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The Carnival of the Repressed Others: Re-Reading Joyce's "Circe" through Bakhtin

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I. Introduction

BELLO

Dungdevourer!

BLOOM

(*with sinews semiflexed*) Magmagnificence!

BELLO

Down! (*he taps her on the shoulder with his fan*) Incline feet forward! Slide left foot one pace back! You will fall. You are falling. On the hands down!

BLOOM

(*her eyes upturned in the sign of admiration, closing, yaps*) Truffles!

(*With a piercing epileptic cry she sinks on all fours, grunting, snuffling, rooting at his feet: then lies, shamming dead, with eyes shut tight, trembling eyelids, bowed upon the ground in the attitude of most*

excellent master.) (*U* 15.2842-55)

In a highly fantasmagoric scene from "Circe," Bella, a prostitute, transforms into Bello, a male sorcerer, and casts spells on Bloom into a pig. Hierarchies between genders, between classes, and between humans and animals are subverted. "He" refers to Bella/Bello; "she" refers to Bloom. Bella/Bello makes orders; Bloom "promise[s] never to disobey" (*U* 15.2864). However, in a previous scene, Bloom himself sat on a throne as an emperor for "the new Bloomusalem in the Nova Hibernia of the future" (*U* 15.1544-45). In this way, in James Joyce's "Circe," both major and minor characters and objects that appeared in previous chapters of *Ulysses* reappear and go through upheavals of status quo, and thus actualize Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "carnival" on the "Circean" stage.

Although there is no clear evidence for any direct acquaintance or influence between the two masters of literature, Joyce's works seem to exist almost as if they were ready-made answer sheets for Bakhtin's theories to be applied. As a matter of fact, a good number of critics have long discussed the possibilities of interpretation of Joyce's works through Bakhtin's theories. Since Joyce posits a lot of importance on multiple levels of narratives, voices, and language, Bakhtin's theory of discourse and the genre of novel as an alternative to monologue fits quite perfectly in exploring Joyce's texts.

However, surprisingly enough, the concept of "carnival" still leaves a lot of room to be desired when it comes to the Joycean criticism. Accordingly, this essay attempts to interpret "Circe," the fifteenth episode of *Ulysses*, through the lens of Bakhtin's concept of "carnival" in which subject and object are indistinguishable, and the repressed others reverberate heteroglossic voices. "Circe" has long been analyzed mostly in psychoanalytic terms, focusing on Leopold Bloom's guilt and subconscious sexual fantasy.[1] However, when we approach "Circe" via Bakhtin's

1) As Andrew Gibson mentions in his "Introduction" to *Reading Joyce's "Circe,"* from its publication, "Circe" has been linked to Freud and read in Freudian terms. As early as 1947, for example, Richard Kain extolled it as "possibly the most brilliant dramatization of Freudian psychology in literature" (31).

theoretical concepts such as "heteroglossia" and "carnival," we can open a new dimension of interpretation.[2] In this interpretation, we do not limit "Circe" to Bloom's fantasy; we can discuss a limitless carnival in which the boundaries between subjects and objects are erased, and the suffocated voices of the repressed others including inanimate objects during the daytime are all polyphonically resounding throughout the "carnivalesque" nighttown.

II. Bakhtin and Joyce

> One critic [. . .] has discussed a series of modern novels featuring rather decorous parties (such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*) and has argued that they are a contemporary expression of the genuine carnival spirit. But it is debatable whether even such convincing analogues as the "Circe" episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* would meet with Bakhtin's approval, or whether he would see them as degenerate forms of a valid folk impulse that began to decline with the Renaissance. (Kershner, "Carnival/Carnivalesque")

According to R. B. Kershner's introductory explanation of "carnival/carnivalesque," there seem to exist strong affinities between modernist texts and Bakhtin's theories although Kershner is somewhat skeptical about Baktin's wholehearted authorization of this relationship. Nevertheless, Kershner also mentions the possibility of applying the concept of carnival onto "Circe." Kershner is not alone in this tendency; many critics have mentioned these affinities between Joyce and Bakhtin.[3] In this context, as Zack Bowen mentions in "Bakhtin, Joyce, and the Epic Tradition," "[t]hat Joyce

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2) Although the title of this essay is "The Carnival of the Repressed Others," I would not limit its discussion only to "carnival." It's part of my point to argue that heteroglossia and carnival cannot be distinguished.

3) See, among many others, R. B. Kershner's *Joyce, Bakhtin, and Popular Literature: Chronicles of Disorder*, Cheryl Herr's *Joyce's Anatomy of Culture*, and M. Keith Booker's *Joyce, Bakhtin, and the Literary Tradition: Toward a Comparative Cultural Poetics*.

never read Bakhtin nor Bakhtin Joyce is hard to believe" (51). Kershner, in another source, seconds this view in commenting that "Joyce is the striking absence in Bakhtin's work" since "all of Bakhtin's major concepts seem best and most obviously illustrated by *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*" (*Joyce* 17). Regardless of the authenticity of mutual indebtedness between Bakhtin and Joyce, it seems almost indelibly clear that Bakhtin's theory on the "novel," "heteroglossia," and the "carnival" provides a very useful tool to interpret Joyce's works—especially *Ulysses* in which polyphonic discourses are experimented in full swing throughout its eighteen chapters.

Karen Lawrence places *Ulysses* "in the generic tradition of the anatomy of Burton, Rabelais, and Sterne" (qtd. in Booker 46). Here, as is wellknown, François Rabelais is one of the writers whose work inspired Bakhtin to develop his theories on the novel and carnival. M. Keith Booker also notes that strong affinities that exist between Rabelais and Joyce appear to reside in their attitudes toward language and in carnivalesque or folkloric contents in their texts (49). In their cowork *Mikhail Bakhtin*, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, two of the most famous Bakhtin critics, also acknowledge,

> The heteroglot line of novels includes the texts that are the most authentic exemplars of novelness. In these works the novel finds its fullest range of voices. The development of the heteroglot novel runs from Rabelais in the sixteenth century to the picaresques of the seventeenth century and through virtually all the great novels of the modern period, including many Bakhtin does not list, such as Joyce and Proust. (293)

According to Clark and Holquist, although Bakhtin did not mention Joyce's name, the kind of lineage of "heteroglot" novel Bakhtin was interested in does resemble Joyce's novels.[4] To sum up many critics' analyses, it would not be surprising to

4) They go on to add, "One of the many enigmas about Bakhtin is that he makes no mention in *Rabelais* of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a book that might be described as a celebration of heteroglossia and of the body as well. This is especially surprising since Joyce was known to several of Bakhtin's associates. [. . .] Once again, Bakhtin's

review Joyce in the tradition of Bakhtinian criticism, although Bakhtin never mentioned Joyce in his works or vice versa.

Many critical terms and concepts in Bakhtin's theory can be applied to reading Joyce's texts. However, this paper will focus on "carnival," a textual version of which "Circe" seems to embody quite perfectly. Bakhtin defines the term "carnival" in *Rabelais and His World* as follows:

> In such a system the king is the clown. He is elected by all the people and is mocked by all the people. He is abused and beaten when the time of his reign is over, just as the carnival dummy of winter or of the dying year is mocked, beaten, torn to pieces, burned, or drowned even in our time. They are "gay monsters." The clown was first disguised as a king, but once his reign had come to an end his costume was changed, "travestied," to turn him once more into a clown. The abuse and thrashing are equivalent to a change of costume, to a metamorphosis. Abuse reveals the other, true face of the abused, it tears off his disguise and mask. It is the king's uncrowning. (197)

Here, Bakhtin defines "carnival" as a moment of reversal in which the status quo is drastically changed and this process is laid bare without disguise. For example, the clown is travestied as a king and the king is abandoned just like a clown. In this way, the hierarchical demarcation between the king and the clown is erased. As a result, a clang of various voices get mixed and juxtaposed on an equal basis. In this sense, Dominick LaCapra asserts that "carnivalization is for Bakhtin the most creative form of dialogized heteroglossia" (qtd. in Kershner, *Joyce* 16). Disguises and travesties are followed by mocking and abuse. And this whole series of reversals in status quo reveals theatricality and subversiveness of both "carnival" and reality.

Kershner's introduction of the term "carnival/canivalesque," a part of which I

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choosing not to include Joyce could have been motivated politically. As of at least the First Writers' Congress in 1934, *Ulysses* could no longer be praised in print, and this was still true in 1965 when the dissertation was published as a book. Thus, Bakhtin effectively had two choices as regards Joyce, to attack him or not to mention him" (317).

quoted at the beginning of this part, is very helpful to understand the ultimate function of carnival. According to Kershner's explication, in his book *Rabelais and His World* and in parts of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin develops the concept of "carnivalization" in order to explore the literary effect of Rabelais's comedic vision:

> For Bakhtin, the "carnivalesque" is an aspect of the medieval celebration known as "carnival," the period of "licensed misrule" in which ordinary citizens could mock and defame the acknowledged authorities of church and state. [. . .] Bakhtin values very highly this inversion of established values and regards carnival as the form of oppositional speech elicited by authoritative utterance, the natural expression of the powerless folk. [. . .] In Bakhtin's vision, carnival provides an atmosphere of "jolly relativity" in which recognized authorities are mocked and alternative, usually marginalized, voices have a chance to be heard. (Kershner, "Carnival/Canivalesque")

Here, the last part of the quotation, in particular, is quite important for Joyceans because Joyce's texts also provide such a moment of "jolly relativity" in which subjects and objects cannot be distinguished and thus the repressed others articulate their voices as "subjects." This moment of "jolly relativity" is quite successfully visualized in *Ulysses*, especially in "Circe" in which even objects earn voices and tell their own stories. Such situations and memories as narrated and remembered in Bloom's and Stephen's points of view in previous chapters of *Ulysses* are played out differently and ask for revised interpretations in "Circe."

Thus, carnival, for Bakhtin, is both a populist utopian vision of the world seen from below and a festive critique, through the inversion of hierarchy, of the "high" culture: "As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (Bakhtin 10). In this sense, carnival can be said to resist fixation and perpetuation of an existing order.

Considering how "Circe" rewrites the content of preceding episodes of *Ulysses* and provides an alternative vision to interpret *Ulysses*, one can admit that the concept of carnival is quite appropriate in maximizing critical interpretations of "Circe."

Clark and Holquist conclude the positive significances of carnival as follows: "Carnival is a minimally ritualized antiritual, a festive celebration of the other, the gaps and holes in all the mappings of the world laid out in systematic theologies, legal codes, normative poetics, and class hierarchies" (300). They go on to add that "Carnival and the grotesque both have the effect of plunging certainty into ambivalence and uncertainty, as a result of their emphasis on contradictions and the relativity of all classificatory systems" (304). Accordingly, carnival can provide an alternative view to critique authorities. This carnival thus presents an opportunity for the repressed others to reverberate their voices and their points of views. In the next section, let us look at more in depth how Joyce's "Circe" embodies this subversive spirit of carnival.

III. "Circean" Carnival

In the world of carnival [. . .] established authority and truth are relative.
(Bakhtin 256)

Even though Bakhtin's name is not mentioned, a number of critics have also seconded Bakhtinian analysis of "Circe." First of all, in her article "At Circe's, or the Self-Opener," Hélène Cixous broaches a crucial question that "Am I the one who was me? The Self-Opener theater which is gaping in Circe not only replays all parts of *Ulysses* in one scene but, by de-compartmentalization and by depersonalization, decomposes each and everyone into his several selves, breaks the real into fragments and calls on the multiplicity of entire pieces to speak, without distinction of object, of subject, of interiority or of exteriority, of property [. . . .] Persons decompose, partial objects are personalized" (387). In this respect, Cixous

summarizes “Circe” in a word of “the ascendancy of the Other” (388).[5] According to Cixous, “Circe” is an episode written from the perspective of others. When she mentions that “It’s the feast day of the repressed” (388-89), it definitely evokes Bakhtinian concept of carnival.

Steven Connor is interested in the extent to which “Circe” deals in what Roland Barthes calls “unheard-of categories” (Gibson 27). He argues that the possibility that “everything speaks in its own way” (*U* 7.177), introduced in “Aeolus,” is literalized in “Circe,” where all kinds of non-human objects are actually given a voice:

> Sllt. The nethermost deck of the first machine jogged forward its flyboard with sllt the first batch of quirefolded papers. Sllt. Almost human the way it sllt to call attention. Doing its level best to speak. That door too sllt creaking, asking to be shut. Everything speaks in its own way. Sllt. (*U* 7.174-77)

Here, it is not just the human body that speaks, but the body of the physical world itself speaks. The theme that “everything speaks in its own way” is realized in “Circe,” which dramatizes speech from all manner of nonhuman objects, agencies, and processes, including bells, a gong, soap, kisses, wreaths, yewtrees, a hen, a cap, a timepiece, quoits, a gramophone, a gasjet, a retriever, gulls, a nannygoat, a button, a dog and a horse (Connor 95). Connor reads “Circe” as a ventriloquism rather than hallucination because “it disposes of the recurrent difficulty of specifying exactly *whose* hallucination is being represented at any particular time, especially where characters seem to be possessed of memories, knowledge (and voices) that we know from the rest of the book have not been available to them” (Connor 101).

However, Connor’s analysis is somewhat limited in that he reads the polyphony of the repressed others as a ventriloquy of the writer. Instead, when we read this

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5) She goes on to add that “Everything is endlessly transformed. You can be someone else because each is always no one. The self is without a core of identity. . . . Are you sure of not being what you are not? Whatever your name you can be someone else: half man half woman for example, Bloom, or each in turn” (388).

chapter as a Bakhtinian carnival where heterolossic voices of the repressed others are reverberating without any censorship, we can approach the Joycean carnival where subjects and objects cannot be distinguished and minor characters or even mere inanimate objects articulate their own stories from their own perspectives. Eric D. Smith reads the chapter as "a dialogic protest from the voice of modernism's repressed Other" (132). Although Smith limits his analysis to Bloom's transformation into a pig, we can borrow his insight and expand it further. With these critics' insights and limitations in mind, let us reread "Circe" along with Bakhtinian concept of carnival.

As we have seen above, carnival is dotted with moments of reversals and renewals which provide the powerless public with hope. Through carnival, the folk are "freed from the oppression of such gloomy categories as 'eternal,' 'immovable,' 'absolute,' 'unchangeable,' and instead are exposed to the gay and free laughing aspect of the world, with its unfinished and open character, with the joy of change and renewal" (Bakhtin 83). "Circe" also provides a moment of revising and reversing interpretations of *Ulysses* so that readers are not bound up with any totalized meaning of *Ulysses*. Bloom and Stephen are intimidated with the attack of different versions of memories with minor characters, animals, and even objects. If the text of previous chapters records from Bloom's perspective the scene in which Bloom gives Banbury cakes to seagulls, "Circe" records the seagulls' voice: "Kaw kave kankury kake" (*U* 15.686). Sometimes Bloom's versions of memories conflict with other versions. In this way, carnivalesque moments in "Circe" jeopardize any totalizing attempts of interpretation and signification; interpretations and significations are delayed and revised ceaselessly.

First of all, the reversal of status quo is quite important in the concept of carnival, and so is it in "Circe," too. As the clown is travestied in a king's costume, Bloom, who has been stigmatized as a "racial" and "sexual" other in previous chapters, is dignified as an emperor in "Circe":

BLOOM

My beloved subjects, a new era is about to dawn. I, Bloom, tell you verily it is even now at hand. Yea, on the word of a Bloom, ye shall ere long enter into the golden city which is to be, the new Bloomusalem in the Nova Hibernia of the future.

(*Thirtytwo workmen, wearing rosettes, from all the counties of Ireland, under the guidance of Derwan the builder, construct the new Bloomusalem. It is a colossal edifice with crystal roof, built in the shape of a huge pork kidney, containing forty thousand rooms. In the course of its extension several buildings and monuments are demolished. Government offices are temporarily transferred to railway sheds. Numerous houses are razed to the ground. The inhabitants are lodged in barrels and boxes, all marked in red with the letters: L. B. Several paupers fall from a ladder. A part of the walls of Dublin, crowded with loyal sightseers, collapses*.) (*U* 15.1541-55)

Here, Bloom puts on the clothing of an emperor and sits on the throne. As an emperor, Bloom gives orders about "mixed races and mixed marriage" (*U* 15.1699). Although Bloom's orders, of course, reflect Joyce's political visions,[6] it is highly comedic that a petit bourgeois like Bloom, obsessed with sexual fantasy in earlier chapters, is revered as an emperor here. However, what is more important is the stage direction describing how "a part of the walls of Dublin" falls down. This hallucination embodies the collapse of the existing order, which is the very essence of "carnival." In this way, carnival reveals the porousness of the existing system. Not only an emperor, Bloom also takes a lot of different roles including a renowned professor and a pregnant woman. This series of transformations also disrupts perpetuations of any fixed, homogeneous, identification. Before long, Bloom is even cast out as a pig by the end of Bella/Bello's fan:

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6) In particular, when Bloom announces "union of all, jew, moslem and gentile" (*U* 15.1686), it reflects Joyce's cosmopolitanism. Also, Bloom's declaration of "esperanto, the universal language with universal brotherhood" (*U* 15.1691-92) and of "free money, free rent, free love and a free lay church in a free lay state" (*U* 15.1693) represents Joyce's concerns about language and home rule, respectively.

BELLO

Down! (*he taps her on the shoulder with his fan*) Incline feet forward! Slide left foot one pace back! You will fall. You are falling. On the hands down!

BLOOM

(*her eyes upturned in the sign of admiration, closing, yaps*) Truffles!

(*With a piercing epileptic cry she sinks on all fours, grunting, snuffling, rooting at his feet: then lies, shamming dead, with eyes shut tight, trembling eyelids, bowed upon the ground in the attitude of most excellent master.*) (*U* 15.2846-55)

Bella/Bello who "has a sprouting moustache" (*U* 15.2746-47) becomes a male and takes ascendancy over Bloom. And Bloom is referred to as a female and "promise[s] never to disobey" (*U* 15.2864). The hierarchical difference of gender and social ranks is disrupted completely. Social categories lose meaning in this carnivalesque moment. In this way, the concept of homogeneous identity is highly problematized.

In fact, a primary element in carnival, Bakhtin maintains, is the "free intermingling of bodies" (Bakhtin 347), the unabashed display of bodily functions, including defecation, copulation, and even labor and birth, and the free interplay between the body and the outside world, in such acts as the ingestion and expulsion of food. It can be easily understood if we think feasts are an important part in carnivals. Carnival puts priority not on the metaphysical part but on the physical function of bodies: "Official culture regards such bodily functions as unseemly and tries to deny the body its wonderful orifices and protrusions, to put a stop to the joyous celebration of the body and life" (Clark & Holquist 311). The nighttown brothel, the background of "Circe," also can be seen as an unseemly side of Dublin. However, the "Circe" episode lays bare this unseemly function on the city as it is. Bloom as a "new womanly man" reveals the function of the body by giving birth to eight children:

DR DIXON

(*reads a bill of health*) Professor Bloom is a finished example of the new womanly man. [. . .] He is about to have a baby.

[. . .]

BLOOM

O, I so want to be a mother.

MRS THORNTON

(*in nursetender's gown*) Embrace me tight, dear. You'll be soon over it. Tight, dear.

(*Bloom embraces her tightly and bears eight male yellow and white children. They appear on a redcarpeted staircase adorned with expensive plants. [. . .]*)

(*U* 15.1797-823)

The scene quoted above has important messages on several levels. First, Bloom as a "new womanly man" blurs the boundary between genders. Gender cannot be a permanent indicator of identity anymore. Second, by giving birth to children, this scene betrays a bodily function, celebrating the material physicality of body itself. Last, this scene makes up for Bloom's loss of Rudy, revising what occurred in the previous episodes. All in all, "Circean" carnival rejects any fixation of significances. The fact that Bloom lost Rudy is doubted; the fact that Bloom is a man itself is cast into doubt. More importantly, all of these preposterous situations are caused by other "minor" characters' utterances. For example, Bloom gives birth to babies following Mulligan's remark that "Dr Bloom is bisexually abnormal" (*U* 15.1775-76) and Dr Dixon's comment that "Professor Bloom is a finished example of the new womanly man" (*U* 15.1798-99). This scene starkly demonstrates how discourses construct reality.

Circean carnival is also constructed by inanimate objects which are given voices in "Circe." Subjects are thrown into the place of objects; objects articulate their voices as subjects:

MOTH

I'm a tiny tiny thing
Ever flying in the spring

Round and round a ringaring.
Long ago I was a king
Now I do this kind of thing
On the wing, on the wing!
Bing! (*U* 15.2468-75)

Here, the moth tells its story as the subject. According to the moth's story, it used to be a king. Again, the theme of transformation or metempsychosis is reverberating throughout the text of *Ulysses*. Even inanimate objects such as a doorhandle, hat, fan, hoof, nymph from a picture, waterfall, boots, pianola, hours, and gasjet articulate their voices. Subjects and objects become indistinguishable. In this way, "Circe" embodies Circean carnival in which objects speak their own voices and subject positions are endlessly changed, not to be fixed.

IV. Conclusion

*Is me her was you dreamed before? Was then she him you us since knew? Am all them and the same now me? (*U *15.2768-69)*

As Cixous notes, Bella/Bello's question evokes the nefarious confusion of subject and object. In fact, the "Circe" episode throughout the chapter does not differentiate subject from object, breaking down boundaries between fantasy and reality. This moment of blurring boundaries is embodied as a carnival in which objects take ascendancy and articulate their voices. Bakhtinian insight is very useful in reading Joyce's text because Joyce's project is also upending the seemingly fixed hierarchies and identities.

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White summarize the concept of carnival: "Carnival is presented by Bakhtin as a world of topsy-turvy, of heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless overrunning and excess where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled" (247). This description corresponds with Joyce's world of literature. By

reading "Circe" through the concept of carnival, we can shed light on an amorphous utopia in which hierarchies and divisions between genders, ranks, and subject/object lose meanings.

In a letter to Frank Budgen, Joyce wrote, "A point about Ulysses(Bloom). He romances about Ithaca (Oi want teh gow beck teh the Mawl Enn Rowd, s'elp me!) and when he gets back it gives him the pip. . . . Can you tell a poor hardworking man where is the ideal climate inhabited by the ideal humans? Address answers (enclosing 5/-P.O.) to: sincerely yours James Joyce" (*Letters I*, 152). These lines reflect Joyce's intention in *Ulysses*: "Joyce's design for *Ulysses* precludes a static, resolved Ithaca for his Ulysses, Telemachus, and Penelope, for like Tennyson's Ulysses, they 'cannot rest from travel,' but must move constantly onward into a world of change and possibility, a world refreshingly free of ideal endings and ideal humans" (Rickard 198). This letter is, of course, about the impossibility of any final interpretations of *Ulysses*. However, the letter itself reflects Joyce's world of literature, which cannot be closed or totalized in any unilinear plot. By ending the letter with "sincerely yours James Joyce," which also becomes the recipient's address, the letter itself makes an endless circle. Here, Joyce becomes both a sender of his own letter and a recipient of his friend's letter at the same time. The world of literature that Joyce dreamed is this kind of endless Circean carnival in which subjects and objects take each other's place.

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Abstract

The Carnival of the Repressed Others: Re-Reading Joyce's "Circe" through Bakhtin

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Although there is no clear evidence for any direct acquaintance or influence between James Joyce and Mikhail Bakhtin, Joyce's works can be read through Bakhtin's theories. This essay aims at interpreting "Circe," the fifteenth episode of *Ulysses*, through the lens of Bakhtin's concept of "carnival" in which subject and object are indistinguishable, and the repressed others reverberate heteroglossic voices. In this interpretation, we do not limit "Circe" to Bloom's fantasy; we can discuss a limitless carnival in which the boundaries between subjects and objects are erased, and the suffocated voices of the repressed others including inanimate objects during the daytime are all polyphonically resounding throughout "Circe." Bakhtinian insight is very useful in reading Joyce's text because Joyce's project is subverting the seemingly fixed hierarchies and identities, and especially because "Circe" revises any totalizing interpretation of *Ulysses*.

■ Key words : Joyce, Circe, Bakhtin, carnival, heteroglossia, subject, object

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