Waste Products:
The Significance of the Grotesque Body and its Functions in Joyce's *Ulysses*

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"In the nineteenth-century realist novel, despite its claims to verisimilitude, nobody ever goes to the toilet," observes Maude Ellmann, literary critic and daughter of Joyce's biographer Richard Ellmann. Indeed, Joyce's refusal to expurgate such everyday experiences from *Ulysses* created some commotion over the course of its publication, leading to charges of obscenity and attempts to ban and censor the text. Joyce's refusal to respect propriety in his depictions of the bodily is among the strangest aspects of the work, especially in its apparent gratuity and extravagance. However, it would be extremely uncharacteristic of Joyce, a gleeful baiter of academics, to include such details purely for the sake of verisimilitude, and critics have long been arguing that such depictions of the body are by no means gratuitous. Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, proposed that such depictions of the "grotesque body" were a means by which authors could remind their audience what was forgotten about the nature of one's self through the bowdlerization and idealization of the body: that they are not just static vessels for the mind, but dynamic, active fleshly things contiguous with their environment, constantly changing and revising itself. Joyce's detailed and explicit portrayals of urination, defecation and menstruation appear to serve this exact purpose: his characters think about their bodies and the day to day realities of being human as an undeniable expression of being human. However, thing are rarely quite so succinctly explainable with Joyce, and Maude Ellmann wrote an essay entitled "Ulysses: The Epic of the Human Body," arguing that these reminders of the physical serve as manifestations of the unique psychological peculiarities of each character, that Joyce uses the physical bodies of his characters as a stage upon which to enact Freudian psychodramas. These disparate readings share a common strain, pointing to the fact that, on a fundamental level, Joyce uses bodily functions as metaphor for the individual's connection to the world, his production and wastefulness both biological and intellectual.

Drinking alcohol and urination are the only bodily function Stephen is portrayed as performing: the other main characters, Bloom and Molly, eat defecate and menstruate. A Freudian reading suggests Stephen's liquid rather than solid waste may be representative of his literary ambition despite not getting any actual writing done. The evidence for such an interpretation is perhaps clearest in "Proteus," in which Stephen's long walk on Sandymount beach culminates in his urinating: "In long lassoes from the Cock lake the water flowed full." (U 3 453) Ellmann applies Freudian analysis to Stephen's urination: "In Freudian terms, Stephen's preference for urination could be understood as a symptom of ambition: Freud speaks of 'the intense burning ambition of those who earlier suffered from enuresis.'" (59) From this connection, she concludes, "he remains unwilling or unable to pass solids, his urethral ambitions exceed his anal productivity," (59) correlating the liquidity of all the product of Stephen's body to the liquidity of all the product of his mind. In light of Ellmann's reading of anal retention in Stephen, the context in which he urinates is significant: A period of aimless wandering on the beach characterized by frequent stretches of self doubt: he contemplates the lot of various royal

"Pretenders..." (U 3 313), then wonders if he could have saved a drowning man, and seems to conclude he is a coward: "I would want to, I would try, I am not a strong swimmer." (U 3 323) In this passage, Stephen finds himself is fluid, lost. In his preoccupation with "pretenders," Stephen questions his own legitimacy as an artist, and in doubting his ability to save the drowned man, he exhibits low self-efficacy, doubting his ability to have any real effect on the world around him. Thus Stephen calls into question the solidity of his own identity into question, holding back his own production of art, of self.

Urination also characterizes the surrogate father-son relationship between Stephen and Bloom. After Stephen is 'rescued' by Bloom after being abandoned by Mulligan in the red-light district, they visit Bloom's house and: "At Stephens suggestion, at Bloom's instigation, both, fist Stephen, then Bloom in penumbra urinated, their sides contiguous, their organs of micturition, reciprocally rendered invisible circumposition, their gazes, first Blooms then Stephen's, elevated to the projected luminous and semi-luminous glow." (U 17 1186-90) If urination is linked to aspiration like Ellmann claims, Stephen now is now following Bloom's lead. The conflation of Stephen and Rudy at the end of "Emmeaus" because Bloom's hallucinatory vision casts Stephen and Blooms relationship as a surrogate father-son relationship, and thus urination episode can be interpreted as a nurturing action by Bloom. Stephen does not produce any sort of magnum opus, fecal or otherwise, but in accepting guidance, it could serve as a step forward, out of anal retention.

In stark contrast to Stephen, Bloom does defecate. By including this detail, Joyce's characterization of Bloom exemplifies Bakhtin's grotesque body, and emphasizes the continuity between his Blooms internal thoughts and feelings and the outside world, embracing the cyclical nature of this relationship. At the end of "Circe," Bloom completes his morning by a visit to the outhouse: "He kicked open the crazy door of the jakes. Better be careful not to get these trousers dirty for the funeral. He went in..." (U 4 494) The voice of the narrator is interspersed by Blooms thought, "Better not get these trousers dirty," and indeed this particular episode is characterized by the inclusion of free indirect discourse, the shift between third person and first person seamlessly. Ellmann correlates the narrative flow to the action of the intestines: "This alternation between inside and outside mimics the peristalsis taking place in Bloom's intestines, as he digests the external world and expels his internal waste products." (60) Indeed, Bloom's thinking – his fantasies of starting a "summerhouse" in his backyard, fertilizing his garden with manure "The hens in the next garden: their droppings are very good top dressing." (U 4 475-479)– are prosaic but less pedantic and abstract than Stephens thinking in his questioning the "ineluctable modality of the visible" (U 3 1). Thus Bloom does "digest" the external world- he is far more connected to his world than Stephen is, his concern is with the concrete; he's living in the real world, so to speak.

However, this depiction of defecation does more than characterize Bloom as grounded and pragmatic. Bakhtinian critic, Simon Dentith describes the effect of depicting the 'grotesque realist body': details of such bodily functions serve as "the incessant reminders that we are all creatures of flesh and thus of food and feces also: this degradation is simultaneously an affirmation, for even 'excrement is gay matter', linked to regeneration and renewal" (67) In this light, Bloom's visit to the outhouse and the explication of his bodily function, subtly hint at the possibility for metamorphosis, the promise his future may still hold despite his current situation. Such possibility is best illustrated when Ellman connects this concept of renewal to the mention of reincarnation that is earlier alluded to in an exchange with Molly: "Bloom begins the chapter eating and ends it defecating, in the course of which his breakfast undergoes an odyssey of metempsychoses, as it navigates its way through the rocks and whirlpools of his digestive tract. (60) Ellmann conflates the invisible act of digestion with the process of reincarnation, connecting the idea of death with the idea of renewal and change. Besides the obvious connection between renewal to waste in Blooms observation that chicken droppings are good fertilizer, there is a broader, narrative sense Bloom contemplates the cyclical passage of time: "Poetical idea: pink, then golden, then grey, then black. Still true to life also. Day: then the night." (U 4 535-536) Digestion is linked to transformation wrought by the passage of time. Eating, shitting, eating; day, night, day: it's symbolic and must be reassuring to Bloom, whose marriage and life is in a state of arrested development following his son, Rudy's death.

Urination and defecation are, however, only the most quotidian examples of biological production, and Joyce does not restrict himself to them. All of the prominent female figures in the novel allude to either childbirth or menstruation, as a means for Joyce to comment on the nature of production, both biological and intellectual. It seems that menstruation follow Bloom around on his day's journey: while teasing Bloom in the "Nausicaa" book, Gerty MacDowell appears to sense her imminent menstruation: "that thing must be coming, because the last time too was when she clipped her hair on account of the moon." (U 13 561) and in "Penelope", Molly contemplates menstruation as she recalls Boylan: "... have we too much blood in us or what O patience above its pouring out of me like the sea anyhow he didn't make me pregnant as big as he is..." (U 18 1122-23) Ellmann connects such functions to wastefulness: "Why does Molly menstruate? Not because she represents the fecundity of nature, as many critics have assumed, but because she does not: menstruation exemplifies the wastefulness of nature rather than its productivity." (63) This wastefulness is meaningful: the female body wastes material that could have nourished life. Joyce's portrayal of the menstruation shows awareness of this in a manner once again characteristic of Bakhtin's grotesque body. Dentith quotes Bakhtin as writing: "The grotesque body is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body." (226) and claims that a realistic depiction of reproductive systems fit this description and has symbolic significance: "a body whose openness to the world and the future is emphatically symbolized by the consuming maws, pregnant stomachs, evident phalluses, and gargantuan evacuations that make it up." (68) Menstruation would be such a "gargantuan evacuation," as would Blooms defecation, and from them it is evident that Joyce is intent on portraying the body, the factory and engine of life, as a system operating on imperfect processes rather than closed stable loops. Indeed, Bloom's masturbation, spilling his semen into "his wet shirt, [...] Still you have to get rid of it someway," (U 13 851) points to Gerty's immanent menstruation as a missed opportunity for conception, and Molly could have just as easily have conceived with Boylan, "as big as he is." Yet they did not - it is wasteful in a necessary way, because to cease to menstruate is to become barren, unable to produce.

The activity of the womb as a process of life however is not confined to the female body: it is the material origin of men as well, and thus has deep repercussions in the male psyche. Furthermore, the awareness that the body expunging waste that Joyce's depictions of menstruation produces challenges the conception of the self as entirely contained, delineated by the skin: "The grotesque body appears unfinished, a thing of bursts and sprouts, the orifices evident through which it sucks in and expels the world. It is a body marked by the evidence of its material origin and destiny." (Dentith 67) The grotesque body's "openness" in menstruation and childbirth has deep repercussions for Stephen, and Ellmann's Freudian analysis in light of this helps sharpen the more obscure parts of his character. When Stephen sees the midwives while walking Sandymount beach, he has a rather morbid and unlikely fantasy: "Number one swung lourdily her midwive's bag [...] One of her sisterhood lugged me squealing into life. Creation from nothing. What has she in the bag? A misbirth with a trailing navelcord, hushed in ruddy wool. The cords of all link back, strandentwining cable of all flesh." (U 3 32-37). The symbolism behind this fantasy is not immediately apparent, but Ellmann interprets it as a further manifestation of Stephens artistic impotence and lack of self-efficacy: "His fantasy that 'number one' is carrying a misbirth in her bag reveals his fear of being an aborted artist, expelled by mother Ireland as a "misbirth with a trailing navelcord" rather than a 'living wombfruit'" (57) Ellmann's conflation of literary production and biological production is lent credence by the structure of the "Oxen of the Sun," which Ellmann describes as "the story of Mina Purefoy's childbirth in all the styles of the English literary tradition." (63) Through this pastiche of the evolution or genealogy of literature, a technique with which Joyce is reminding the reader that literature does not happen in a vacuum: just as an individual birth is dependent on genetics and ancestry, a work of literature is dependent on its intellectual ancestry, as each work informed and influenced by the works before.

Thus the flaw in Stephen's thinking is evident in his disgust with the reproductive process and it's "Womb of sin." Stephen tries to deny that he is a product of the process: "Wombed in sin I was too, made not begotten." (U 3 45) This inversion of the Nicene Creed, which states that Jesus Christ was "true God from true God, begotten, not made," demonstrates be his obsession with "creation from nothing," and his denial of his markedly undivine progenitors by the rather desperate assertion that he was "made not begotten," a notion that Joyce cuts down throughout the rest of *Ulysses*. Ellmann claims that in his portrayal of menstruation, birth and miscarriage, "Joyce's methods of pastiche and parody [in "Oxen of the Sun"] intimate that 'creation from nothing' is impossible; the eared womb of the artist's brain can produce new works by means of recirculation of the past." (63-64) In light of the parallel between the physical and the intellectual, between the body and artistic expression, and Stephen's fears that he is not truly a writer, but rather a "pretender," are characterized as misguided. Specifically, it is because Stephen so desperately resists contextualization, and conceptualizes himself as an individual – physically, intellectually, and temporally – that hinders him. Because he fears rather than embraces the "strandentwining cable of all flesh" that links him to the past, the "womb of sin" that once nurtured him, he is anal retentive and cannot produce. In depicting this fear, Joyce implies Stephen is not fulfilling his ambitions because of his fundamentally flawed conception of literature as belonging purely to the author, refusing to acknowledge that the author reads and digests his predecessors in the creation of his own work: his refusal to allow himself to fit into the temporal and intellectual genealogy of literary work stifles him

Given the acknowledged semi-autobiographical nature of Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's apparent celebration of the materiality of the body shows that he has come a long ways since the younger self Stephen is based on. Joyce is not shy in his application of Bakhtinian grotesque realism to his portrayal of the body to thematically develop his work. However Ellmann's usage of Freudian analysis to demonstrate how Joyce's character's bodily functions parallel their psychologies shows that Joyce goes a step further, implicating the mind into the physicality of the body. From the digestive tract, Joyce demonstrates that physically, mentally and emotionally, the individual is an open system that must take in and push out. From menstruation and the reproductive system a work in progress, Joyce demonstrates that the physical body is imperfect, and wastefully reiterative, like the process of writing. Joyce celebrates these facts, reminding the reader of the physical nature of the body to illustrate the nature of the mind.

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