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Melanie Klein and the Hermeneutics of Uncertainty

Uncertainty -- that primal, inchoate set of emotions, drives, and physical reactions -- is our first experience of the world. Such is the theory of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, whose work attempts to dismantle contemporary and Freudian conceptions of infancy, arguing instead that the infant's fundamental situation is precisely a vicious uncertainty: terror the mother might never return, vengefulness and guilt when she does. This first experience of life, and the way the infantile subject learns to manage it, provide the template for every experience of uncertainty to come; even adult encounters with uncertainty return the subject to that primitive crossroads between a paranoid-schizoid reaction and a healthily depressive response.

Klein's schematization of uncertainty opens a rich, new dimension for psychoanalytic literary theory. The subject, for instance, when presented with any communicative act (whether in language or, perhaps, in a mother's gaze), is challenged to reconstruct these "part-objects" into a meaningful whole, a move which operates beyond cognition and engages that primitive, anxious template of frustration. A successful reconstruction, or hermeneutic, thus risks both the schizoid-paranoid reading and the negative-depressive reading, but also opens the possibility for the complex, positive-depressive enactment of Klein's depressive position -- the resigned, longing, reparative stance the mature subject can take toward the world.

For readers, the more "difficult" and uncertain the text -- or the more difficult and uncertain we demand our *interpretation* to be -- the more we risk, hermeneutically, assuming the unhealthy positions Klein describes. A Kleinian hermeneutic means to "think" uncertainty without reducing it into a grand, paranoid-schizoid transcendence or a negative-depressive stance. This paper examines this hermeneutic through "The Dead," mapping the ways Klein's primitive strategies come to bear on Joyce's textual operation, narrative construction, and the subtle but insistent challenge this text makes on our infantile, meaning-making needs.