

Literature on Trial in Britain : An Historical Survey of the Oscar Wilde and D. H. Lawrence Trials at the Old Bailey

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Literature on Trial in Britain: An Historical Survey of the Oscar Wilde and D. H. Lawrence Trials at the Old Bailey

Brian Thomas Fox

I: Introduction

On 24 April 2013, the Rt. Hon Maria Miller MP, UK Secretary of State at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, delivered a keynote speech at the British Museum entitled “Testing Times: Fighting Culture’s Corner in an Age of Austerity”. “Arts and culture”, the Secretary of State told her audience, “underpin what it means to be British; how we see ourselves; and how the world sees us. Our culture is our hallmark, and it makes the UK distinctive in a globalised world”. However:

Faced with a crippling budget deficit, there are big choices to be made at both a national and a local level, few of which are easy, or palatable... Culture cannot be seen in isolation at a time of unprecedented economic challenge. Everyone has to play a part in our efforts to reduce the deficit, my Department is no exception. Do we want to be seen to inspire our children or leave them with a mountain of debt? (Miller)

Testing times, the Secretary of State’s speech seems to suggest, call for desperate measures. This recent example of the State’s claim on the arts—in this case, reconfiguring public funding as corporate investment, Miller argues that “public funding distributed by the Arts Council should effectively act as seed funding, or venture capital” (Miller)—is but the latest manifestation of an historical process that concerns me here, one which involves institutions of the State being deployed as a response to a crisis, or rather perceptions of crisis.

At present, the crisis Britons are living through is the so-called Age of Austerity. As we shall see, the rhetoric of crisis often leads to those crises being defined in terms of “ages”. The formulaic description of this crisis as “unprecedented” forms part of this strategy; its exceptional nature justifies exceptional measures. On the contrary, this paper will suggest that the present Age of Austerity is far from exceptional and the nature of its perceived crisis is indeed preceded. The State’s claims on big-C Culture have a long history, one which encompasses, for instance, historical censorship and present attempts in Britain and elsewhere to divert public funds away from research in the arts. Some of these attempts to control the public’s dissemination of and access to Culture became sensational events in themselves and came to symbolise the social and cultural historical moment in which they occurred. Two of these moments form the subject of this paper. The particular crisis points I want to focus on are based around the trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895 (three in total), and the trial of Penguin Books for publishing D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in 1960, all held at that stately, symbolic institution, the Old Bailey.

The historical timing of both trials is highly significant. In Wilde’s case, fin-de-siècle fears of social, cultural, and racial degeneration lie behind the crisis of morality his trial and prosecution represent. The question of the moral and even patriotic responsibilities of the artist weighed heavily on contemporary commentators, and as a result the end of the nineteenth century saw a deepening of an introspective turn in English cultural nationalist writings and a concomitant attempt to “impose homogeneity” not just in Britain but throughout the Empire (Giles 136). The overt literary aspect of Wilde’s trial can be connected to this cultural nationalist crisis. Recent scholarship has developed the idea that Wilde’s performances at the Old Bailey were just that: theatrical performances blurring the lines between legal and literary history (Wan 3). Wilde himself regarded the trials in similar terms; his biographer Richard Ellmann tells us: “If nothing else, he would put on a good show” (444). Moreover, the transcripts from the trial reveal the extent to which literature itself was also on trial, as Wilde defends and defines his writings through cross-examination.

In his literary manifesto, “The Critic as Artist”, Wilde prefigures the terms he

will later use to defend himself and his writing against the morality of the State: “To be good, according to the vulgar standard of goodness, is obviously quite easy. It merely requires a certain amount of sordid terror, a certain lack of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle-class respectability. Aesthetics are higher than ethics” (Wilde 295). Wilde repeatedly made the case for the separation of morality and literary merit; as he put it in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all” (48). Moreover, the nascent subject of English Literature was being developed and institutionalised during this period and the Old Bailey trial raises important questions about the judgement of literature and literary issues. In this sense, then, this paper is a tale of two institutions: the Old Bailey and the University. But, as I shall argue, there is no simple antagonism between the two.

In Penguin’s case, the historical timing hinges around the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s. Richard Hoggart, an important witness for the defence at the *Chatterley* trial and senior lecturer in English literature at Leicester University, describes this exact moment:

[The trial] has been entered on the agreed if conventional list of literary judgements as the moment at which the confused mesh of British attitudes to class, to literature, to the intellectual life, and to censorship, publicly clashed as never before—to the confusion of more conservative attitudes. On the far side of the watershed and largely as a consequence, the favoured story continues, we had the Permissive Society (52).

The tone of this passage from his early-nineties memoir suggests a belated realisation that the freedoms won in 1960 were in fact only notional, and that the “Permissive Society” was permissive in name only. This perhaps reflects the atmosphere arising out of the “kulturkampf” (Collini, “HiEdBiz” 3) against universities that began in the 1980s in Britain, but the term “Permissive Society” is also extremely useful here for describing the contours of this particular crisis and its perceived threats, as we shall

see. If the separation of morality and literary merit that Wilde had argued for in the 1890s was achieved in the 1960s, then it also came with a transfer of power of judgement in literary matters from the courts to the university. However, with the perception of universities as the new custodians of cultural value has come a fresh crisis (Austerity) and renewed attempts prompted by “more conservative attitudes” to control big-C Culture by removing public funding for universities and replacing it with laissez-faire economics.

These trials represent instances of institutional responses to crises of morality, of identity, of culture. Sex and sexuality are only the most sensational aspects of the trials. They are connected to wider cultural-historical moments of crisis, which are in turn connected to developments within English Studies. The current Conservative Government’s attempt to remodel British universities as businesses simply reflects the latest development in a series of perceived crises and efforts to control cultural custody. These intertwined strands comprise a legal-literary history in which the trials are themselves narratives of social change. The role of judges is a case in point. In an essay for the fiftieth anniversary edition of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Geoffrey Robertson QC states that the Old Bailey has, for centuries, provided the ultimate arena for challenging the State, adding: “Judges in 1960 regarded themselves, rather more than they do today, as the custodians of moral virtue. In performing this egregious function, they came to blur the distinction between literature and life” (Robertson). Robertson hits upon important points here: that the Old Bailey is both a site for challenging the State as well as the State’s stronghold against assaults on moral virtue. Thus the Old Bailey itself represents a contested space for testing times.

II: The trials of Oscar Wilde.

The particulars of Wilde’s trials are by now very well known, and there is thus little need to recount them here. Rather, I will concentrate on certain historical markers of social and culture change in the 1890s, such as the (previously mentioned) deepening introspection among English cultural nationalists in response to a variegated sense of crisis: crises of morality, identity, nationality, spirit, of Englishness.

It may at first appear almost counterintuitive to describe nineteenth-century Englishness as being in crisis—as cultural historian Stefan Collini has argued, the English did not undergo the kind of political upheavals and military invasions that marked many nineteenth-century European societies and prompted members of those societies to “a self-conscious liberationist nationalism and its associated imperative of political, cultural, or ethnic self-definition” (*Public Moralists* 345). In other words, England never had to fight for its Englishness, to defend vigorously Englishness against another hegemonic culture. As a result, according to Collini, “the dominant relation to the English past during this period [...] was experienced along the lines of what might be called [...] the ‘English Heritage’ or ‘National Trust’ model, a repository of treasures which all members of a united nation can enjoy as part of their uniquely glorious heritage” (“Genealogies” 131-2). Hardly a model in crisis, it would seem. However, this model of English cultural nationalism, as Collini rightly highlights, disguises the violence of the process by which inimical voices are silenced. Voices including Wilde’s.

The reasons behind the cultural crisis of England in the 1890s are many and complex. Brian Doyle has pointed to “arrested imperial expansion and greater international competition” (17), while Stephen Arata has also situated fin-de-siècle literature and Wilde in the context of imperial decline (54-76). This also ties in with perceived threats in the domestic sphere from popular, democratic processes. Indicative of the connections being made between domestic and international spheres, the phrase “splendid isolation”—used with reference to Britain’s political, cultural and commercial uniqueness or isolation from the rest of the world—came into common usage in the mid-1890s. Giles links this to fears that “hybridity in its various forms might bring about the fragmentation of a civilised English identity” (136). Hence, Giles continues, “Much British imperial discourse in the late nineteenth century involved an attempt to impose homogeneity and ‘disciplined order’ on widely disparate locations, a form of standardization which apologists for empire frequently associated with advances in travel and communication” (136). Britain also experienced a fin-de-siècle invasion-hysteria which prompted two notable Anglo-

Irish works, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Erskine Childer's *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903). American industry and consumerism were also seen as threatening, and its democratic culture in particular was a potentially destabilising influence on established class hierarchies in Britain (Giles 135-6). In Stoker's *Dracula*, a fear of contamination played directly on concerns among cultural nationalists of a dissolution of national identity. As Arata argues, the Labouchère Amendment of the Criminal Law Act of 1885, under which Wilde was prosecuted for "acts of gross indecency", as a whole was,

designed to protect bourgeois domestic spaces from various forms of contamination. The bill was vigorously supported by 'social purity' campaigners [...]. Proponents of the bill further argued that the strength of the home was inseparable from the health of the nation and empire. Rome, it was said, died when vice invaded the family circle (57).

For vice read Count Dracula, or indeed, Oscar Wilde—Lord Queensberry insisted he was motivated only by a desire to save his son and preserve the sanctity of his family circle. The "English Heritage" or "National Trust" model was thus only achieved through a process of homogenisation, of which Wilde was a prominent victim just as the ideology of splendid isolation materialized as a national self-defining concept.

If the 1860s and 1870s can be defined as an Arnoldian struggle between the forces of Culture and Anarchy, the period 1880-1920 saw, in increasingly official form, the emergence of a "symbolic and emotionally charged selection of writing known as 'English Literature'" (Collini, "Genealogies" 132) as a response to Anarchy. Collini argues that the "noticeably greater attention paid to arranging and celebrating English literary history in the last few decades of the century, including move to establish it as an academic subject, may be seen as part of this wider process of national self-definition", and he goes on to define it as the "Whig interpretation of English literature", which "suggests a relation to the national literature which was celebratory and consensual" (347). Celebration and consensus were the tools, then, for resisting

what Matthew Arnold had designated as Anarchy—antidotes to the low, democratic, hybrid idioms perceived to be threatening the established social hierarchies. Celebration and consensus were also tools for social control. This is partly what Chris Baldick has described as the “social mission” of English Criticism between 1848 and 1932. Baldick takes crisis as the formative impetus behind the particular developments in English literature under discussion: “From the beginning”, he argues, “English literature as a ‘subject’ has been founded upon a series of uncertainties and conflicts”. These crises led critics including Arnold, then, to boldly extend literature’s claim to social importance. According to Baldick:

No less a task than the prevention of Anarchy now fell to the guardians of literary culture. Arnold [...] had looked to the study of English literature as an agent of social harmony, capable of binding class to class; and this social project moulded the forms of literary education as they were applied variously [...]. English literature became, in these applications, an impressive cultural example, a museum of national genius, but very rarely an object of critical investigation (59).

In addition, according to Baldick, colonialism was a major factor behind the development of English Literature as a subject. The 1853 India Act had officially encouraged the study of English literature for the good of the empire (Baldick 70). Anglo-Irishman Wilde is particularly relevant here because he represents an antithetical or antinomian voice to the Whig interpretation, a voice inflected by traditions from outside the imperial centre. He was an interloper in the museum of national genius, and his prosecution was closely tied to fin-de-siècle concerns about literature, morality and the good of the empire.

If today’s age is the Age of Austerity, then Wilde’s was the Age of Anarchy, and he himself was an anarchic force within it. Wilde’s writings, including the letters on which he was cross-examined by Carson, constantly foreground dissensus over consensus, multiple personalities over an integral consciousness; and he does so

precisely at a point when English literature was being co-opted into the formation of a consensual national consciousness. Thus Anglo-Irish Wilde is prosecuted in the Old Bailey in a precise historical moment in English cultural nationalism when English literature was being co-opted for Empire abroad and social control at home—its social mission to prevent Anarchy. There was a Whiggish attempt to homogenise English literature through the creation of a literary canon that emphasised consensus and moral cohesion. Wilde clearly challenged this formation. Although the Old Bailey is the point at which this challenge is met and ostensibly defeated, it is also (much more interestingly) to an extent complicit in the literary moral challenge (the crisis) to the State by acting not only as its best possible advertisement (nothing boosts sales or guarantees attention like censorship), but by acting as a forum for that literary challenge to be aired, discussed, disputed, cross-examined—all the supposed provisions of a university course in English literature. Thus, in prosecuting Wilde, the Old Bailey is in effect doing the canon-making and canon-breaking work that the Academy would increasingly take over in the 1920s and 1930s.

III: The *Chatterley* trial

This leads me on directly to the period concerning Lawrence and the *Chatterley* trial. Collini has argued for the disintegration of the Whig interpretation of English Literature occurring in the 1920s and 1930s, but for the purposes of my discussion I want pinpoint a different moment of a not-unrelated sense of crisis (*Public Moralists* 318). I'm going to follow historian Tony Judt's very precise demarcation of the year 1959 as when "the skein of convention began to unravel" in Britain (376). Judt argues that the liberation from traditional moral authority was "most striking" in Britain, compared to other non-Catholic European countries in the post-war period. "Until the end of the 1950s", Judt writes,

British citizens were still forbidden to gamble; to read or to see anything that their betters judged 'obscene' or politically sensitive; to advocate (much less engage in) homosexual acts; to practice abortions on

themselves or others; or to get divorced without great difficulty and public humiliation. And if they committed murder or certain other major offences, they could be hanged. (376)

Judt highlights the 1959 Obscene Publications Act, which, among other things, made literary merit a defence, as a key moment in the transition to what Hoggart referred to as the Age of Permissiveness. In 1959, Britain was on the cusp of the Age of Permissiveness, the age Philip Larkin in his celebrated poem “Annus Mirabilis” famously placed “Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban / And the Beatles' first LP” (lines 4-5). This was the age of youth culture; second-wave feminism; protest movements; mini-skirts; rampant commercialism; as well as “Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies, / Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers” (Larkin “Here” lines 15-16).

Larkin’s description of the “residents from raw estates” (“Here” line 12) brings into focus one of issues involved in this particular age of crisis, one which is now encapsulated in the prosecution’s Mervyn Griffith-Jones and his well-known question regarding the suitability of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* for wives or servants. Class and social relations are at the heart of the crisis which began around 1959. Widening the scope, historian Christopher Hilliard makes the point that: “The trial became one of a series of episodes, running from the disastrous Suez intervention of 1956 to the Profumo sex-and-espionage scandal of 1963, in which the judgment and competence of Britain’s leaders came under fire and ‘patrician authority’ was publicly interrogated” (657). As Hilliard notes, Penguin, too, was involved in this democratising affront to the status quo. In the early days of its business, Penguin editions could be bought from vending machines in central London. The patrician authorities’ refusal to allow the “residents from raw estates” easy access to this questionable reading material was indicative of the crisis of 1959. “The question of the system’s bias was visible,” Hilliard argues, “in the case of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*”:

On two occasions in 1956, London distributors of French editions of

Nabokov's novel had been convicted of publishing an obscene libel. The first British edition was published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and one of the firm's directors, Nigel Nicolson, used the fact that he was also a Conservative MP to draw attention to the uncertainty and danger he faced in publishing the novel. When the book was published, in 1959, the director of public prosecutions decided not to prosecute Weidenfeld & Nicolson. (669-70)

Labour MP Horace King explained why it escaped prosecution: 'As an Englishman I am opposed to censorship, particularly a censorship which allows *Lolita* to be published because it costs 25/- [shillings] but has a court case over *Lady Chatterley's Lover* because it costs 3/6' (qtd. in Hilliard 370). The class bias was evident and the cover of the first 1960 edition proudly declared that it was the "complete 3/6 unexpurgated" text. Millions could now enter the Age of Permissiveness for 3/6. Or, to put it another way, the Old Bailey—that symbol of patrician order—was the conduit through which the Age of Permissiveness was allowed to enter.

Cambridge don and literary critic F.R. Leavis recognised this moment of transition. In a discursive review entitled the "The New Orthodoxy", in *The Spectator* of 17 February 1961, he wrote: "I have to point out that the Prosecution was defeated, not by the presentment of any sound or compelling case, but by its realisation that it was confronted by a new and confident orthodoxy of enlightenment—that the world had changed". The defeat for the Prosecution was, he said, "a definitive registration of this change in society" (21). Significantly, Leavis's orthodoxy of enlightenment, criticised in his *Spectator* article, included "the intellectuals of the university and the literary world" (21). In his earlier work *Education and the University* (1943), Leavis, much like the intellectuals and cultural commentators of the 1890s, questioned the proper place of English literature in society. As Thomas Docherty points out, Leavis "put it in terms of a conundrum: does the university replicate the society of which it is a part; or does it rather exist in order to counter the tendencies and drift of that society in some measure?" (4) The 1959 Obscene Publications Act is key to this

conundrum. Hilliard states that: “Before the Obscene Publications Act, practically all the authority in an obscenity trial rested with the prosecution” (672). However, the 1959 Act allowed the defence to call expert witnesses. This, Hilliard argues, shifted the balance of power significantly (672). The provision for expert literary witnesses turned the trial into, in the words of C.H. Rolph, “probably the most expensive seminar on Lawrence’s work ever given” (qtd. in Hilliard 677). But the Act had a significant, if probably unintended consequence. As Baldick points out:

Although its real effect was to relax censorship, under this law adverse pronouncements by literary critics can lead directly to the suppression of a literary work. [...] Under normal circumstances the ‘verdict’ of criticism will have extra-legal consequences only [...] but consequences which may be effectively identical. [...] There is no impassable gulf between censorship and criticism; the former may often be seen as the paradigm of the latter or, so to speak, its armed wing. (8)

There is thus a blurring of distinction between the work of censorship and criticism, of literature and law at the heart of this seminal moment in legal-literary history, with critics being raised up to the right-hand side of patrician judges as joint custodians of the nation’s moral virtue. Leavis’s phrase “the new orthodoxy” —balanced as it is on the point of self-contradiction—captures this sense of social norms, with Whiggish obstinacy, simply adapting to the latest crisis. In this sense, the Age of Austerity is very much the new orthodoxy.

IV: Conclusion

Does the university replicate the society of which it is a part; or does it rather exist in order to counter the tendencies and drift of that society in some measure? Docherty’s formulation of a question central to F.R. Leavis’s thoughts on the university and the culture in which it is based is the point on which I wish to conclude. This paper has discussed the trials in the Old Bailey of Oscar Wilde and D.H.

Lawrence via Penguin. It has linked both trials to historical moments of cultural crisis and the contemporary crisis facing universities in Britain through a succession of Ages: Anarchy, Permissiveness, Austerity. It has suggested that with the shift in the balance of power as universities came to be seen as custodians of culture and cultural authority came renewed attempts, first in the 1980s under the Thatcher governments then the Cameron governments of the 2010s, to wrest back control of culture from the universities and remake those universities as businesses subservient to economic needs. The message from the Secretary of State Maria Miller in 2013 was clear: “though cultural organisations might be hubs of creative flair at their heart, they are also businesses—which must combine creativity with commercial nous” (Miller). This dictum clearly extends to third-level education for the current Government, and the marketization of higher education continues apace with the latest higher education green paper (published November 2015) and its proposals to create a new Teaching Excellence Framework. In its study of the green paper, the National Union of Students counted 27 appearances of the phrase “value for money”, topped only by the equally vague phrase “what employers want” (qtd. in Collini “Who are the spongers now”). It was inconceivable in the 1890s and 1960s to argue that universities in Britain might be thought of as for-profit businesses, and that academics would feel the need to form groups such as the Council for the Defence of British Universities, whose very name suggests through its echoes of the courtroom that big-C Culture is in the docks again, just as it was in the 1890s and 1960s. If this shift in thinking does eventually occur, it will mark not just a significant turning point in the history of British universities, but also a significant historical turning point in the culture and society of which those universities are part. At the moment, strong resistance on the part of the universities to their reconfiguration as businesses indicate a will to counter the tendencies and drift of Conservative Britain. But if this resistance fails and universities in Britain are successfully and totally remodelled as businesses whose customers are a new wave of consumer-students then this replication of the society of which it is a part would surely warrant the designation of a new Age in the history of British society and culture.

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