and certainly more advanced than those of many other political economists. What matters in this context, as I repeatedly insist, is not so much Malthus as the discourse of Malthusianism.

27 There was another crucial reason why population increase was such a political issue in nineteenth-century Ireland, and why it was so feared specifically by the landlords: the Poor Laws had made them responsible for half the rate. The rapid growth in numbers of evictions compared with the eighteenth century was directly related to this. See Isaac Butt, *Land Tenure in Ireland: A Plea for the Celtic Race* (Dublin, 1866), p. 33.

28 The list would include such figures as James Warren Doyle, J. B. Bryan, Michael Thomas Sadler and G. Poulett Scrope. See Collison Black, *ETIQ*, p. 95.

29 Both Carlyle and Mill accepted the arguments for emigration. In some ways, however, Mill was of course a fine critic of Malthus. See Eversley, *STF*, p. 157. In particular, Eversley points out that Malthusian theory rests on the assumption that the restriction of women to certain roles has the force of natural law, an assumption which is powerfully disputed by Mill.

30 Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species, The Works of Charles Darwin*, hereafter *WCD*, Vol. 15 (London, 1988), p. 47 (the sentence remains in the 1876 edition); and *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Part One, with an essay by T.H. Huxley, *WCD*, Vol.21 (London, 1989), pp. 48–52.

31 John Stuart Mill, 'England and Ireland' (1869), in *Collected Works Vol. VI: Essays on England, Ireland and the Empire*, ed. John M. Robson, introd. Joseph Hamburger (Toronto, 1982), pp. 502–32, 528.

32 Isaac Butt, *The Irish People and the Irish Land* (Dublin, 1867), hereafter *Butt, IPIL*; p. 141. The Viceroy in question was the Marquis of Abercorn.

33 For evidence of the latter point, see Lalor's view of Whately's arguments as 'poison', James Fintan Lalor, *Collected Writings* (Poole, Wahington D.C., 1997), hereafter Lalor, *CW*; p. 153.

34 Butt, *IPIL*, pp. 137–46. See also his *LTI*, pp. 64–66, 73, 101.

35 John Mitchel, *The History of Ireland from the Treaty of Limerick to the Present Time* (New York, 1868), p. 599. For the argument as a whole, see pp. 544–45, 597–99.

36 Mitchel, 'Preface', *Irish Political Economy, by Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, and George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne* (Dublin, 1847), p. iv.

37 On Lalor's conception of social as opposed to political economy, see David N. Buckley, *James Fintan Lalor: Radical* (Cork, 1990), pp. 63–64.

38 See Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1880, hereafter George, *PP*; p. 81.

39 The quoted phrase is Bernard Semmel's. See his introduction to Malthus, *OPI*, p. 18. The word 'electrifying' can be found in other accounts of George and his work.

40 Quoted in Charles Albro Barker, *Henry George* (New York, 1955), hereafter Barker, *HG*; p. 347.

41 George, *The Irish Land Question* (New York, 1881), p. 61.

42 Quoted in Barker, *HG*, p. 356.

43 Steven B. Cord, *Henry George: Dreamer or Realist?* (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 34.

44 See Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* (London and New York, 1904), pp. 3, 34. The inverted commas are Davitt's, but seem appropriate.

45 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869; New Haven and London, 1994), hereafter Arnold, CA; p. 125.

46 John Eglinton, *Irish Literary Portraits* (London, 1935), pp. 145–46.

47 Quoted Fred Kaplan, *Thomas Carlyle: A Biography* (Cambridge, 1983), hereafter Kaplan, TC; p. 339.

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