Volume 3: 2010-2011 ISSN: 2041-6776

INNERVATE
Leading Undergraduate Work in English Studies

The University of Nottingham
School of English Studies

Excreta, Ejaculate and the Emetic: the Role of the Abject in *Ulysses*

Rory Byrne

> It is [...] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.
>
> —Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.[1]

The abject, as defined by Julia Kristeva, is that which is located at the borders of two positions; it is 'beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.'[2] It causes repulsion, it is suppressed by society and thus it is placed behind closed doors — it is, nevertheless, ultimately an element of life. James Joyce's *Ulysses* mentions the unmentionable with such frequency that its presence adopts a prominent place in the narrative. It is manifested most conspicuously in the frequent bodily emissions found splattered around the text and also in the instances where the body is presented 'without God and outside of science' in the form of the corpse.[3] The role of the abject, I will argue, is dichotomous: it repels and entices, it is opposed and integral to the subject, it represents both the natural and unnatural. The divided quality of the abject in *Ulysses* will be the focus of this discussion with a view to establishing how the paradoxes presented by abjection impact upon the text as a whole. The exploration of the issue at hand will be punctuated by thoughts from Kristeva's essay on abjection in order to place her theories at the centre of the discussion and allow the argument to develop around them.

It 'fascinates desire'

From his introduction onwards, Leopold Bloom shows an enjoyment of the abject. We are told 'Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls [...] Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine.'[4] The implication here may not be that mutton kidneys are Bloom's favourite in spite of their excremental flavour, but *because* of it. The fact that he eats 'with relish' that which most would consider substandard suggests both an enjoyment and, even more, a preference for it over higher quality meat.

Bloom's affection for the abject is shown to have some pragmatic basis when he thinks 'Mulch of dung. Best thing to clean ladies' kid gloves. Dirty cleans.'[5] Whether or not dung can indeed be used to clean leather, Molly Bloom recalls when her husband tried to make her walk in 'all the horses dung I could find' to clean her boots, reflecting 'but of course hes not natural like the rest of the world'.[6] Molly's hesitance to interact with the

[1] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.4.
[2] Ibid., p.1.
[3] Ibid., p.4.
[4] James Joyce, *Ulysses: The 1922 Text*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.53.
[5] Ibid., p.66.
[6] Ibid., p.697.

abject, coupled with her opinion that there is something unnatural about anyone who thinks otherwise, highlights the irregularity of Bloom's apparent relationship with excreta.

His affection for the abject is shown most positively through his love of Molly's breast milk, which he enjoys to such an extent that 'he wanted to milk [her] into the tea'.[7] Kelly Anspaugh cites Joyce's infamous 1909 letters to Nora as evidence for his assertion that 'Joyce was a coprophile.'[8] These letters are paralleled by Bloom's 'mad crazy letters' to Molly, in which Bloom says 'everything connected with your glorious Body everything underlined that comes from it is a thing of beauty', which corroborates the suggestion that Bloom is, as Bella Cohen puts it, a 'Dungdevourer!'[9]

For Bloom the abject is — in Kristeva's words — 'as tempting as it is condemned.'[10] His appetite for the objectionable, like his preference for the urinary taste of kidneys, may well be based on, not in spite of, its liminality. The indication that one might enjoy that which others eschew may in itself be a form of abjection according to Kristeva: Bloom is what she calls a 'criminal with a good conscience', in that he enjoys what others see as unnatural and reprehensible, which in itself may be considered a form of abjection.[11]

'The repugnance, the retching...'

Judge M. Woolsey concluded the New York trial of *Ulysses* for obscenity in 1933 by announcing his famous verdict in which remarked that 'in many places the effect of *Ulysses* on the reader undoubtedly is somewhat emetic.'[12] The use of the abject is, arguably, used purposefully within the text to induce just such an 'emetic' response.

Stephen Dedalus, while contemplating a dream about his 'beastly dead' mother, remembers 'A bowl of white china had stood beside her deathbed holding the green sluggish bile which she had torn up from her rotting liver by fits of loud groaning vomiting.'[13] This image, especially when presented in contrast to the natural image of the sea as it is, is unarguably repugnant; 'sluggish', 'rotting', 'groaning' and 'torn up' are chosen above any other words to illustrate Stephen's thoughts in order to communicate the utter loathsomeness of his memory. His mother is arguably more repulsive when she returns to Stephen's mind as a ghost in 'Circe': she is 'emaciated', 'noseless, green with gravemould', 'A green rill of bile trickling from a side of her mouth.'[14] The accretive use of green images seen here coupled with the old woman means that the apparition may be a representation of Ireland as a whole, because of its similarity to the character of Kathleen Ní Houlihan. The subversion of both the beautiful woman and Ireland itself through the grotesque corpse adds to the offensiveness of this image in order to communicate Stephen's utter abjection sufficiently.[15]

'Circe' depicts a hellish vision not only for Stephen, but also for Bloom: Bello threatens him by saying 'We'll bury you in our shrubbery jakes where you'll be dead and dirty with old Cuck Cohen [...] suffocated in the one cesspool.'[16] The idea of throwing a body down a toilet, as Jeri Johnson points out, is reminiscent of the anti-Semitic 'blood libel' tales,

---

[7] Ibid., p.705.
[8] Kelly Anspaugh, 'Powers of Ordure: James Joyce and the Excremental Vision(s)', *Mosaic*, 27.1 (1994) <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5000209733> [accessed 02 January 2011] 73-100 (p.1); 'coprophile': 'one who is attracted to filth', *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, (Oxford University Press, 2010) <http://www.oed.com> [accessed 08 January 2011].
[9] Joyce, p.721; p.498.
[10] Kristeva, p.1.
[11] Ibid., p.4.
[12] Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p.678; 'emetic': 'Having power to produce vomiting', *OED.*
[13] Joyce, p.8; p.6.
[14] Ibid., pp.539-40.
[15] Joyce, p.894.
[16] Ibid., p.509.

the recurrence of which in Bloom's mind imply his unease concerning them.[17] The text combines Bloom's angst, excrement and — what Kristeva identifies as as 'the utmost of abjection' — the corpse in order to describe a punishment which collectively represents a nightmarish proposition for Bloom.[18]

The corpse is experienced by Stephen in the form of his mother's ghost and by Bloom in his own hallucination, the use of which is chosen because it repulses: it lies at the borders between the dead and the living and is therefore liminal — 'it abjects.'[19] Just as Molly considers letting out 'a few smutty words smellrump or lick my shit' to shock Bloom, Joyce's use of the abject is necessarily emetic in order to describe that which is, in Kristeva's terms, 'beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.'[20]

'I expel *myself*'

'Signatures of all things I am here to read': Stephen states his purpose is to read identifying marks of 'all things', which of course does not exclude the abject.[21] Freud notes that children see their excreta as valuable and 'part of their own body' and as such bodily emissions are ultimately not only a product but also an extension of the individual.[22] Just as an animal marks its territory with its urine, people's signatures are expressed by their productions throughout *Ulysses*, encouraging connections to be drawn between creator and creation.

When climbing into bed Bloom notices 'the imprint of a male form, not his' on the 'new clean bedlinen'; with regards to this Henry Staten asserts that 'no actual bed would register the readable imprint of a body identifiable by gender and distinguishable from that of its habitual occupant' and so concludes 'this imprint must take shape in Bloom's mind.'[23] This is, however, not the case: the imprint is seen again in 'Penelope' when Molly observes 'theres the mark of his spunk on the clean sheet', evidently the signature of Blazes Boylan, a consequence of his earlier coition with Molly.[24] The stain is conspicuously 'not his [Bloom's]' because of the '10 years, 5 months and 18 days during which carnal intercourse had been incomplete' and identifiably male because, as 'menstruation signifies femaleness' incontestably, ejaculation of semen is irrefutably masculine.[25]

Stephen's urination on the beach in 'Proteus' is subsequently echoed by Bloom's defecation at the end of 'Calypso'; the more substantial nature of Bloom's excretion parallels his more physical personality and corporeal interests, whereas Stephen's emission, like himself, is more meagre and ethereal.[26] Further representations of the two can be seen in their emissions when they simultaneously urinate in 'Ithaca'; Bloom's is 'longer, less irruent', whereas Stephen's is 'higher, more sibilant.'[27] The two sources from which their respective urine originates are described as organs of 'micturition', a word which Don Gifford notes

[17] Johnson, in Joyce, p.806; 'those jews they said killed the christian boy', p.104.
[18] Kristeva, p.4.
[19] Ibid., p.3.
[20] Ibid., p.1.
[21] Joyce, p.37.
[22] Anspaugh, p.1.
[23] Joyce, p.683; Henry Staten, 'The Decomposing Form of Joyce's Ulysses', *PMLA*, 112.3 (1997) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462947> [accessed 04 January 2011] 380-392 (p.390).
[24] Joyce, p.730.
[25] Ibid., p.687; Cheryl Herr, '"Penelope" as Period Piece', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 22.2 (1989) 130-142 (p.135).
[26] As Johnson puts it: '[Bloom] is corporeal man to Stephen Dedalaus's mental man', citing the lack of bodily organs assigned to Telemachus by the Gilbert and Linati Schemata, Joyce, p.793.
[27] Ibid., p.655.

Joyce would later explicitly associate with creativity and the composition of *Ulysses* in *Finnegans Wake*, thus indicating the connection between bodily fluids and their designer.[28]

Kristeva posits that 'I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*.'[29] In expelling their abject bodily fluids the characters of *Ulysses* also expel themselves; they emit part of their body and so their excreta is ultimately a representation of themselves.

It is 'opposed to the *I*'

In 'Proteus' Stephen observes 'a bloated carcase of a dog' consecutively followed by 'a point, live dog'; in this instance the abject serves the purpose of being the antithesis of the subject, in that the latter dog is defined by its inverse relationship with the former.[30] This proximity between the living and the dead triggers a corollary thought from Stephen: as he looks at the sea he experiences, in an imagined sense, seeing 'a corpse rising saltwhite from the undertow.'[31] He is separated from the drowned man by the fact that he stands on the beach, which is both solid and real, whereas the imagined corpse floats on both the Irish Sea and the figurative waves of his imagination. Staten suggests that Stephen's repeated consideration of the dead stems from his fear that he might have died in infancy; this implication is illustrated when he sees a pair of midwives — whose obvious role is to augment birth — carrying a bag, which he instantly assumes must contain a 'misbirth.'[32] Just as the dead dog serves as a role in the portrayal of the live one, the drowned man and the dead child are negatives from which both the adult and infant Stephen, the subject, can be developed.

On the occasion where Bloom and Stephen jointly urinate, discussed above, each contemplates the other's 'reciprocal theirnothis fellowfaces.'[33] Also discussed above is Bloom's encounter with Boylan's 'imprint' where the offending mark is noted as being 'not his', which is the reason it is called to our attention: it is, as Staten describes it, the '*not thing* itself, the thing called infidelity, improper essence or essence of impropriety.'[34] The abject, by Kristeva's definition, 'has only one quality of the object — that of being opposed to the *I*'; the inverse relationship between the abject and the subject, as demonstrated here, is used to define an entity in terms of what it is not.

'Such wastes drop that I might live'

Molly, in her interior monologue, is very aware of her various 'omissions.'[35] Cheryl Herr asserts that Molly's personal view of the world 'knows itself most profoundly in its unspeakable secrets and secretions'; Molly's knowledge of herself is of prime importance to the integrity of the episode because, after all, 'Penelope' is a monologue which is performed for no-one else but her.[36] Her unexpected period presents a definite interruption to the narrative; Molly is surprised at the occurrence of 'that thing', although her euphemism 'usual monthly auction' underpins what she describes as an affliction as part of her natural cycle.[37] As Herr points out, the cyclical rhythm of 'Penelope' represents the flowing nature of

[28] Don Gifford, *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's Ulysses*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p.585.
[29] Kristeva, p.3.
[30] Joyce, pp.44-5.
[31] Ibid., p.49.
[32] Staten, p.388; Joyce, p.38.
[33] Joyce, p.655. In the context of Bloom and Stephen's combined activity 'fellowfaces' is taken to connote the appearance of each other's organ.
[34] Ibid., p.683; Staten, p.390.
[35] Joyce, p.721.
[36] Herr, p.142.
[37] Joyce, p.719.

menstruation, as well as the patterns of the moon and the tides; even though Molly's period is a blunt disruption of the narrative its presence within that narrative inextricably links it with the natural form of the episode.[38] The blood which runs from her is joined by urine which becomes apparent in her thoughts by her reworking of 'The Cataract of Ladore', the imagery of which increases the idea
of her excretions as being based within the natural sphere.[39]

The corpse — although noted above for its utterly abject status — is ultimately an aspect of life; Staten suggests that within *Ulysses* there exists a 'general circulation whose primary figure is eating and the digestive process', into which the corpse fits. Bloom notices a rat in the graveyard and observes that a deceased body is 'Ordinary meat for them. A corpse is meat gone bad.'[40] Stephen's reconstructed memory of the drowned man is, similarly, fed upon by fish in reaction to which he observes 'God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain.'[41] Bloom considers a similar cycle 'food, chyle, blood, dung, earth, food', and so even the corpse — still more the consumption of it — is shown to have a natural place within the 'general circulation.'[42]

The excreta and bodies within these examples show what Kristeva describes as 'permanently thrust aside in order to live'; as such, the role of what might be seen as abject is essential to survival.[43] *Ulysses* recognises that this is the case: people produce waste — annually 'a sum total of 80 lbs' if we trust Joyce's figures — and so without the inclusion of the abject in the text could never be in a position to depict a realistic day in 1904 Dublin.[44]

'what disturbs order, system, identity'

Although the consumption of the dead by animals is arguably an aspect of nature and therefore acceptable, human cannibalism is presented within the text and serves as an example of transgression which results in abjection. After contemplating the rat's ingestion of the dead Bloom considers their flavour: 'Saltwhite crumbling mush of corpse: smell, taste like raw white turnips.'[45] The transference of the flesh to Bloom's mouth — even though it is only figurative — subverts the normality of the rat's consumption of the corpse and thus creates something objectionable. A similarly disturbing idea is suggested by Stephen, who jokes that 'an omnivorous being [...] might possibly find gastric relief in an innocent collation of staggering bob', which is explained to be 'the cookable and eatable flesh of a calf newly dropped from its mother.'[46] The 'omnivorous being', as Staten points out, could well be a human being; the context of the situation is that the already sickening proposal is being presented whilst Stephen is both in a maternity hospital and within earshot of Bloom, whose son Rudy died whilst fitting the description 'newly dropped from his mother.'[47] This image is arguably more objectionable than the former because of both the situation in which it is presented and because it concerns the body of child.

A similarly disquieting image is presented in 'Cyclops': a discussion takes place between the drinkers at the pub concerning 'the poor bugger's tool that's being hanged' and how it may experience 'a morbid upwards and outwards philoprogenetive erection.'[48] This image bases its disturbing nature on the combination of sexual imagery and the dead, as does

[38] Herr, p.131-2.
[39] Joyce, p.720; p.979.
[40] Ibid., p.110.
[41] Ibid., p.49.
[42] Ibid., p.168.
[43] Kristeva, p.3.
[44] Joyce, p.670.
[45] Joyce, p.110.
[46] Ibid., p.399.
[47] Staten, p.385.
[48] Joyce, p.292.

Bloom's musings on 'Whores in Turkish graveyards'; he thinks 'Both ends meet. Tantalising for the poor dead. Smell of grilled beefsteak to the starving' which adds a carnal element to the already uncomfortable combination of death and sex.

That which might be seen as abject, as explained previously, can fit into the natural and the normal but when it 'does not respect borders, positions, rules' it becomes liminal and therefore objectionable.[49] Kristeva conceives that the horror caused by the Holocaust is due to the combination of death with science, which is supposed to protect life; these examples similarly cause unease by the combination of death with that which continues life — childhood, food and sex — and so show no respect for the rules and the natural cycle.[50]

This discussion has attempted to show that — like Bloom's flow of urine — the role of the abject is 'bifurcated.'[51] Kristeva's theories show how the seemingly contradictory aspects of the abject, such as those seen within *Ulysses*, coexist and combine to form the perception of it; the inconsistencies are what make it indefinable, and which therefore cause most discomfort.

> [The abject] does not have, properly speaking, a definable *object* [...] If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.[52]

The most important distinction in this dichotomous role of the abject — which in fact all the other differences draw attention to — is that the abject when experienced in an internal or theoretical sense differs from when it manifests itself in an external and real form. That which could constitute the abject, when encountered in reality, finds its role in the natural and the everyday and can be seen as an extension of the individual — Bloom shows us that even its more sordid elements can be seen to have enticing qualities. When we experience it internally within the minds of characters, however, it exhibits that which is impossible, intolerable and unthinkable: Stephen's mother, his suggestion of eating a newborn and the corpses he sees himself as a reflection against, all only materialise in his imagination. Similarly, Bloom's nightmare visions and the most shockingly of his devious suggestions only ever enter the text from his internal narrative — the perversions of which he is guilty of pursuing in reality are never fully externalised because they are only shared within the borders of his marriage.

Kristeva states that '[the abject] is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within.'[53] The discussion of the issue at hand has plausibly suggested that this is the case in *Ulysses* which has further reaching implications for the text as a whole: if the abject can indeed only be fully experienced when encountered internally then can the book, which is undoubtedly an external stimulus for the reader, ever hope to be truly emetic and thereby elicit a reaction of abjection from the reader? If not, it may be impossible to see *Ulysses* — which is in a sense an 'omission' of life — as an object which in itself can cause abjection.

[49] Kristeva, p.4.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Joyce, p.655.
[52] Kristeva, p.1-2.
[53] Ibid., p.5.

Bibliography

Anspaugh, Kelly, 'Powers of Ordure: James Joyce and the Excremental Vision(s)', *Mosaic*, 27.1 (1994) <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5000209733> [accessed 02 January 2011]

Ellmann, Richard, *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959)
Gifford, Don, *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's Ulysses*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008)

Herr, Cheryl, '"Penelope" as Period Piece', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 22.2 (1989) 130-142

Joyce, James, *Ulysses: The 1922 Text*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998)

Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Ney York: Columbia University Press, 1982) also available at <http://tinyurl.com/powersofhorror>

Oxford English Dictionary, (Oxford University Press, 2010) <http://www.oed.com> [accessed 08 January 2011]

Staten, Henry, 'The Decomposing Form of Joyce's Ulysses', *PMLA*, 112.3 (1997) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462947> [accessed 04 January 2011] 380-392