

# Joyce between Montaigne and Shakespeare: Caliban, Cannibals and Creaturely Men

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## *Abstract*

The Renaissance was an age of exploration that revealed new types of human beings, offering Europeans a radical experience of Otherness. This age is most in evidence in *Ulysses* in relation to the uncertain lower limits of its rich panorama of human characters, and in the depiction of cannibalism. Joyce, at this point, appears as a true heir of the Humanist legacy, standing between Montaigne and Shakespeare. Joyce, as Montaigne did four centuries before, will dismantle

Murphy's portrait of cannibalism projecting relativism and scepticism onto the cannibals' narrative, wrapping it with several geographical locations and with many uncertainties. As Bloom advances towards Eccles Street the feminine capacity to devour must appear as faraway and unreal. On the other hand, Shakespeare's Caliban, the Bolivian "cannibals," the subhuman types at "Circe's" portal or the beastly eaters at the Burton (where Bloom goes to rehearse his rejection of the male capacity to devour) appear as "creaturely men." They are beings suspended between the human and the animal, and always in the process of becoming fully human. They establish the necessary contrast with Bloom, a modern Odysseus, an all-round man.

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One of James Joyce's greatest concerns in *Ulysses* may have been to re-invent the human figure from many of the veils and hypocritical representations that had masked and even falsified it for so long, but he also created in his novel a rich panorama of human characters. This wide range of representations sinks its roots deep into the Renaissance age of colonisation and the discovery of new and unexpected human types. During the sixteenth century, Europeans discovered, to cite a number of examples, the Caribbean Indians, Patagonians and North American natives. Joyce, at this point, seems to be a true heir of the Humanist legacy, suspended between the scepticism of Montaigne and the hierarchy of beings in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1616). It is my intention in this essay, therefore, to explore new ways of representing human beings, and the substantial role that savagery and civilisation play in certain passages of *Ulysses* as precluded by modern European ethnographic descriptions, especially those related to the New World.

The discovery of new human types sparked off numerous ethnographic speculations and arguments about the human status of the Indians. Many Europeans considered them uncivilised and inferior. For example, Álvarez de Chanca, a surgeon who accompanied Columbus, was appalled by the natives' habit of eating snakes and spiders, concluding that their bestiality was greater than that of any beast. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, one of Hernán Cortés' friends, stated that the Indians were as inferior to the Spaniards as children to adults or as monkeys to men (Hamlin 19).<sup>1</sup> However, others spoke out against judgements of this kind, such as Bartolomé de las Casas, a Dominican bishop who defended the status of the Indians as fully human, and Michel de Montaigne. In the historical context of the French religious and ideological wars of the sixteenth century, many thinkers looked for societies that were happier and more primitive. Montaigne, for example, in 1562, when he was twenty nine, was engaged in a conversation

at Rouen with a Tupinamba native from Brazil. Montaigne did not find anything barbarous in him and his kind. After all, as he wrote, each man calls anything alien to his own practices and customs “barbarous.” And he used the Indians’ views to criticise his own supposedly-superior social organisation.<sup>2</sup> For example, concerning social injustice, he reports how the Indians could not understand how beggars could starve at rich people’s doors without setting their houses on fire. All his observations, in fact, indicate the extent to which Montaigne accorded the Indians “their own identity and their own inquisitive subjectivity” (Hamlin 45).<sup>3</sup>

However, his close study of the classics and their great varieties of perspectives, were to mould Montaigne’s scepticism, which was partly a result of the controversies brought about by the religious wars that shook France at that time. Theologians and thinkers of different creeds undermined other religious dogmas, rendering ideas thought to be immutable and sacred as doubtful and even false. “*Que sais je?*” What do I know? Was one of his mottoes. He, in fact, followed Socrates who “only knew that he knew nothing.” And following the late classical philosopher, Sextus Empiricus, Montaigne wrote: “What I know for certain is that nothing is certain.”<sup>4</sup> The strongest argument in favour of his scepticism, he argued, was the enormous variety of customs, ideas, uses and judgements all around the world, and their lack of reliability. All the former ideas led inevitably to a relativist perception of reality. Furthermore, he followed the cosmopolitanism of the open-minded philosophers of Ancient Greece, as well as historians such as Herodotus.<sup>5</sup> This relativism prevented him from taking sides with the major European view concerning the conquest of the New World. In his essay “Of Coaches,” he denounced the destruction of cities and peoples in order to gain profit from pearls or pepper. As a result, the cannibalism of the natives was diminished in contrast to the barbarism of the old continent and the extreme

cruelty of the Europeans. As Montaigne argued, there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than if he were dead.

In “Eumaeus,” James Joyce will dismantle Murphy’s views of American cannibals using weapons similar to those Montaigne used four centuries earlier, mainly scepticism and relativism. In the sixteenth episode of *Ulysses*, cannibalism appears in the way it has been regarded throughout history, as a way of ascribing<sup>6</sup> barbaric behaviour and non-human qualities to other cultures.

Eumaeian cannibalism, in fact, belongs to the “ritual” and “necessary” type of cannibalism. One historical example of this category was the Aztec practice of human sacrifice, which was a means of supplying essential nutrients lacking in their diet, as well as fulfilling a ritualistic ceremony. To be precise,

Murphy’s portrait of cannibalism in the sixteenth episode is a fictionalised version of this type. Murphy’s story is another projected fantasy that is set up by the blatantly obvious lie about a crocodile he saw bite an anchor. The tall story about the crocodile puts the reader on his/her guard against all the lies and fantasies about cannibals to come. The postcard that Murphy displays shows a photograph of a group of native women in striped loincloths supposedly eating raw liver. Photographs have been praised as one of the most objective and trusted means of representing reality, although when accompanied by the wrong discourses and references, reality is falsified. So, the postcard, the exotic tales, the language, the displayed references, and everything that surrounds Murphy’s “persona,” cause the reader to doubt both him and his message.

To begin with, there is no historical trace of any cannibalistic practice in Peru, the country where the exhibited natives are supposed to be from (Gifford with Seidman 540; Thornton 434-435).<sup>7</sup> Also, as becomes obvious, the postcard is not from the country where the cannibals are supposed to hail from: they are not in Peru, but in Beni, Bolivia, while the address on the card is Santiago, Chile. All this implies that Murphy’s claim to direct experience of cannibalistic practices must be false.

Joyce, in a Montaigne-like way, projects scepticism onto the reader's perceptions by weaving uncertainties into the fabric of Murphy's narrative. And, like the sixteenth century French thinker, he also projects relativism onto the postcard of

"cannibals" by assigning them several geographical locations, which are divorced, in an almost surrealist way, from the sailor's discourses and the reality they are supposed to represent. Therefore, those "barbaric" women, whose images float somewhere in the midst of a fictional South American reality, end up having no place in our Hor Bloom's or Stephen's real world.

The reader, then, may wonder about the reason why these man-eating Peruvian-Bolivian women, voluptuous and all-devouring, have to appear at this precise stage in

"Eumaeus" when Bloom is beginning his journey home. In one sense, they are generalised images of the feminine. Cannibalism may serve as a metaphor for the potential female capacity for devouring flesh. And this may point to, or even enhance, Molly's early urge to devour. But this voracious potential is attributed to exotic, faraway women who turn out, in fact, to be dubious and a tissue of lies. As Bloom advances towards Eccles Street, the female (and, by implication,

Molly's) drive to devour has to appear to him (for the sake of his own mental health and for his own peace of mind) as something faraway and unreal.

However, Montaigne's reflective ethnography influenced Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in various respects: for example, in the bard's admirable creation of Caliban (his name being suggestive of a cannibal). Some of the characters in *Ulysses* appear to share features with the witch Sycorax's son: the Bolivian women in "Eumaeus," some of the subhuman characters at "Circe's" portal and the beastly eaters at the Burton. They all appear as "creaturely men." "Creaturely," which comes from the Latin "crea-tura," refers to a being, mainly incomplete, whose existence hovers between the animal and the human.<sup>8</sup> The creature is confined to living "mere life,"

satisfying its most immediate, primary instincts. Caliban, for example, is strongly associated with the element earth and with brutish understanding (Frank Kermode lxxxii).<sup>9</sup> He is called “though earth, though” (1.2.314); “a thing most brutish” (1.2.356); “this thing of darkness!” (5.1.275). He is a “creatura,” a being in the process of being created. As Julia R. Lupton comments (8): “The uncertainty throughout the play as to Caliban’s shape— a man or a fish— dead or alive? (2.2.25-26) —reflects this fundamental lack of reflection, this inchoate muddiness at the heart of Caliban’s oddly faceless and featureless being” (8).<sup>10</sup>

Many Dubliners, like Caliban, are “creaturely,” caught between “mud and mind, dust and dream, measuring the difference between the human and the inhuman...” (Lupton 5). In “Circe’s” dark scenario, humans appear like shadows of Caliban, too close to the beasts: the “figures wander, lurk, peer from warrens” (*U* 15.39). Like bats or vermin, they are nocturnal beings who hide in alleyways and respond promptly and instinctively to sudden cries. A standing woman, “her feet apart, pisses cowly” (*U* 15.579); “An armless pair of them flop wrestling, growling” (*U* 15.581-582). A deaf-mute idiot and a scrofulous child also appear; physical and pathological deformities are shown at night. Confined to living “mere life,” those beings are unable to attain any degree of transcendence, freedom or imagination. These “creaturely people” appear like phantom characters in “Circe’s” unsafe, psychic world. Dublin’s Nighttown forms a spectral humanscape that illustrates how well-rooted evils such as political prostitution, a certain spiritual dwarfism, the inability to carry out any effective imaginative project, or a deep rebelliousness were slowly gnawing away at the Hibernian inhabitants.

However, other “creaturely men” will appear in Dublin as the time for adultery approaches. Voracious male drives and primal instincts emerge on the streets of Dublin as a subconscious warning —or as painful images— of Boylan’s capacity for devouring. Bloom, a Dubliner who walks the

streets every day, knows the animal-like style of eating at the Burton. Why, then, the reader wonders, does he go there for lunch? As Bloom heads for the Burton, he compensates for the approaching beastly male behaviour by imagining idealised erotic situations. So, in Bloom's mind beastly eating is strongly associated with erotic activity, since this activity frames the eating narrative. Then, he enters the Burton, but instead of thinking about what he is going to eat, he positions himself as a voyeur of the trough: "See the animals feed." Therefore, he seems to have gone there, not to eat, but to watch the animal-males feed:

Men, men, men.

Perched on high stools by the bar, hats shoved back ... swilling, wolfing gobfuls of sloppy food, their eyes bulging, wiping wetted moustaches ... A man with an infant's sauced napkin tucked round him shovelled gurgling soup down his gullet. A man spitting back on his plate (*U* 8.653-659)

Those "Lestrygonians" are portrayed as "creaturely men," specimens suspended, not unlike Caliban, between the human and the animal. The language used leaves us in no doubt. The first verb to be used is "to perch," which is commonly applied to birds, as they often perch on branches or sticks. "To swill" means to drink greedily or in large quantities like a pig, while "to bolt" means to eat so quickly, like a dog, that the food is not even tasted. "To wolf" is explicit in meaning: eating ravenously like a wild beast; "gullet" can also refer to the throat of a vulture, a hawk, or, in fact, any bird. The comment "a man with an infant's sauced napkin tucked round him" (*U* 8.658) evokes a regression to a state of human immaturity.

In fact, the communal eating scene at the Burton represents, in a figurative, anthropological sense, an endogamous form of cannibalism. Animals eat other animals of

the same group; mammals eat mammals. The hungry mouths of men unconsciously suggest Boylan's all-consuming appetites, not only because the scene is prefaced by evocations of eroticism, but because Bloom insists on the male appetite "men men men" at that sensitive time of the day.

The communal meal at the Burton is also a subtly complex temptation, which Bloom rejects "as Christ rejected temptation in the desert" because he is unable to sit and share that greasy, sumptuous communion with hungry, "creaturely" males. The Burton meal, moreover, is not food for Bloom's stomach, but for his eyes.<sup>11</sup> After the main scene at the Burton is captured, Bloom's crucial reason for not eating there, appears: "Smells of men...men's beery piss...Couldn't eat a morsel here" (*U* 8.671-673). The frantic devouring activities of the males that were visualised in the upper parts of the body, in the mouth, the teeth or the jaws, subtly hint at other body parts soon to be engaged in a devouring activity in Eccles Street that the crucial image "men's beery piss...Couldn't eat a morsel here" makes blatantly obvious. Bloom seems to have gone to the Burton not to eat, but to rehearse his sick reaction to the male instinct, his intimate disgust at Boylan's urges, and to degrade and revile the male capacity to devour. In a visual, attitudinal revenge, he seems to have gone there to paint men with dirty, animal-like strokes as abject "creaturely men," to slander his own kind, to which Boylan also belongs.

In conclusion, Murphy's alleged cannibals, some of the characters at "Circe's" portal and the animal-like eaters at the Burton are representations of "creaturely people," anchored in the Renaissance human typology of uncivilised, beastly colonised beings, and in Shakespeare's masterpiece of uncanny indeterminacy, Caliban. Joyce explores the uncertain lower limits of the human realm, where it borders on or can be confused with the subhuman or the inorganic. These Joycean characters constitute the earthiest, most telluric category of the wide variety of ways in which the human can be represented.<sup>12</sup> Yet, they are permanently held back in the process of



becoming fully human. These earthly heirs of the Renaissance colonials often appear as mutated forms from strange canons and alien traditions, partly due to the frantic Modernist search for originality. Those “creaturely men” reflect an image of us, humans, that we are not too willing to acknowledge as ours.

We have serious doubts about whether to call them “*Mon semblable, more frère.*” When we look at them, a curtain is suddenly raised to reveal our beastly past when we howled in caves. Furthermore, they reveal the almost unbearable simultaneity of savagery and barbaric impulses in our present world: the uncanny energy that still lives among us in our foulest prisons, in the unlawful killings or on the dark margins of our cities. Although such beings look hybrid and deformed, they are unmistakably human.<sup>13</sup> They stage, in fact, the return of the repressed: of those barbaric European impulses that some early modern thinkers unsympathetically projected onto American natives and that Montaigne disclosed, using relativism and scepticism, as clearly ours.

Finally, all the aforementioned characters provide a strong contrast with Bloom, probably the most complete representation of a character in Western Literature. He is a keen beholder of the skies, a poet, an inventor in the underworld, a student of gravity, light, optical effects and eclipses. Furthermore, like Prospero, he will appear like a Renaissance showman-magician who, holding the artist’s “magic wand” (Stephen’s ashplant), will create a final image of

Rudy. Like the god Hermes and classical Odysseus he is *polytropos* His mind has many forms, and turns to many sides; and many-sidedness was a highly-esteemed Renaissance quality. Bloom is a true heir of that man to whom Leonardo da Vinci granted wings and whom Hamlet praised with melancholy and wonder.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in William M. Hamlin, *The Image of America in Montaigne, Spencer, and Shakespeare: Renaissance Ethnography and Literary Reflection* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995) 19; and translated from Sepúlveda's *Democrates segundo, o de las causas justas de la guerra contra los indios* (ca.1544), ed. Ángel Losada (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas. Instituto Francisco de Vitoria, 1951) 33.

<sup>2</sup> Many authors have commented on Montaigne's striking modernity, and how he embraced a broader concept of civility which was closed to the twentieth-century Western idea of civilisation.

<sup>3</sup> As Montaigne did with the American Indians, he also granted subjectivity and wisdom to animals. He refused the vain presupposition that humans were superior to them. As he exemplified: "When I play with my cat, who knows if it is not her who is having fun with me, rather than me with her? (2.12). Like Montaigne, Bloom will acknowledge a similar trait in his own cat in "Calypso," compassionately granting her with an unmistakable wisdom, her own perspective on the world and her own subjectivity: "They call them stupid. They understand what we say better than we understand them ... Wonders what I look like to her. Height of a tower?" (*U* 4.55). Bloom, like Montaigne, questions common ideas about animals as being inferior beings, "They call them stupid," and questions human superiority. After all, the Renaissance placed man at the centre of the universe, but also, and as a result of the close observation of nature, upgraded other natural hierarchies. All Montaigne's quotations are from Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. and ed. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Montaigne 112.

<sup>5</sup> Socrates, for example, considered the whole world as his native city; and travellers and historians such as Herodotus contributed to the understanding of faraway uses and alien cultures.

<sup>6</sup> However, cannibalism for Murphy is not just a distorted fantasy about faraway people, but the grotesquely superior discourse of the coloniser. As Alcida Ramos explains: "Cannibalism provided, perhaps, the most potent weapon for European control. It had the power to construct, with a single stroke, two of the handiest images for the colonisation of the New World: white martyrs [like reverend MacTriggan in "Lestrygonians"] and Indian heathens. While martyrdom justified the political domination of the „cannibals," paganism justified the right to subject the Indians to

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Christian indoctrination.” In Alcida Ramos, “From Eden to Limbo: The Construction of Indigenism in Brazil,” in *Social Construction of the Past: Representation and Power*, ed. George C. Bond and Angela Gilliam (New York: Routledge, 1994) 80-81.

<sup>7</sup> Don Gifford, with Robert J. Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce’s ‘Ulysses’*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989). And Weldon Thornton, *Allusions in ‘Ulysses’: An Annotated List* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> “Creaturely” refers to according to Santner who at this point is following Giorgio Agamben’s concepts in *The Open* to “a thing always in the process of undergoing creation”; or “of being caught up in the process of becoming creature.” Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006) 27-28. See also Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> In William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. and intr. Frank Kermode. 1954 (London: Methuen, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Julia R Lupton, “Creature Caliban,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.1 (Spring 2000): 1-17.

<sup>11</sup> If a harpy emerges above the Shakespearean victuals to awaken the conscience, another harmful “harpy” springs from the Joycean communal meal: the male instinct to devour.

<sup>12</sup> They share this low status with those Ulyssean characters who appear as mere items of clothing, boards, hats or umbrellas, such as Macintosh, Hely’s sandwichmen, the madman Cashel Boyle, and, often,

Blazes Boylan. A few women, who are represented as immobilised or crippled, appear at a higher level; for example, those females “imprisoned” in convents, glass cubicles, brothels or in marble figures. Lame Gerty precludes Molly, who is represented in bed, or throwing a coin to a crippled sailor. She is fully infused with the static quality of Ithaca; after all, home is that place where all sailors become “crippled.” And above them, the dark charcoal-drawn, funereal Ariels of *Ulysses*, the family ghosts, appear.