

JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

13

**WHY READ JOYCE  
IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY?**

Edited by  
FRANCA RUGGIERI AND ENRICO TERRINONI

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THE BODY OF FINITUDE

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According to Michel Foucault the threshold between our prehistory and what is still contemporary was crossed “when finitude was conceived in an interminable cross-reference with itself” (2002, 346). One of the major consequences of that great discontinuity was the disappearance “of the old concept of man, in its correlation to the [...] retreat of the divine” (Badiou 2007, 166). Trying to define the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Alain Badiou writes that our cultural situation is dominated by “a bad Darwin”, meaning that the waning of metaphysics has reduced man to a species, to “the animal datum of a body”. Accordingly, he has labeled the present age as that of “animal humanism” (175).

One sentence would be enough to lay the claim for Joyce’s contemporary relevance: “*It’s only Dedalus, whose mother is beastly dead*” (*U* 8). Dying *as* an animal, that is, outside any metaphysical project, was the previously unthinkable concept which became the legacy of the twentieth century. In *Ulysses*, Joyce confronts the passage of human life from what “belonged to God as creaturely life” (Agamben 1998, 75) to bare animality, from *bios*—a category capable of being refined into “human existence”—to *zoe*. And nowhere does he express that insight more clearly than in endowing Buck Mulligan with the attributes of Father Flynn, a religious minister (Melchiori 1995): in “the age of patent medicine” (*U*, 689), the “medecineman” was rapidly supplanting the priest in dictating the meaning of death and, therefore, in defining life. To Mulligan, death is only a mechanical failing of the brain, a wrong performance of the “cerebral lobes” (*U*, 8). The concept of brain death was legally introduced in 1968, with the motivation that “the brain is the one organ that can’t be transplanted”, which actually turned death into “an epiphenomenon of transplant technology” (Agamben 1998, 93). However, the complete coincidence of personal identity with the brain, considered as a material organ, could be thought only after the traditional entities “soul”, “mind”

or “conscience” were regarded as a direct resultant of the disposition of cerebral matter.

Undeniably, the departure from metaphysics unhinged the idea of the immortal, substantial soul as the main foundation of subjectivity. In Michael Maher’s *Psychology* (Rickard 1999), Joyce could find a synthesis of contemporary monistic theories. Father Maher analyses recent theories concerning the soul, wondering whether it should be considered “the brain [...] or a pure spirit” (1895, 2). This evokes the debate between Stephen and Bloom on the issue of “body and soul” in “Eumaeus”:

- You, as a good Catholic, he observed, talking of body and soul, believe in the soul. Or do you mean the intelligence, the brainpower as such, [...] I believe in that myself because it has been explained by competent men as the convolutions of the grey matter [...]

- They tell me on the best authority it is a simple substance and therefore incorruptible. It would be immortal, I understand, but for the possibility of its annihilation by its First Cause, Who, from all I can hear, is quite capable of adding that to the number of His other practical jokes, *corruptio per se* and *corruptio per accidens* both being excluded by court etiquette. (*U* 732)

“Beastly” reductionism seemed to be the only alternative left in the waning of a religious frame, and is indeed the dominant position in contemporary discourse, where the body is a biological entity and a field of medical management. Although the decline of a theological frame for considering body and soul is Joyce’s historical starting point, he refuses a purely biological interpretation of incarnated existence.

It is noteworthy that Stephen lays emphasis on the soul’s incorruptibility. Indeed, in what Foucault terms Classical thought, the modalities of finite existence—such as the body as opposed to the immortal soul—were conceived as the mere negative correlation of the infinite, manifesting man’s imperfection. According to St. Thomas, the resurrection is the state in which human nature will be restored to its *perfection*, as God created it without defects (*Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 81, a. 1). On the contrary, proudly choosing as its central tenet that “nature abhors perfection” (*U*, 267), *Ulysses* emancipates man’s incarnated condition from its traditional metaphysical signature.

In analyzing the traditional identification of the subject with the soul, Foucault remarks that the two symbolical axes of self-knowledge were that of *concentration within* and *elevation above* the material universe (2005, 43-

79), both entailing a fundamental detachment from the external world. In *Ulysses*, Elijah repeats to his audience “you have that something *within*, the *higher self*” (*U*, 625, my emphasis). For a “self” conceived as a “shesoul” or a “hesoul”, the body is no more than a “fleshcase” (*U*, 245): it’s no essential part of the spiritual, eternal essence that it momentarily houses. In *Ulysses*, while retrospection and subjective appropriation are still performed by the soul, the emphasis on Aristotelian “form,” existing only in matter and enfranchised from “insignificant [...] musings about the afterlife” (*U*, 237), advocates the central role of the body in the actualization of a *finite* subject.

Discarding the interpretation of the material world as “the kingdom of the soul’s malady” (*CW*, 94), Joyce discards the canonical representation of an absolute selfhood in a body immune from alteration and decay, which is symbolically achieved in salvation.<sup>1</sup> When Stephen contrasts the land of Phenomenon with the “land of promise [...] where there is no *death and no birth neither wiving nor mothering*” (*U*, 517, my emphasis), mortality and connection are acknowledged as the main qualities of earthly existence. Therefore, *Ulysses* figures an ecstatic and relational subjective body as the incarnation of a human being emancipated from the transfiguring correlation to the infinite, to “the land of promise”.

In Joyce’s writings the body first appears in connection with finitude. In *Stephen Hero*, as in one of the *Epiphanies*, the question “Do you know anything about the body?” (*SH*, 168) is addressed to Stephen by his mother when Isabel is about to die. Death comes to Isabel through “the hole” in her stomach, which, like the umbilical cord in *Ulysses*, intrinsically connects the birth in the flesh to the state of the carcass. As Bloom enounces in his “law of falling bodies”, bodies “all fall to the ground. The earth” (*U*, 87). Later, the body’s weight will be denoted as “dead weight” (*U*, 127). Joyce plays with the Church Fathers’ maxim that “the flesh [...] is overthrown in death” and is “thereafter described as *cadaver*, from *cadere*” (Evans 1960, 51). The essence of the flesh is its being bound to fall.

According to Jacques Lacan, in the dualistic, Cartesian notion of human nature the soul is meant to perform the “function of synthesis”, as the

<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault writes that “salvation is the vigilant, continuous, and completed form of the relationship to self closed in on itself. One saves oneself for the self, one is saved by the self, one saves oneself in order to arrive at nothing other than oneself.” (*The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, New York: Palgrave, Macmillan 2005. 184-185). For instance, the novelistic concern with virginity, a bodily figure for self-preservation and purity, is viewed by Foucault as the embodiment of an immunological notion of selfhood.

unifying entity which supports the imaginary viability of a “moi ideal [...] projection de notre totalité” (1981, 167). By means of Molly, Joyce mocks the idea that “in the other world” they will be “tying ourselves up” (*U*, 917): making us “entire” from a previous fragmentation and subjection to loss; moreover, the possibility that on the last day Lazarus found “his liver and his lights and the rest of his traps”, that “all of himself” should be re-synthesized “that morning”, becomes a joke. Instead, *Ulysses* posits as real the fact that Dignam’s flesh is always materially changed into something else. The difference between the two carnalities called into play—Lazarus’s, traditionally transfigurable, and Dignam’s, joyously metamorphical—is marked by the twelve grams (at least according to Bloom) that stand for the weight of the immortal soul. Indeed, Bloom calls it “powder in a skull”, implying the alienation of the body from the salvation scheme.

It has been argued that in the Christian tradition the human body achieves the fullness of its functions only after the Fall, so that physiological activities intrinsically connote the body as mortal (Agamben 2009). Aquinas writes that Adam would eat in a way that would produce no indecorous waste, while generation would occur by “*nulla corruptione integritatis*”, with no corruption of Eve’s bodily integrity (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 98, a. 2). Obviously, the Edenic body was immune from decay and every lesion of its wholeness, such as wounds (*Summa Theologiae* I, qq. 97-98). If the state of innocence includes some animal functions, albeit with “*nulla [...] indecentia*”, the resurrection will entail the suspension of every natural activity. Thus, nutrition, evacuation, and reproduction are shameful because they only belong to the fallen condition and to the state of mortality. They are indeed “obscene” and must be hidden from the public gaze: to Gerty, eating is in fact a shameful activity—“she didn’t like the eating part when there were any people” (*U*, 458). The passage from S. Augustine in the 1904 *Portrait*, where Joyce declares his search for a “philosophy of reconciliation” between corruptibility, beauty and goodness, with a view to reveal the “beauty of mortal conditions” (Scholes and Kain 1965, 65), re-appears in *Ulysses*. Here, the corruptibility of the body is intentionally foregrounded as a mark of its radical finitude: through defecation, micturition, “life with hard labour” (*U*, 204), and menstruation. The human gallery of *Ulysses* foregrounds the flawed and the deformed: a “blind stripling” (*U*, 230), a “onelegged sailor” (*U*, 288), men with a “ruined mouth” (*U*, 302) and “a misshapen gibbosity” (*U*, 533), bodies corrupted by illness and death. More importantly, though, *Ulysses* presents



humanity as the “asymmetrical” (*U*, 831), with a significant deviation from the “theoretical restriction of beauty to formal symmetry” (Bosanquet 2005, 131), symbolic of reason and divinity, which represented the aesthetic legacy of Platonism to Christendom.

On the other hand, Joyce extensively satirizes the “soultransfigured” (*U* 177) canon of bodily beauty, which banishes whatever is connected to alteration and corruption. According to the Church Fathers, *integritas*, also meaning immunity from corruption, is the fundamental feature of the “soultransfigured” or glorious body, while Thomas Aquinas posits it as the basis of beauty: “Ad pulchritudinem tria requiruntur. Primo quidam *integritas*, sive perfectio: quae enim *diminuta sunt, hoc ipso turpia sunt*” (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 39, a. 8, my emphasis). What is not *integer*, or *diminutus*, is also ugly. By shifting the aesthetic focus on man’s inherent “diminuteness”, Joyce discards an idealizing canon that would propose the incorruptible body as the *ontological mode of beauty*. His shift towards the obscene, deformity and dis-integrity should not be viewed as the cloacal obsession of “a hater of his kind” (*U*, 49), but as a deep meditation of aesthetic canons in relation to their metaphysical implications, first of all the opposition “nature versus grace” (Aubert 1992, 109).

In *Ulysses*, indeed, only the immortal body is a whole, such as the one that cannot die because it has already died: “Quite right to close it. Looks horrid open [...] Much better to close up all the orifices. Seal up all. (*U* 123).” By sealing up the horrid uncleanness of mortality, our culture strives to exorcise the body’s perturbing and ego-deflating ugliness.<sup>2</sup> With a relieving effect diametrically opposed to the hypogean incubism of “Hades”, in “Nausikaa” the emphasis on bodily wholeness proceeds from a latent identification of the self with “her very soul” (*U*, 456), consistently with the vertical tension of this “chapter of culminations” (Senn 1977, 277). While the perfect wholeness of the skin manifests the original cohesion of the subject as a spiritual entity, Gerty’s “glorious rose” (*U*, 469) stands for the sexual excitement which is banished by the rhetoric of spirituality. Gerty and Bloom are presented as two nimble spirits going forth to one another with the eyes

<sup>2</sup> cf. “[Bodily] wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit-cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, “I” is expelled.” J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, Transl. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press 1982, p. 4.

only; in the episode, “their souls” (*U* 478) are often the grammatical subjects of action. Joyce chooses “glorious” as an epithet of Gerty’s imaginary body, while everything connected with reproduction, feeding or evacuation becomes “the unmentionables” (*U*, 451). In Gerty’s imagination, a spiritual self would not really eat, go to the toilet, have *pudenda*, like in the state of innocence and glory. On the contrary, Gerty’s real body is dis-integral, both by diminution—“She’s lame!” (*U*, 479)—and by excess: “those discharges she used to get” (*U*, 452).

Joyce ironically represents the body whose natural functions Gerty would like to hide as a form not made for action but for showing an ideal: “Her wellturned ankle *displayed its perfect proportions*” (*U*, 455, my emphasis); Gerty’s body shares this ostensive and inactive quality with the “naked goddesses,” whose nudity is for “All to see” (*U*, 224)<sup>3</sup>. When first defining Gerty’s beauty, Joyce blended Christian and classical references:

Gerty MacDowell [...] was pronounced *beautiful* [...] Her figure was... *graceful*, [...] the *waxen pallor* of her face was [...] *spiritual* in its *ivorylike purity* though her [...] mouth was [...] *Greekly perfect*. Her hands were of finely veined *alabaster*. (*U* 452)

She is indeed like a statue. Bloom repeats the analogy when he pairs the Virgin with the “Goddesses of Greece” (*U*, 334). Greek perfection meets the spiritual transfiguration of the body, since both “romantic” patterns present beauty as the perfection of the thing in the mind of the maker. In the Christian tradition, this identifies the body in the Edenic and *graceful* states, not in its earthly and corruptible quality. Thus, “Nausikaa” unveils the angel-like body as the foundation of the beautiful, in comparison with which Gerty’s actual, performing and mortal body—the lame and crippled one—is neither beautiful nor good: it belongs to the de-formed which the aesthetics of integrity banishes as obscene.

The representation of an incorruptible body misses the vital human quality that Joyce aims at epiphanizing, the constitutive incarnation in time through action:

<sup>3</sup> See G. Agamben, *Nudità*, Roma: Nottetempo, 2009, p. 139: “The glorious body is an ostensive body, which does not perform its vital functions but only displays them as potencies; from this perspective, glory goes hand in hand with inoperativeness” (my translation). See also G. Agamben, “Physiology of the Blessed,” in *The Open: Man and Animal*, Stanford University Press, 2004.

Beauty, it curves, curves are beauty. Shapely goddesses, Venus, Juno: curves the world admires. [...] All to see. Never speaking... Mortal! [...] Immortal lovely. And we stuffing food in one hole and out behind (*U* 224-225)

The corporeal beauty defined only by the outline (“curves”) and by a surface without orifices (goddesses have no mouth to speak nor to eat, nor anus for defecating, as Bloom wishes to verify) belongs to an “immortal” body, displaying perfection (“admires [...] All to see”). The human body, the mortal one and paradoxically the living one, is defined by the shape of an open circuit, active and deep (“we stuffing food in one hole and out behind”). Joyce’s strategy in *Ulysses* is to shift the core of corporeal beauty from the *image* of a physiologically inactive body, to its *performative* quality in earthly existence, from the wholeness of an impassible body to the openness of connection and temporal unfolding. In contrast with the nymph’s immortal body, Molly’s flesh incarnates “the beauty of mortal conditions” in a body that eats, menstruates, urinates, and farts, whose corruptibility is exposed without shame, since it is no longer bound to the normative power of immortality. This is the body “of a new humanity, *active* [...] and *unashamed*” (*U* 199): one that proudly acknowledges that physiological activeness with which the Western tradition identified the shame of fallen nature. If in 1902 Joyce wrote that “beauty is the splendor of truth” (*CW*, 60), in *Ulysses* the obscene becomes a truth programmatically staged as a radiant manifestation of human, that is finite, *quidditas*.

Thus, to come back to the subject of Joyce’s contemporary relevance, it should be clear that while the emancipation of the body from its traditional theological apparatus is common to Joyce and Mulligan’s biological reductionism, the latter only *reverses* the traditional antinomy of matter and spirit, whereas Joyce *overcomes* it by stressing the vital role of the body in subjectivation. The paradigm of subjectivation in *Ulysses* is indeed the traversing: “What went forth to the ends of the world to traverse not itself. [...] Having itself traversed in reality itself, becomes that self” (*U*, 623). The body allows the traversing to take place both as an ecstatic tension, a going out of oneself (“went forth”), and as a passage within oneself of otherness, the “not itself.” “That self” is created by such mutual crossing. Contrary to the millennial association of spiritual growth with a process of detachment from the material universe, Joyce posits the material world as the only possible means of self-actualization. Consequently, in *Ulysses* the body can never be completely reduced to its material limits as it is always engaged in an outward projection. Therefore, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while giving a new, post-metaphysical mean-

ing to incarnation, *Ulysses* also provides a model of intellectual resistance against “the animal humanism that besieges us” (Badiou 2007, 178), which would reduce a living being to his/her naked biological life.

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