

Post-Carnivalism in David Ireland's *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*

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David Ireland's *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* commences with an intertextual flourish: the first section, 'One Day in a Penal Colony', evokes Kafka's story in which the punishment of those convicts incarcerated in his penal colony have the laws which they have transgressed inscribed on their bodies by that horrific device, the harrow. Most but not all of the industrial prisoners of Ireland's fiction have their own bodily inscriptions as proof of their abject condition, an 'inch-wide residual scar of chains passed down from father to son, from ankle to ankle for half a dozen generations' (2). Whereas in Kafka's story the typography of the convicts' abjection is a cruel torture imposed from without, the textuality of *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* arises from a compulsion of *ressentiment* in the extreme image of the inherited ankle scar. By *ressentiment* I mean Nietzsche's usage of the term: 'the vengefulness of the impotent' (*Genealogy* 37). Perhaps this is Lamarckian *ressentiment*, a bad attitude handed down from generation to generation, but the ankle scar is not its only manifestation. It is evident in the quasi-utopian diatribes of the great White Father, the obsessive note-taking of the Samurai, the psychotic 'secret language' and abject authoritarianism of the Glass Canoe and lastly, the vast aggregation of atomised or atomic fictions, as Ken Gelder calls them (1–27), that the anonymous narrator of Ireland's novel has built up 'piece by piece' into his 'bleak ratio of illuminations' (374).

For each of the three major characters of Ireland's novel, the ability to textualise or author their lives is crucial for their ability to formulate an adequate response to their abject condition, even though the most adequate response to abjection is most likely inadequacy. Here it is important to distinguish between the mere subjection of servitude and abjection. In his book *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero*, Michael André Bernstein draws on Julia Kristeva's essay on abjection to explore the darker aspects of what he calls the Saturnalian dialogue and which can also, in a broader sense, be said to belong to menippean satire (see too, for example, Fiona Giles 'Creative Decay: Some Contemporary Forms of Menippean Satire in Australian Literature'). Primarily, the abject is 'something rejected from which one does not part,' a horror that violates 'identity, system, order' (27). In Kristeva's usage of the term, abjection is a 'social and dialogic category' – a formulation that draws on the psychoanalytic tradition and on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bernstein utilises the concept of abjection in relation to the often ne-

glected negative implications of the Bakhtinian carnival. An abject consciousness, according to Bernstein, is characterised by an awareness of the predicament of being rejected by, or rejecting that from which one cannot part, an awareness that serves only to intensify one's plight, and which is converted into an 'additional and especially acute symptom of the very state it is intended to diagnose' (30). The embittered quality which this consciousness engenders comprises impotence, a characteristic of all male menippean anti-heroes, and an 'obsessive and involuntary theatricality: or a 'manic logorrhoea' – a compulsion arising from the fear that in authoring one's life each act of representation has been leached of inward feeling by the condition of abjection' (92). The logic of abjection, if that is what it is, 'could only continue to function powerfully in the shadow of a kind of monstrous collective crime with which the Abject Hero is associated but for which he is not directly responsible' (143) – much like the entropic dystopia of *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*.

The focus of Ireland's novel rarely moves beyond the confines of the Puroil Clearwater refinery, which provides his imagined, nightmarish Australia with fuel and is in turn fuelled, inefficiently and entropically, by the *ressentiment* of those that work there, workers (or 'industrial prisoners') and management alike. Although the Puroil refinery looms menacingly above ground, it is really a subterranean maze of hatred, disaffection and hostility. And yet for all of the bitterness of its characters, the fractured, menippean form of *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* is much like the 'cat cracker' at the heart of the refinery itself – a carnivalistic zone of disintegration and recombination. Of particular interest here is the connection between carnival and *ressentiment*, a connection of which Nietzsche has written in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche links the 'pure folly' of carnival (*Twilight* 90) as a spiritual restorative with the man of *ressentiment* in his discussion of the motivation of those 'English psychologists' who are concerned with the history of the origin of morality. He asks whether or not it is

a petty subterranean hostility and rancor toward Christianity (and Plato) that has perhaps not even crossed the threshold of consciousness? Or even a lascivious taste for the grotesque, the painfully paradoxical, the questionable and absurd in existence? (*Genealogy* 24)

Earlier in the same work he writes of cheerfulness 'or in my own language gay science' as 'the reward of a long, brave, industrious, and subterranean seriousness,' suggesting that *ressentiment* and pure folly are in fact deeply interconnected (*Genealogy* 21). The zone of their interaction is in the realm of the subterranean, or grotesque, something that belongs in the cave as much as it is an instance of the 'pure folly' of carnival. In fact the man of *ressentiment*, or the abject hero, as Bernstein has it, represents one aspect of the negative potential of the menippea:

Fundamentally one can cope with everything else, born as one is to a subterranean struggle; one emerges again and again into the light, one

experiences again and again one's golden hour of victory – and then one stands forth as one was born, unbreakable, tensed, ready for new, even harder, remoter things, like a bow that distress only serves to draw tighter. (*Genealogy* 44)

In a parody of one of the more famous grottos in literature, Plato's cave in Book X of *The Republic*, Ireland has his characters unwittingly replay that parable of representation in the Home Beautiful, their obediently carnivalistic haven:

As they drank and spoke and moved about the hut, their shadows played fantastic games on the walls, for all the world like shadows in a primitive cave deep in the earth, safe from monsters outside. And because of the magnification of their size and speed on the walls the shadows seemed to possess more life and vigour than the men who made them. (92)

In a sense, the industrial prisoners are more abject than the shadows they create. Yet, as I shall argue, the grotesqueries they are able to bring forth represent the most powerful expression of the possibility of emerging once more from an abject *ressentiment* into that 'golden hour of victory.'

Although the three major characters of Ireland's novel are not alone in their compulsion to author the lucid irony of their abjection – among others, there is the author of the subversive Utopia 1852 posters which satirically decry the condition of industrial servitude – they represent three distinct voices articulating discrete abject consciousnesses. The Great White Father articulates the voice of amiable *ressentiment*, ultimately differing little in his beliefs from the position of conservatism and ineffectuality ascribed to carnival theory by its harsher critics. 'The prince of prisoners', as the anonymous narrator calls him (22) advocates a strategy of the superficial carnivalesque, the kind that John Docker espouses in relation to melodrama and antipodean literature (48–56). 'Smiles, a quick wit, sex, alcohol, and never say Yes to the bastards' (10) is the Great White Father's advice to those who congregate in the Home Beautiful, the subversive haven which the subterranean yet strangely compliant industrial prisoners inhabit when they are not engaged in work at the Puroil Refinery. The laughter of the Great White Father is closely allied with the laughter of carnival but it lacks its recreative (and destructive) powers. Instead, his laughter must be supplemented with his oratory which projects a somewhat misogynistic and alienated vision but also, as Gelder notes, extols the virtues of community and togetherness (18). The optimistic carnival which characterises his vision and which is the most frequent interpretation of Bakhtin's writing on carnival is doomed by a certain insouciance – a reluctance to burrow deeper into the subterranean spleen of abjection. His dying words: 'neighbour – more important – god' convey a message unintelligibly ambiguous to its hearers, the narrator and presumably the readers. It is the ultimate confusion of the monologism of authoritarian discourse (if such a thing has ever existed) with the monologism of absolute carnival. The other two central characters

of the work, the Samurai and the Glass Canoe, represent variations on the theme of compulsive discourses of abjection authored in relation to dysfunctional authority. The Samurai, as we learn, has a heart which can encompass 'mercy and pity and a large capacity for revenge and hate' (67). His heroic role as a kind of warrior of *ressentiment* makes him an ideal model for the abject narrator hero: he is full of peculiar impulses, one of which leads him to get 'hold of some scrap paper and [begin] making notes of the things he saw about him' (34). In this respect he differs little from the Glass Canoe, who is possessed by a number of psychotic voices. We are told that 'He could lose himself in something more powerful than he was. The noise filled him, swelled him up so that he sang. At the top of his voice he roared, singing. The sound deadened his limbs: he felt he could smash steel with his fists' (96).

But all three characters are really minor variations on the true Abject Hero of the novel, the anonymous narrator and unknown industrial prisoner himself. Few clues are given to his identity, and although Helen Daniel has conceded there are grounds for identifying him as the Samurai or the Two Pot Screamer, he is essentially nameless (66). The consciousness of the anonymous narrator is the most powerful engagement with *ressentiment* of all the characters. For him, the world of Puroil, and in fact the universe itself, is a study in abjection – as if the complicity of all the workers in the collective crime of which their industrial servitude is but a part were only a reflection of an abject universe. The similarity between 'Puroil' and 'puerile' not only adumbrates this point, it also recalls Blanchard's definition of menippean satire as 'learned puerility' (7). One manifestation of this is the recurrent scatological theme of the novel. The first atomised fiction of the first section of the novel is called 'LOWER DEPTHS', equating the subterranean with what Bakhtin terms the lower material bodily stratum (368–436). The metaphor is developed throughout the novel and has its most complete description in the relation of refinery to public and refinery to workers:

The refinery took in its crude oil and production supplies at the other end, so that if its true mouth extended down into Clearwater Bay, the employees must have entered the other end of the refinery's alimentary tract, for that was the end that discharged the company's products, suitably refined, into the waiting arms of the public. (24)

Elsewhere, the Great White Father exclaims, 'Oil and excreta, that's what they fractionate here. Us and oil . . . Forty grades of shit. That's all any of us are. White shirts, brown shirts, overalls boiler suits, the lot. Shit. The place is a correction centre' (11). Scatological abjection knows no hierarchical boundaries either. One of the senior managers, The Wandering Jew, savours a brief sun shower:

Several drops of moisture fell on his upturned face as he took off his hat and looked with pride upward at the mighty structures. Rain? Probably a small leak, not worth mentioning. He didn't see Far Away Places, two

hundred feet above, buttoning his fly. He had taken to peeing from the top rather than have the Glass Canoe on his back. (119)

But it is left to the Glass Canoe to provide an echo of this motif on a cosmic scale: 'He looked up, grinning at the nothing in the sky. 'God pulled the chain, the doors of heaven were opened and all the piss pots in heaven were emptied,' he shouted and made a two-finger sign at the rain' (61).

But this abject universe, of which scatology is a symptom, by no means ends with the text. The preface to *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* is placed close to the end of the book, on page 374 to be exact, and recalls Derrida's consideration, in *Dissemination*, of the impossibility of ever prefacing a work (*Dissemination* 1–59). More importantly, it recalls his often mis-translated phrase, that there is no 'outside-text' [*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*] (rather than there is 'nothing outside of the text') (*Grammatology* 158). That is, the textuality of abjection knows no boundaries, just as the dark saturnalia of Ireland's menippean satire is not confined to the pages of his book. The vision of Australia that *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* offers is that of an abject text of which we are all authors, however unwitting. It is also a vision of belatedness – of coming into cognisance of one's inferiority too late and of finding oneself abject before one can find the possibility of difference.

This sense of belatedness is also shared by what could be offered as a definition of postmodernism: that is, consciousness of the belatedness of carnival. It has been noted that postmodernist writing is often carnivalesque (McHale 157), but it is more accurate to say that postmodernism is not so much carnivalesque as *after* carnival. That is, the post-carnival condition is not characterised by the rupture of carnival as much as it is by a state of continual, suffuse play with no particular centre of gravity to explain away the explosive moment of puncture. Post-carnivalism is that state of continual ludism in which the primary features of carnival have become so diffuse and omnipresent that that moment of festive inversion in a world already perpetually inverted is no longer possible. The world-upside-down of *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* is therefore not an inversion of the everyday Australian world, but rather an exacerbation of it.

In the post-carnival world of Ireland's fiction, laughter is reduced and serves a destabilising function, exposing the ambivalence of power relationships unmoored from a monologic centre (see Gary Morson & Caryl Emerson, *Bakhtin: Creation of a Poetics*). It is as if the anonymous narrator is steering a middle path between what Dorothy Jones notes is the official ideology of Australian humour and the sad reality:

Australian humour . . . is closely bound up with a concept of the Australian character as egalitarian, anti-authoritarian and irreverent towards social pretension, even though close examination of Australian social and political institutions must inevitably lead a dispassionate observer to question whether such qualities are at all significant in Australian life. (82)

This is the Australian version of *ressentiment*, 'a vast underground movement of inertia', as it is described by the unknown industrial prisoner, where even abjection is half-baked and resistance ineffectual (166). But the depiction of this 'vast underground movement of inertia' is not wholly despairing: *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* can be read as an invitation to open up a dialogue of and with abjection, and to embrace the cringe, as it were, until we learn to cringe properly for the first time. For it can be argued that Australians have never truly cringed, despite Phillips' famous formulation and despite all that continues to be cringe-worthy in contemporary Australia – and that until the art of cringing has been mastered, we may perhaps never sink deep enough to find treasure in the murky depths, (like the jewel extracted from the dunghill), nor ever emerge into the light of unreasonable discovery.

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