

1 Introduction: Joyce and the grotesque

‘After God Shakespeare has created most’, says John Eglinton in *Ulysses*, echoing Dumas *fils* (or is it Dumas *père*?). Among the select band of writers of English who can legitimately be named ‘after Shakespeare’ are two whose peculiar province was the modern city. They are comic and visionary writers, powerfully aware both of the plasticity of words and of the mass and texture of things. They are so individual that their work defies direct comparison, though it makes a suggestive initial contrast. They are Joyce and Dickens.

Dickens needed the actual physical input of London or, as he put it, of ‘streets’ to fuel his writing.¹ Joyce, living in exile, told a friend that ‘I want . . . to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book’.² We can get some idea of the intensity of Dickens’s imagination from his remark that ‘I don’t invent it – really do not – *but see it*, and write it down’.³ G. H. Lewes remembered him stating that ‘every word said by his characters was distinctly *heard* by him’.⁴ There is evidence that Joyce, too, may have heard the voices that resound in his books. Imaginary voices are prominent in his two most directly autobiographical works, the *Portrait of the Artist* and *Exiles*. In *Exiles* Richard Rowan, a writer, works all night and then goes out onto the strand, before dawn, to be plagued by the demonic voices of ‘those who say they love me’ (E 157). The voices recur in a letter Joyce wrote twenty years later to his old college friend Constantine Curran. Joyce was declining Curran’s suggestion that it was time he revisited Ireland:

I am trying to finish my wip [Work in Progress] . . . and I am not taking any chances with my fellow-countrymen if I can possibly help it until that is done, at least. . . . But every day in every way I am walking along the streets of Dublin and along the strand. And ‘hearing voices’.
 (Letters, I, 395)

Voices reverberate in Stephen Dedalus’s imagination. Character in parts of *Ulysses* is reduced to the rambling voices of the interior monologue. In *Finnegans Wake*, where Joyce said that ‘time and the

river and the mountain'⁵ are the real heroes, the voices of Anna Livia, Shaun, Issy, and many others make an immediate impression on us. No doubt Joyce as a young man emulated Dickens and roamed the streets of Dublin for hours at a stretch, since this is what the protagonist of *Stephen Hero* does (*SH* 42). In adult life he was content to be absent from the city, but he depended utterly on remembering and hearing it. The Joycean artist is a 'penman' who can bring back the dead to life (a recurrent motif) and invest them with the gift of tongues: 'He lifts the lifeward and the dumb speak' (*FW* 195:5).

Richard Rowan heard the voices of 'those who say they love me'. All Joyce's fiction has its roots in autobiography (though it all diverges, in greater or lesser degree, from 'straight' autobiography if such a thing exists). He knew suffering and bitterness in his early life, and occasionally spoke about it with raw and passionate feeling. Here is a passage from a letter to Nora Barnacle, written when they had just met, in which he set out to describe his character:

My home was simply a middle-class affair ruined by spendthrift habits which I have inherited. My mother was slowly killed, I think, by my father's ill-treatment, by years of trouble, and by my cynical frankness of conduct. When I looked on her face as she lay in the coffin – a face grey and wasted with cancer – I understood that I was looking on the face of a victim and I cursed the system which had made her a victim. (*Letters*, II, 48)

'Cursing the system' was not uncommon (in life and in English fiction) around 1900. George Gissing, for example, had responded to the death of his first wife with a similarly resolute imprecation.⁶ The 1880s and 90s had seen the heyday of literary naturalism when writers as various as Gissing, Zola, Maupassant, and George Moore showed their characters as being both moulded and trapped by circumstances. Yet there is a difficulty in Joyce's outburst, since he himself seems to be part of the 'system'. He knows he is partly to blame for his mother's unhappiness. And he was incapable of the rhetorician's trick of turning a caustic eye on society while keeping it strenuously averted from himself. In his novels he is not a passionate declaimer, as Dickens had been. Dickens began as a parliamentary reporter and, just as he needed the input from the streets, so he seems to have needed the rhetorical excitement associated with the editor's chair, the bar, the pulpit, and the platform. Joyce too had some newspaper experience and incorporated many sorts of hack writing and speech-making into his fiction. Yet Joyce was not a natural journalist; what he wrote for the press is usually inhibited and musclebound. Whenever newspaper

oratory appears in his fiction it is as a borrowed style, ironically distanced – a bombast which he loves to parody but would never commit *in propria persona*. For Joyce's irony (much more genial than that of Swift, with which it has often been compared) is that of a connoisseur of the absurdities of others who, for himself, instinctively avoids self-exposure. Was he a socialist? An atheist? An anti-imperialist? The proper answer to these questions is almost certainly 'yes', but he had not the least inclination to blurt out such answers in public. In the letter to Nora quoted above he went on to say that 'One brother alone is capable of understanding me'. His art is constructed out of self-division and complexity.

This is not to say that his response to oppression and injustice was a supine one. He took some pride, quite rightly, in being less gullible in political matters than such artistic contemporaries as Pound and Wyndham Lewis. Leopold Bloom is to some extent a political spokesman for Joyce, and Bloom's prudence and moral sense are reminiscent of the humble Dickensian 'man in the street' such as Mr Plornish in *Little Dorrit*: 'As to who was to blame for it, Mr Plornish didn't know who was to blame for it. He could tell you who suffered, but he couldn't tell you whose fault it was'.⁷ Joyce might laugh a little at Bloom's ingenuousness, but he lacked the sort of journalistic instinct which led Dickens to propose for *Little Dorrit* the sarcastic title of *Nobody's Fault*. His creed of 'silence exile and cunning' suggests, not an art of social impeachment, but one of subtly subversive effects.

Dickens was both a highly opinionated writer and one with an exceptional commercial flair. The occasions on which Joyce showed a genuinely commercial attitude to his fiction are remarkable for their rarity. One of the few blatant false starts in his career was his intention of following up *Dubliners* with a further collection of short stories to be called *Provincials* (*SL* 63). (The eight-year 'censorship' of *Dubliners* put paid to that.) By the time he was finishing *Ulysses*, the writer who made fun of the newspaper market for 'prize stories', such as 'Matcham's Masterstroke' by Philip Beaufoy, was protected by patronage from the full pressures of the literary market-place. Thanks to Miss Weaver's generosity he could provide for his family better than his father had done, while at the same time being saved from the financial necessity of writing conventional or even publishable fiction. After 1918 Joyce was not only a leader of the avant-garde but was peculiarly well-placed to follow T. S. Eliot's injunction that artists 'in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*'.⁸

Could Dickens have avowed that he wished to give a picture of London so complete that if the city one day disappeared it could be reconstructed from his books? Presumably not. Not only were his settings and characters more exaggerated than Joyce's but he left behind too many versions of his London. His city is a prodigal, pulsating, shapeshifting place which he can go on creating afresh so long as there is the need to get a new book out of it. Joyce's two later books, by contrast, have a static and monumental quality which makes it inappropriate to describe them as 'novels'. The peculiarity of these works (as Ruskin said of St Mark's in Venice) is that of an architectural principle of confessed *incrustation*. Each interstice of their structure is meticulously crammed with detail and colour. The order they reveal is one of decorative intensity rather than of mere narrative sequence. An extraordinary labour of compilation and collation went into their making. *Ulysses* especially is an encyclopaedic representation of a day in Dublin – even if its relationship to the actual city is less straightforward than is implied by Joyce's boast.

But there is one point on which Dickens and Joyce are in profound agreement. Their recreation of the cities they loved would – in contrast to those of most other writers – be unashamedly populist and plebeian. Their books take us into the streets and pubs of their cities because they share a fascination with the lives, experiences and modes of expression of ordinary people. Both writers had an unlimited appetite for popular culture, whether in the forms of music and song, handbill and ballad, pantomime and melodrama, repartee and humour, or of sentiment and – in Joyce's case – pornography. Both are popular historians in the sense of giving written form to much that would otherwise perish, being in its nature oral, ephemeral or throwaway. Yet Joyce's activity as a cultural chronicler is much more deliberate than Dickens's. *Ulysses* is not only a novel of the recent past but one with a precise date (16 June 1904). Where for Dickens popular culture had been part of the irresistible material of storytelling, for Joyce it was something to be collected and exhibited; his work thus functions as a library or archive which confers permanence on the material deposited in it.

We may explain this more intellectual development in Joyce's art both in terms of his temperament and of the society and period in which he grew up. Stephen Dedalus, the 'artist as a young man', is necessarily an intellectual elitist and prig. Joyce, too, took pride in his Jesuit training and modelled himself on the rigour (if not the theology) of

St Thomas Aquinas. As a poet, he followed Pater and the Decadent school who saw the artist as a privileged being set above social and moral responsibilities. In drama he spurned what he saw as the political opportunism of the newly-formed Irish national theatre. Like Ibsen, he believed it might be necessary to appear as an 'enemy of the people'; so much is explicit in the title of his theatre pamphlet, 'The Day of the Rabblement' (1901). Yet this aloof intellectualism was a pose reflecting only part of Joyce's complex personality. *A Portrait of the Artist* shows Stephen rejecting his natural father in favour of Daedalus, the legendary embodiment of the lonely and innovating artist. But for Joyce a reconciliation with his father's world, and a determination to recreate the Irish urban culture his father personified, was the precondition of *Ulysses*.

Where Joyce did not deviate from Stephen's views was in his repudiation of the cultural ideology which had seized middle-class Catholic Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century. Douglas Hyde's Gaelic League, dedicated to the 'de-Anglicization' of Ireland, was formed in 1893. The folklore which interested Joyce, however, was not that of the peasantry and the Celtic twilight but of his own circle. He had no time for the language revival, which was intent on creating an artificial culture in order to nurture the myths of Irish nationalism. Stephen Dedalus vows to fly by the 'nets' of nationality, language and religion which would hold him prisoner in provincial Ireland. Though British rule was part of the 'system' he cursed, he had even less sympathy for what he called the 'old pap of racial hatred' (*SL* 111). He inclined towards international socialism rather than the chauvinistic project of 'de-Anglicization', and found no magnetism whatever either in the League or in one of its principal activists, the future rebel Patrick Pearse, whose Irish language class he briefly attended.⁹ He certainly did not admit – what even Yeats, in his play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), was to imply – that he should be prepared to sacrifice himself in the cause of national independence. Yet Joyce was neither unpatriotic nor indifferent to the Irish cultural heritage. To a friend such as Arthur Power he did indeed appear a 'literary Fenian' in revolt against the English conventions.¹⁰ The sort of patriotism he felt can be more easily understood when we remember his lifelong reverence for the drama of Ibsen. Far from being the prisoner of a nationalist party-line, Ibsen was a cosmopolitan artist who nevertheless drew profoundly on Norwegian legends, traditions, and ways of life. Joyce returned to traditional Irish folklore in *Finnegans Wake* – written once Ireland

had gained its independence – but in *Ulysses* he combines Greek mythology and the intellectual detritus of two thousand years with a wholly modernized, pragmatic and unidealized notion of culture. Through the device of a Jewish, deracinated hero he shows how inherited values, aesthetic tastes and half-remembered ‘lessons of history’ are forced to find their own level amid the blare of slogans, street-signs and advertising jingles produced by modern capitalism. His hero, an advertising agent, is a ‘cultured allroundman’ generously hospitable both to the high-points of literature, the sciences, and grand opera, and to such ephemera as Kino’s eleven-shilling trousers and Plumtree’s potted meat:

*What is home without
 Plumtree’s Potted Meat?
 Incomplete.
 With it an abode of bliss.* (U76)

Bloom, sentimental and bourgeois, enjoys the jingle and would dearly like to preside over an ‘abode of bliss’. For him, Home Rule takes second place to home comforts – even though he knows that the latter depend on something more substantial than Plumtree’s potted meat.

Bloom unfolds his newspaper and reads the Plumtree’s advertisement in the middle of talking to an acquaintance. Equally natural, and equally defiant of conventional etiquette, is the literary gesture Joyce makes by including such doggerel in a work of art. In his time Joyce was much criticized for his anarchic, debunking attitude toward literary pieties. More recently he has been much admired for it. Without dismissing such reactions (which Joyce clearly intended to provoke) we should also remember his comment that *Ulysses* was fundamentally a humorous work, and that this would become obvious when the critical confusion about it had died down.¹¹ For Joyce’s is what may be called anarchic humour – a humour which subverts existing structures and hierarchies *without taking up a political stance*. The time-honoured place of anarchic humour in Western societies is represented by the institution of the carnival. Of Joyce’s two major works, the first takes place on the day when its hero is cuckolded – traditionally an occasion for bawdiness and ridicule – while the second is a ‘funferal’ based on the Irish wake or funeral merrymaking.

Laughter goes with licence, and licence in all its forms – from the most disorganized to the most highly organized – takes a curiously parallel course to acts of political revolt and rebellion. The drunken orgy parallels the political riot (words like *mob* and *hooligan* are

conventionally used of both), and, among the more stage-managed forms of festivity, the modern carnival queen is a descendant of the medieval Lord of Misrule. The coronation ceremony for beauty queens parodies the sanctification of the monarch's authority. The whole point of such parodic occasions is to provide a forum in which behaviour that is normally frowned upon – such as ogling another person's physical attributes, or flaunting one's own – becomes sanctioned and overt. The world, as ordinarily experienced, is turned bottom upwards. Such a bottoms-up view deeply appealed to Joyce, for all sorts of reasons. He was no respecter of sexual conventions, and some of his letters to Nora, written during their brief separation in 1909, go far beyond the usual bounds of discretion even in our present permissive half-century. A letter to his brother Stanislaus in 1904 contains the following abrupt, though eloquent, conclusion:

I really can't write. Nora is trying on a pair of drawers at the wardrobe
 Excuse me JIM (SL 44)

Joyce's experiments with form are, in part, a successful attempt to get material as profane as this into fiction.

There is a more sombre reason for the comic form of Joyce's major works: not only the recording of unsanctified pleasures but the lightening of unavoidable pain. Joyce, as any biographical summary will show, did not have an easy life despite a fair ration of success and good fortune. He portrayed Stephen Dedalus with full sincerity as a haunted young man, guilty, insecure, and obsessed with the recent death of his mother. New troubles – the loss of his eyesight, his estrangement from his brother, his daughter's schizophrenia – came to him as he grew older. But in his writing, as to a certain extent in his life, laughter and excess could hold misery at bay. It is no accident that Leopold Bloom, that masterpiece of comic fictional characterization, is the son of a suicide. The Irish wake, with its upside-down antidote to the gravity of mourning and bereavement, is the perfect symbol of Joycean comedy.

Joyce's humour cannot be reconciled with the notion that his is a 'classical' art, despite the well-known passage in *Stephen Hero* which speaks of the 'classical temper' (*SH* 83). Joyce did have leanings towards what (using the analogy of a style of architecture) we might call 'romantic neoclassicism'; this is evident from such things as his adoption of the name Daedalus or Dedalus, his study of Aristotelian and Thomist aesthetics, and his decision to write a new version of the

Odyssey. But classical proportion and classical decorum are alien to most (though not quite all) of his writing. ('For classicism is dead', he declared to his friend Power; 'It was the art of gentlemen, and gentlemen are out of date'.¹²) Many critics have remarked on his affinities with medieval art, especially that of the Irish *Book of Kells* with its astonishingly intricate marginal designs and illuminated letters. The *Book of Kells* is a manuscript of the Gospels, and W. B. Stanford has compared its transformation of the sacred text with Joyce's transformation of Homer.¹³ Both the *Book of Kells* and *Ulysses* are 'copies' in which the original text is overlaid with an unprecedented degree of decorative extravagance.

The reason why the *Book of Kells* appealed so strongly to Joyce is, almost certainly, that it is one of the greatest traditional examples of the art of the grotesque. The word *grotesque* derives from a type of Roman ornamental design first discovered in the fifteenth century, during the excavation of Titus's baths. Named after the 'grottoes' in which they were found, the new forms consisted of human and animal shapes intermingled with foliage, flowers, and fruits in fantastic designs which bore no relationship to the logical categories of classical art. For a contemporary account of these forms we can turn to the Latin writer Vitruvius. Vitruvius was an official charged with the rebuilding of Rome under Augustus, to whom his treatise *On Architecture* is addressed. Not surprisingly, it bears down hard on the 'improper taste' for the grotesque. 'Such things neither are, nor can be, nor have been', says the author in his description of the mixed human, animal, and vegetable forms:

For how can a reed actually sustain a roof, or a candelabrum the ornaments of a gable? or a soft and slender stalk, a seated statue? or how can flowers and half-statues rise alternately from roots and stalks? Yet when people view these falsehoods, they approve rather than condemn, failing to consider whether any of them can really occur or not.¹⁴

We have here a confrontation between the logic of imperial classicism and what is condemned as a meretricious popular taste. Classicism demands the analytical and ordered representation of 'things as they are'. The grotesque involves a blurring of distinctions, a continual change from one type to another, a riot of incompleting forms. In modern aesthetics the term has become a generic one extending to the art of any period or nation. Hegel, for example, defined the grotesque with reference to Hindu sculpture. For him it had three characteristics, 'the unjustified fusion of different realms of being', 'excess and

distortion', and the 'unnatural multiplication of one and the same function', as in the presence of numerous arms and heads.¹⁵ The decorative complexities of the *Book of Kells* would fit this definition very well. Like the Hindu temple sculptures, this ancient Irish art contains strong overtones of fertility symbolism.¹⁶

The most remarkable modern discussion of the grotesque in literature is that offered by the Soviet critic and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. In his book on Rabelais, Bakhtin shows how the confrontation of the classical and the grotesque may be exemplified by a difference in bodily imagery. Classical art

presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off . . . is eliminated, hidden, or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable facade.

The grotesque body, by contrast,

is cosmic and universal. It stresses elements common to the entire cosmos: earth, water, fire, air; it is directly related to the sun, to the stars. . . . This body can merge with various natural phenomena, with mountains, rivers, seas, islands, and continents. It can fill the entire universe.¹⁷

If Rabelais is a grotesque artist – as both Bakhtin and Wolfgang Kayser have powerfully argued – then so, in large measure, is Joyce. The critical comparison of Joyce and Rabelais, and the description of aspects of Joyce's art as Rabelaisian, has been a commonplace since the 1920s. The first thing we learn about Mr Leopold Bloom is that he 'ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls'. In the course of *Ulysses* we see or hear him eating, drinking, defecating, micturating, belching, farting, and masturbating. Stephen may show a romantic inclination for the classic, but Bloom and Molly (who, in addition to the above-named activities, copulates and menstruates) plainly belong to the grotesque. Their orifices are all too blatantly open, and so – for that matter – are Stephen's. At the end of the 'Proteus' episode the young artist feels his cavity-ridden teeth and then picks his nose, the first fictional hero ever to do so.

At least two incidents in *Ulysses* turn on the distinction between the classical and the grotesque body. The first is Bloom's curiosity about the Greek statues in the National Museum. In the 'Lestrygonians' episode we see him thinking of ambrosia and nectar, the 'food of the gods', and whether this food does not entail a digestive process. How did the Greek deities relieve themselves of bodily wastes, he wonders?

Do the statues throw any light on this murky problem? ‘They have no. Never looked. I’ll look today. Keeper won’t see. Bend down let something fall see if she’ (*U* 176). The keeper may not see, but apparently Buck Mulligan does; and the results of Bloom’s hastily concluded investigation are inconclusive (*U* 650). Nevertheless, the classical doctrine holds (in the words of the Nymph in ‘Circe’) that ‘We immortals . . . have not such a place and no hair there either. We are stone cold and pure. We eat electric light’ (*U* 499). Anyone less vulgar and more classically minded than Bloom should have known instinctively that the Greek statues would possess no anal orifice.

The aesthetic theory of Stephen Dedalus in the *Portrait* distinguishes between impure or ‘kinetic’ art and the classical mode of ‘aesthetic stasis’. Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals* had made fun of the Kantian view that the spell of beauty enables us to view even nude female statues ‘disinterestedly’.¹⁸ Leopold Bloom pays lip-service to this aesthetic when he shows Stephen Molly’s photo, conceding that it ‘simply wasn’t art’ (*U* 573). Be that as it may, the slightly soiled snapshot carried around by this amateur of the female form provides another instance of the grotesque as opposed to the classical. Molly’s parted lips, her winsome look aimed directly at the camera, and most of all her opulent bosom ‘with more than vision of breasts’ are a direct affront to the classical separation of art from life, or of aesthetic appreciation from lust. Earlier Bloom has expressed his admiration for the splendidly proportioned hips and bosoms of Greek statuary. His dubious motives for showing Stephen Molly’s picture are a further example of his instinctive reduction of the classical to the erotic.

Ulysses, as I shall argue later, is full of grotesque humour, much of it based on distorted or incongruous views of the body. But *Ulysses* is a comparatively realist work and classical art still retains an important place in it. *Finnegans Wake*, by contrast, is entirely given over to the grotesque, and contains many renderings of the body merged into landscape. The heroine is a river – or rather, all rivers – and the hero an extinct volcano or legendary giant buried (in one of the many versions) with his head at Howth and his toes sticking up in Phoenix Park. Hero and heroine both have a multiple, not an individual, identity. This opening-up of the body and of identity belongs naturally with an opening-up of the word – a systematic deformation and reformation of language. Kayser sets Joyce in a tradition of ‘verbal grotesques’ going back to Rabelais and Sterne.¹⁹ Rabelais, according to Leo Spitzer, ‘creates word-families, representative of gruesome