

# Suppression and Appraisal: Latrinalia as Obscene Art

by Tommy Sheffield

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I often encounter latrinalia (public restroom graffiti) when I use the Carrier library bathroom. Though I usually scoff at what I read, I can't help but be intrigued by the obnoxious yet clever things people come up with. In his article "Identity and Ideology: The Dialogic Nature of Latrinalia," Adam Trahan writes that latrinalia "is best characterized as an impassioned dispute where no single ideology prevails" and that there is "a general discomfort regarding the nature of the space where it appears" (8). When I read this, it makes me think of how artistic progression is in many ways an impassioned dispute where no single ideology prevails, and that, in artistic progression, there have been many works of art that touched on controversial subject matter or transgressed genre and were initially rejected because of it. In the same way that an opinionated graffiti entry in a bathroom stall often invokes harsh responses from those who read it, artworks that touch on controversial topics and portray intimate and private and therefore "obscene" scenes are often rejected, legally or aesthetically, by those whom they offend.

The purpose of this paper is to compare the impermanent and confrontational nature of the rhetoric of graffiti (especially latrinalia) with the rhetoric of artistic progression and genre to identify any overarching similarities between the evolution of graffiti designs and the evolution of artistic genres/movements. Although artistic genres are usually based on the production of some specific kind of beauty, and latrinalia often develops into something visibly ugly/offensive, my research question is this: how are the processes by which artistic genres form and progress similar to the ways in which latrinalia forms and evolves? The artifacts I'll be examining are James Joyce's *Ulysses*, several latrinalia examples, and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

In order to begin comparing these two very different topics, it is important to understand that one of the biggest differences between latrinalia and "obscene" literature is that latrinalia is almost completely anonymous in its origin, whereas the writer and publisher of "obscene" literature are able to be held accountable for their creation. However, each of them are able to be viewed by the general public. This provokes another interesting similarity: just as the obscenity portrayed in works like James Joyce's *Ulysses* inspires other writers to be more open in their treatment of sexual subject matter, so too does the intimate/public aspect of graffiti in a bathroom stall provoke more open and opinionated expression. Trahan later writes that out of the latrinalia he observed in the study, three main themes emerged: sexuality, religiosity, and humor (6). Interestingly enough, these are also major themes in *Ulysses*. However a difference is that while in fine literature obscenity is used to honestly portray character and scene, in latrinalia obscenity is often expressed in an intentionally offensive manner. I found this example of latrinalia in Alan Dundes' "Here I Sit—A Study of American Latrinalia" to be particularly funny (Dundes called it "surprisingly intellectual"; I agree):

"God is dead." Nietzsche

"Nietzsche is dead." God (97).

This excerpt consists of two stark viewpoints in direct opposition to each other. First there is the atheistic Nietzsche quote, and then the response, which is the clever statement of a literal fact presented as a quote from God. Most latrinalia seem to function in this way: with a statement and then a response to that statement (which could be ironic/satirical, sexual, or religious). This statement response pattern, which Trahan calls in his article "a temporal sequence," can actually become a sort of evolving argument. An example provided by Trahan shows this pattern via an argument over homosexuality that goes from anti-gay to pro-gay:

"Whoever draws a dick on the wall is not straight"

"Actually, they're straight gay"

"So are you you fucking fag"

"Everyone loves a homophobe" (5).

Sometimes these arguments even manifest in a circle, especially if the original statement was unusually hostile and antagonistic. Another of Trahan's examples involves a statement that reads "Homosexuality is a sin and all fags go to Hell" (5). And then, surrounding that statement in a circle, are four other response statements; the first is anti-religious, the second anti-gay, the third anti-homophobic, and the fourth anti-religious. This argument is interesting because all the response statements surround the original statement on the bathroom wall, effectively containing the statement in terms of both space and ideology, which can be rhetorically effective.

These three examples of latrinalia, though mean and abrasive and darkly funny, can be used as basic metaphors for artistic progression and the development of genre. Latrinalia response statements are usually confrontational and offensive and based off disagreement--(even so, plenty of artists disagree)<sup>1</sup>--but art is constantly progressing, so when an artist creates a work, it in a way responds to all the artworks that have come before it, especially those from similar genre(s). Art's progression can even resemble the latrinalia examples I quoted from Dundes and Trahan, but usually with more positive response statements.

*Ulysses*, published in 1922 and considered the greatest novel of the Modernist literary movement, had a strong influence on T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (now considered the greatest Modernist poem), which was published later that year and was in many ways an artistic response to *Ulysses* and Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*. Similar to my second quoted example (the one in four parts) is how James Joyce's Modernist novel *Ulysses* greatly influenced Vladimir Nabokov,<sup>2</sup> whose work can be categorized as a bridge between modernism and postmodernism and which had a huge influence on Thomas Pynchon, and how Pynchon's Postmodern fiction and lengthy novel *Gravity's Rainbow* greatly influenced David Foster Wallace's Postpostmodern fiction, especially his massive novel *Infinite Jest*. Stephen King's writing is comparable to my third quoted example. Critics generally agree that King writes genre fiction (horror) and not literary

fiction, but his strong book sales and faithful fans have made him an extremely popular writer nonetheless. Most literary critics will still side with Joyce, but considering Stephen King and other popular writers (like Clive Cussler and John Grisham) sell more books than modern literary fiction writers, there are still just as many critics who would stand by Stephen King's writing ability as would deplore it, just as those who agreed and disagreed with the anti-gay latrinalia tried to surround the offensive statement to decrease its rhetorical power.

Even more interesting are the artworks that can rouse the same kind of rhetorical animosity that latrinalia does: Nazi propaganda, slave labor, terrorism, death, to name a few--but what kind of imagery could evoke a reaction that results in death? One example is the portrayal of Mohammed in Western artwork and the violent reactions that the Islamic world has to it. In "Blasphemy or Art: What Art Should Be Censored and Who Wants to Censor It?" Curtis S. Dunkel and Erin E. Hillard discuss how "artwork that mixes the sacred and profane . . . is particularly likely to elicit a negative emotional response and is more likely to be the target for censorship" (1). In this same way, latrinalia such as "I will fucking rape all you fucking Jesus freaks" provoke a much stronger emotional/rhetorical response in the reader by combining sacredness with profanity in a way that is overtly offensive, so those who it offends want to respond to it in a way that inflicts some sort of symbolic ideological revenge. This was also why Joyce's *Ulysses* was banned from the United States and United Kingdom for so long,<sup>3</sup> as his work also combined subject matter considered to be sacred and profane, so the people who it offended wanted it censored.

But this doesn't mean that things are that much better than in 1922; in fact, for Salman Rushdie, they might be worse. Rushdie, a British Indian novelist and essayist, had a fatwa (an Islamic religious decree) declared on him by Ayatollah Khomeini for publishing *The Satanic Verses*, a book that was criticized by the Muslim world for its supposedly blasphemous depictions of Mohammed. Though 13 Muslim barristers tried to have it banned, the mainstream view of the book is that it is not blasphemous. However, because Rushdie combined what is sacred and profane to Muslim culture, it garnered a heated reaction in the Muslim world and became a target for censorship (Robertson, the 1<sup>st</sup> interview). And though they were never successful in killing him, the bounty that was offered for Rushdie's death resulted in him needing a police escort. There was even a failed assassination attempt where Mustafa Mahmoud Mazeh,<sup>4</sup> while priming (very ironically) a book bomb loaded with RDX explosive intended for Rushdie, blew himself up in his London hotel. And, though Salman Rushdie having a fatwa put on him for writing a book is completely absurd, the fact that he was able to get away with it will encourage other writers--just as *Ulysses*' fearless depiction of the human character did when it was published 66 years before--to be brave, and write about things that matter.

Similar to the way that latrinalia starts with a single statement on an empty space and grows to slowly fill that space up, so too do genres and artistic movements start small and slowly build up to their peak and then finally recess once more. However, along with the difference in the levels of anonymity, legality, and profitability, there is also a grand irony underlying all censorship and to a lesser extent genre.

In Jean-Loup Richet's "Overt Censorship: A Fatal Mistake?" he writes about Twitter's blockage of a Neo-Nazi account and how it "stimulated interest in the group, causing its number of

followers to grow rapidly by 200 in just one day" (38). This is also the case with latrinalia: one original statement is all it takes to begin a string (or web) of argumentative response statements, and even if someone were to wash off all the latrinalia in a bathroom, soon enough, new graffiti would take its place. And this is similar to artistic progression as well--there are plenty of modern writers whose styles rely heavily on obscenity (like Chuck Palahniuk) to give the reader the same kind of jolt that reading a really offensive statement on a bathroom stall might give. Richet also writes that "Censorship exposes a government's intentions and in many cases undermines the government's credibility" (38).<sup>5</sup> So despite being intended to suppress obscene works of art, censorship exposes motive and weakens credibility when done in too aggressive a manner, only serving to draw further attention to the censored artwork, surely defeating its purpose" (Richet, 38). This is true with latrinalia, in that the person who responds to the original statement is trying to censor the other person's expression, and he undermines his own credibility by doing so, provoking more responses similar to his. Artistic progression is also heavily influenced by censorship and genre, especially with a work like *Ulysses*, which had to initially be smuggled into the United States and sold for a high price. In that same way, *Ulysses* resisted and eventually overcame censorship and defied genre and was later put on Modern Library's list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century--ranked in first place.

So what does that mean exactly? Is every work that could be considered obscene or lewd going to be deemed fine literature? No--but, works that have the courage to display the human experience in an honest manner will be rewarded for it, despite the attempts of those whom the art offends. In many ways, censorship only works to create more controversy around a work of art, and in these contemporary times, this merely attracts more attention to that artwork. The grand irony is this: any work of art deemed obscene and worthy of censorship, so long as its purpose is literary and its quality fine, will resist that censorship, and perhaps, in the long run, even benefit from it.

#### Works Cited

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<sup>1</sup> Though Nabokov himself denied having taken any influence from Joyce, the intertextuality exists nonetheless and is worth noting.

<sup>2</sup> An example of this would be Hemingway's novella *The Torrents of Spring*, which was a parody of Sherwood Anderson and his novel *Dark Laughter*. Hemingway's mocking of Anderson's novel actually angered Gertrude Stein, Hemingway's mentor, and the two had a falling out after.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the 1920s, the United States Postal Service burned copies of the novel; Muslims would later do the same thing with *The Satanic Verses*.

<sup>4</sup> A member of the Organization of the Mujahidin of Islam, a Lebanese group.

<sup>5</sup> Such as with Twitter taking down a Neo-Nazi account for the German government.