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The Compositor of the Farce of Dustiny: Lacan Reading, and Being Read by, Joyce

Geoff Boucher

L'important n'est pas pour moi de pasticher *Finnegans Wake*—on sera toujours en dessous de la tâche—, c'est de dire en quoi, je donne à Joyce, en formulant ce titre, Joyce le symptôme, rien de moins que son nom propre, celui où je crois qu'il se serait reconnu dans la dimension de la nomination.

What is important to me is not to pastiche *Finnegan's Wake*—one will always be inferior to the task—but to say how I give to Joyce, in formulating this title, Joyce the Symptom, nothing less than his proper name, a name in which, I believe, he would have recognised himself in the dimension of nomination.

Jacques Lacan, "Joyce le Symptôme" (Lacan 1975, session of 20.6.1975).

"We have learnt to see Joyce as Lacan's own symptom," writes Jean-Michel Rabaté, "and as the *sinthome* par excellence" (2006, 26). This duality of Joyce as an unreadable text permeated with enjoyment and at the same time as an enigma that Lacan wants to decipher supplies the key to an understanding of Seminar XXIII. Lacan's addition to the triad of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary of a fourth term, the Σ (or *sinthome*) firms up his late shift from the speaking-being (*parlêtre*, the Lacanian neologism that indicates the insertion of the human being into the signifying chain) to MAN (*LOM*, a Lacanian play on *l'homme*). Instead of the human being as *inserted* into the Symbolic Order, Seminar XXIII presents Joyce as *inserting* himself into language, tying the signifier to the body in a special, unique way. For Lacan, the *sinthome* is eccentric to the registers of the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary, yet it paradoxically links them when the Name-of-the-Father fails. The implication is carried in the concept of "nomination" that the Name-of-the-Father (or its structural equivalents, such as "Woman," "God" and "Joyce") makes language possible for the individual.

Lacan's final complete seminar on Joyce represents a last, convulsive revision of the entire corpus of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Prompted by an invitation to speak at an international Joyce conference by leading French Joyce scholar, Jacques Aubert, Lacan turned the seminar of 1975-1976 into an exploration of the questions raised by the paper delivered the previous year. Rabaté's comment sums up the findings of a torrent of recent scholarship on what is perhaps Lacan's most perplexing seminar. Thanks to this material, we can now draw some conclusions about the status and implications of Lacan's Seminar XXIII on "Joyce the Symptom,"¹ both

¹ [This title is the name given by J-A Miller to the final session of Jacques Lacan's

regarding psychoanalytic theory and Lacan's reading of Joyce. But there are two main unresolved problems within the current debate on Seminar XXIII—whether Lacan regarded Joyce as a psychotic (stabilised or otherwise) and the degree to which Lacan's final seminar represents a belated *rapprochement* with Derrida on the question of “generalised writing” (Rabaté 2001, 154-182). This paper provides a summary overview of the major discussions of Lacan's intervention and then probes some of the findings, especially regarding the Joycean text.

I position Lacan's inquiry in the context of his research programme into the unconscious, centred on the object (a) as the epistemological object of psychoanalysis, and then bring out the opposed character of the psychoanalytic and deconstructive readings of Joyce. While highlighting the insights that Lacan's reading of Joyce enables, I question Lacan's basic strategy, namely, to interpret not the unconscious in the text but the activity of writing as a symptom. This commits Lacan to a biographical approach that he is elsewhere sceptical towards, with the consequence that he is forced to regard the Joycean text itself as situated in the dimension of unreadability; Lacan speaks of Joyce's “scribbledehobble” in terms of “radically private jokes” that he elsewhere describes as located in the Real “which forecloses meaning” (Lacan 2005, session of 20.6.1975). A perhaps overlooked result of this is that not only does Joyce become Lacan's symptom, but also that the Lacanian seminar becomes dominated by a literary trope—that of inversion and reversal in the mirror of the *dopplegänger*. Lacan locates Joyce as both a saint of letters and a literary Sphinx, declaring Joyce un-analysable on the basis that he enjoys without suffering, because Joyce believes in his Thing, the *sinthome* of his work. Lacan thinks that the Joycean riddle can be solved with a fourth loop in the notorious Borromean knot. But, of course, with truly Sophoclean irony, it is Lacan who is the riddle. As Lacan's theoretical prose becomes increasingly Joycean, the Joycean relation to the literary father is transposed onto Lacan's relation to Freudian psychoanalysis.

The Joycean *Sinthome*

Certainly, the Joyce seminar is remarkable for its intellectual energy. Although the seminar is interrupted by Lacan's trip to America, it is clear that Lacan re-read the central Joycean works during the year—*Portrait of the Artist*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*—in their entirety. If this were not already enough, Lacan also made his way through the scholarly volumes populating the walls of Aubert's extensive library, with caches of books being delivered weekly and regular midnight visits to Aubert to question him on recondite points of Joyce interpretation. At one point, Lacan declares to his audience that “you must be thinking that when it comes to Joyce, I'm a fish out of water”. And he explains:

Seminar, Book XXIII, which is called *Le Sinthome*. Editor.]

“he writes with such peculiar subtlety in English that it becomes disarticulated” (Lacan 2005, session of 20.6.1975). That Lacan was defeated by Joyce’s language seems unlikely for Lacan, of all people—this is the same Lacan who a few weeks before this mock-admission declares to his American audience that he has been practising his English by reading Joyce in the original (Smith 2000, 25–40). Lacan dives into the wonderland of Joyce’s works, principally concerned with its implications for psychoanalytic research and clinical practice. If Lacan is finally defeated by what we might call Joycean *llanguage*,² this is not a consequence of English but of the peculiar structure of these riddling texts.

In the process, Lacan begins to produce an enigmatic series of new concepts within a completely fresh “turn” in his thinking. If Lacan’s trajectory can be characterised by the progression through the Imaginary (from the “Rome Discourse” to Seminar II), the Symbolic (the “structuralist” Lacan of seminars III to XI) and the Real (the “post-structuralist” Lacan of seminars XII to XX) (Zizek 1989, 132–33), then Seminar XXIII seems to cement a fourth and final Lacan—the Lacan of “nomination” and the Σ , the fourth loop in the Borromean knot; of the *sinthome* and MAN; of the Joycean ego as alternative to psychosis; and, of the radically individual character of the unconscious and the replacement of Lacanian “linguistrickery” by a new “faunetics”. Now, the loops of the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary cannot be knotted together without the intervention of the *sinthome*, which, more than just an archaic spelling of the symptom, is the centre of gravity of the human being, the kernel of enjoyment sustaining the individual. For Lacan, the *sinthome* is “the most proper element of the human dimension” (Lacan quoted in Rabaté 2001, 165) and the referent or result of the process of nomination. The implication of the Σ (or *symptôm*) is that this process connects the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real through the nomination (in the sense of election) of a functional equivalent for the Name-of-the-Father. Nomination involves, then, both the election by the human being of their singular insertion into language, and the process whereby the subject “makes a name for themselves,” up to and including Joyce’s evasion of psychosis, despite the absence of the paternal function, through his nomination of his own ego as the functional equivalent of the Name-of-the-Father. In the first instance, “Joyce the symptom” signifies that the proper name nominated by James, and made through the literary works of Joyce, is coextensive with the *sinthome* of a radically private use of language: Joyce (the literary name) *is* the symptom of Joyce (the man); the works of Joyce are the replacement for a radically deficient paternal signifier that keeps the man Joyce sane. Who can doubt Lacan’s intellectual courage? Can there be any real uncertainty that this is a fundamental revision of the conceptual armature of the previous decade? Surely, this is a last rupture with everything that had been established in so-called “Lacanianism”—almost, one might say, a handful of suggestive brushstrokes on a fresh canvas.

² [A term referred to as “lalangue” in Lacanian terms and context. Editor.]

Along the way there are also the opaque topological ruminations, Duchampian wordplays and intellectual meanderings that characterise the final period. Lacan regrets that he has nothing to say and wonders whether Joyce was mad. He wonders with strategic naivety why Joyce bothered to publish his scribbledehobble. Gone are the dazzling insights into the texts of Shakespeare and Claudel, Sophocles and Gide. Instead of textual commentary that suddenly blazes into the heart of a new understanding of the literary work, we have pages and pages of multicoloured diagrams, word salads and neo-Dadaesque provocations to the audience, numerological speculations and diagrammatic conjectures. It is not just that Lacan simply cannot absorb the entire library of Joyce scholarship in a hectic year of teaching. In the place where a new reading might be, there is a biographical interpretation of the Joycean work that becomes more insistent as Lacan's perplexity at the texts increases. At the same time, Lacan's own text becomes ever more openly Joycean: acrostic rather than aphoristic; inscrutable rather than enigmatic; hermetic rather than hermeneutic. "Joyce the symptom"—whose symptom is this Joyce that seems forced on Lacan? If Lacan baptises Joyce with his proper name—as Lacan claims to do—then who prepares the way for whom? Joyce might indeed have had, as Lacan suspects, a redeemer delusion. But the redeemer's mission is primed by comparatives—"one will always be inferior to the task"—if not superlatives. This is Lacan's position of enunciation throughout the seminar: "I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?" (Matthew 3:14).

It is not that Lacan in his final seminar lacked intellectual power, but that his theoretical position lacked penetration—at least, into Joyce's texts. I do not accept the condescending theory of the advancing senility of the final years. The reduction of language to its letters, the condensation of complex discursive motifs into a series of deceptively simple sigla—these I would describe as perfectly Joycean, rather than intellectually enfeebled. I completely discount the theories of the "Lacanian delusion" and the master's sterility returning with a vengeance at the end of his life. These notions of a deficiency in Lacan's intellectual energies are contradicted by the text of the seminar at every point. Instead of speculations on the impotence of the master, to account for the cryptic nature of "Joyce the Symptom," the reading of Rabaté of Joyce as *Lacan's* symptom has immense potential. I understand Rabaté's position to have highlighted the relative difference in their respective powers of insight—where Lacan's interpretation of Joyce remains within the ambit of biographical criticism and traditional scholarship, the encounter with Joyce provokes one last revision of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

As Rabaté observes, throughout the seminar, Lacan's concern is not to position Joyce's work within the discourse of the university, as the object of a scholarly knowledge that barely conceals its will to mastery even as it puts the intimidated clerks to work (Rabaté 2001, 160). Instead, Lacan is operating within analytical discourse, where the analyst positions himself as the "trash" (the *trashitas* rather

than the pious *caritas*), the remainder of enjoyment left over from the signifying operations of the subject (1981). Lacan identifies the object (*a*), the *sinthome*, with the saintly man (*saint-homme*) who has renounced mastery, and then with St Thomas Aquinas (*sinthomaquinas*) who is just as crazy as Joyce (and Lacan) (“Joyce displaces the *saint homme* from my *madaquinisme*”) (Lacan 2005, session of 18.11.1975). Employing just such a mythical knowledge, the analyst, as agent within analytical discourse, is positioned in dialogue with the divided subject of the unconscious, and by insisting on the place of the symptom—the object (*a*)—the analyst allows the subject to produce those master signifiers that are, rather than its symptom, the cause of its suffering. Yet the twist is that in Seminar XXIII, it is *Joyce* who occupies the place of the *sinthomaquinas*, whose language is the *madaquinisme* of acrostic re-combinations, trans-linguistic homophonies and untranslatable puns. Joyce is Lacan’s literary saint, whose letters reduce the English language to litter even as they generate a “Joyce” who is entirely distributed across the ruins of the signifier. In the “faunetics” of Lacan’s *Wake*, the text is traversed by a major movement whose tropology is highly literary: ironic reversal and the chiasmatic exchange of properties. As Lacan becomes ever more Joycean—moving, indeed, towards what some have called a “post-Joycean conception of the end of analysis” (Harari 2002, 359)—Joyce increasingly occupies the position of Lacan’s divine *trashitas*.

A focus on language and the operations of literary irony in the seminar implies acceptance of the position of, for instance, Philippe Julien, that the Borromean knots are a distraction, a lure for the desire to directly comprehend the transmitted message in the form of a spatialised schema. Indeed, I consider the entire departure of the Borromean topology—Lacan admits to being “the prey of the knot”—to exhibit an imaginary captivation. Along these lines, Julien proposes that these diagrams, initially introduced as mnemonic devices to support a uniform pedagogy, usurp their cognitively subordinate status and posture as non-symbolisable mathematical objects (Julien 1994). Yet they are everywhere used by Lacan as visual representations for linguistically conveyed concepts. Accordingly, their topological value is nil, because they are not generated by formal mathematical reasoning but through the symbolic postulation of analogies, although as images of theoretical positions their utility is unquestionable. Lacan’s fundamental insight is that the unconscious is structured like a language, not like a mathematical surface. That Lacan decided to express this deep theoretical insight through the quasi-mathematical diagrams is potentially unfortunate. Instead of Lacan’s mathematical reflections, we can interpret the ruination of the signifier and the endlessly suggestive enjoy-meant of the recombination of letters into portmanteau words and polyvocal, multi-lingual jokes, that characterises *Finnegans Wake* as a final model for the operations of the unconscious.

Lacan's encounter with Joyce

In his lecture to Aubert's symposium, Lacan stresses that the encounter between Joyce and Lacan happened in reality—in 1921 they actually met in a Paris bookstore—as well as in a certain relation to language, one that ruptures the everyday pragmatics of what Lacan calls “the chatterbox,” and which instead facilitates the emergence of equivocation and polyvocality. We can specify that this encounter with Joyce involves both subjective identification and theoretical revision.

In Seminar XXIII (although not for the first time), Lacan stages a profound identification with Joyce. According to Néstor Braunstein, Joyce is Lacan's literary alter ego (Braunstein quoted in Rabaté 2001, 174). Yet perhaps this formulation is not quite accurate. Lacan maintains that Joyce is indifferent to his reception yet highly narcissistic. Despite his lack of human sympathy for Joyce, in the Joyce Seminar, Lacan highlights a cluster of shared symbolic traits—their mutual rejection of Catholicism, their style in language, their reduction of labyrinthine signifying complexity to a series of elementary diagrams. In other words, Joyce functions here for Lacan not as imaginary other but as bearer of a symbolic identification. Joyce, Lacan declares, “is like me: a heretic”. But the Lacanian “heresy” (*heresie*—Lacan's pun on RSI, the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary) is to be supplemented by the Joycean apostasy.

Lacan's identification with Joyce determines the transposition of this relation into the text, with frequent elision of the distinction between Joyce and his characters. “Stephen,” Lacan announces, “is in other words, Joyce as he imagines himself” (2005, session of 13.01.1976). And again: “Stephen is Joyce as he solves his own riddle,” through the search for an absent/lacking father in the progress of Ulysses. “*Ulysses* bears witness to the way in which Joyce remains rooted in his father, even as he denies him—and this is exactly his symptom” (Lacan 2005, session of 13.01.1976). Yet strangely, Lacan at the same time announces his intention to interpret the symptom of the work rather than the unconscious within the text.

There is no doubt that Lacan read copiously Joyce and Joyce criticism. Lacan's research question, however, is not “what is the meaning of these texts?” but “what was the function of his art for Joyce?” If the fertility of a Lacanian approach has been abundantly demonstrated by the critical works of Jean-Michel Rabaté (as the foremost among several Lacanian Joyce critics), then, Lacan's own strategy is based on a frankly biographical approach.

Guided by an attentive reading of Richard Ellmann's important work, Aubert's patient scholarship and close analysis of Joyce's letters, Lacan's thesis is that Joyce's art supplements the deficient Name-of-the-Father. Lacan appears to have interpreted both *Portrait* and *Ulysses* as autobiographical. For Lacan, then, the crucial datum is the failure of the paternal function on the part of John Joyce, so that the writing of James Joyce becomes a supplement to this fundamental deficiency. Joyce, as the thesis goes, “makes a Name [of the Father] for himself” through his endless writing,

thus fathering himself as the son. The Lacanian discourse on Joycean “original sin” interprets this motif in terms of the failure of the RSI to knot together around the Name-of-the-Father, so that writing acts as a prosthetic paternity, a rejoining of the sundered links. Joyce’s artistic career is interpreted externally as the symptom of a compensation for the paternal deficiency, based in a wish for a real father.

In the field of Joyce studies, at least, Lacan’s theoretical compass is determined by his respect for traditional literary scholarship, especially that of Robert Adams and Clive Hart. Lacan also makes use of Jacques Aubert’s edition of *Ulysses*. Adams *Surface and Symbol: The Consistency of Ulysses* proposes that most of the texture that provides narrative verisimilitude in the novel is superficial detail (some of it factually wrong) rather than “luminous symbol”. Accordingly, the “meaningless is interwoven with the meaningful” and the novel “does not make a neat allegory” (Adams 1967, 25–26). Lacan’s interpretation of this is that Adams has identified the distinction between the imaginary consistency of the diegetic world formulated in the symbolic medium of the narration, and the Joycean epiphanies that appear at right angles to the symbolic texture as interruptions where meaning and meaninglessness interpenetrate. But like Adams, Lacan does not fully take up the implications of Stephen’s (highly Lacanian) equation of Shakespeare with the Ghost in *Hamlet*. One result is that the Oedipal dynamics of the struggle over literary progenitors for Joyce (the name, not the man) are missed by Lacan, and consequently, *Ulysses* begins to seem like a text transitional towards psychosis.

Hart’s *Structure and Motif in Finnegans Wake* uses the motif of the crossed circle to describe the cosmological structure of *Finnegans Wake*. The quartered circle symbolises the Viconian division of history into four ages (if you include the *ricorso* as an age, which Joyce does), while the cyclical structure adumbrates the narrative circle of the *Wake* itself. All of this thematises the circularity of a text that returns on itself in the first and last lines, yet constantly generates new interpretations with every traversal of the textual surface. Finally, the motif of the crossed circle indicates the problem of squaring the circle, that is, a mathematical problem involving infinite recursion, which adequately summarises the generative matrix of this most important Joycean work (Hart 1962). But for Lacan, the elaborate manipulation of rings of string and quasi-geometrical figures is not intended to summon up the “bad infinity” of deconstructive dissemination. Instead, the act of abstraction from the textual surface to its generative problematic discloses the mechanism by which the whole work forms a “consistency without unity”—that is, a style of the subject.

Lacan is wary of what we might call “psychoanalysis and other ruses”—depth hermeneutics, father-son patterns and the collective unconscious. He excoriates Mark Shechner’s *Joyce in Nighttown*, on the basis that it trivialises the actual text, reducing it to a schema external to the significations of the nighttown sequence (Shechner 1974). Shechner is taken as illustrative of “applied psychoanalysis,” which involves not an encounter with the text with the potential to transform theory,

but the application of an interpretive grid to the text so as to validate a hermeneutic result actually determined outside the work itself. Lacan is also highly suspicious of the psychoanalytic motifs nested within the text. He rejects the conception of Bloom as father to Dedalus. Lacan dismisses Joyce's dalliance with occultism and obscurantism (Blavatsky). His comment on the relation between *Finnegan's Wake* and the collective unconscious is profound and damning: the idiosyncrasy of the text is a precise refutation of the speculations of Jungian psychoanalysis, which stands unveiled as itself a symptomatic defense against the unconscious. Finally, and perhaps too definitively, Lacan rejects the mythological structuration of *Ulysses* and the *Wake* (Homer and Vico).

Lacan's intuition is that Joyce is a literary saint—on the one hand, meaningless trash, an objectival remainder of the signification process; on the other hand, a figure who “is” only as text, that is, who dissolves into the Joycean writing. According to Lacan, “in his art, Joyce, in a privileged manner, aimed at the fourth term of the knot” (2005, session of 09.12.1975). At one level, what this means is fairly clear: “Joyce compensated for the lacking father” (Lacan 2005, session of 17.02.1976). As Lacan says, “what I proposed very gently last time was that Joyce has a symptom whose origin is this: that his father was lacking, radically lacking—he speaks of nothing but this” (2005, session of 17.02.1976). Again: “it turns out in *Ulysses* that Joyce has to support the father's subsistence” (Lacan 2005, session of 18.11.1975).

Yet before we conclude with Catherine Millot that the opposition between analysts and critics entails a division in the reception of Joyce between the meaninglessness and the meaningfulness of the texts, we need to consider Lacan's interpretation of the enigma of Joyce's work (Millot 1988, 207–09). Again, Lacan does not fully observe his own stricture regarding the distinction between an external approach (the enigma of Joyce's work; art as symptom) an internal hermeneutic (the enigmas in Joyce's work; the textual unconscious). The acrostics of the Joycean text fascinate Lacan as a new riddle of the Sphinx—that is, Joyce is an anti-Oedipus for Lacanian psychoanalysis. Aubert's reading of the Stephen-Bloom relation as a puzzle whose solution is “the Name-of-the-Father” is indicative of the fascination, as is Lacan's own interpretation of the moment in *Portrait* where Stephen is beaten by his friends in terms of the bodily ego as a detachable envelope.

Lacan is interested, for instance, in the riddle that Stephen Dedalus tells his class:

The cock crew, The sky was blue: The bells in heaven, Were striking eleven.
'Tis time for this poor soul, To go to heaven. (Joyce 1968, 22)

The “solution” to the riddle is “the fox burying his grandmother under a hollybush”. But as Roberto Harari notes, this riddle is preceded by another that has a clearer bearing on psychoanalysis (2002, 134–36):

Riddle me, riddle me, randy row.
My father gave me seeds to sow.

The rest of the riddle (not supplied) is “the seed was black and the ground was white/Riddle me that and I’ll give you a pipe”. The solution to this riddle is *writing a letter*. The paternal seed only germinates in the form of letters. According to Lacan, the distinction between Joyce and Oedipus is that because Joyce believes in his *sinthome*, he does not desire to solve the riddle of himself (Harari 2002, 135). But it is not clear that Lacan can entirely resist the temptation.

Lacan’s confrontation with deconstruction

Perhaps for this reason, at the moment of the turn in avant-garde theory, during the mid-1970s, to textual formalism and “revolutions of the word,” Lacan is not interested in the liberation of the signifier. Unimpressed by the ruptures with the dominant ideology said to spring from the dissolution of the subject into the textual network, Lacan’s objective is exactly the opposite of the literary experimentalism of Philippe Sollers and the critical vanguardism of Roland Barthes. Lacan’s question goes something like this. *Given* the generation of the identity of the speaking subject in the anonymity of the signifying chain, through a contingent series of identifications, *how* can we account for the evident style of the subject, its idiosyncratic adoption of language, expressive of a unique subjectivity?

Such a question means that Lacan is ineluctably involved in a theoretical confrontation with Derrida. Indeed, the various “revolutions of the word” supposedly heralded by the Joycean text, although often enlisting Lacan as a theoretical authority, in actuality employ deconstructive rather than psychoanalytic insights.

One dimension of this confrontation dates from Seminar XX and the reading of Lacan by deconstructionists Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (1992). The basic accusation made in that text is that Lacan reinstates the unitary subject of the Cartesian *cogito* by means of the ruse of placing it “under the bar” of signification, that is, in the unconscious. The elementary Lacanian rejoinder to this frank misreading is that the subject of the unconscious is eccentric to itself—its substance is external to its existence as a product of the chain of signification, lying as it does in the object (*a*). Hence the Lacanian subject cannot be conceptualised as a Cartesian unity of thinking and being—however disguised, buried or repressed—because it is by definition divided between these alternatives. This is the entire meaning of Lacan’s tortuous excursions into the topic of the forced choice and his restatement of the Cartesian *cogito* as a disjunctive syllogism, from Seminar XI onwards. According to Lacan, the *cogito* does not run “I am thinking, therefore I am,” but “where I am thinking, there I am not, and where I am, there I am not thinking” (Lacan 1998a, 224–25). This rejoinder is not explicitly provided in Seminar XX—Lacan has other things on his mind and only says that

although Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy read “with the worst of intentions,” they are effectively addressing a love letter to him by supposing his full knowledge of the unconscious (Lacan 1998b, 64–69). Yet it is easy to see how Seminar XXIII completes a Lacanian rejoinder: Joyce, the subject, as Joyce-the-symptom, has all of his being, his substance, outside him, in the *sinthome* of the Joycean work.

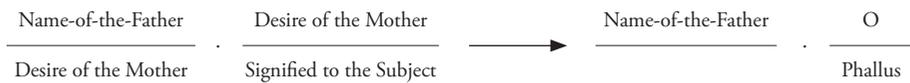
The apparent *rapprochement* with Derrida in Seminar XXIII—Lacan declares that some of their insights are in accord, on the basis of Lacan’s prior demonstration of the existence of the bar of signification—therefore conceals a deep underlying difference. Derrida reads Joyce as an instance of the dissemination generated by the “infrastructures,” deep textual quasi-structures supporting and subverting the signifier with their limitless and anarchic play (Derrida 1988, 27–75). Accordingly, Derrida positions Joyce in the lineage of textual experimentation running through Artaud, Mallarmé and Celan. Indeed, from his opening work on Husserl onwards, Derrida steadfastly maintained that Joyce’s project was the opposite of the Husserlian reduction of multiplicity to univocal self-presence—the Joycean work is taken to represent a dispersion of the self-present intentionality of the ego into the textual network that supports and subverts consciousness (Derrida 1978, 102). In grouping Derrida’s interpretive strategy with his own insights, then, Lacan is probably being a bit too generous—just as he had previously recommended to his audience that they all read Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, despite the hostility of these authors. For in actuality, Lacan is highly sceptical of the deconstructive effort to demonstrate that the dissemination of the textual infrastructures explains the Joycean text, that is, to claim Joyce as the broadcast mechanism for a grammatological demonstration. While the Derridean record tends to grind out the same threnody irrespective of the literary author in question, it is manifestly evident for Lacan that Joyce is exactly the opposite of what he should be for deconstruction—Lacan’s Joyce is a signature.

That the Joycean liberation of the signifier brings the unconscious into play is not for a moment questioned by Lacan. But Lacan’s interest lies elsewhere, in the proper name of the author, that is, in the emergence of a distinctive style of the subject *despite* the “subversion of the subject in the dialectic of desire”. The limitations of the deconstructive position, by contrast with Lacanian psychoanalysis, have been explored in detail by Peter Dews in *Logics of Disintegration* (1987). According to Dews, the problem faced by Derrida is that the endless dissemination of the textual infrastructures prevents the emergence of meaning and therefore blocks the identity of the subject. By contrast, Lacan can explain the emergence of meaning without reverting to the fiction of the self-present intentionality of the speaking subject, because Lacan proposes that the object (*a*) is a non-specular double for the subject. In the “lost” object, the divided subject can unconsciously recognise themselves without that involving a transparent, Cartesian ego (Dews 1987, 107–33).

Lacan’s theorisation of the object (*a*) happens in relation to the concepts of alienation and separation. Conceptually, the entry of the speakingbeing into

language requires the transformation of the linearity of instincts into the circularity of the drives, through the cutting out of any determined object of the instincts and its replacement by a signifier that acts as the ideational representative of the drives. But this logically requires two steps (even though these factually happen at the same time): the creation of a “hole in the Real” and the emplacement of a signifier in that hole. We can relate these two steps to alienation and separation, as well as to Lacan’s earlier schema of the metaphor of the Name-of-the-Father, developed in the text “On the Possible Treatment of Psychosis”. In that initial explanation, Lacan proposed that “the metaphor of the Name-of-the-Father ... is the metaphor that substitutes this Name in the place first symbolised by the operation of the absence of the mother” (Lacan 1977, 200).

This process can be schematised as follows:



But Lacan continues:

Let us now try to conceive of a circumstance of the subjective position in which, to the appeal of the Name-of-the-Father responds, not the absence of the real father ... but the inadequacy of the signifier itself. ... The presence of the signifier in the Other is, in effect, a presence usually closed to the subject, because it usually persists in a state of repression ... [But, for the psychotic,] to the point at which the Name-of-the-Father is called ... may correspond in the Other, then, a mere hole, which, by the inadequacy of the metaphoric effect, will provoke a corresponding hole at the place of phallic signification (Lacan 1977, 200–01).

The paternal “No!” has not repressed the mother as enjoyment, and so the Name-of-the-Father cannot operate as a phallic signification. Instead, it is foreclosed. The consequences of this are familiar from Seminar III: the imaginary status of the phallic signifier, the degeneration of language into reified objects and sentence fragments of a *Grundsprache* (“basic language,” or “mother tongue”) profoundly permeated with enjoyment, the invasion of the Real in the form of hallucinations and a paranoid relation to the Other.

But in his subsequent considerations of the dialectic of desire, in Seminar VI, Lacan appears to develop this notion of a paternal “No!” in the form of the “unary trait,” the mark of lack in the Other, symbolised as $S(\emptyset)$. The initial mark that occupies the place of the hole in the Real created by the absence of the mother as enjoyment cannot be a signifier, because it is itself the *condition* for entry into language. That implies that the $S(\emptyset)$ is neither articulable nor differential: it is

non-fungible and silent, yet it marks the place of the infant's entry into language. We can conjecture that the object (a), the object of the drive that is also the object of desire, is the phantasmic "referent" of this impossible, primordial "ur-signifier," $S(\emptyset)$. Like the $S(\emptyset)$, the object (a) is non-symbolisable yet always returns to the same place. Unlike the $S(\emptyset)$, the object (a) has an imaginary component, appearing as it does foremost in the other.

The non-fungible mark that creates a hole in the Real and makes it possible for the infant to enter the Symbolic Order occupies the position of the object (a)—the ideational representative of the drives—only to be displaced by the object signified by the paternal signifier. This mark is not a signifier properly speaking—because it is non-displaceable and non-differential. But it is also not a part of the Real (it makes a hole in the Real). Nor is it Imaginary, although it has an imaginary aspect insofar as it appears through the other. Otherwise expressed: the unique entry point of the human being into the field of the signifier happens—right from the start of Lacan's thinking—through the intervention of something that is not, properly speaking, Imaginary, Symbolic or Real.

In other words, alongside the cataclysmic revision of Lacanian psychoanalysis, something else is also going on, namely, a return to the concepts elaborated in Seminar III. Here, Lacan sees Joyce as a proof a contrario of the hypothesis that the Name-of-the-Father is the key to entry into the Symbolic Order.

Lacan's insights into the Joycean text

For Lacan, the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father is the basic key to the Joycean text—with the difference, compared to the figure of Schreber investigated in Seminar III, that Joyce engages in "nomination," that is, construction of a replacement for the paternal function. The liberation of the signifier in Joyce's work is accomplished through an aberrant relation to the paternal function, so that art is the process by which Joyce "makes his name". The theme of original sin in Joyce is therefore interpreted as a sign of paternal failure and in particular paternal perversion. Paternal perversion describes the father-son relation in terms of a turn to the father, as a defense against the mother, that generates filial masochism. In particular, the deficiency of the real father—John Joyce—leads James Joyce to seek replacement paternal figures with sufficient gravity to supplement the lack in the Name-of-the-Father. This leads Lacan to interpret Bloom and Stephen as sons rather than a father-son figure, with the consequence that the literary fathers (Homer, Dante, and especially, Shakespeare) are the problem posed by the Joycean text.

Yet, paradoxically, Lacan does not fully follow up this insight into *Portrait*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, perhaps because of his determination to interpret art as symptom rather than the unconscious in art. Instead, the accent in Lacan's reading falls on the fabrication of a paternal signifier through the artifice of "making a name".

Lacan provides a brilliant reading of the transition from *Portrait* to *Ulysses* that demonstrates, that the Name-of-the-Father and the lack of a sexual relation are correlates, just as the lack of the Name-of-the-Father can be correlated with the existence of a sexual relation. For Joyce *forges* a Name-of-the-Father for himself; consequently, there *is* a sexual relation between James Joyce and Nora Joyce (nee Barnacle).

Harari summarises this economically in the chapter “Eve in the Labyrinth of Daedalus” of his *How James Joyce Made His Name*. The chapter sets itself the task of interpretation of the “beginnings of Joyce’s literary project” in *Stephen Hero* and *Portrait*. In *Portrait*, the accent falls on the “artificer” whose artisanal production is aestheticised through Joyce’s “Thomist” aesthetics. Stephen Dedalus is linked through naming to artifice in a lineage that connects him to Daedalus (an inventor) and then Hephaestus (*the* artificer). Daedalus constructs the labyrinth of Minos and then becomes imprisoned in his own creation. Escaping with his son Icarus by means of artificial wings, the son flies too close to the sun, falls and dies. The son and the father are mutually exclusive categories, for Joyce. His nomadic existence, meanwhile, testifies to his failure to find a protective father who would shelter his endeavours.

Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystic state, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. On that mystery and not on the Madonna which the cunning Italian intellect flung to the mob of Europe the church is founded and founded irremovably because founded, like the world, macro and microcosm, upon the void. (Joyce 1968, 170)

Joyce concludes that “*Amor Matris*, subjective and objective genitive, may be the only true thing in life”. The notion that the love of the mother enjoys the ambivalence of the genitive (love of and love for) is reminiscent of the desire of the Other, as is Joyce’s conclusion that “paternity may be a legal fiction”. But in the section on Shakespeare, Stephen elaborates that Shakespeare, in writing the character Hamlet, “was not the father of his own son merely, but, being no more a son, he was and felt himself the father of all of his race, the father of his own grandfather, the father of his unborn grandson” (Joyce 1968, 171). What is at stake here is the fabrication of an Other of the Other, expressed in terms of a fantasy of auto-genesis. The father begins when and where the son ends. Correlatively, to become a father the son must destroy his own father, and father himself, as the only possible way to be son and father at once.

For Lacan, the Name-of-the-Father is located in the place of lack. But Joyce does not really lack. Evidence for this comes from his relationship to Nora: Nora fits him, says Lacan, like a glove. That is to say, with Nora *there exists a sexual relationship*. For Joyce, Lacan stresses, Nora is The Woman. She “fitted” him like

a glove—that is, there is nothing contingent about their encounter (Harari 2002, 164-70). In the letters, a set of exacting sexual practices highlight this fitting like a glove—Joyce wants to savour the “very stink and sweat that rises from [Nora’s] arse”—and when children intrude into the relationship, there is trouble, because there is no space in the glove for three (Harari 2002, 165-68).

So, secondly, the existence of a sexual relation means that there is a necessary rather than contingent connection between Real and Symbolic, drive and desire. Lacan diagnoses the existence of a sexual relation in Nora/Molly and uses this as the key to understanding Joyce’s women, including Eve/Issy. The presence of a sexual relation in the absence of a paternal function means that a scission opens between Joycean enjoyment and the enjoyment of Woman (God).

Joyce’s challenge to Lacan

The problem for the Lacanian reading of *Portrait*, *Ulysses* and the *Wake* is that according to the considerations outlined so far, Joyce should be psychotic. Yet as Rabaté stresses, Joyce scholars are reluctant to consider these works to be the productions of a psychosis (Rabaté 2006, 26–42). Indeed, Lacan himself has serious reservations as to whether the texts are authentic productions of a psychotic state—he considers most of it to engage in a sort of mimicry of schizophrenic discourse.

Before examining the implications of this, I want to simply gather the evidence that this is indeed, and despite strong reservations, the overall direction of Lacan’s thinking. Lacan regards Joyce as the author of a progression of documents—*Stephen Hero*, *Portrait*, *Ulysses*, *Wake*—that testify to a struggle against psychosis. “In fact,” Lacan maintains:

in the continuing progress of his art—namely that speech which comes to be written, to be broken, to be dislocated, so that in the end to read him seems an encounter with a continuing progress, from his first efforts in the critical essays, then in *Portrait of the Artist* and again in *Ulysses*, concluding with *Finnegans Wake*—it is hard not to see that a certain relation to language is increasingly imposed on him, to the point where he ends up breaking or dissolving language itself, by decomposing it, going beyond phonatory identity (Lacan 2005, session of 17.02.1976).

I have already mentioned the deficiency of the paternal name and the existence of a sexual relation. Lacan also mentions three other decisive symptoms of psychotic process in Joyce: hallucinations (imposed voices and a redeemer delusion), the disintegration of language into letters and the irruption of the real in the form of epiphanies. Finally, implied in Lacan’s discourse and supported by Joyce’s biography, there are strong aetiological indications of a schizogenic situation in the family background, which, taken together with Lucia’s own schizophrenic break, appear to ground Lacan’s position in a clinically solid diagnostic insight.

Hallucinations. Lacan seems convinced that Joyce suffered from a redeemer delusion—not to redeem God, but to redeem the father at God’s behest. Indeed, the “barmy idea” of redemption happens insofar as “there is a relation of the son to the father”. Lacan proposes that this results in Joyce’s language (or Llanguage, *lalangue*, pre-Symbolic babble) that he calls *jouis-sens* (enjoy-meant) and links this to “imposed speech”—the voice of Them in paranoid hallucination as well as the inspired wordplays of Joycean artifice. The Real—the register of the Thing—is ab-sens (absent meaning), present in Joycean Llanguage. According to Lacan, Joyce accepted the “calling” (by God) to break up the English language and eliminate mindless routinisation from it.

Lacan also considers that Joyce transposed his own symptom of imposed voices onto Lucia when he maintained that she was capable of marvellous forms of communication. Lacan interprets this as a claim about telepathy and understands that Joyce thereby implicates himself in his daughter’s symptom. For Lacan, Lucia is an extension of Joyce’s symptom/*sinthome*. Joyce believed in Lucia as in his writing: for Joyce, she was more intelligent than others, capable of miraculously informing him about others’ fate; she is merely eccentric, she does not hear voices but is capable of telepathy.

Language. According to Lacan, Joyce “allows himself to be invaded by the essentially phonematic qualities of speech, by its polyphony” (Lacan 2005, session of 16.07.1975). The implication is that in Joycean portmanteau words and linguistic puns, we are dealing not with metaphors but with moments where the “knot” of the *sinthome*, essential for holding the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary together for Joyce, momentarily fails. The implication is that in the place of metaphor, Joyce maintains endless chains of metonymic equivocation. But these chains of metonymic equivocation are punctuated, not by metaphors, but by moments where the meaningless Real discloses itself. Accordingly, his text is an archipelago of epiphanies in a sea of metonymy, which Lacan understands to consist of moments of the “splendour of Being” or irruption of the Real, into the banality of corrupted speech or everyday experience. In this sense, the Joycean practice of annihilating English with a fundamentally Other language that would make way for these isolated moments of radiance is not unlike Schreber’s *Grundsprache* from Seminar III.

Epiphanies. Indeed, the epiphanies are interrupted moments of speech reminiscent of the fragmented discourse of Schreber’s rays. The epiphany must be rigorously opposed to equivocation—in equivocation (especially punning) the meaning emerges only with a saturation of context; in epiphanies, the radiance emerges as a rupture with a context defined in advance as meaningless (banal). As Harari observes:

the *extasis* that comes over being at the moment of the epiphany does not generate meaning. This would also imply—as we have observed in Joyce’s

work—a failure of metaphorisation... The evacuation of phallic signification from what surges up in the epiphany, touching on mysticism and devoid of all meaning, means that it can be categorised... as being in contact with the Thing (Harari 2002, 73, 77).

Aetiology. In aetiological terms, there is plenty of evidence to support Lacan's contention of a lifelong struggle against psychosis. There appears to be a crisis between *Portrait* and *Ulysses* insofar as Joyce's conviction that "one great part of every human existence is passed in a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wideawake language, cutanddry grammar, and goahead plot" represents a radical departure from the aesthetics of *Portrait* (Ellmann 1975, 318). Between *Ulysses* and the *Wake* a fresh crisis intervenes: the death of Joyce's father and the collapse of Lucia into schizophrenia. It is reasonable to suppose that the radical derangement of the signifier into constituent letters in the *Wake* bears some relation to these events.

If *Ulysses* stages an abortive return to the father, then the *Wake* is an exploration of the "original sin" of his lack. The riddle Joyce poses throughout is that of writing a letter (as a result of a mandate from his father). In psychotic style, this writing a letter becomes a writing of letters, (de-)composed of letters and decomposed into letters. Hence the portmanteau words, the bilingual puns, the acrostic character of the Joycean text. Joycean ambition—summarised as the creation of the uncreated conscience of his race (genealogical not ethnic)—is immortality, the destiny of a unique writing, which Lacan finally identifies with the role of the Joycean ego in tying together the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary for James Joyce. To summarise: the Joycean *sinthome* is his own ego, considered in its almost megalomaniacal character as the bearer of a special destiny.

Now we come, though, to the crucial interpretive decision. A basic question facing anyone confronting Seminar XXIII is whether the *sinthome* appears when the standard Name-of-the-Father lacks (that is, when an individual might otherwise slide into psychosis), or instead whether every person has a *sinthome*. We can say that Lacan prefers the second option—he talks of the *sinthome* as the elementary human dimension and the psychotic kernel of every individual—and that the commentators have followed Lacan in this. From this perspective, Lacan performs on Lacan the same conceptual operation of abstraction and generalisation that he had previously performed on Freud's father in the Oedipus Complex. Recall that Lacan, from at least Seminar III onwards, maintains that it is not the empirical father who is decisive, but the signifier representing the paternal function—which means that the Oedipus Complex, with its requirement of identification with the imago of a specific individual, is a myth, a specious generalisation of a particular instance, but one that nonetheless accurately reflects something important about the underlying universal process.

The fourth knot—the Σ that supplements the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary, knotting them together—is originally the Name-of-the-Father (but no longer conceived as an element of the Symbolic Order). Reconceptualising the

Name-of-the-Father outside the Symbolic Order as the *sinthome*, the fourth loop of the quadruple Borromean knot, implies a new generalisation, of which the Name-of-the-Father is but one specification (others include Woman, God and Joyce). Hence Lacan asks himself, “was it not in compensation for this paternal abdication, this *Verwerfung* [foreclosure] in fact, that Joyce felt himself imperiously called—this is the very word, resulting from a mass of things in his text—to valorise his proper name at his father’s expense?” (2005, session of 10.02.1976). The Name-of-the-Father is lacking; Joyce writes to compensate for this, to make himself a proper name as well as to make a name for himself; and, “Joyce’s art is so particular that the term *sinthome* is very fitting for it” (Lacan 2005, 10.02.1976). *Sinthome*, the concept, is a high-level generalisation, a functional element that knots together the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary. *Sinthome*, the particular thing that every individual clings to, will be something absolutely singular, that functions as or in the place of the Name-of-the-Father. Does not the concept of “nomination” (the nomination of a *sinthome*) perform the same operation of abstraction and generalisation on the paternal function?

Elegant as this might seem, we should sound a note of caution. Lacan says explicitly that the *sinthome* in Joyce emerges through nomination, a peculiar operation that happens because of the failure of the Name-of-the-Father. Lacan is then being completely consistent when he characterises Joyce’s condition as a *de facto* foreclosure—that is, not one *de jure*, according to the Law. Joyce mimics the Law in his practice of nomination, thus operating so deep within the standard coordinates of the Oedipus Complex that it is quite possible to read *Finnegans Wake* in terms of an Oedipal address to the father and as an Oedipal staging in relation to the literary father, Shakespeare (Cheng 1984). At the same time, Joyce is “disinvested from the unconscious,” according to Lacan. He is not, in other words, a divided subject. For Lacan, because Joyce believed in his *sinthome*, he is not analysable—he does not suffer from his symptom; his symptom indeed cures him (or keeps him sane).

All of this suggests that rather than looking for a fourth and final Lacan, we should warily regard Joyce as a proof a *contrario* of Lacan’s earlier theses on psychosis and the phallus.

One reason for this interpretive strategy is supplied by efforts to do otherwise. Insofar as commentators such as Harari accept the notion of a fourth register as something that applies to every individual, they begin to adopt anti-Freudian positions. Harari notes that:

[t]he splendour of the *Wake* has to do, not with metaphor, but with enjoyment. This is the fundamental point about Joyce: he managed to work on his own enjoyment, all the while convinced that what he was producing was something exceptional and deserving of being recognised by the whole world. This amounts to a complete reversal of the Freudian view of art (Harari 2002, 82).

But other, larger reversals loom into view with this. The unconscious becomes radically individual, rather than formed in the intersubjective space of the discourse of the Other. The faunetics of language implies mimicry, rather than entry into a web of differential relations. Individuals with complementary *sinthomes* can enjoy a sexual relation. LOM does not lack. Entirely reasonable propositions when applied to the individual Joyce, these become rather suspect (at a minimum, they are radically under-motivated by the clinical data) when applied to everyone. Along this, radical path, finally, the global effectiveness of psychoanalysis is questioned, and with the Real, according to Harari, “Lacan sought to distance himself from what Freud dreamt up” (2002, 300).

Insofar as such a catastrophic position is motivated by Lacan’s own remarks—and I have said that they are hedged with qualifications and conjectures, representing a work in progress rather than a “final state”—I want to draw attention in closing to how this is in actuality a *Joycean* anti-psychoanalysis. For these positions—the suspicion towards both Jung and Freud, the rejection of the unconscious as operating at any level other than the collective/mythical, the radical individual ability to transcend linguistic determinations, the insistence on the possibility of a harmonious sexual relation, the belief that it is possible after all to fabricate a paternal signifier and thereby chose one’s own destiny—are Joyce’s positions first and foremost.

I suggest that this ironic reversal, where Joyce acts as a literary Sphinx that Lacan believes he solves, only to end up as the riddle himself, is generated by means of Lacan’s own strategy. Adopting a biographical approach, Lacan trembles on the threshold of declaring the Joycean text psychotic. He runs from this oracular determination, determined to find the text unreadable rather than to declare the author insane. Then he hesitates, not only because he is impressed by Joyce, but also because he is unsure how authentic this text actually is in terms of its testamentary value. But this is of course to state both the dilemma and its solution at the same time, for literary texts are not literal, no matter how much they might approach the status of letters. There is no contradiction between Joyce’s lifelong struggle against psychosis and literary genius, not just because there is no *a priori* opposition between these terms, but also for the more straightforward reason that a literary work is not entirely the product of authorial intentions. The entire dimension of mythological structuration and references to literary father figures—Homer, Dante and Shakespeare foremost—is overlooked by Lacan, who then ends up with something perilously close to a Joycean reading of Joyce, rather than a Lacanian interpretation of Ulysses and the Wake. We should be careful, I think, before we ascribe to this interplay of misreadings and reversals the status of a wholly new psychoanalytic theory.

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