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Visions, nightmares and naval chords-obsessions of modernist literature

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Abstract

This paper is a study of recurring images of the obsession with the navel signifying both union and separation. Drawing heavily on the theories of psychoanalysis developed by Sigmund Freud and others, modernist fiction inaugurated by Ulysses plunges into networking patterns of the contemporary cityscapes. The persistent allusions to vampires and rats penetrating and disrupting the extensive life veins of the urbane civilisation gets subliminally connected to the metaphor of the navel, serving as a point to return, a not that binds and ruptures as well. Joycean theme of leaving the home and returning to it has its centrality in the navel, omphalos theme and not entirely unconnected to fort/da game which Freud illustrates in his theories.

Keywords: Networks, navel, omphalos, brisure, primal sundering, auto-erotic pleasures

Introduction

The modern literature is entangled in the labyrinthine pattern of connections existing in sexual, linguistic, financial and pathogenic ideas, which is richly suggested by the nets of Stephen Dedalus, Mrs. Ramsay's knitting needles and the countless web like patterns in the Freudian dream analysis. A creature which is notoriously synonymous with acts of infiltration into modernist networks is the rat, the rampant symbol of decay and devastation unleashed by the cultural decantation and apathy. The rats make the impervious intrusions into every form and aspect of the modern networks like sewers, transportation systems, the infernal world of pipes and cables. By making nocturnal intrusions into the very life-veins of contemporary city civilisations, rats unleash an unsavoury attack on the vey pretensions and facades of world which has already started revealing signs of decay and degeneration. Rats in a way becomes the visible manifestations of an irreversible process determined by the mysterious detours of history.

Historically rats resurface at those junctures, when the cyclic patterns of time begins to reveal signs of an inevitable sundown time, as *The Wasteland* has its "rats' alley" and the cemetery episode in *Ulysses* and Freudians explorations into the case history of the Rat Man. One of the lesser studied aspects of literature is the incidental familial similarity between rats and vampires. One of the exemplar instances is the episode of Dracula's transformation into a swarm of rats when the Vampire makes his inroads into Great Britain. Bram Stoker must be having the striking but nearly imperceptible analogy existing between rats penetrating the walls and vampires penetrating the bodies. Both are calculated acts of violating the permissible boundaries. Even as the vampires are leeching the blood of the victim caught at the zenith of an orgasmic act, the rats draw out the life blood of the city by disrupting its manmade circularity.

There is a near death like obsession with the vampires in Modernist fiction, beginning with the iconic Dracula to James's *The Sacred Fount* (1901) and Stephen's poem in *Ulysses* (1922) [10]. Vampirism is one of the possible ways of exploring self with the other. Van Helsing in Dracula makes the succinct observation as he remarks that, the invitation extended to the vampire perennially grants him the infinite freedom to come and go as he pleases. In a rather unexpected way Vampirism annulled forever the traditional hegemonies and divide between high and popular literature. With his manifold diversified acts in telepathy, spiritualism, demonic possession and invasion, has often been described as a phobic reaction against the invasions of technology. Modernist city civilisations have extensive networks serving as their lifeblood, like that of water, gas, electricity and telephone. Life was no longer something which could be taken for granted. Along with this ushering in of innovative networking, there began to arise serious ethical and ideological

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issues concerning privacy, especially with the arrival of telephone on the scene. Michael Foucault summarizes the opposing polarities that the new monster is holding within, "As telegraphers and physiologists discovered long ago, networks both empower and disempower. They offer exciting new relationships and relative knowledge even as they destroy obsolescent fantasies of autonomy."

Joyce subtle suggestions of the connecting series of networks run throughout *Ulysses*. One instance is the "Proteus" episode in the novel. Stephen's accidental spotting of the "midwife's bag" with one of the two old women descending to the beach sparks off a series of associations that end up the imagery of umbilical cord, "successive anastomosis of navelcords" that draws everyone back to the archetypal Garden of Eden. Stephen's yearning to create for himself an existence devoid of links to the past is now nearly spoiled with the suggested theme of the umbilical cord. The spotting of the cable should now remind him of the telephone wire, a wired telephone connection that runs back to the Garden of Eden. The subtle connection that now arises between the telephone operator and the numbers for the first cause, since aleph and alpha incidentally are the first letters of the Hebrew and Greek alphabets. Stephen who desired to create himself out of nothing now begins to realise enigmatic links existing between him and his dead mother becomes numerous and more complex with umbilical, linguistic and commercial wires crisscrossing the existence.

The Greek legends suggest the geographical location of the Delphic oracle as the "omphalos" of the earth, the navel to which Stephen do not want to return. The drumlin-shaped stone known as omphalos could be spotted at many places across the Mediterranean which were all claiming to be navel of the earth, obviously the most famous of them is at Delphi. The Delphic priestess could be seen sitting on a tripod enveloped in thick mephitic vapours rising from the depths, the source of the confounding prophecies, which inevitably wrought the doom of the visitors to the temple. Many scholars believe that the omphalos is capturing in essence the ultimate victory of Apollo over the earth goddess. Python the guardian snake of Omphalos lies buried under the stone, which metaphorically happens to be the point of the mephitic cleft.

The imagery of Omphalos transplanted into Ulysses begins to suggest interconnectedness of all flesh, as well the primary separation from the mother's body. The Joycean epiphanies have their association with the bodily ruptures, like the one of his mother's cry to the piano playing Stephen about his brother Georgie's haemorrhaging from the navel. Analogies exist between Derrida's concept of the "brisure" and Joycean theme of navel suggesting both unity and separation. This suggestive ambiguity of the navel as holding both a coming back and going away has been one of the recurrent themes of the modernist folklore. In Joycean fiction relationship between absence and nets of circulation gets a full bodied representation through terms "gnomon" and "simony".

In spite of its potency to emerge as one of the prime leitmotifs of literature primarily because of its Delphic legacy, the theme of navel was either ignored or taken to mean only its lowest sexual themes and 'navel gazing' has to come to suggest "idle cogitation upon unanswerable questions, useless speculation or circular self-reflection". The begotten status of Adam and Eve made it impossible to

have them navels, which Michael Angelo's artistic interventions in Sistine fresco sought to reject, against which Thomas Browne raised objection in 1646.

All his fervent efforts snap the chains ultimately yields nothing to Stephen, on the other hand, he is ensnared inescapably by nets of home and homeland. Complicating his dilemma, ultimately he has to realise his outsider status in the English language. Far away from the home-grown tongue of Ireland, the language of the imperialist comes down to torment his deprived soul. In a classical twist, Stephen's English language even as it is binding him to the navel cord of the past, is alienating him from the present day Ireland. The navel for Joyce signifies the primal sundering, but simultaneously it comes to suggest the artist's stranderwinning cable of indebtedness. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), there is the much debated scene of Freud's grandson playing with a spool of thread in the fort/da game. It is not difficult to see the thread stands for the umbilical cord. In recurrent patterns, the child is uttering the vowel 'oooo' and brings back the umbilical thread with a victorious "da" (here). Freud goes onto suggest the first vowel stands for the German word fort, meaning gone. The imperceptible drama which the child plays out here is his mother's moving away and returning to assert symbolic mastery over her intermittency.

The toy which the boy is playing with in Freud's story could be seen to be using it as a sign, the sign for auto-erotic pleasures, the alternating phonemes in the game. It is an act of reenacting the primal separation from the mother. Now the child begins to experience the absence of the mother, which he tries to overcome every time by throwing the spool into the darkness. Even as the filament is helping the child to get connected to the mother, it is systematically demolishing the mother's place. Every time the child is hurling the spool into darkness, he is destroying the mother's effigy, after which all his encounters would be substituted by various viable alternatives for the mother's position. In a world of signs, the child is inventing his own sign through loop and spool.

Joycean stories never abandon their perpetual obsession with recurring themes of losing the home and returning to it. The fort/da game is a redeployment of an odyssey, wherein you leave home early so as to return to it some day. In a major reenactment the game the ambassadors are expelled to Paris, Woolfian Rasmay is cast away into the lighthouse, Bloom and Stephen are on a never ending odyssey through Dublin. It is not always the same toy one hurls to the distant darkness that comes back, at least in the case of Ernst, as it is death that comes back to him from the void, Bloom vanishes into exile and circles back to 7 Eccles Street. The novelist maintains an enigmatic silence as to whether he is returning to the same Ithaca he left in "Lotus Eaters", which in all probability is not. As his wife Molly is rearranging the furniture, there is already the imprint on the bed as well as flakes of Plumtree's potted meat left behind by her lover Blazes Boylan. In *Ambassadors*, Lambert Streether, his odyssey to Paris is being over he must return to Massachusettes. Unlike the archetypal odyssey, the modernist Odysseus goes over to the other rather than his Ithaca.

In modernist fiction, what has been cast to circulation never comes back, or it may come back in all its ferocity, reminding us of the primordial traumas. The modernist character caught in a state of wanderlust is not destined not

to return, and Ithaca remains a distant dream not to be desired after, as it has already been deprived of its accompanying mythical halo. The chapter titled "Ithaca" in *Ulysses*, informs the reader that once Bloom marked a florin with three notches and launched it "for circulation on the waters of civic finance, for possible, circuitous or direct return." For the query of the narrator as to whether Bloom's coin had returned, he is met with the curt riposte "Never", severely suggesting the sheer hopelessness as well as the undesirability of such an expectation.

Here Joyce is definitively casting the Odysseus myth in a modernist mould, since the three notches which marks Bloom's coin is a vague reminder of the scar of the archetypal character, which helps others to identify him on his ultimate return to Ithaca. Simultaneously the scar could be suggestive of the navel-scar which sets the neonate onto his odyssey into the world. In the Freudian world, the castration is the extreme violent act of initiating the newborn into culture, a gruesome reminder of the primal scarification of the navel. Lacanian approach to castration seems to offer a different perspective by suggesting that the castration fantasy is an open sesame to the symbolic order, and regards the symbolic phallus with the name-of-the-father. Under the aegis of the nameless mother, the navel memorialises a pre-symbolic order.

Freud makes the most penetrating observation of the navel in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable - a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown". Incidentally the first reference to the navel happens to be in the footnote. Later it gains prominence in the main body of the text and Freud goes onto add the navel is a "tangle of the dream thoughts which cannot be unraveled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream.", and further, "the dream-thoughts branch out in every direction into intricate network of our world of thought."

The blackhole at the centre of the navel absorbs all dreams within and meanings get dissolved in their accompanying density, thereby attributing the Freudian navel complex associations of not and net, entanglement and absence, deriving its ominous energies from netted omphalos-stone at Delphi. The "rhizomatic" structure representing mushrooms rising out of its mycelium, against which Deleuze and Guattari raised fierce resistance, is seeking the demise of the conventional thought having its "arboreal" structure. The basis of opposition rests on the reasoning that because of the associative property of language, which keeps generating meanings, images and themes is neither having a beginning nor an end, but only the middle which continues to be brimming with possible furtherances of meaning. Freud considers the dream-navel as a mycelium, a shallow creeping fungus. This theme strikes an unusual camaraderie with Stephen's vision of the matrilineal nets of navel cords which are rhizomatic in nature and resists the arboreal structure of the family tree, heavily subjected the unflinching notions of the patriarchal domination.

Freudian ideas began to gain currency when Joyce, Woolf and James were at the prime of their literary career, though none of them ventured into psychoanalytic fiction. Woolf suffered from the typical 'anxiety of influence' as she feared that reading Freud will ultimately outmanoeuvre her writings, which generally seems to have held the writers of the time from venturing into psychological analytical

fiction. The complimenting and sometimes contradicting feature of the navel as the hole and net seems to be one of the determining strategies of modernist fiction. With its irresistible fascination for dreams and erotic obsessions, there are common denominators running all across modernism from the wildly reprobate writings of Sigmund Freud to the major works of Proust, often taking tangential leaps into quasi-scientific speculations on sexology. In *Ulysses*, the compelling illogicality of stream of consciousness inaugurates rhizomatic perambulations along the network of Freudian dreams. Joycean characters act out the psychopathology of mundane life, revealing definitive symbols of psychedelic experiences and sexual perversions. Monstrous extensions of the Freudian slips serve as weary cohesive force in *Finnegans Wake*, where the repressed ultimately stages a come back where pun is dextrously employed to remove the last of the barriers between conscious and unconscious attributes of the mind.

It is a well known fact that Joyce had a profound distrust of psychoanalysis. Yet compelled by the tragic circumstances of his daughter being psychotic, he trusted Jung to subject her to psychoanalysis and in his library, there was complete works of Freud, Jung and Ernest Jones. In psychoanalysis he came across evidences of his own phantasmagoria. In her study of Joyce's *The Turn of the Screw*, Shoshana Felman suggests that the function of the psychoanalytic critic is to deal with the ways in which literary texts resists, invites and even preempts theories ushered into study of that. Incidentally psychoanalysis bears many analogies with that of fiction, especially with detective fiction. So it is possible to state the literary texts have inherent theories that patiently lay in waiting for their interpreters later on.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the compatriots of Odysseus grow oblivious of the way home after eating the lotus-flower. In the strange aftermath of a drugged euphoria they prefer the pleasant hallucinations to the real dangers of Ithaca. In modernist literature, this myth is endlessly replayed representing the contemporary man's predicament. In the television series *Star Trek*, the officers of the Starship Enterprise beam down a laid-back planet, which bears a striking similarity to California, where almost everyone including the robotic Mr. Spock, let themselves to be drowned in the haze of a narcotic flower. Lotus eating is serving as archetypal instinct of man to spend lives in blissful unawareness to facing the harsh realities of life. So the cultural heroes have to make their timely interventions to coerce the man to his destiny.

Leopold Bloom forgetting his latchkey is symptomatic of his growing oblivion of the reality of home, and forsaking his chances of ever returning there. Along with this major theme of forgetting, he should now forget the recipe for "skinfood", the skin-lotion for his wife. As he forgets to collect the concoction from the chemist since the "undies" of Gertie MacDowell casts its powerful temptation and distraction on him. All the associationist images of civilisation he must forget now: words, names, physics, lower buttons of waistcoat and even his previous identity, his name, wife and finally his address. He must now adopt the pseudonym of Henry Flower so that he may maintain an erotic clandestine correspondence with his penpal. Incidentally Flower connects him to the ancient Lotus of Ulysses, the drug of forgetfulness and delirium which begins to circulate through the postal and commercial arteries of Dublin.

In an ironical contrast with his epic counterpart who is perusing his destiny with fierce determination, Leopold Bloom is a typical modern city dweller whose life is determined in terms of phenomenology and not in essences. Instead the eternal truths Ulysses encounters, here is a man who lives in terms of brief encounters, fleeting moments, unstable, shifting impressions. The very superficiality of his lived out life keeps pushing him to the surface, where the immense depths of Ulysses is not even a distant dream. Like Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock, Bloom takes careful note of the people's appearances, offering a skinscape of the modern city. Bloom is in search of the chemist's office dispensing medical concoction to combat the skin disease, where obviously he is destined to fail. Bloom keeps meditating on the depth of the skin, both metaphorically and literally. In the confession chamber of the Church, the women are imagined to be revealing their "lovely shame" to the confessors. So Joycean treatment of the epic partially turns out to be one exploring profundities of the skin.

Conclusion

In the act of endless replay of protean archetypal images and characters, the modernist literature is seeking to create alternate myths, which are built into the vastly chaotic unconscious of the contemporary civilisations doomed to set out on an unpredictable journey which do not have a destination to be reached. In these scenarios, the road itself becomes the destination, the fate of the modernist compatriots of Ulysses, preferring forever to dwell in the drugged euphorias and hallucinations.

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