

“NOT A BLOODY BIT LIKE THE MAN”: UNCANNY SUBSTRATA IN JAMES JOYCE’S *HADES**

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In the Joycean “Hades”, under a surface of a certain naturalistic, grotesque beauty, a few dark elements are hidden. During the funeral in Glasnevin, the caretaker tells the story of two drunkards who went to visit a friends’ tomb during the evening. This comic anecdote hides a whole phantom narrative underneath. This story alludes to the too-frequent custom of those body-snatchers who went to the cemetery to loot tombs. The main reason for this macabre and horrendous practice was the enormous difficulties the medical profession had in obtaining bodies for anatomical dissection. The dead bodies that invaded a public space produce uncanny feelings in readers, feelings that Freud related in 1919 with the return of the familiar and the repressed. Therefore, under the beautiful veil of “Hades” verbal fabric, whole uncanny narratives are hidden, infusing the episode with an extra, disturbing dimension and imbuing it with an unexpected vitality.

Keywords: *the uncanny, Joyce, Ulysses, “Hades”, body-snatchers, Freud.*

En el “Hades” Joyceano, bajo una superficie de cierta belleza naturalista, aunque no carente de elementos grotescos o expresionistas, se esconde grandes estratos siniestros. Durante el funeral, el encargado del cementerio relata la historia de dos borrachos que fueron a visitar la tumba de un amigo durante la noche. Esta anécdota cómica esconde toda una narrativa fantasma: las acostumbradas visitas nocturnas de los ladrones de cadáveres al cementerio de Glasnevin con el objeto de vender los cuerpos para la

disección anatómica. Las figuras de los muertos que, arrastrados por los ladrones, invadían en la noche los espacios públicos, pertenecen a uno de los aspectos de lo siniestro, y tal como lo definiera Freud en 1919: el retorno inquietante de lo que antaño fuera familiar y que ha estado reprimido. Así, bajo un velo verbal de ordenada belleza, relatos o mitos terribles, como ocurriera en *El nacimiento de Venus* de Botticelli, donde se escondía el mito de la castración de Urano, laten ocultos en el “Hades” Joyceano narrativas oscuras que infunden al episodio de una dimensión inquietante, aunque sólo entrevista y aludida.

Palabras claves: *lo siniestro, Joyce, Ulysses, los ladrones de cadáveres, Freud.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The beautiful painting “The Birth of Venus” by Sandro Botticelli conceals one of the most sinister myths ever told. Cronos castrated his father, Uranus, and threw his genitals into the Mediterranean Sea. From the spilt semen of the god Uranus, Aphrodite, Goddess of Desire, was born. This sinister act of generation, however, is only hinted at in the canvas in the form of tiny insects and splashes of yellow foam scattered among the waves. Taking this pictorial version of the myth as his starting point, Eugenio T́rias (1982) developed a theory of aesthetics concerning the beautiful and the uncanny. He argued that the sinister is a condition inherent in most classic works of art; it must be present somewhere to give the work an unexpected and disturbing quality. At the same time, it must only be alluded to, hinted at, since to reveal it overtly would destroy the aesthetic effect that the work seeks to communicate. In this way, the sinister both darkly enhances and limits the work of art.

The writer of our present concern, James Joyce (1882-1941) would seem to fulfill the above premises in his naturalistic collection of short stories, *Dubliners* (1914). This is apparent, above all, in his novella “The Dead”, where under the beautiful scene “Distant

Music", in which Gabriel Conroy imagines himself to be painting his wife, is "buried" the dark story of Michael Furey, who died for love for Gretta. Years later, moving away from a classical, naturalistic conception of beauty, Joyce enters, mainly in the second part of the sixth episode of *Ulysses*, "Hades", into the realm of expressionism and the grotesque. The author, as he had previously done in "The Dead", not only imbues this episode with dark aspects related to death, but also with bold expressionist effects dragged from many different sources. In doing so, he not only produces a great variety of unusual effects, but also hidden layers of the sinister which create unexpected connections and implications enriching the narrative with mysterious and disturbing second meanings. And precisely what I want to explore in this essay is the way in which Joyce conceals a sinister substratum under subtle lexical veils, covert references, or metonymic or metaphoric workings. According to our previous premises, the dark layers are not only hidden in order to avoid destroying the aesthetic effect, but also to create multi-faceted connections that enrich the text with many unexpected meanings. Dark substrata will, *multum in parvo*, be well buried within the verbal fabric of "Hades".

2. FREUD'S "THE UNCANNY"

Sigmund Freud, in his famous essay "The Uncanny" (1919), thought that many people considered the epitome of uncanniness to be in relation to corpses, ghosts, spectres and death. Even languages seem to avoid the sinister. Freud, for instance, complained that the German expression "ein unheimliches Haus" (an uncanny house) was rendered into other languages by a circumlocution or a more diluted coinage such as "a haunted house" in English (133). Also in relation to the subject of death, Freud claimed that many scholars thought the idea of being buried alive was the height of uncanniness, although, from a psychoanalytical point of view, he considered this a self-indulgent fantasy: going back to live in the mother's womb. Nevertheless, we have to accept that our relationship with death has not changed much since ancient times. There are, for Freud, two crucial reasons for this: firstly, our attitude to death has been so deep-rooted since prehistoric times that it has resisted any attempt to change it, and secondly, we lack scientific knowledge about death and what happens after it. It

seems that the central fact of disappearing forever from the world, leaving life behind and entering an unknown reality, tinges everything related to death with horror. Coffins, corpses, candles, the gloomy coldness of rigid limbs, all clearly create uncanny feelings. Furthermore, there are other important aspects of the uncanny. As “The Sandman” by E.T.A. Hoffmann well illustrates, an encounter with an automaton or a mechanical or wax doll also stirs up strange feelings. Freud argues that in some way these feelings stem from our uncertainty as to whether an apparently live being is really dead or, conversely, whether a lifeless object is, somehow, alive. It is the way the human and the non-human, living and non-living matter are inextricably and inexplicably mixed up with each other that clearly induces the unease. The most eloquent example is the eerie doll Olympia that Nathaniel peeped at with his pocket-telescope. Borges, for example, experienced precisely an uncanny feeling while reading Dante’s *Inferno*. In the first circle, Virgil and Dante, the character, arrive at a noble castle (a “nobile castello”) surrounded by seven city walls. And Borges comments: “se habla asimismo de un arroyo que desaparece y de un fresco prado, que también desaparece. Cuando se acercan, lo que ven es esmalte. Ven, no el pasto, que es una cosa viva, sino una cosa muerta” (*Siete Noches* 49).¹ In the opposite process, uncanny emotions may surface when something we are convinced is inorganic or inert is suddenly perceived as animate, or alive. In mythological tales and paintings such as Goya’s “Saturn Devouring his Children” (1819-1823), for example, sinister effects are often achieved through shocking images of horrific injuries or amputations. Cannibalism, dismemberment, especially of precious body parts such as the eyes or the penis, fit into this category. An illustration of this is the dismemberment of Olympia by the two men in “The Sandman”. One man kept the mechanical body and the other, the bleeding eyes of the doll. And, finally, the most powerful kind of uncanniness takes place when we realise that bodies and members we thought dead suddenly become alive in our daily environment as happens in the Joycean “Hades”.

3. NOT A BLOODY BIT LIKE THE MAN

In James Joyce’s “Hades”, Paddy Dignam, who died three days before of a heart attack due partly to his incurable vice (alcoholism),,

pays his last visit to the cemetery on the 16th of June in order to remain in consecrated soil forever. But other less-decent visitors also frequented Glasnevin in an intoxicated state, searching the site for sheer entertainment. John O'Connell, Prospect Cemetery caretaker, tells the audience of mourners the story of two drunks who went to the cemetery on a foggy evening to look for the tomb of their friend Mulcahy from the Coombe. When they eventually managed to find the tomb, they had a good look at the statue of Christ that the widow of the deceased had put up. And then, after blinking up at the sacred figure, one of the drunks commented: "*Not a bloody bit like the man*, says he. *That's not Mulcahy*, says he, *whoever done it*" (U 6.107).

The caretaker's joke is, to begin with, a drunken men's comedy, as Robert H. Bell comments: "Yes, along with a laugh at the expense of sacred figures comes a kind of stubborn faith in banal, mundane life as we ordinarily live it...Even Joyce's drunks play their positive role in the casual comedy" (82-83). But other deeper issues emerge from this apparently inconsequential passage. It shows us the gap that exists between art (Jesus' sculpture) and the banal, human reality that is not portrayed by it. It also shows the enormous abyss opened between the divine and the twentieth century man. How little comfort can be found in spiritual forms when the secular man is finally left to be only food for worms. However, by applying the similarity of a human being, like Bloom, for example, and Christ, further implications appear. As Sicari commented:

Brook Thomas has noted that Joyce includes in 'Hades' a warning to those who seek a facile identification of Bloom with other figures, especially Christ...the resemblance between Bloom and Christ is not difficult to discern—"not a bloody bit like the man", we might wish to say; yes, Stephen will see it, and we will learn to see it through Stephen's eyes. (59-60)

Sicari, however, also notices that Bloom may not agree with certain Christian principles, but through Joyce's art, he will become, to a certain extent, a model of Christian behaviour. On the other hand, the drunks of the caretaker's anecdote behaved in an irreverent and appalling way, creating a space of spectrality. A cemetery on a foggy evening is eerie enough: the half-glimpsed stone forms, the oppressive

silence, the loneliness of the place must infuse more than one strange sensation. But the sacrilegious, intoxicated, loud presence of the drunkards, tramping and stumbling among the tombs, further increases the uncanny feelings. And like that terrible myth that was hidden under the beauty of “The Birth of Venus” by Sandro Botticelli, here, under the naturalistic, comic-macabre textual reality of the former passage, a truly uncanny and nocturnal practice is hidden, yet hinted at, adding an unexpectedly sinister dimension to the text.

The drunkards who wander around the cemetery at night allude to the body-snatchers’ custom of heavy drinking before looting a tomb. Night robberies at Glasnevin were so frequent and offensive that Dublin’s authorities had to build high watchtowers to defend the dead from bold incursions. The main reason for this macabre and horrendous practice was the enormous difficulties the medical profession had in obtaining bodies for anatomical dissection. Surgeons kept resorting to executed criminal bodies, but these never fully supplied the high demand. Professional body-snatchers, popularly called “Sack-‘em-Ups” and “Resurrectionists”, had to be hired. As the Holy Office in May 1886 opposed cremation, all the bodies of Catholics had to be buried uncremated. So, the supply at Glasnevin was never short. The robbers acted promptly, when the earth was still soft and the corpse was easy to remove. It also helped when the coffin was a pauper’s coffin, like Dignam’s, made of the cheapest and the thinnest timber. A customary way of getting the body out was burrowing at an angle towards the coffin, in such a way that the visible and superficial earth over the tomb was left intact. Thus, on consecutive visits, mourners and family wouldn’t know the place was empty. Occasionally, after being dressed up and prepared, the raised corpse, disguised as a drunkard, would be dragged along the streets held by the body-snatchers (Ito 10).

The night incursions at Glasnevin open up not only a scenery of spectrality, but a Bahktinian carnivalesque inversion where comedy, alcohol and jokes take the place of the solemnity of funeral rites. In this phantom narrative, the almost universal taboo concerning the disturbance of the dead is violated. This transgression is a serious offence against civil law; it is a supreme irreverence against the deceased’s family and, above all, a religious profanation. Even the

popular name of “Resurrectionists” given to the body-snatchers is a collective mockery, however minor, of Christ’s, or indeed, of any religious resurrection. Furthermore: all the religious and social rituals are inverted. A violent unburial (it was customary to pull the corpse out by tying ropes to the body’s members) inverts the burial service. The drunkards’ swearing and shouting take the place of sacred prayers. The transmitted, jerky movements of the corpse take the place of that promised undisturbed, eternal peace. The company of uncouth and noisy strangers substitutes the caring proximity of family and friends. Even the ritual journey to the cemetery is inverted: instead of heading in a ceremonial procession to a sacred place, the corpse is dragged away from it in a rough manner to an unrestful destination: the operating table where it will be endlessly dissected.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Some aspects of Freud’s classification of the uncanny inevitably emerge from this phantom narrative. His first category states that something lifeless, a dead man in this case, appearing to be alive, often produces a feeling of uncanniness. The snatched body dragged along back alley ways, must inevitably produce in our imagination a feeling of unease. In the same way, the invasion of a public place by a corpse tidied and ready, must produce a very strange and grotesque sensation in the reader. In a second category, the uncanny is generated through repetition, duplication and parody, as in this case. In the first instance, the body crosses the city in a funeral procession; in the second, an unintentional parody, the decomposing and unburied bodies are dragged along the streets at night. The uncanny not only has its origin in that strange parallelism between both “processions”, but mainly in the horrific, nightmarish quality of the latter scene. Also a primitive terror reaches us when we imagine the living dead invading familiar surroundings. A third category emerges when the body is being dissected on the operating table, the uncanny feeling being generated by dismembered limbs, a severed hand or head. Finally, if we imagine the scenes of Glasnevin cemetery at night, and the corpse that begins moving like a living being along the Dublin streets, the uncanny must reach us with all its mighty power.

However, of the sinister ghost story of the body-snatchers only an allusive, metonymic presence remains in “Hades”: the traditional drunkards’ night visits to Glasnevin. This irreverent practice is only glimpsed at without destroying with its sinister aspects the aesthetic effect that the text may produce. Going back to our foundational hypothesis, beauty, made of whatever materials are required, is an appearance and a veil that conceals a dark layer where any effect of beauty vanishes; when the sinister material is openly made visible, it cancels most of the reader’s aesthetic apprehensions.² Thus, the dark bottom is the body-snatchers’ narrative that is hidden under the textual surface of the passage dealing with the drunkards’ night visits. It creates a disturbing, uncanny substratum in the same way as the story of Uranus’ castration remained hidden under the beauty of “The Birth of Venus”, vaguely alluded to by little animals and insects in the foam of the sea.

However, a coda must be added to the conclusion in order to round off our topic. The dubious, promiscuous veil of “Hades”, splashed by occasional lyrical beauty, gains extra and uncanny dimensions with the episode’s allusions to the transgression of taboos, mainly dealing with the handling of the dead. And precisely, one of the main sources of uncanniness in “Hades” is produced by the defamiliarization of the human body. Joyce offers us a vision of the body that moves far away from those images propagated by philosophies, Catholic schools, traditional paintings and previous literature. The human body will never be again that harmonious machine, a perfect mirror of the cosmos, that Leonardo devoutly painted and that Hamlet praised with irony and wonder. After Descartes’ philosophy and especially after the Darwinian revolution, the body in “Hades” will be a higher version of the beast in the scale of animal evolution. Almost like Frankenstein’s body, the human organism will be rendered as a gathering of different organs that can be cut, dismembered or drained of fluids. The body is often represented as too close to the eye, too realistic, appearing blurred, or as a torn issue. Other times, viewed from too far a (psychological) distance, it will appear in a cynical or humorous manner in the form of distorted caricatures or with animal features. The body is also made equal to any mechanical item invented since the Industrial Revolution. Viscera and entrails are displayed as belonging to a working machine

that once it breaks down, is dumped like a piece of scrap iron in any wasteyard. But when the body reaches a higher degree of uncanniness, displaying all its decay and mechanical symptoms, is when it is “resurrected”.

NOTES

¹And Borges comments: ” They also speak about a stream which vanishes and about a fresh meadow which also vanishes. As they come closer, they only see enamel. They do not see the pasture, which is something alive, but something which is dead.” (*Siete Noches* 49; my translation)

²See Eugenio Trías’s explanation, especially pages 8-22.

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