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## *Ulysses* as Digestive Tract

James Joyce described *Ulysses* as “the epic of the human body” (Budgen 21). Richard Ellmann, Joyce’s great biographer and critic, claimed that Joyce “conceived of his entire book as a silent, unspoken portrayal of an archetypal man who would never appear and yet whose body would slowly materialize as the book progressed, linguafied as it were into life” (Ellmann 1972, p. 73). Much has been said about the characteristics and functions of the body in and of Joyce’s text. Death, birth, sex, disease – the critical lexicon is so exhaustive that it reads like a medical book. I wish to focus on a mundane aspect of the body: digestion. The triviality of the topic is a deliberate attempt to avoid turning the body into an “epic” or an “archetype”, and instead to treat it as an irreducible fact of lived experience. In Joyce, the body is a fundamental component of all human interaction. It is at once a personal and a social organ, and it provides a problematic but inescapable link between self and other. Ultimately, the problem of digestion dramatizes at a very intimate level the social interconnectedness and interdependence that I take to be one of Joyce’s central concerns. An analysis of the text as digestive tract shows that the other is always an integral part of the self.

Considered from a biological perspective, eating is simply the most basic life-sustaining activity. But it is also an antagonistic activity, at least from the perspective of the social scientist, because it pits individuals against one another in the search for food. Alexander Kojève, in his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, says that “the being that eats” preserves itself “by the transformation of an alien reality into its own” (Kojève 4). In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva sees this type of transformation as a form of *abjection*, which she defines as a confusion of “the self’s clean and proper body” (Kristeva

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2, 75). The abject is “[...] what ditsurbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). Taken together, Kojève’s and Kristeva’s formulations illustrate the paradox of eating. On the one hand, eating is necessary for life; on the other hand, it poses a threat to the corporeal boundaries of the individual. If we push eating to its logical extreme, it also poses a threat to society since it pits individuals against one another in the search for food.

Leopold Bloom is preoccupied with the personal and social implications of eating. We are first introduced to him through his favorite foods – “the inner organs of beasts and fowels” – then follow him as he makes his way from one meal to the next, and follow his food as it makes its way through his body. In “Lestrygonians”, where Bloom’s central concern is finding a good lunch, and where his path, when traced on a map of Dublin, forms the hieroglyphic of a digestive tract, eating is an image of both personal contentment and social strife. “Hungry man is an angry man”, he says at one point; “Peace and war depend on some fellow’s digestion”, he reflects a few paragraphs later (*Ulysses*, pp. 139–141). These passages suggest that a good diet is the recipe for peace. But the problem is that eating, when pushed to its logical extreme, also results in violence. Thus Bloom’s brief utopian vision of a great communal kitchen and its “incorporated drinking cup” rapidly degenerates into “children fighting for the scrapings of the pot” (*ibid.*). Similarly, the scene at a cheap restaurant reminds Bloom that social interaction can quickly become a war of all against all: “Eat or be eaten. Kill! Kill!” (*Ulysses*, p. 139). Earlier, in the section of “Aeolus” entitled “And It Was the Feast of Passover”, Bloom evokes the same sentiment by parodying a Passover song:

And then the angel of death kills the butcher and he kills the ox and the dog kills the cat. Sounds a bit silly until you come to look into it well. Justice it means but it’s everybody eating everybody else. That’s what life is after all. (*Ulysses*, p. 101)

The dilemma for Bloom, a hungry man with a social conscience, is how can a pacifist eat?

Reflecting on the food chain makes Bloom feel as if he’s been “eaten and spewed”, so he heads to Davy Byrne’s “moral pub” to assuage his conscience (*Ulysses*, p. 134). He briefly contemplates becoming a vegetarian, then orders a cheese sandwich because “cheese digests everything but itself” (*Ulysses*, p. 141). This would be one solution to Bloom’s moral dilemma, albeit an impossible one – to eat in a way that removes him from the food chain. Bloom’s reflections on the form of the oak bar suggest another solution: aesthetic contemplation.

His downcast eyes followed the silent veining of the oaken slab. Beauty: it curves: curves are beauty. Shapely goddesses, Venus, Juno: curves the world admires. Can see them library museum standing in the round hall, naked goddesses. Aids to digestion .... Quaffing nectar at mess with gods golden dishes, all ambrosial. Not like a tanner lunch we have, boiled mutton, carrots and turnips, bottle of Allsop. Nectar imagine it drinking electricity: gods' food. Lovely forms of women sculpted Junonian. Immortal lovely. And we stuffing food in one hole and out behind: food, chyle, blood, dung, earth, food: have to feed it like a stoking engine. They have no. (*Ulysses*, p. 144)

The sculptures in this passage are aids to digestion because their beauty leads to the contemplation of pure form. Bloom's associative leaps suggest that formal beauty has to do with not eating, or with eating ambrosia, which is insubstantial (like electricity) and does not result in waste. The sculptures and the gods are equivalent in that they have no ... The word Bloom leaves out here is "anus" or a synonym. The anus is a symbol and symptom of the excess of the body. A body without an anus has nothing to expel. It is formally immaculate, inviolate, and self-contained.

Formal beauty offers respite from the eat-or-be-eaten social dynamic because it evokes a completely self-sufficient model of existence. It is food without the food chain, the body without orifices; in other words, self without other. But the lacuna in the passage suggests the problem of pure form: the lack of substance is a lack of content. Bloom leaves out the word not only to be delicate (which is only a secondary consideration in an interior monologue), but because there is literally nothing to say. The famous episode where Bloom wipes himself with a page out of "Titbits" illustrates the link between expression and expulsion. Lindsey Tucker, Vincent Cheng, and Henry Staten have developed this topic at great length.<sup>1</sup> For my present purposes it suffices to point out that formalism curtails expression for the same reason it avoids social turmoil. When there is no interaction between self and other, there is nothing to fight for and nothing to say.

The link between formalism and silence is a problem for Stephen Dedalus. Stephen has aspirations to be an ascetic, and as he points out in "Eumaeus" he hardly ever eats. While he distinguishes himself from the vegetarians he calls "those literary etherial people," he is, as Buck Mulligan points out, "toothless

<sup>1</sup> L. TUCKER, *Stephen and Bloom at Life's Feast: Alimentary Symbolism and the Creative Process in James Joyce's Ulysses*, Ohio State UP, Columbus, 1984; V. J. CHENG, "'Godinpotty': James Joyce and the Language of Excrement" In: *The Languages of Joyce*, eds. R. M. B. Bosinelli et al., John Benjamins, Philadelphia, 1992, pp. 85-99; H. STATEN, "The Decomposing Form of Joyce's *Ulysses*", *PMLA* 1997, 112, pp. 380-391. Staten's article is particularly interesting and draws a suggestive analogy between the disintegration of text (deconstruction) and the disintegration of body (digestion, expulsion, identity crisis). His account of the body is similar to mine, the main difference being that while he focuses on body's relation to language, I attempt to elaborate its role in a pattern of social interaction.

kinch" (*Ulysses*, p. 136, 19). Because he is abstemious about consuming the external world, he has little to expel or express. His unwillingness to eat is linked to his inability to create.

Stephen's abstemiousness also manifests itself in his anxiety about birth, which, like eating, poses a serious threat to the ideal of bodily integrity. He imagines himself to be "made not begotten", and by a man with *his* voice and *his* eyes (*Ulysses*, p. 32, italics added). The possessive pronouns are important as Stephen consistently presents his own traits as transcendental and universal; those of his predecessors as derived. This type of deliberate anachronism is a typical manifestation of his fantasy of personal completeness; he even imagines establishing a telephone hook-up to Eden through a continuous cable of umbilical cords (*ibid.*). In this image the umbilical cord is no longer a physical link between mother and child, but a means of communicating with the origin of all life. The body, desubstantialized and removed from the ambiguity of personal contact, is transformed into a metaphor of eternity.

In Stephen's theory of art, part Aristotle, part Plotinus, and part anxiety of influence, eternity is the measure of aesthetic value. Art is the eternal form, and the artist is the divine creator. In *A Portrait of the Artists as a Young Man* he compares the playwright to the "God of creation" who vanishes behind his work, and he argues that art should produce a static response which sets the appetite at rest (*A Portrait...*, p. 222). Both the generative and affective components of this "impersonal theory", as Stephen calls it, efface the corporeal aspects of identity – i.e. substance and appetite. Once identity is freed from the contingencies of the body, the creative act becomes timeless and immortal:

In the intense instant of imagination, when the mind, Shelley says, is a fading coal, that which I was is that which I am and that which in possibility I may come to be. So in the future, the sitser of the past, I may see myself as I sit here now but by reflection from that which then I shall be. (*Ulysses*, p. 160)

As the temporal mirroring in this passage suggests, imagination liberates the artists from the contingency of history. And history is Stephen's biggest fear.

Stephen wants to escape history because, as he tells Haines, he feels like a servant to two masters: "the imperial British state ... and the holy Roman catholic and apostolic church" (*Ulysses*, p. 17). As he puts the problem to Mr Deasy, "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (*Ulysses*, p. 28). In "Circe" he articulates his fear in a more rebellious form: "'Ah non, par exemple!' The intellectual imagination! With me all or not at all. 'Non Serviam!'" (*Ulysses*, p. 475). It is my argument that Stephen's attempt to escape history is analogous to his rejection of the body. Of course, Stephen cannot escape historical memory or the body. He cannot achieve the immortality of pure form. The authority that he rejects on the outside is introjected as remorse. This is

why he keeps repeating *agenbite of inwit* – a Middle English synonym of the Latin *remorsus*. Both phrases suggest that to be bothered by conscience is to be “bitten again”. Stephen, like Bloom, feels like he’s been “eaten and spewed”.

The reference to eating is not accidental. Stephen’s problematic relation to history, like Bloom’s vexed relation to contemporaneity, stems from the ambiguous relation of the body to identity. At the most basic level, Stephen is uncomfortable with the fact that the body changes and, in changing, incorporates that which is other. Thus, while he admits that “molecules all change. I am other I now”, he also claims that his form or personality remains the same: “I, entelechy, form of forms, am I by memory because under everchanging forms” (*Ulysses*, p. 156). The unalterability of pure form is also his model of artistic creation:

As we, or mother Dana, weave and unweave our bodies, Stephen said, from day to day, their molecules shuttled to and fro, so does the artist weave and unweave his image. And as the mole on my right breast is where it was when I was born, though all my body has been woven of new stuff time after time, so through the ghost of the unquiet father the image of the unliving son looks forth. (*Ulysses*, p. 160)

As this passage suggests, Stephen views internal consistency and personal immortality as analogues of artistic production. The body retains its identity through all changes for the same reason that the son always already looks forth from the father. The reason: identity is a pure form, and pure form does not change.

This type of formalism, like Bloom’s, is completely self-consumed. Mallarmé’s description of Hamlet, which Stephen quotes, seems appropriate here: “il se promene, lisant au livre de lui-meme” (*Ulysses*, p. 153). There are many images of self-consumption in the text, especially in “Lestrygonians”, and all of them are unappetizing. There is a nobleman eating his own scruff (*Ulysses*, p. 143), a dog lapping up its own cud (*Ulysses*, p. 147), and a handyman gnawing on his hand (*Ulysses*, p. 148). Unlike Hamlet, these figures do not read themselves in a world become text, but they do eat themselves in a world become digestive tract (Stuart Gilbert, in his influential book on *Ulysses*, claims that the “technique” of this section is “perisaltic” [Gilbert 1958, p. 208]). These images are emetic: they tend to produce in the reader the very response they inhibit in the text. They also function as the *reductio ad absurdum* of Stephen’s aesthetic (and ascetic) aspirations by showing the ridiculous implications of self-consumption.

Stephen himself hints at the absurd implications of his theory in his discussion of the ghost of King Hamlet. Returning to reveal the identity of his betrayers, the ghost is the bite of conscience in Prince Hamlet – the voice that pushes him to act.

He [the ghost] goes back, weary of the creation he has piled up to hide him from himself, an old dog licking an old sore. But, because loss is his gain, he passes on towards eternity in undiminished personality, untaught by the wisdom he has written or by the laws he has revealed ... (*Ulysses*, p. 162)

The ghost is a morbid example of eternal form, and because it does not exist contingently – in time – it cannot change or learn. The fact that the ghost creates in order to hide from himself suggests the other meaning of *inwit*: “deception”. This passage is important because it brings together a whole series of related issues (immortality, identity, social interaction, and digestion) in a dense cluster of images. The most striking image – that of the dog licking its own sore – again tends to produce the kind of visceral reaction that would be impossible in the imaginary realm of pure form.

But the text offers an alternative model of creation and interaction – a model that embraces the lessons of eating. The being who eats is also a being who can be eaten. In other words, there is a radical interdependence between self and other, an interdependence that can be antagonistic, but also nurturing and vital. The image here is that of Mrs. Thorton putting the spoon of pap in her own mouth before she feeds the babies in her care (*Ulysses*, p. 133). Or more significantly, Bloom’s memory of a romantic afternoon with Molly:

Ravished over her I lay, full lips full open, kissed her mouth. Yum. Softly she gave me in my mouth the seedcake warm and chewed. Mawkish pulp her mouth had mumbled sweetsour of her spittle. Joy: I ate it: joy. Young life, her lips that gave me pouting ... (*Ulysses*, p. 144)

These images digest the distinction between inside and outside; they dissolve the difference between other and self. Molly is not an outsider here; she is the indispensable mediator between Bloom and himself. This ontological interdependency is reflected in a corresponding grammatical chiasmus between subject and predicate, active and passive tense. As Bloom’s narrative fluctuates between these two constructions, it embodies the instability of the grammatico-philosophical subject: “She kissed me. I was kissed. All yielding she tossed my hair. Kissed, she kissed me” (*Ulysses*, p. 144).

Molly’s discourse embodies the same type of fluctuation when, significantly, she gets up to urinate in the middle of the night. Sitting on the chamber pot she says to herself,

I bet he never saw a better pair of thighs than that look how white they are the smoothest place is right there between this bit here how soft like a peach easy God I wouldnt mind being a man and get up on a lovely woman O Lord youre making like the jersey lily easy easy O how the waters come down at Lahore

In this excerpt Molly describes her own thighs in terms of food (the peach), voicing the scopophilia of an avowedly male desire. This makes her both consumer and consumed, both self and other. Indeed, Molly's discourse is the culmination of the text's various attempts to voice the positive aspect of interdependency. The bodily functions that Stephen and Bloom try to contain in the aesthetic of pure form are here celebrated because of their excessiveness. Molly exceeds the boundaries – anatomical and social – that are supposed to contain her.

The novel's name for this kind of excess is "love" – which Stephen says is the "Word known to all men" (*Ulysses*, p. 161).<sup>2</sup> In "Cyclops," Bloom argues that love is essential for social justice, though he can only define it as "the opposite of hatred" (*Ulysses*, p. 273). Ultimately, love and the eat-or-be-eaten mentality are two sides of the same coin: the one celebrates the interdependency of self and other, the other recoils against interdependency and uses it as a pretext for destruction. Stephen, despite his rejection of the body, does recognize the importance of accepting the other. As he puts it half-jokingly: "Lui, c'est moi" (*Ulysses*, p. 35).

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<sup>2</sup> There is a critical debate over Hans Walter Gabler's decision to include this "lost passage" in his 1984 version of *Ulysses*. In spite of his argument in *Ulysses on the Liffey* that love is indeed "the word known to all men" Ellmann suggests that the interpolation is a mistake (ELLMAN 1986, p. 33). Since my argument does not depend on *when* the word is uttered in the story, I include the passage merely to underline my point, ie that loving, like eating, creates an interdependency between self and other.