

James Joyce and the embodiment of blasphemy: The banning of *Stephen Hero* in Spain

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James Joyce's work is noted for its subversion of the form and structure of the novel, as well as for its critical attitude towards contemporary Irish politics and the hold of the Roman Catholic Church. His rhetoric of subversion has generated numerous confrontations with official and unofficial censors, who rejected his works on aesthetic, political, moral and religious grounds. In *Stephen Hero*, the early fragmentary version of *A Portrait* posthumously published in 1944, Joyce undermines what he considered to be one of the main repressive forces in Ireland: the Catholic Church. It offers an autobiographic account of Stephen Daedalus's years at the National University, showing how the protagonist develops his commitment to art while detaching himself from his family and the Catholic Church. Joyce's story must have been found too subversive in Ireland. According to Michael Adams, in *Censorship: The Irish Experience*, *Stephen Hero* was prohibited in 1944 (1968: 241). And it is interesting to note that Joyce's refined version of the story, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, was not included in the Irish list of banned books. This leads us to think that *Stephen Hero* is what we might call a "subversion" of *A Portrait* that adopted a much more critical and subversive stance. But, how was *Stephen Hero* received in Spain, then another Catholic country with a church-dominated censorship? Did it also meet a more repressive response by the state than *A Portrait*? Do the Spanish censors' response confirm the differences between both versions of Joyce's story?

During Franco's regime (1939-75) there was a policy of cultural protectionism in Spain and the censorship office exercised a tight control over the publication and importation of books. No book could be printed or sold without permission from the Spanish board of censorship, which decided for or against the banning of

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literature on moral, religious or political grounds. The reports that Spanish censors had to fill in included some very explicit questions about the book they were reading: "Does it attack religious beliefs? Morals? The Church or any of its members? The Regime and its institutions?"¹ These questions highlight the importance of religious and political correctness for Spanish censors. Therefore, it would not be too difficult to imagine a grim picture for Joyce's *Stephen Hero* in Franco's Spain. Censors certainly were to raise objections to the way Stephen turns in revulsion from the Catholic Church.

Nevertheless, we find a first successful attempt to introduce *Stephen Hero* to Spanish readers already in 1953. It is an early Spanish version of chapter XIX translated by Joan Ferrater and published in a Barcelona journal called *Laye*.² Although the excerpt comprises Stephen's "subversive" aesthetic theories, illustrated with references to atheistic writers such as Ibsen and Maeterlinck, there is apparently nothing that could have caught the censor's attention. It is true, however, that a few paragraphs are missing – the whole dialogue between Stephen and his mother. A footnote at the beginning of the article points out this absence, but no explanation is given. Did the Spanish censorship office cut this passage? I have found no file on this publication in the archive, but there is a couple of irreverent comments in this missing passage that censors might have had trouble with. One is an impertinent remark on Catholic priests uttered by Stephen: "An artist is not a fellow who dangles a mechanical heaven before the public. The priest does that" (1975: 90-91). Another might be Stephen's "light-heartedly blasphemous description of that stout burgher [Dr Stockmann] as 'Jesus in a frock-coat'" (1975: 91). It is difficult to confirm the censor's intervention in this case without the appropriate written evidence. It might have simply been a voluntary omission. Perhaps, the whole chapter was too long and the editors just wanted to focus on the way Stephen's aesthetic theory is contrasted with the President of the University, somebody that represents the conventionality of Catholicism.

Whatever the case, one cannot but be surprised that the excerpt was published in Spain at the time, with Stephen's provocative questioning of the established Catholic literary values embodied by the President, and Stephen's disdainful attitude towards the very existence of censorship. This dialogue between McCann and Stephen over the protagonist's essay was included in the early Spanish text from *Stephen Hero*.

¹ "¿Ataca al dogma? ¿A la moral? ¿A la Iglesia o a sus miembros? ¿Al Régimen y a sus instituciones?" Most files on censorship of this period are found in the "Fondo de Cultura" at the Archivo General de la Administración in Madrid. I should like to express my gratitude to the archive staff for their unstinting help and friendly guidance on how to find my way through the complexities of these files. The translation of the texts from these files into English is mine.

² It predates the Argentinian edition of the novel by seven years.

- Brilliantly written – a bit strong, it seems to me. However, I gave it to the President this morning to read.
 - What for?
 - All the papers must be submitted to him first for approval, you know.
 - Do you mean to say, said Stephen scornfully, that the President must approve of my paper before I can read it to your society!
 - Yes, He's the Censor.
 - What a valuable society!
 - Why not?
 - It's only child's play, man. You remind me of children in the nursery.
- (1975: 93-94)

During this conversation, Whelan, the college orator, comes to them and says that Stephen's essay has been considered "tabu" by Reverend Dr Dillon and, consequently, could not be read to the Debating Society (1975: 94).

If this early Spanish version of *Stephen Hero* was not taken as "tabu", the censors showed a very different attitude when the whole text arrived in Spain in 1960. As could be expected, Joyce's anti-Catholic comments – his scornful attacks upon religious beliefs, the Church and its members – were not favourably received. On 23 December 1960, Ricardo Campos Burrell, manager of E.D.H.A.S.A. (Editora y Distribuidora Hispano-Americana, S.A.) applied to the Ministry of Information for permission to import 50 copies of the Argentine edition of *Steban el héroe*.³ After seven weeks of deliberations, on 10 February 1961, the censorship board decided to impose a ban on the book. In their reports we can clearly appreciate both the detailed scrutiny that books were subjected to during Franco's regime and the unremitting strictness of the censorship guidelines on religious issues. A first censor made a very negative comment:

The novel, undoubtedly, is autobiographical. It narrates the process of gestation of the artist, a rebel against the ideas, traditions and religious feelings of his homeland, Ireland. Detachment, jibes, ill-will for religion and priests. With intolerant irony he offends good taste with his constant criticism of religion and priests. IT SHOULD NOT BE AUTHORISED.⁴

³ The novel had just been translated by Roberto Bixio and published in Buenos Aires by Editorial Sur that same year.

⁴ "La novela, indudablemente, es autobiográfica. Cuenta el proceso de gestación del artista, rebelde a las ideas, tradiciones y sentimientos religiosos de su patria, Irlanda. Despego, burla, animadversión por la religión y los sacerdotes. Con ironía intolerante comete faltas de buen gusto, siempre dirigidas hacia la religión y los sacerdotes. NO DEBE AUTORIZARSE" (File 6774-60, Box 13095, N° IDD 50.04).

The file was then passed to an ecclesiastical censor who submitted a more detailed and severe report, specifying particular pages with offensive comments:

The author describes the psychological conflict that Stephen, a young Irish man educated in a Jesuit school, suffers when he gets rid of his religious ideas and becomes a rationalist. The Catholic clergy is held up to ridicule, pages 67, 108, 182, 246. Christ is insulted with real blasphemies, pages 123, 127, 153. God and the Catholic Religion are insulted, pages 159, 203, 227, 251. There are immoral remarks, pages 63, 64, 206, 242, 243. Therefore, I believe that the publication of this work should not be permitted.⁵

This was not the first time that Joyce's works had difficulties with Spanish censorship. Although the censorship office authorised the publication of *Dubliners* in 1942 and the importation of *Exiles* in 1944, they prohibited the importation of 100 copies of *Ulysses* in 1946.⁶

Censorship files usually contain a copy of the text that was to be imported, the text that censors read and in which they often made specific marks to signal inappropriate passages. Unfortunately, in the case of *Stephen Hero* there is no book in the file. Nevertheless, I have read the 1960 Argentinian edition of *Stephen Hero*, the same one the censors read, and checked the pages referred to in the second report. There I found several subversive remarks that were most likely those blasphemies and insults the second censors pointed out. The following paragraphs provide a discussion of these subversive comments in the order in which the censor mentioned them, although quotations are taken from the original English version.

The Catholic clergy is indeed held up to ridicule several times in *Stephen Hero*. A negative and mocking description of Catholic priests, and particularly Jesuits, will aptly endorse Stephen's decision to abandon the Catholic Church and the Jesuit school in order to pursue a career as an artist. The Spanish censor identifies a first derisive image of the clergy in Maurice's story about a priest that is unable to convince a drunkard on his deathbed to repent and give up drink (1975: 63). Surely, a more traditional edifying tale of an atheist or a libertine that repents and takes the Christian sacrament in the last minute would have been more appropriate. The second reference to a ridiculous religious figure can be found at the end of chapter

⁵ "El autor describe la lucha psicológica que sufre Esteban, joven irlandés educado en un colegio de Jesuitas por desprenderse de sus ideas religiosas y convertirse en racionalista. Se pone en ridículo al clero católico, págs. 67, 108, 182, 246. Se injuria a Cristo con verdaderas blasfemias: pág. 123, 127, 153, se injuria a Dios y a la Religión Católica 159, 203, 227, 251. Hay expresiones inmorales, pág. 63, 64, 206, 242, 243 por lo cual creo que no se debe permitir la publicación de esta obra."

⁶ In "James Joyce's Encounters with Spanish Censorship, 1939-1966" I included a general description of the Spanish censor's response to Joyce's works.

XIX. Now it is the President of the University, with his endless sermonising observations on Stephen's essay and his "hermaphroditic gesture" (1975: 103). We should remember that this passage had already been allowed in Spain in 1953; however, on that occasion the Spanish translator transformed the hermaphrodite gesture into a simple "gesto suave" or "soft gesture" (1953: 116). The third subversive passage that shows contempt for the clergy is the description of the priest who performed Isabel's burial service:

A priest with a great toad-like belly balanced to one side came out of the sacristy, followed by an altar boy. He read the service rapidly in a croaking voice and shook the aspergill drowsily over the coffin, the boy piping responses at intervals. When he had read the service he closed the book, crossed himself, and made back for the sacristy at a swinging [gate] gait. (1975: 172)

The last negative comment on the clergy, identified by the Spanish censor on page 246 of the Argentine edition, is somewhat more ambiguous. Here we find Stephen telling his parents about his interview with Father Butt. Perhaps, what the censor found offensive was Stephen's flat refusal to stay with the Jesuits, ignoring his father's and Father Butt's advice. Or, perhaps, it was simply that the censor just misread a confusing sentence in the Spanish version. The phrase "Father Butt had been vague" (1975: 233) was translated as "el Padre Butt había sido vago" (1960: 246), and the word "vago" in Spanish has two very different senses: "vague", as Joyce wrote, and "lazy", which was far from the original meaning.

The following two series of blasphemies the censor cited referred to insults against Christ, God and the Catholic Religion. It cannot be denied that in *Stephen Hero* Joyce introduces a crude foul-mouthed character whose profound disappointment and intense resentment towards his Catholic upbringing makes him feel that no one and nothing is sacred. Firstly, Stephen compares a picture of the Russian Tsar with a "besotted Christ", a "wirrasthrue Jaysus", he adds in a mocking manner (1975: 118). Then, in a conversation with Cranly, the description of the figure that rises before Stephen on Good Friday is no less insulting:

An ugly little man who has taken into his body the sins of the world: Something between Socrates and a Gnostic Christ – A Christ of the Dark Ages. That's what his mission of redemption has got for him: a crooked ugly body for which neither God nor man have pity. Jesus is on strange terms with that father of his. His father seems to me something of a snob. Do you notice that he never notices his son publicly but once – when Jesus is in full dress on the top of Thabor? (1975: 122)

In the following chapter, Cranly and Stephen discuss the figure of Christ on Good Friday, again with the same comic frivolity. This is the passage on page 153 of the Argentine edition that the censor underlined in his report, indicating the seriousness of its offence. Here, they talk about an “ugly misshapen Jesus”, “a conscious impostor”, whose chastity and divinity is questioned (1975: 146). Stephen’s catalogue of blasphemies continues with devastating criticism against Irish Catholicism (1975: 152), references to God as the “middle-aged gentleman with the aviary” (1975: 192) or the “half-witted God of the Roman Catholics” (1975: 215)⁷, and allusions to the Catholic dogma as “some old stale belief or hypocrisy” (1975: 239).

Finally, to make matters worse, Stephen is portrayed not only as an anti-Catholic blasphemous youth, but also as an immoral character who makes several obscene observations and keeps bad company. For instance, the first immoral page mentioned by the censor includes a conversation between Stephen and Madden in which Joyce’s protagonist provides a simple explanation for the chaste behaviour of the Irish people: masturbation (1975: 60). Also important in showing the dissolute side of Stephen’s life is his remark to his friend Lynch, while sitting in a tavern: “Jesus said ‘Whoso looketh upon a woman to lust after her hath already committed adultery with her in his heart:’ but he did not condemn ‘adultery’. Besides it is impossible not to commit ‘adultery’” (1975: 196). This may only be a witty comment in a men’s conversation, but Stephen’s immoral behaviour is confirmed towards the end of the book when he finds himself in a group of friends who discuss the possibility of going and picking a prostitute for the night (1975: 229-30). Important though they are, these shameful episodes of Stephen’s life were not recorded by the first censor, who concentrated on the protagonist’s anti-religious stance. One may imagine that, had it not been for Stephen’s blasphemies, his immoral behaviour would have gone unnoticed.

What is more difficult to imagine, and indeed it comes as a surprise, is that the ban imposed on *Stephen Hero* by the Spanish censorship office lasted for only two years. The ban was lifted on 22 March 1963, on the occasion of a request from HISPAR (Hispano Argentina Libros S. A.) to import 25 copies of the Spanish version.⁸ The following attempt to sell the book in Spain was also authorised on 5 June 1963,⁹ and so were the other thirteen import requests – which involved a

⁷ The censor also underlined the page number in which this remark appeared; the significance of the blasphemy lies in the fact that Stephen believes Emma’s eyes might cajole this half-witted God.

⁸ This request included the importation of Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy* – the Sur edition, I believe, though no details are given on the application form –, which was rejected because the book was considered “pornographic”; see File 547-63, Box 77358, N° IDD 52.117.

⁹ On this occasion the request included the importation of 5 copies of an Argentinian translation of Marjorie Barkentin’s *James Joyce’s Ulysses in Nighttown*, which the censors banned for being a “lascivious comedy”; see File 1085-63, Box 77359, N° IDD 52.117.

total of 1,338 copies – submitted before *Stephen Hero* was published in Spain in 1978. That was the same year that the Spanish Constitution was established, introducing full freedom of expression. The file that authorised that edition of *Stephen Hero* has no censor's report, but it contains the copy of the volume that the publishers gave to the censorship office. This book was read by somebody who bent the top corners of nine pages. Looking at those pages one can see marks which still indicate several blasphemies and irreverent comments – some of them were the same as those marked by the 1960 censor.

Joyce's refined version of the story, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, also has a history with Spanish censorship, although it is a history that proves to be less hostile than that directed against *Stephen Hero*. Three import requests of *A Portrait* were rejected between 1961 and 1962, but this time there are no detailed reports, just a simple comment: "anti-religious and anti-Jesuit".¹⁰ Furthermore, its publication was authorised in 1963 with a favourable report in which the censor, among other things, stated that the book was written with Joyce's "characteristic mastery".¹¹ Compared with the more caustic reading they offered of *Stephen Hero*, it seems that the offensiveness of Joyce's *Portrait* was not so acute. The banning of *Stephen Hero* highlights the sharp critique that Joyce wanted to present in his early draft. Although in the end the effects of censorship were not as negative as one might have expected during Franco's regime for such a blasphemous book, Joyce's willingness to ridicule the Catholic Church, its clergy and its beliefs, certainly disturbed some Spanish censors in 1960. We should not forget that *Stephen Hero* is a fragment of a manuscript that was never revised for publication, and therefore Joyce's subversion of the then prevalent Irish Catholic conventions appear in a more direct form than in *A Portrait*. What is more, the early Stephen is not exactly the same person as the figure in the later version.¹² He is much more passionate, self-confident and explicit; and his reaction against his Jesuit training is much more incensed, sarcastic and subversive, something that the Spanish censors of Franco's regime did not miss.

¹⁰ See File 644-62, Box 77352, N° IDD 12.117; File 791-62, Box 77352, N° IDD 12.117; File 1117-61, N° IDD 12.117, is missing, but an archive card confirms that the request was not authorised.

¹¹ See File 6759-62, Box 14309, N° IDD 50.05. Despite this authorisation one of the two editions published in 1963 (the one issued by *Círculo de Lectores*) included three small cuts in the final dialogue between Cranly and Stephen (see File 2985-63, Box 14580, N° IDD 50.05).

¹² See the differences that Theodore Spencer establishes between both characters in the introduction of the book (1975: 19); see also Peter Dorsey's article "From *Hero* to *Portrait*: The De-Christification of Stephen Dedalus.

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