

Nora's Filthy Words: Scatology in the Letters of James Joyce

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"The behavior of a human being in sexual matters is often a prototype for the whole of his other modes of reaction to life."

Sigmund Freud

"Civilized" Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness (1908)

"But, side by side and inside this spiritual love I have for you there is also a wild beast-like craving for every inch of your body, for every secret and shameful part of it, for every odour and act of it."

James Joyce

In a letter to Nora Barnacle dated December 2, 1909

The purpose of this analysis is to examine the ways in which the paraphilic sexual fantasies of James Joyce were expressed in his relationship with his common-law wife, Nora Barnacle. Although any definitive assertions regarding the inner workings of Joyce's

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sexual being must be conjectural insofar as the empirical evidence for such claims is nonexistent, it is possible for us to formulate certain conceptualizations owing to the fact that Joyce himself left for posterity a vast compilation of his sexual fantasies in the form of a written correspondence with Nora while he was visiting Dublin and she was in Trieste during the latter half of 1909. Through an examination of these letters and the extraordinary prurience of many of the fantasies contained therein, an attempt will be made to more clearly explicate the origins of Joyce's aberrant sexual predilections and their effects on the manner in which he came to view Nora as a sexual object. The contention of this essay is that Joyce and Nora's correspondence indicates that during the period in which these letters were exchanged, that is, from around 27 October through the end of December 1909, Joyce's sexual impulses were still clearly fixated at levels of libidinal development associated with infantile sexuality, the particular characteristics of which, in his case, were heavily influenced by a ubiquitous anal eroticism. Moreover, it is plausible to infer from his letters to Nora that Joyce was afflicted with unresolved castration anxiety that resulted in the paraphilic conditions most clearly evidenced in the correspondence, namely, fetishism and coprophilia based upon scatological impulses existing within the unconscious.¹

With scatological fantasy serving as a type of psychosexual foundation from which all his polymorphously perverse component instincts could pursue their various aims, Joyce tried desperately to coalesce his diverse impulses and direct them onto one sexual object, namely, the person of Nora. Although the

1: Whereas *scatology* refers either to an excessive interest in excrement or the use of obscene language, *coprophilia* involves either an abnormal interest in feces or, more specifically, a type of paraphilia in which sexual gratification is obtained from feces. See Reber (1995), Laws and O'Donohue (1997), and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)*; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) for more information on these and related conditions.

letters addressed a variety of topics significant at the time, they also contained a vast conglomeration of direct and indirect sexual allusions that can only be characterized as licentious, even by contemporary standards. Two of the letters written by Joyce, those of 8 and 9 December 1909, do not appear in Richard Ellmann's second volume of Joyce's letters published in 1966 due to their vulgarity and the protestations of the Joyce estate. In 1975, Ellmann was finally able to publish these texts in the *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, in addition to the segments of other letters that had been omitted owing to the influence of various censors (Ellmann, 1975). The analysis of these two letters in conjunction with the wider correspondence constitutes an invaluable means by which the intrapsychic conflict that so heavily influenced Joyce with respect to his literary work as well as his personal life can be elucidated. Due to the fact that here Joyce's aberrant sexual proclivities will be examined in the context of psychoanalytic theory, we must first consider the ideas of infantile sexuality and the complexes with which it is associated.

According to Freud (1975), the male child's libidinal impulses are directed outward first onto the figure of his mother, who becomes a sexual object in his psychic life due to the qualities with which she is associated (e.g., nurturance, physiological sustenance, protection, bodily contact, etc.). At around three to five years of age, this situation gives rise to the Oedipus complex, the "nucleus of the neuroses" (Freud, 1966, p. 419), in the context of which the boy conceptualizes his father as a potential rival for sexual possession of his mother. Cognizant of the fact that he will inevitably fail in any "battle" with his father that may ensue, the son comes to believe that he will receive punishment via the paternal agency and that this retribution will be exacted in the form of castration. This notion is ostensibly confirmed in the boy's mind when he becomes conscious of the fact that females lack penises, the presumed consequence of some grave infraction

for which they have been punished by way of castration (Freud, 1963a).

Throughout the course of "normal" development, castration anxiety eventually leads the son to renounce the erotic attachment to his mother and to identify with his father, thereby consolidating the superego as a structure within the mental apparatus (Freud, 1963a). If this fragile process is distorted at a given point, castration anxiety may be repressed and subsist throughout life as an extremely powerful complex within the unconscious. Later on, the ego will attempt to mitigate the unresolved castration complex through the use of defense mechanisms and/or some form of psychopathology. Along with the neuroses and psychoses, the perversions constitute a third type of mental disorder frequently associated with castration anxiety (Freud, 1963b, 1963c; Fenichel, 1996), and it is in this context that Joyce's fetishistic and coprophilic tendencies can be best understood.

In the Joyce-Barnacle correspondence, a progression exists through which Joyce first attempts to patronize Nora and then subject her to a psychosexual reformulation in accordance with his scatological fantasies. Depending on the context of the letter, Nora exists for Joyce as a child, fetish object, whore, mother, or dominatrix. For instance, on 27 October, he supplies her with a list of instructions that are at best condescending and at worst simply cruel. He tells her to eat large portions so that her appearance could be womanlier "than the dear awkward-looking simple slender little girl you are" and to drink plenty of cocoa for purposes of breast augmentation. Joyce (1975) explains to Nora how he has "some very fine furs in my mind for you" (p. 175), a clear indication of his desire to recast Nora in an image of his own creation along fetishistic lines. On 22 November, Joyce (1975) expresses his wish that Nora "had a great store of all kinds of underclothes, in all delicate shades, stored away in a great perfumed press" (p. 180). The desire to subject her to a metamor-

phosis in accordance with his fantasies is clear, as is Joyce's intense interest in tangible objects, the parallel of which is found in the figure of Leopold Bloom and his anatomical analyses of Zoe, Kitty, and Florry in the "Circe" episode of *Ulysses* while in the guise of his grandfather, Lipoti Virag (Joyce, 1986).

There are other ways in which Joyce's fetishistic inclinations are manifested both in his writings as well as in his personal life. For instance, on 1 November Joyce (1975) writes a letter exemplifying the obsessive meticulousness with respect to detail so frequently seen in fetishists in relation to their sexual object: "I would like the coat of your dress to reach nearly the base of the skirt and to be collared, belted and cuffed with dark blue *leather* and lines with bronze or dark blue satin" (p. 176; original emphasis). Subsequent to their verbal conflicts Joyce would often report to Nora that he had purchased gifts for her, which frequently assumed the form of furs—"those archetypal Joycean gifts" in Shechner's words—and which constituted a means by which Joyce could at once pacify Nora and reformulate her into the dominatrix he would eventually wish her to be in the future (Shechner, 1974, p. 80).

The fact that he wished to adorn Nora with an assortment of fetish objects betrays Joyce's hostility to reality insofar as the costumed woman he would eventually see upon his return to Trieste would be in no way commensurate with the persona of the actual Nora with her solid demeanor and humble peasant background, the latter of which Joyce, according to Fitch (1999), would condescendingly promulgate to new friends and acquaintances in an effort to humiliate her. Restuccia (1985) has suggested that Joyce's fondness for fetishes can be understood as an unconscious disavowal of the fact that females lack a penis: the fetish object is a penis-substitute conducive to the amelioration of castration anxiety. Thus, Joyce used the fetishized Nora as a means by which he could manipulate or deny those

aspects of his psychic life and external reality that he found most disconcerting.

The most bizarre aspect of the correspondence pertains to Joyce's scatological fixations and the virtually ubiquitous coprophilic fantasies in which he indulged. In a manner similar to fetishism, psychoanalysts have posited that coprophilia is the etiological derivative of the unresolved castration complex. According to Smith (1976), excrement serves as a penis-substitute and thereby constitutes a means of defense against castration anxiety. With respect to Joyce, Maddox (1988) explains what H.G. Wells termed Joyce's "cloacal obsession" with reference to his early fears concerning enuresis and of being shoved into the slimy "square ditch" or cesspit by other students while he was attending Clongowes Wood as a young child. She also alludes to the psychoanalytic tenet according to which feces, money, and newborn children are rendered symbolically interchangeable within the unconscious (e.g., Freud, 1963d). Thus, it is plausible that the frequent attention given to fiscal matters in Joyce's texts, as well as his own exorbitant spending and farfetched financial investments during certain periods of his life, can be understood in the context of his anality and castration complex.

The presence of scatological themes supersedes virtually everything else in the letters written during the first half of December. Perhaps the most striking instance of perverse reverie in the correspondence occurs in the letter of 2 December when Joyce (1975) recounts how he "taught [Nora] to make filthy signs to me with your lips and tongue, to provoke me with obscene touches and noises, and even to do in my presence the most shameful and filthy act of the body" (p. 181). During the last of these "teachings," Joyce positioned himself beneath Nora in order to view her defecating firsthand. Following this episode, she was "ashamed even to meet [Joyce's] eyes" (Joyce, 1975, p. 181). On 9 December, he instructs her to "Buy whorish drawers, love, and be

sure you sprinkle the legs of them with some nice scent and also discolour them just a little behind" (p. 185). In "Circe," Leopold Bloom is accused of making similar exhortations to Mrs. Bellingham when he "implored [her] to soil his letter in an unspeakable manner" (Joyce, 1986, p. 381). Later on in the letter, Joyce (1975) expresses his desire to hear Nora uttering "filthy words" and to see her "mouth making dirty sounds and noises" while he enjoyed the olfactory stimulation produced by her "dirty fat girlish farts going pop pop" (p. 186). The epithets Joyce (1975) uses when referring to Nora are significant: "my little naked fucker, my naughty wriggling little frigger, my sweet dirty little farter...my darling brown-arsed fuckbird" (p. 186).

Similarly, the letter of 8 December addresses little other than Nora's propensity to expel gas while she is engaging in sexual intercourse "arseways." Joyce (1975) recounts how "sweet little whorish" Nora responded to "every fuck [Joyce] gave" her (p. 185). After Nora's "shameless tongue came bursting out through [her] lips," Joyce (1975) would administer a "bigger stronger fuck than usual" that would elicit "fat dirty farts [that] came spluttering out of [her] backside" (p. 185). Joyce (1975) seems proud of his ability to offer relief to Nora, whose "arse full of fat farts" was deflated when he "fucked them [farts] out of you, big fat fellows, long windy ones, quick little merry cracks and a lot of tiny little naughty farties ending in a long gush from your hole" (p. 185). The synonymy with respect to sexuality and filth in Joyce's psyche is conspicuous. Words such as "dirty," "arse," "farts" and "slime" are always written in connection with sexual activity, and the object to which these words are applied remains constant-Nora Barnacle.

In the same letter, there is also an instance of somnophilic² fan-

2: In *somnophilia*, the paraphilic focus is directed to persons who are sleeping. See Laws and O'Donohue (1997, p. 408) for more information.

tasy in which Joyce writes of how he will perform cunnilingus on Nora in an effort to "surprise [her] asleep." This will cause her to "groan and grunt and sigh and fart with lust in [her] sleep" (Joyce 1975, p. 185). In terms of the fantasy itself, some investigators have suggested that the etiology of somnophilia is similar to that of fetishism and coprophilia. For instance, Calef and Weinschel (1972) have advanced the hypothesis that somnophilia is associated with factors such as the desire for reunification with the maternal womb, the unresolved Oedipus complex, fixations at pregenital stages of psychosexual development, as well as castration anxiety. The degree to which Joyce's own aberrant libidinal impulses were influenced by factors such as these is uncertain; however, the fact that castration anxiety has been posited as a causal mechanism with regard to somnophilia as well as fetishism and coprophilia, the latter two of which played salient roles in his sexual fantasies, lends credence to the notion that the threat of castration did indeed constitute Joyce's "nuclear complex."

In view of these considerations, it is possible to infer certain conclusions regarding the significance of the letters exchanged between Joyce and Nora during a period of two months in late 1909. Joyce's conceptualization of Nora was characterized by a profound ambivalence; as a consequence, the mental representation of her in Joyce's psyche was subjected to a process known in psychoanalysis as "splitting of the object"³ -depending on the letter, Nora was either the virgin or the whore, the dominating mother or the naïve daughter, the "beautiful wild flower of the hedges...dark-blue rain-drenched flower" or the "darling brown-arsed fuckbird." Joyce's ambivalence in this respect may be

3: See Freud (1963b, 1963c) and Melanie Klein's articles on "The Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States" (1940) and "The Oedipus Complex in the Light of Early Anxieties" (1945) for important early contributions to the concept of "splitting."

attributed, at least in part, to his childhood background in Roman Catholicism (see, e.g., Ellmann, 1983), in which a long tradition involving the stigmatization of most aspects of human sexuality not directly linked to procreation has existed at least since the time of Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE).

Moreover, due to his unresolved castration anxiety, Joyce was compelled to seek outlets of sexual gratification divorced from what most people would consider rational in nature, especially in terms of his anal eroticism and scatological fantasies. Unable to admit into full conscious awareness the fact that females lack penises, Joyce attempted to convince himself otherwise by personally watching Nora defecate and thereby produce her own symbolic phallus in the form of excrement. This strange episode is one instance among many in which Joyce subjected Nora to a form of objectification whereby she, as a fetish, could be recast in an image reflective of her husband's sexual fantasies. In the final analysis, the control Joyce wished to exert over Nora in terms of her physicality constituted yet another method of defense against the anxiety associated with the threat of castration. In other words, by reformulating Nora as a fetish object (i.e., penis-substitute), Joyce was assuring himself of the existence of his own penis, the phallic symbolic representation of which he had projected onto Nora. In doing this, Joyce was able to at least partially mitigate the anxieties inherent in a malevolent reality that he evidently believed could castrate him at any moment.

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