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978-0-521-68109-4 - The Nets of Modernism: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Sigmund Freud

Maud Ellmann

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction: what hole?*

When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets ...

Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Stephen Dedalus's statement that he means to fly by the nets of nationality, language, and religion is often regarded as Joyce's modernist manifesto, his declaration of independence from the past (*P* 199). Yet the Stephen of *A Portrait of the Artist*, who longs to fly by nets, is superseded in *Ulysses* by a Stephen torn between the dream of flight and the recognition of entanglement. *The Nets of Modernism* investigates how four modernist writers – Joyce, Woolf, James, and Freud – confront the entangled nature of the self, caught in the nets of intersubjectivity and intertextuality. “Really ... relations stop nowhere,” Henry James famously declared: his writings, like those of Woolf, Joyce, and Freud, portray the human subject as enmeshed in relations of exchange – sexual, linguistic, financial, pathogenic – that violate the limits of identity.<sup>1</sup>

The chapters of this book have been written over several years, and each may still be read as a stand-alone essay. I have rewritten them in response to the kind request from friends and colleagues that my forays into modernism and psychoanalysis be collected in a single volume. In the process of revision I have tried to highlight interconnecting themes. The most conspicuous of these is interconnectivity itself, as exemplified by Stephen Dedalus's nets, or Mrs. Ramsay's knitting needles, or the networks of association that Freud elicits out of the laconic script of dreams. My book focuses on a cluster of modernist images arising from these nets and networks.

One such image is the rat, a creature notorious for its infiltration of modern networks: the sewers, the transportation system, and the netherworld of pipes and cables that circulate utilities around the city. In

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[More information](#)

modernist writing, images of rats proliferate as furiously as the animal itself, resurfacing in Eliot's "rats' alley," in the cemetery episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, and in the elaborate "rat-currency" that Freud investigates in the case history of the Rat Man (SE 10:212). Rats, moreover, bear a family likeness to the vampire, another dominant figure of anxiety at the turn of the century. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), the vampire invades Britain by transforming himself into a swarm of rats, which suggests an affinity between these menacing creatures. Both violate boundaries, the vampire by penetrating bodies, the rat by penetrating walls, and both act as parasites on networks, the vampire leeching off the circulation of the blood, the rat off the circulatory systems of the metropolis.

The fin-de-siècle obsession with vampires, epitomized in Stoker's pot-boiler, also reasserts itself in "highbrow" novels of the period, such as James's *The Sacred Fount* (1901) – whose characters (at least in the mind of the prurient narrator) undergo a vampiric interchange of wit and youthfulness. Likewise a vampire kiss provides the subject of Stephen's only poem in *Ulysses* (1922).<sup>2</sup> The widespread recurrence of this theme indicates that vampirism, which undermines the boundary between self and other, also jeopardizes the distinction between "high" and "low" modernism. Stoker's Van Helsing remarks that the vampire, once he is invited in, can come and go as he pleases, and the same could be said of the literary theme of vampirism, which overrides the "great divide" separating modernism from popular culture.<sup>3</sup>

Vampirism, together with other characteristic obsessions of the fin de siècle, such as telepathy, spiritualism, demonic possession, and invasion, has been interpreted as a phobic reaction to innovations in technology.<sup>4</sup> This was the period in which the world was "networked," particularly in the metropolis where the installation of utilities – gas, water, electricity – rendered private homes dependent on clandestine networks of supply.<sup>5</sup> In the same period the telephone invaded the privacy of the home, offering uncanny powers of communication *in absentia* while subordinating users to a central system of exchange.<sup>6</sup> Such networks insinuate the public in the private sphere, creating mysterious and uncontrollable relations of dependency.<sup>7</sup> This networked world threatens to reduce the human subject to a knot or intersection, rather than an independent agent, in the webs of communication, commodities, and capital. "As telegraphers and physiologists discovered long ago," Michel Foucault writes, "networks both empower and disempower. They offer exciting new relationships and relative knowledge even as they destroy obsolescent fantasies of autonomy."<sup>8</sup>

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

A particularly suggestive image of networks occurs in the “Proteus” episode of *Ulysses*. Here Stephen Dedalus, strolling along Sandymount Strand, catches sight of two old women descending to the beach, one swinging her “midwife’s bag,” which sparks off Stephen’s associations on the theme of birth.

One of her sisterhood lugged me squealing into life. Creation from nothing. What has she in the bag? A misbirth with a trailing navelcord, hushed in ruddy wool. The cords of all link back, strandentwining cable of all flesh. That is why mystic monks. Will you be as gods? Gaze in your omphalos. Hello. Kinch here. Put me on to Edenville. Aleph, alpha: nought, nought, one. (*U* 32:33–40)

In this passage Stephen contemplates the umbilical cord, or (as he puts it in a later chapter) the “successive anastomosis of navelcords” that links each newborn back to its original progenitors in the Garden of Eden (*U* 320:300). Since Stephen would prefer to create himself from nothing, he feels imprisoned by this “strandentwining cable of all flesh.” But he allows himself to be distracted from his “moody brooding” by a pun: the term “cable” reminds him of a telephone wire, which prompts him to phone up the Garden of Eden, giving the operator the telephone number for the first cause (aleph and alpha being the first letters of the Hebrew and the Greek alphabets, respectively), followed by the formula for creation from nothing: “nought, nought, one.” This riff may be understood as a symptom of Stephen’s desire to fly by the nets that bind him to his flesh and blood, especially to his dead mother, and his ambition to create himself *ex nihilo*. Yet at the same time, this passage reveals a fascination with the nets – umbilical, linguistic, commercial – that crisscross the body, the text, and the metropolis.

H. G. Wells, in a famous review of *A Portrait of the Artist*, accused Joyce of a “cloacal obsession.” “How right Wells was,” Joyce later commented (*JJ* 414). Wells was referring to the scatological dimension of the *Portrait*, but Joyce is even more obsessed with the networks of cloacae than with their odorous contents. An instance of this obsession is the passage in the “Ithaca” chapter of *Ulysses* where the Dublin waterworks are mapped out in fanatical detail, the catechistical narrator tracing the odyssey of water from Roundwood reservoir in county Wicklow through all the “subterranean aqueducts” that lead to Leopold Bloom’s tap at 7 Eccles Street:

What did Bloom do at the range?

He removed the saucepan to the left hob, rose and carried the iron kettle to the sink in order to tap the current by turning the faucet to let it flow.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Did it flow?

Yes. From Roundwood reservoir in county Wicklow of a cubic capacity of 2400 million gallons, percolating through a subterranean aqueduct of filter mains of single and double pipeage constructed at an initial plant cost of £5 per linear yard by way of the Dargle, Rathdown, Glen of the Downs and Callowhill to the 26 acre reservoir at Stillorgan, a distance of 22 statute miles, and thence, through a system of relieving tanks, by a gradient of 250 feet to the city boundary at Eustace bridge, upper Leeson street ... (U 548:160–70)<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile Joyce portrays the human body, with its “intestines like pipes” (U 147:1048) and telephonic navelcords, as a net within nets, linked through “successive anastomosis” to the pipelines, sewers, cables, wires, traffic arteries, railway tracks, and postal tentacles of urban life.

If the navel marks the point at which the body is plugged into networks of circulation and exchange, this birth-scar also stands for the severance of such connections. The navel signifies the exile of the infant from its first home in the mother’s body, which induces the hunger for home – nostalgia – that motivates odysseys ancient and modern. As we shall see, odysseys provide the framework for three of the novels analysed in this book – Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, and James’s *The Ambassadors* – but these modernist works frustrate the expectation of a nostos or homecoming; instead, the journey is postponed, interrupted, or prolonged indefinitely.

In *Ulysses*, Stephen’s odyssey begins in the Martello tower that Buck Mulligan wryly dubs the “*omphalos*” – the Greek word for the navel of the world at Delphi, shrine of the Delphic oracle (U 15:544) – an omphalos to which Stephen will never return. In Greek legend Zeus sent two eagles to fly across the world, and the point at which they met was thought to be the navel of the earth. To mark this spot, a drumlin-shaped stone called an omphalos was erected in several would-be navels of the Mediterranean. The most famous of these is the omphalos-stone at Delphi, which is hollow in the middle and covered with a carving of a knotted net. It was at this shrine that the Delphic priestess, seated on a tripod over a chasm and inspired by mephitic vapors rising from the depths, chanted her enigmatic prophecies.

Scholars have argued that the omphalos marks the victory of Apollo over a previous matriarchal earth-goddess, a conquest memorialized by the erection of a phallic stone in the place of the mephitic cleft. Apollo slew the snake Python, guardian of the omphalos and child of Gaia the earth-goddess, and buried the serpent under the omphalic stone, the new god thereby setting up his temple on the grave of his defeated rival.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

Elizabeth Bronfen has made the ingenious suggestion that the Python, shown coiling around the omphalos-stone in one Pompeian fresco, represents the umbilical cord, while its burial by Apollo signifies the suppression of the matrilineal order.<sup>10</sup>

For Stephen Dedalus, the omphalos or navel signifies interconnectedness, the “strandentwining cable of all flesh,” but also marks the primal wound of separation from the mother’s body. This association of the navel with bodily rupture emerges in one of Joyce’s early epiphanies, recording a dramatic scene in which the author’s mother bursts into the room where Joyce is playing the piano to announce that his dying brother Georgie is hemorrhaging from the navel.

MRS. JOYCE – (crimson, trembling, appears at the parlour door) – Jim!

JOYCE – (at the piano) ... Yes?

MRS. JOYCE – Do you know anything about the body? ... What ought I to do? ... There’s some matter coming away from the hole in Georgie’s stomach ... Did you ever hear of that happening?

JOYCE – (surprised) ... I don’t know ...

MRS. JOYCE – Ought I send for the doctor, do you think?

JOYCE – I don’t know ... what hole?

MRS. JOYCE – (impatient) ... The hole we all have ... here (points)

JOYCE – (stands up)<sup>11</sup>

“What hole?” The mother’s pointing finger scarcely resolves this question, since “the hole we all have – here” could be anywhere or everywhere. Because the deictic “here” is unlocateable, it opens up a puncture in the text itself, a hole through which its meanings hemorrhage. In Joyce’s writing, the navel – “the hole we all have” – signifies the hole or absent center of the nets in which the subject is enmeshed. Like the Delphic omphalos, hollow in the middle and encased in knotted nets, the navel is both seam and fissure, knot and not. (This pun, incidentally, is also used in Beckett’s *Watt* [1953], where Mr. Knott [not] is the absent master of the house tenanted by Watt [what]; Knott therefore functions as the not that knots the nets of power, much as the navel is the not that knots the body in its skin.)

The navel, in its dual role as separation and connection, could be compared to Derrida’s conception of the “brisure,” a term from carpentry denoting both a break and a junction; the term “cleavage” is a sexy if inexact equivalent in English.<sup>12</sup> The double-sided concept of the navel – both gap and knot, both break and hinge – offers a model for the structure of several of the works of fiction discussed in the following chapters of this book. In these fictions, it is absence that gives rise to ramifying

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[More information](#)

networks in which language, money, and libido circulate. Mrs. Newsome, in James's *The Ambassadors* (1903), functions as the absence or "central reserve" that instigates the circulation of letters and desire. In Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), the relation between absence and the nets of circulation is encapsulated in the terms "gnomon" and "simony" which, together with the term "paralysis," cast a strange enchantment over the boy-narrator of "The Sisters." The "gnomon" in geometry means a parallelogram with a missing corner, while "simony" means the traffic in sacred things.<sup>13</sup> In *Dubliners*, the absent father functions as the gnomon or the missing corner that instigates the simoniac traffic in paternal substitutes.

## GAZE IN YOUR OMPHALOS

Despite its Delphic ancestry, the navel is rarely taken seriously. Known to children as the belly button, either an "innie" or an "outie," the navel forms a hollow or hillock on the belly, signifying nothing, "gathering fluff." In popular usage, as Fred Botting has pointed out, the navel is associated with the time-wasting, self-indulgent activity of "navel-gazing," a term denoting "idle cogitation upon unanswerable questions, useless speculation or circular self-reflection."<sup>14</sup> "Gaze in your *omphalos*," Stephen counsels himself in "Proteus" as he wanders aimlessly around Sandymount Strand (*U* 32:38).

Purposeless though it seems, the navel has always troubled believers in creation from nothing. Did Adam and Eve have navels? If our first parents were begotten not made, there was no reason for their bellies to be dimpled by these natal scars. Hence Stephen ponders "naked Eve" in "Proteus": "She had no navel. Belly without blemish, bulging big, a buckler of taut vellum ..." (*U* 32:41–42). Yet Michelangelo, in the Sistine fresco depicting the creation of Adam, daubs the first man's belly with a navel. In 1646 Thomas Browne objected to such paintings for besmirching our first parents with "that tortuosity or complicated nodosity we usually call the Navel." Browne insists that navels are mere "superfluities." Why would God ordain "parts without use or office"? Having no anatomical navel, Adam retained "an umbilicality even with God himself," an unbroken connection to his maker.<sup>15</sup>

Two centuries later Philip Henry Gosse (father of the more famous Edmund) takes issue with Browne's contemptuous dismissal of the navel. In a bizarre defence of creationism, *Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot* (1857), the elder Gosse insists: "The Man would not have

been a Man without a Navel.”<sup>16</sup> Much ridiculed by its Victorian audience, *Omphalos* argues that the world was created instantaneously, but in the deceptive form of a planet on which life had existed for aeons. God gave Adam a navel for the same reason that he buried fossils in the earth, to test our faith by providing false proofs of a non-existent past. In his memoir *Father and Son* (1907), Edmund Gosse remembers that “even Charles Kingsley, from whom my father had expected the most instant appreciation, wrote that he could not ... ‘believe that God has written on the rocks one enormous and superfluous lie’ ... a gloom, cold and dismal, descended upon our morning teacups.”<sup>17</sup> Borges, on the other hand, admires the “monstrous elegance” of Gosse’s *Omphalos*, and Baudrillard likewise relishes the implication that God is “an evil genius of simulation.” Gosse’s hypothesis is coming true, Baudrillard declares, given that “the whole of our past is indeed sliding into a fossilized simulacrum ...”<sup>18</sup>

The navel troubles Stephen Dedalus because it proves he was “made not begotten,” unlike Christ who was begotten not made (*U* 32:45). His “neverstop navelcord” links him back to his first home in his mother’s all-too-blemished belly (*FW* 475:14). Yet if Stephen feels trapped by the nets of home and homeland, he also feels homeless in the English language. In *A Portrait of the Artist* Stephen realizes that every word he speaks or writes in English entails an exile from the home-grown tongue of Ireland, compelling him to fret in the shadow of the language of imperialism (*P* 189). To vary a quip of Oscar Wilde’s, the English have condemned Stephen to write in the language of Shakespeare.

Joyce’s writing in the English language could be seen as the elastic navelcord that ties him to the past while also ostracizing him from Ireland. “Where there is a reconciliation,” Stephen intones, “there must have been first a sundering” (*U* 159:334). In Joyce, the navel signifies this primal sundering (the not), yet also represents the artist’s strandentwining cable of indebtedness (the net). The game Joyce plays with navelcords could be compared to the game Freud’s grandson plays with a spool of thread in the famous fort/da game of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). In an attempt to exercise remote control over his mother’s comings and goings, the child flings a spool into his curtained cot, uttering “oooo,” and then retracts this umbilical thread with a triumphant “da” [here]. Freud interprets the first vowel as a childish pronunciation of the German word *fort*, meaning gone, and argues that the child is staging his mother’s departures and returns to gain symbolic mastery over her intermittency. According to Freud, this game performs a psychic function similar to the



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Maud Ellmann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

catharsis of Greek tragedy, which inflicts upon the audience the painful experience of loss while wresting pleasure out of the aesthetic mastery of that experience (SE 18:14–17).<sup>19</sup>

In the fort/da game, the child reenacts the primal separation from the mother while creating a symbolic substitute for the umbilical cord. Like Walt Whitman's noiseless patient spider, the little boy launches forth "filament, filament, filament" "to explore the vacant vast surrounding," "measureless oceans of space."<sup>20</sup> Yet the cord the child casts into the dark hollows out the very absence that he strives to overcome. This filament links the child to the mother, but also usurps the mother's place, substituting the auto-erotic pleasures of the sign – the toy, the alternating phonemes – for the plenitude of the lost object. Each time the child throws the spool away, he murders his mother in effigy, yet what he really kills is presence and immediacy. Henceforth all his encounters with the real will be mediated by symbolic substitutes. The loops he outlines with his spool constitute the nets that bind him in a world of signs.

It is worth noting that the fort/da game stages an odyssey in miniature, in which the bobbin is cast away to bring about a future homecoming. As little Ernst expels his toy, so James expels ambassadors to Paris, Woolf sends the Ramsays to the lighthouse, and Joyce dispatches Bloom and Stephen on their odysseys through Dublin. But the toy that Ernst ejects is not the same as that which he retrieves, for it is death that he lassoes out of the void (by a poignant coincidence, the little boy's mother died shortly after Freud witnessed the fort/da game) (SE 18:14–16). Like the child's bobbin, Bloom goes forth in exile and circles back to 7 Eccles Street, but it is unclear whether the Ithaca that he returns to is the same place that he left in "Lotus-Eaters." In the meantime his wife Molly has rearranged the furniture, and her lover Blazes Boylan has left his imprint on the bed, along with telltale flakes of Plumtree's potted meat. As for Lambert Strether, the hero of James's *The Ambassadors*, who returns to Massachusetts after his odyssey to Paris, "he goes back other, and to other things," as James records (*A* 403). To go back other, and to other things, epitomizes the fate of the modernist Odysseus.

In the "Ithaca" episode of *Ulysses*, we are told that Leopold Bloom once marked a florin with three notches and launched it "for circulation on the waters of civic finance, for possible, circuitous or direct, return." "Had Bloom's coin returned?" the narrator demands, to which the implacable riposte is "Never" (*U* 571:979–88). Never is a long time. Modernist writing confronts the possibility that what is forfeited to circulation never



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Maud Ellmann

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

returns, or else returns too fast and furiously, as in the compulsive repetition of primordial traumas. "Returns" in the economic sense refer to the profits or losses that result from launching money, like persons, into circulation. But the fate of Bloom's florin implies that the modernist wanderer is destined for dissemination rather than return.

The three notches with which Bloom marks his florin could be compared to the scar by which Odysseus is recognized on his return to Ithaca. These notches also correspond to the navel-scar with which the neonate is launched into the world, since the severance of the umbilical cord represents the first notch that culture inflicts upon the human body. The fantasy of castration, understood in post-Freudian psychoanalysis as the infant's violent initiation into culture, could be interpreted as a symbolic reenactment of the primal scarification of the navel. While Lacan regards the castration fantasy as the open sesame to the symbolic order, and identifies the symbolic phallus with the name-of-the-father, the present study proposes that the navel memorializes a pre-symbolic order under the aegis of the nameless mother.

Freud's most famous reference to the navel occurs in a footnote to *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" (SE 4:111n). It is appropriate that the navel of the dream makes its first appearance as a footnote, since the anatomical navel also functions as a footnote in the flesh, marking an indelible debt to the lost mother. Later Freud incorporates this umbilical footnote into the body of his text, when he redefines the navel as a "tangle of the dream-thoughts which cannot be unraveled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream." A knot that adds nothing, this navel opens up the void from which "the dream-thoughts branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought." It is where this "meshwork is particularly close" that the dream-wish rises "like a mushroom out of its mycelium" (SE 5:525).

The navel of the dream marks the point at which the nets of meaning dissolve in their own density, leaving a black hole in the center of the dreamwork. For this reason the Freudian dream-navel encompasses the contradictory ideas of not and net, absence and entanglement, embodied in the hollow netted omphalos-stone at Delphi. Furthermore Freud's image of the mushroom rising out of its mycelium evokes the "rhizomatic" structure that Deleuze and Guattari have opposed to the "arborescent" structure of conventional thought. The authors argue that rhizomatic

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Maud Ellmann

Excerpt

[More information](#)

thought, like the associative property of language, “grows between” other things, like weeds or grass; it has “neither beginning nor end, but always a middle [*milieu*] from which it grows and which it overfills.”<sup>21</sup> Rhizomatic thought, characterized by Vicki Mahaffey as an “associative, omnidirectional, ever-changing process of exploration without a set goal,” corresponds to Freud’s conception of the dream-navel as a mycelium, a shallow creeping fungus.<sup>22</sup> Stephen’s vision of the matrilineal nets of navelcords could also be described as rhizomatic, as opposed to the arboreal structure of the family tree, governed by the name of the father.

*The Nets of Modernism* uses the concept of the navel, in its dual aspect as hole and net, to investigate the structure of modernist fiction, including Freudian psychoanalysis, which could be seen as a serial fiction – part autobiography, part epistolary novel, part Viennese soap opera. As many commentators have pointed out, Freud’s work bears a strong resemblance to Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, another serial fiction delving into dreams, erotic obsessions, and the psychopathology of everyday life; Proust also ventures into quasi-scientific speculations on sexology, enlivened by case histories at least as spectacular as Freud’s. Similar resemblances to Freud may be found in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, where streams-of-consciousness unfurl as rhizomatically as the associative networks of the Freudian dream. Meanwhile Joyce’s characters dramatize what Freud calls the psychopathology of everyday life, exhibiting such symptoms as the first Freudian slip in English literature, when Bloom substitutes “the wife’s admirers” for her “advisors” (*U* 257:767). As for sexology, the “Circe” episode offers a psychedelic encyclopedia of sexual perversions, largely based on Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), a source also exploited by Freud. Finally *Finnegans Wake* could be seen as a monstrously extended Freudian slip, where puns break down the barrier between the conscious and the unconscious mind, facilitating the return of the repressed.

It is well documented that Freudian ideas were “in the air” at the time that Joyce, Woolf, and James were composing their novels, yet none of these novelists set out to write psychoanalytic fictions. Woolf, on the contrary, avoided reading Freud, even though she published the Strachey translation of his works, for fear of being outmaneuvered by Freudian insights.<sup>23</sup> Henry James, during his 1904 visit to the United States, consulted a doctor influenced by Freud, a treatment that the novelist experienced as beneficial; his brother William James, meanwhile, believed that Freud held the future of psychology in his hands.<sup>24</sup> Beyond these circumstances, however, there is little reason to suppose that Henry James was