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*The Uncanny Effects of Theater:*  
Notes on Joyce's "Circe"

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This text addresses the question of the relation between the notion of the uncanny and the media of theater and literature. In particular, it proposes a reflection on the 15th episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, "Circe" through Freud's key observation of the "uncanny."<sup>1</sup> Specifically, it deals with the uncanny effects in and of Joyce's text. It attempts to formulate ways in which projections/realizations of the concept can be recognized. Thus, the question would be: how does the philosophical concept of the uncanny work in literature and theater, in this case, within "Circe"? A broader, implicit task within the same framework is to show ways in which the uncanny can be captured and produced. The second part of the text deals with the particular contextualization of the effects of the "uncanny," namely, its figurations and realizations within the theatrical mode of the episode. On the basis of the analysis, a few propositions will be formulated.

### Figurations of the Uncanny

The examination of functions and effects of the uncanny in literature would begin with the choice of a starting definition.

"Circe" is widely interpreted and known as "the Freudian episode, the one that most thoroughly explores the deepest recesses of the unconscious and the world of hidden desires"<sup>2</sup> of its protagonists Bloom and Stephen. Undoubtedly, the family romance triangle, the

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1. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, New York: Random House, 1986.

2. Terence Killeen, *Ulysses Unbound*, Dublin: Wordwell, 2005, 183.

themes of castration, the interpretation of dreams as suppressed fears, stay very close to the narrative of “Circe,” where Bloom is presented and accused of Don Juanism. This only reinforces the necessity to outline the figurations of the uncanny through Freud’s definition which reads as follows: “It is undoubtedly related to what is frightening, to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide what excites fear in general.”<sup>3</sup>

But what is frightening? What arouses dread and horror? If it is elusive, surely we cannot capture it. If it coincides with the excitement of fear, then it is the reader of the hypothetically “uncanny” text who would experience it, who would not “belong” to the text, nor have its “place” in it. Thus, the starting point is not the “fearful,” but is the uncertainty of the fearful. It is what changes within time, with the emergence of different contexts of reception, and even within the experiences of different acts of reading of the same person. What is familiarized loses its “uncanny” appeal. Thus, the uncanny fears are cannot be related to specific images. Every image can be used in an “uncanny way.” It is the use, then, which provokes fears. When images, related once to the uncanny are respectively exploited, they become cliché. An image can be uncanny in its singularity. The evocation of the uncanny comes with uncertainty, with the fearful imagination, which, like a magnifying glass, makes the familiar object seem of the scale of natural phenomena, engulfing, entirely subordinating the subject. While the sublime, if we follow Kant, is the meeting place of the natural disaster and the subject, in which the only exit is the moral highness of the subject, the uncanny would be that same imaginable meeting within the aesthetic imagination of the subject.

Experiences of fear and uncertainty in “Circe” are evoked at the very beginning of the episode, by the setting/atmosphere of Nighttown in the introductory description of the space:

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3. Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, Vol. XVIII (1917-1919), London: The Hogarth Press & The Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1973, 219.

The Mabbot street entrance of nighttown, before which stretches an uncobbled tram siding set with skeleton tracks, red and green will-o'-the-wisps and danger signals. Rows of grimy houses with gaping doors. Rare lamps with faint rainbow fans. Round Rabbaiotti's halted ice gondola stunted men and women squabble. They grab wafers between which are wedged lumps of coral and copper snow. Sucking, they scatter slowly, children. The swancomb of the gondola, highreared, forges on through the murk, white and blue under a lighthouse. Whistles call and answer. (U 15: 1-9)

In this opening description of the darkness, the skeleton tracks, the red-green lights, the whistles and danger signals are associated with the feeling of fear. This is not fear, which the reader experiences, but it is a framework for a "fearful story" within which "dread and horror" would be directing the protagonists and the plot. The suggested feeling of fear for the protagonist does not coincide with the uncanny; on the contrary, it is supported by the details, which contradict the "fearful," which destabilize the darkness of the soul and the place, which suggest the inadequacy of the fear: these are the exact mapping of the quarter, where Bloom enters, which immediately puts the narrative within "the known," but also the rainbow colors, the ice-cream gondola, and the image of the kids. The contradiction reinforces the uncertainty onto the experience of the reader, who is no more sure whether he is entering a "real" space of Dublin, such as the different places, mentioned earlier in the novel and with the pretention for over-exhibited realism, or if this is Bloom's consciousness or an uncanny mixture and constant fluctuation from one realm to the other. By definition, "Circe" is the most diffuse, unpredictable and arbitrary of episodes in its twists and turns. Objects talk, the deads arise and appear, and gender transforms. Sometimes the focus narrows to a small moth flying around a lampshade, sometimes widens to almost cosmic dimensions. In the first place the uncanny is produced directly by the constant shifts from one realm to the other, leaving both the protagonist and the reader within the confusion and uncertainty. In "Circe" the uncanny would be framing the entire experience of the episode.

However, the feeling of fear, which seems to be central to Freud's definition, develops in two different modes here. For Bloom and Stephen it comes from different sources:

1. The constant expectation of violence: For example, in the first fantasy, Bloom is accosted by a sinister nameless figure, who speaks Irish and refers to the password. Bloom suspects that he is a spy from the Gaelic League. In reality, it has been just a policeman who walks past him in Bloom's imagination, however, his possible relation to the Citizen provokes uncontrollable fear of violence.

2. The double, or seeing double, which is also outlined by Freud, as well as by Otto Rank before him as one of the main sources of the uncanny: At the beginning of the episode Bloom's image is doubled in the windows of shops: "He disappears into Olhausen's, the porkbutcher's, under the downcoming rollshitter A few moments later he emerges from under the shutter, puffing Poldy, blowing Bloohoom." If this can be taken as "real," later on, when Stephen and Bloom gaze into a mirror seeing, instead of their own reflection, the face of Shakespeare, which metamorphoses into Martin Cunningham (who was supposed to resemble Shakespeare in appearance). These metamorphoses are kept in the realism of a dream, do not necessarily provoke fear as they take place within the dream logic, but at the same time, as far as they are meant to function as well within the imagined space of the theater, as a performance, they are unimaginable. It is precisely the unimaginable performance here, which makes the uncanny.

3. Ghost stories, death in life and people raised from the dead: Bloom encounters his parents, Rudolph and Ellen, both of whom are dead. Virag appears in a brothel (U 15: 1958-2742; 4005-4313). Stephen's mother appears to him as well, as Terence Killeen summons up her image: "emaciated, in grave clothes, with a torn bridal veil, her face worn and noseless, as a ghastly apparition from beyond the grave."<sup>4</sup>

The Mother: (with the subtle smile of death's madness) I was once the beautiful May Goulding. I am dead [...] (comes nearer, breathing upon him softly her breath of wetted ashes) All must

4. Terence Killeen, *Ulysses Unbound: A reader's companion to James Joyce's Ulysses*, Wicklow, Ireland: Wordwell, National Library of Ireland, 2005, 181.

go through it, Stephen. More women than men in the world. You too. Time will come.

Stephen: (choking *with fright* [*italics mine*], remorse and *horror* [*italics mine*]) They say I killed you, mother, He offended your memory. Cancer did it, not I. Destiny.

The Mother: (a green rill of bile trickling from a side of her mouth) You sang that song to me. Love's bitter mystery. (U 15: 4171-4190)

But here is the problem: the feeling of fear in itself, experienced by the protagonists within their fictional world, is not necessarily “uncanny” for them as it is not for the reader, who is experiencing, not to say “used to,” constantly exposed to stories with this kind of images. The uncanny, both for the reader and for the protagonists, would be an effect of uncertainty, constant shifts of realities, of different logics, of the co-existing levels of spaces: real, hallucinatory, textual, magical and theatrical.

The uncanny experiences of the protagonists do not necessarily provoke uncanny uncertainties for the reader. On the contrary, the representation of the text of a theater play, suggested even by the layout of the episode, emphasizes its fictional character. In this case, anything from hybrids and composite figures to ghosts and bodies, waking from the dead are not by themselves “uncanny” for the reader, at least not in the same way in which Mary Shelly's “ghost story” *Frankenstein* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses* might have been for the readers of their time. What brings these representations in the dimension of the uncanny is, in the first place, the simultaneity of the uncertainty brought out by the techniques Joyce uses and the Freudian idea of the dream as performed desire. The dream ties back the fantasies to reality and consequently reduces their fictionality paradoxically by doubling it. The mode of “fiction within fiction” emphasizes the “real” plane of experience for the protagonists and manipulates the experience of the “dream,” suggesting that experience of dreams by the reader and by the protagonists are possibly of the same nature, namely, that the “fiction”

of text has a similar nature to a dream, that the dream represented is “possibly” coinciding with the experience of a dream.

A great part in this double estrangement from the fictional character of the text plays the double logic of details, which introduces the ironic incongruities, strewn within the speeches.<sup>5</sup> Changes of scene and character and the fragmented logic of the narrative, in which events just occur, without any explanation, reinforce the “mimetic” (as far as it is a dream) and simultaneously the “anti-mimetic” character of the fictional text, opening for the reader the possibility to experience the uncertainty, which accompany the experience of his own dreams.

On the other hand, if we follow Nicholas Royle’s idea that “we speak of having had an uncanny feeling or experience, as something that came to an end, something now past,”<sup>6</sup> it is clear that within a dream, as within a theater play, the uncanny is produced in the constant shifts of nightmares and positive dreams, retrospectively. The immediate uncanny experience within the nightmares of Bloom comes from their continuity, the impossibility to escape and his total subjugation. This *a posteriori* emergence of the uncanny for the protagonist is reinforced through the proactive technique of deliberate uncertainty and impossibility to grasp “what is happening here and now” in the experience of the first-time reader of “Circe.”

As this short observation shows, what produces the uncanny effect in Joyce’s “Circe” is the parallel between the representation of “uncanny” figures and themes, drawn from literary traditions on the one hand, and the destabilization of their fictional presence through the literary technique on the other. The uncanny is a product of the implicit, hidden bonding of figuration and of technique.

## Uncanny Theater

The relation of the dream and the uncanny is further elaborated through its contextualization within the idea for theater, suggested

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5. Andrew Gibson, *Reading Joyce’s “Circe,”* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994, 24.

6. Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny,* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, 320-321.

and emphasized through the specific textuality of which the text is already self-conscious.<sup>7</sup> Theater, as far as it is suggested by the textual representation of a play, works together with hallucination and magic. Simultaneously, it destabilizes the fictionality of representation and deepens within it the wound of the real through the suggestion of a “real” performance. This allows for a potency to be opened between the objective reality of an ephemeral performance and extraordinary shifts and transformations of fictional subjective context. Here, the “representation” of the play, instead of reconciling the Hegelian opposites of subjective/objective or real/fictional, further produces uncertainties, connecting indirectly the pleasurable/painful, or uncanny, experiences of the protagonists and of the readers.

The pain and pleasure for the protagonists, being not only imagined, but also really experienced by the reader through imagination, are the meeting point of the different experiences of the uncanny. This is suggested, or almost explicitly emphasized by the text, for example, in the Bella/Bello section, where the alteration of images happens within the imagination of the master (Bello), but is experienced as real and living by Bloom.

The human body is the *topos* of the uncanny and an instrument of theatrical representation. A closer look through the Bello/Bella section may serve here as an example of the uncanny objectification of the body within the context of theater. The section presents Bella Cohen, a massive whoremistress. When she enters the space, the episode slides into fantasy. Her fan starts speaking to Bloom and instantly subjugates him: Bloom finds himself lacing Bella’s boot — a symbolic situation of enslavement. As he does so, Bella’s heavy, dominant gaze forces her power over him. The act of domination of Bella through her heaviness and psychic power parallels and embodies Bloom’s repressed unconscious, which now meets him in a subject/object relation.

Several “sources” of the “uncanny” can be outlined here. The scene

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7. As many critics point out, there are moments, which clearly encourage the reader to imagine it as taking place in a theater complete with audience (“coughs and feetshuffling” U 15. 2169), with the characters as performers (15. 1603/5) The style of “Circe” is that of an extended drama, complete with stage directions, descriptions of characters’ appearance and attire at the first entry and apparent “speeches” by characters prefixed by their names.

was one of the most controversial at the time, due to the course of the dominatrix/victim fantasy, in which Bloom is involved. The androgynous qualities of the human, which captured the interest of philosophers and writers, are presented in the mode of the hyperbolic metamorphosis of Bella into Bello, a harsh male master, and consequently the metamorphosis of Bloom into a maidservant. Bloom as the new womanly man, who is about to have a baby and give birth, may have provoked secret discomfort, a sign for the unconscious fears of many stable identities. Facing one's own unconscious would therefore be an uncanny experience, where familiarity is estranged and recognized as a source of fear and anxiety. As Harry Levin points out: "The latent fantasy of homosexuality and incest, however close to the surface, should be kept on a subliminal Freudian level or sublimated to the plane of primitive myth."<sup>8</sup> The rationalization, representation or visible experience of one's own fantasies opens up the dangers and fears, coming from within. The human being, traditionally associated with the brightness of reason, with the comforting force of civilization, becomes the place of the most dangerous and monstrous experiences, not of sublime natural phenomena, but of the darkness of its own nature.

A second source of uncanny experience for the reader comes from the reduction of the human into a "thing." Bloom's body is victimized, dominated, enslaved, animalized, threatened, ridiculed and physically violated by Bello. The theatrical context projects the fear of pain and victimization onto the reader through the presence of the body of the actor, by definition, split between the fictional dimension of representation and its immediate presence on stage. This is further reinforced by the immediate identification of word and gesture, by the sense of simultaneity opened up within the textual representation through the suggestion of performance. Bloom's reactions show no difference between the word and the gesture. The word is a gesture. What is imagined by the reader and the potential spectator of the theater is actual. In this case, pain serves as a boundary of the living creature, which suggests that the hierarchy between the human and

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8. Harry Levin, *James Joyce*, New York: New Directions, 1960, 159.



the animal are not only uncertain, but also unimportant. Bello forces Bloom's body in pain without any sympathy and only the comic serves to distance the perception of the reader from the situation and identification with the objectified protagonist, and consequently, from any tragic cathartic experiences. This estrangement from fear and pity, which has for centuries held the tragic, is here entirely displaced by the comic and the sentimental details. The comic has a specific function in relation to the uncanny. It replaces the highly tragic undertones, brought out through its traditionally implied connection with the sublime. It "saves" the transgression and brings it back "home," making it *heimlich* after it has been on the edge of the ultimate transgression. It functions in the opposite direction of the connection of the uncanny to the sublime, minimizing the effect of estrangement, inflicting sympathy, releasing the pain, but still carrying through the anxiety of a possible even more severe transgression.

At the end of this text, I will put a few propositions:

A major source of uncanny effects in Joyce's "Circe," as well as other works, is the human body, manipulated and technologized; the human body is place/space of the fantasy of regression to the primitive, of the reduction of the human. Thus, the human body takes the place of the sublimity of natural phenomena. It is the place of a really experienced apocalypse.

The uncanny is an instrument for the metamorphosis of the human. The human is only possible as an effect, a product of its uncanny formation.

The uncanny takes the place of the cathartic in the dream-theater of Joyce, and fragments the experiences of the protagonist and the audience, simultaneously and paradoxically being in the same place, where a double reflection of the subjective and the objective, revealing the subconscious, creates pure images.

The uncanny is an indirect effect of the work of art. It is to be evoked and experienced, but hardly explicitly framed in specific images, captured in unites, defined in characteristics. It is mainly an effect of the combination of formal/thematic units of the work, or, more precisely, of the places of disintegration, of the gaps, which the work preserves.

The uncanny cannot be produced repetitively through the same means, as it is singular. Once a unit (image, technique) of the work of art, which has been used (in the same work or other) to produce uncanny effects is used a second time, it turns to its opposite: the comic, because of the displacement from the situation of the uncanny through repetition.

At the same time, the suggestion of repetition, the idea that a fearful (uncanny) situation may be produced more than once, putting the subject within an uncertainty, taking away the power of his subjective will and thus making him an object, situates him immediately in the uncanny. This is, if we may say so, the psychological uncanny. Our unconscious, therefore, always keeps us in the possible uncanny of our own fears and dreams. The uncanny enters within us. We are, and not the outside world, the space of the uncanny. The subject may coincide with the uncanny space.

Self-reflection, in the same way as imagining ourselves as on a theater stage, or dreaming, in other words, through detachment, even if rational, keeps the possibility for auto-technologization, leading further through the pleasurable and sadomasochistic dreams of dehumanization prove to be, through Joyce's text, an undeniable route to the uncanny of the 20th century.

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