The Composition of the Modernist Book:

Ulysses, A Draft of XXX Cantos and The Making of Americans

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The Composition of the Modernist Book:
_Ulysses, A Draft of XXX Cantos, The Making of Americans_

Abstract

This is a study of the composition of three Modernist first editions: _Ulysses_ (1922), _The Making of Americans_ (1925) and _A Draft of XXX Cantos_ (1930). The bibliographical and figurative commitments made to being in print by _Ulysses, A Draft of XXX Cantos_ and _The Making of Americans_ set a coherent program for reading Modernist texts in their perfected form: in print. The editorial reception of the Modernist book has proceeded, however, with reference to the editorial and bibliographical principles established by the New Bibliographers. In deferring to the authors and manuscripts of Modernist books as the highest source of textual authority, the vital significance of being in print to literary Modernism is obscured.

The figure of the ideal Book concentrates the central aesthetic, intellectual and bibliographic problem posed the Modernist book: the making of literature. The rhyme with _The Making of Americans_ is appropriate: this book intensifies and consolidates the propositions made about objective and autonomous composition made more hesitantly by _Ulysses_ and _A Draft of XXX Cantos_. These three books display a gradual refusal to equate inscription and intention; their composition effaces all traces of a sovereign creative subjectivity. The vision of the book guides Modernist composition, and requires a critical distinction be drawn between manuscripts and printed letters. Modernism must be read in print.

The vestigial nostalgia for Romantic modes of textual production and creation in _Ulysses_ is repeated on the placards and proof-pages for the book. Printed drafts are revised and reformed by the pen of the author. The finality asserted by the printed letter is only reluctantly ceded on the publication of _Ulysses_. The composition of _A Draft of XXX Cantos_ represents a further transition away from the script economy of Romanticism. The interplay between authorial typescripts, early publications and the first edition of _A Draft of XXX Cantos_ assert an intermediate order of Modernist textuality which takes the printed page as its foundation. _The Making of Americans_ relies on the absolute objectivity and anonymity of its composition for the effect of its narrative. Objectivity is the intellectual and aesthetic strategy which produces literature rather than the personality and memory of the author. The impersonality of the apparently automatically written manuscripts and scarcely revised typescripts for _The Making of Americans_ severs the visible links between the writing author and her page.

In their unwillingness to corroborate the modes of textual generation described by the New Bibliographers, these three books thematise their own composition as the exemplary Modernist and modern mode of textual generation. The Modernist book attenuates or
denies a Romantic connection between the creative hand of the author and the surface image of the page: the mechanisms of print deliberately detach the author from the literary text. The distance of the author from the scene of textual reproduction is measured by the printed book. The composition of this analytical object is not a fallacy but an actuality, commemorated in the archive, enacted by the book. Modernism is the literature of the imprimatur rather than of authorial inscription and accordingly it is towards the first editions of Modernist texts that the attentions of editors and textual scholars must be directed.