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Afterword:
The Enigma of Jouissance
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Novelists often declare that characters in their novels tend to take on a life of their own, so that the author can never say in advance what twists and turns the plot may take or what the characters might do. I have found that much the same thing happens when I write a theoretical essay. I begin with an idea, formulate a thesis and map out the general argument. And then, once it is written, I find that I have ended up in some place different from where I intended to go. This essay is no exception.

My original idea was that the traumatic nature of jouissance is not due to its intensity or strength or power, but rather to the fact that it is enigmatic. I was taking my cue from a remark in the 1975 ‘Geneva Lecture on the Symptom’ that Jacques Lacan made in relation to Little Hans: "The enjoyment [jouissance] that resulted from [Little Hans’] Wiwimacher is alien to him—so much so that it is at the root of his phobia. “Phobia” means he has got the wind up’ (1989: 16). That is to say, the jouissance is traumatic for Little Hans because he has no way of understanding its source and origin, or in less psychological terms, because it is not inscribed in a signifying chain. Thus, it is traumatic, not because of its intensity but because it is enigmatic. So my thesis initially was that jouissance is traumatic precisely in so far as it is meaningless, in so far as it escapes or exceeds the symbolic network within which it is inscribed. And, I would have argued, we can see this in the case of Little Hans, in the case of Daniel Paul Schreber and in many cases of ordinary psychosis.

However, the more I looked into the issue, the more it seemed to me that my title had a second meaning, as relevant as the first: the very concept of jouissance itself is enigmatic, in that it is not well understood and leaves us with a number of puzzles, though it might seem odd to say so, since it seems rather
clear, these days, with all that has been written on it, that jouissance is the special type of satisfaction which lies beyond the pleasure/pain dialectic; that is, beyond the pleasure principle. It is related to the drive and Sigmund Freud's concept of satisfaction, Genuss, of the drive, and to the objet petit a or object a. However, I see several obscurities with the concept and wish to clarify some of the issues that it raises. But before I turn to them I would like to comment on what jouissance is.

My focus in this essay is on the use to which Lacan puts this specialized concept. While there is quite a lot of discussion about this concept in the literature, most of these commentaries focus on the ways in which Lacan's thinking about jouissance changes and evolves. While this discussion is important, since it brings out some substantive theses and some reflections on the reasons for the concept's evolution, there is nevertheless a prior issue to be addressed which is at risk of being confused with this: the issue of the meaning of the concept and whether it has more than one meaning. It is important because, strictly speaking, not all the changes in Lacan's use of the concept are in the concept of jouissance; at least some of the changes are in the ways in which Lacan thinks about the sources and the consequences of jouissance. If, indeed, there is more than one sense of the term, as I believe there is, there is the further issue of what, if anything, the different meanings have in common. It would be odd if they had nothing in common, but we should not dismiss this possibility out of hand.

We might thus wonder not only whether jouissance is only produced through transgression, or whether there is mystical jouissance in mystical experience, or what its connection is with the satisfaction produced by a symptom, but also whether the concept is being used in different ways in each of these contexts and whether these different uses have anything in common. This is a necessary step, without which we will be prone to the confusion expressed, for instance, in Dylan Evans' comment that 'jouissance does not retain a stable meaning' across Lacan's work and that its 'resonances and articulations

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1 The three most detailed discussions I am aware of are by Miller (1999), which has been translated into English (see Miller 2000) but it is best to read it in the original, Braunstein (1992) and Evans (1998).
shift dramatically over the course of his teaching' (Evans 1998: 2), which may confuse the distinction between changes in what the term refers to and questions about what Lacan thinks the conditions and consequences of jouissance are, that is, the distinction between what the concept means and what Lacan thinks is true of it.

The broadest possible definition of jouissance, as Lacan understands it, is that it is synonymous with the drive's satisfaction; it is not necessarily sexual, nor is it necessarily unpleasurable, though it can be both. At different stages of his work, Lacan states that this satisfaction can arise from imaginary, real or symbolic sources—for instance, the narcissistic jouissance obtained from the imaginary dyad of ego and alter-ego; the symbolic jouissance obtained from the \textit{Witz} [wit], as analyzed by Lacan in \textit{Le Séminaire. Livre V. Les formations de l'inconscient}, 1957–58 (The Formations of the Unconscious; 1998b); or the jouissance that arises from a symptom and whose origin is ultimately 'the real' of one's drive. In this most general definition of the term, despite its having been elaborated by Lacan at different times, these cases combine to show the different possible ways—imaginary, symbolic and real—in which human beings enjoy.

Jouissance also refers to satisfaction that, though satisfying a desire, can be experienced as unpleasurable. This is not an original observation with Lacan. Freud drew attention to it as early as \textit{The Interpretation of Dreams} (1899; here 1953), where he pointed out that the satisfaction of an unconscious wish is capable of producing anxiety. Two of the implications of the Freudian discovery of a division at the heart of human subjectivity are that the subject will repudiate and prohibit the satisfaction of his most fundamental desires, and that these can only be satisfied in a disguised form if distress and anxiety are to be avoided.

For Freud, the satisfaction of a desire—or the fulfilment of a wish—will be perceived as unpleasurable when the desire is repressed ('repudiated', 'prohibited') and when there is not sufficient disguise. It would be possible to restrict the use of 'jouissance', then, to refer to the illicit satisfaction of a repressed desire where there is no pleasure. It would, however, not only be unnecessary but also unfortunate because it would, for no good reason, cut the link between the satisfaction of desires that are repressed and those that are
not. Moreover, jouissance cannot be merely the (un)pleasure obtained from the satisfaction of a repressed desire, and its relationship to transgression is a little more complex than that. We get an idea of this greater complexity by considering the detailed treatment the concept of jouissance is given in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–60* (1986; here 1992) where it is important to appreciate that his analysis is developed out of two phenomena: the special sort of satisfaction obtained from the renunciation of desire, especially in the name of the moral law, and the special kind of satisfaction arising from acts of transgression. These two phenomena would appear to be opposite—and there is no answer to the enigma of jouissance unless one recognizes this opposition and resolves it. This is the underlying and fundamental issue concerning Lacan’s concept of jouissance and it is the central enigma that I address here. There are three general obscurities with the concept on which I should comment.

The first concerns the source and origin of jouissance, which is absolutely not the body because, firstly, there is jouissance even where the body is not at stake—there is jouissance in thinking, for instance. The jouissance in the mental life of obsessinals, at the root of their ruminations, is not bodily. Secondly, as Lacan tells us, there is *jouis-sens*, enjoy-meant, an enjoyment of meaning, which we derive from the blah-blah-blah of language, just as—as Lacan demonstrates with his study of Joyce—there is the jouissance of the letter. It is because its source is not the body that Lacan describes jouissance as ‘of the real’—in the sense of belonging to the real and sharing its features or characteristics—whereas the body is located largely in the imaginary. But how clear is the idea that the source of jouissance is not the body but the real?

The second obscurity with the concept of jouissance is: why does Lacan draw a profound distinction between jouissance and language? This distinction runs so deep as to be a form of ‘dualism’, a true ontological dualism that replaces and rivals the mind/body dualism of René Descartes; it is a jouissance/signifier dualism.

What, to my mind, is profoundly obscure about this dualism, whereby the signifier and jouissance belong to two incommensurate and opposite registers—the symbolic and the real respectively—is that it is very difficult to see how one
can maintain the opposition for long. The concept of jouissance cannot be understood without reference to the register of meaning or be defined without the concept of meaning; and since meaning is what signifiers produce, the dualism collapses.

But why does the concept of jouissance always invoke the realm of meaning? It is because, first, when Lacan refers to jouissance, the question of meaning is never far away. In *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX. Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–73* (1998a) for example, he famously refers to the 'jouissance of the idiot' (1998a: 81, 94), which locates jouissance in the realm of meaning—albeit in the form of the absence of meaning. Second, considering the enigma of jouissance concerning Little Hans' *Wiwimacher*, where, the fact that it is an enigma implies that it is located in the field of meaning—an enigma is an enigma because we expect it to have a meaning and we then worry because we fail to decipher the meaning. This is roughly how Lacan defines an enigma, though his definition is narrower, when he claims that an enigma is an utterance whose statement we do not understand. Third, by thinking of jouissance as a concept that makes no sense without reference to meaning we can throw light on the differences between what Lacan calls phallic jouissance, *jouissance phallique* or the idiot's jouissance and jouissance of the Other, *jouissance de l'Autre*. On the one hand, we think of phallic jouissance as regulated by a network of signifiers and thus imbued with meaning and, on the other, we think of the Other's jouissance as lying outside the field of signifiers altogether and thus inaccessible to meaning. This relationship between the two types is important, and I will return to discuss it at greater length, after a brief mention of a further complication with the concept of jouissance.

**Jouissance and Symptom**

Lacan's thinking about jouissance evolves especially in relation to the nature of symptoms. There is, nevertheless, one constant throughout his teaching, which is that a symptom is a source of enjoyment, even if his views about the rest change. In an excellent article, 'Paradigms of Jouissance', Miller discerns six uses of the term at different moments of Lacan's teaching (see Miller 2000).
One might not agree with the entire classification, but we can agree that the basic point—that Lacan's use of the term evolves—is undeniable. I want to mention three ways in which Lacan uses the term.

In the first instance, jouissance is fixated and regulated by signifiers that encode—'encipher'—the unconscious in the form of symptoms. Thus, a symptom is both a body of signifiers and a source of enjoyment. A symptom embodies jouissance—though 'embodies' is not quite the right word since a symptom is not invariably inscribed on the body but can affect thought as well, for example, in the form of procrastination or doubt or compulsive ideas, as I have already observed. It might be more accurate to say that a symptom *in-signifies* jouissance. It is because a symptom is a product of repression that its jouissance is experienced as unpleasure.

In the first conception of jouissance, then, there is a close relation between meaning and jouissance. That symptoms both have meaning and are a source of satisfaction was Freud's discovery, which Lacan formulates by stating that a symptom is a source of jouissance whose meaning is closed off to the subject. It is a question of meaning, even if the meaning is opaque.

This observation is important clinically. People visit a psychoanalyst because they are miserable or anxious or lonely or in the midst of a personal crisis or disturbed by a compulsion to harm themselves and they also want to know what is going on, why they feel, think and act as they do. Each of these phenomena is a problem because its meaning is opaque, not only because it makes them miserable. Or, rather, the opacity of the phenomenon is integral to the misery. It is not a question of quantity or strength or degree of jouissance. That there is 'too much' or 'too little' jouissance cannot be said in any absolute sense, since its 'amount' is necessarily relative to its 'meaning', the reason for its occurrence and its motivation. The significance of deciphering a symptom's meaning is that, by unpacking the hidden reasons that motivate it, it makes the jouissance understandable. Of course, what I have put in psychological terms of 'understanding', etc. can also be expressed in a different way, by talking about the regulation of jouissance, in terms of a phallic economy, and so on.

Thinking in terms of the regulation of jouissance is particularly relevant when we turn our attention to psychosis, since here, the failure of the regulation
of jouissance in the absence of the signifier, the Name-of-the-Father, has devastating consequences. Schreber, for instance, is invaded by jouissance, which finds expression in psychotic phenomena such as the destruction of body parts and organs, the manifestation of a persecutory other and Schreber's transformation into a woman, or into The woman who will become the partner of God. Again, as discussed by Jonathan Redmond, in more 'ordinary' cases of psychosis, we see more subtle signs that the regulation of jouissance has failed, leading to accounts of 'partial foreclosure' or some alternative way of explaining why in many cases with an evidently psychotic structure, the classic symptoms of psychosis never develop or appear (see Redmond 2009).

When we speak of the regulation of jouissance in each of these contexts, we use a quantitative metaphor and are at least implicitly appealing to something that can be measured. But this language is pure metaphor, since there is no real suggestion that we can ever quantify jouissance. 'Regulation' is a metaphor of exchange, of the market that can be regulated, deregulated or unregulated. In neurosis, jouissance is 'regulated', whereas in psychosis, it is 'deregulated' or 'unregulated'. In either case, it is only a metaphor and to speak of the regulation of jouissance is to say that it is structured by signifiers; and to structure something by signifiers is to make it meaningful.

One of the subsequent ways Lacan thinks about jouissance, one that has enjoyed a huge degree of success, dates from *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, where jouissance is construed as impossible, or, in Lacan's terms, as real. This is what Lacan means by Freud's concept of *das Ding* (the Thing): satisfaction of the drive occurs neither in the symbolic nor in the imaginary but in the real. One does not repress jouissance, since it is in the real and since repression is a phenomenon of signifiers and therefore implies deciphering or decoding; rather, one *defends against* jouissance, which is henceforth neither a product of the symbolic nor related to it but exists even before the conditions that make repression possible arise.

It would seem that if jouissance lies outside the symbolic and the imaginary it is fundamentally inaccessible—except in the one exceptional way described in this seminar, which is by forcing a break through the symbolic by challenging the fundamentals of the symbolic universe in a procedure, or better, an act,
that Lacan calls 'transgression'. Taking Antigone's refusal to comply with the edicts of her ruler, Creon, as the prime example, this transgression readily takes on a heroic dimension and we thus acquire a tendency to indulge in praise of the hero who fearlessly and uncompromisingly advances into the horrific destruction of the symbolic world. This understanding of jouissance is most famously advocated by Slavoj Žižek, who has treated Antigone’s actions as definitive of the mode of access to jouissance and as inaugurating a new—and in my view, romanticized—ethics of the real. Žižek is right to point to the ethical character of Antigone's act, for the strange thing is that there is no transgression in Antigone in anything but the most superficial of senses. Of course, she breaks the law, but it is Creon’s law, and she breaks it 'as a matter of principle' and for the sake of a higher law that, she believes, overrides Creon’s law. Apart from the ethical conclusions that Žižek draws from his reading of The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, which I have discussed elsewhere (Grigg 2008: 119–31), Lacan’s redefinition of jouissance is problematic for several reasons.

First, by locating jouissance in the real Lacan makes a radical break with his initial teaching, which is not a problem in itself. However, he thereby introduces a fundamental distinction and an unbridgeable gap between the signifier and jouissance, to the point where one has to wonder how psychoanalytic praxis, the talking cure, can ever possibly operate and have any effect upon a subject’s jouissance. And this is a problem because if the only means of access to jouissance is through transgression, if it lies in the real, outside and untouched by the symbolic, then how can a procedure that operates by deploying signifiers have any impact upon the sources of a subject’s enjoyment? If we aim to effect some alteration in a subject’s modes of enjoyment, then there must be something commensurate between the manner of our intervention, which of course is through language, and the outcome of this intervention, which is to modify jouissance.

Second, the thesis here is that the only means of access to jouissance is through transgression. The idea has encountered considerable success, particularly in the academy. But how true is it? Symptoms are a form of jouissance. But are we therefore to conclude that symptoms are a form of transgression? Is not a symptom rather the opposite of a transgression? A symptom is the result of repression, and do we not repress desires instead of transgressing? Moreover,
we also know that enjoyment is permanent and, effectively, inescapable for speaking beings. So, where is the relationship between jouissance and transgression?

Lacan himself rather discreetly abandons this thesis about the relationship between transgression and jouissance in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII. The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, 1969–70* (1991; here 2007) where he introduces the four discourses, by remarking: 'What analysis shows, if it shows anything at all [. . .] is very precisely the fact that we don't ever transgress' (2007: 19). I think that he abandons the thesis that transgression is the sole route to jouissance because it faces too many difficulties to be correct.

However, what should not be lost in all of this is the really important distinction that emerges in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* between jouissance and desire, which marks a difference between what lies on the side of the pleasure principle and what lies beyond pleasure. Yet, while jouissance and desire are distinct, they are not completely independent. As the texts of Marquis de Sade illustrate very well, one of the characteristic features of pleasure is that it can act as a sort of obstacle to jouissance. As Miller contends, an opposition becomes established between the homeostasis of pleasure and the constitutive excesses of jouissance; between what is of the order of the Good, well-being, the side of pleasure on the one hand and, on the other, the excess of jouissance, the component of bad or evil that jouissance conveys; between what is of the order of the lure, of attraction, of pleasure, of the signifier, of the imaginary and of the semblant, and, on the other side, what is of the order of the real. We need to hold to this distinction because it marks a breakthrough.

The third moment I want to discuss occurs in Lacan's *Encore*, and the associated text, 'L'Etourdit' (1973), for here Lacan gives the concept of jouissance quite a different meaning from that which he had given it at the two earlier moments I have described. It is well known, notorious even, that in this seminar he introduces the idea of a specifically feminine jouissance. Since this concept has arguably produced the greatest amount of misunderstanding and ill-informed commentary on any of Lacan's views, I will clarify a point about it. This involves making some very specific and precise comments on some details of *Encore*, which can be encapsulated in two of Lacan's statements.
The first of these statements is not an incidental aside. Rather, it is significant enough for Lacan to write it up in large letters on the blackboard at the very first session of his seminar on 'Encore' on November 21, 1972: 'Jouissance of the Other, of the Other’s body that symbolizes it, is not a sign of love' (1975: 11; my translation). However, shortly afterwards in the same session, he adds that 'phallic enjoyment is the obstacle preventing a man from enjoying a woman’s body because what he enjoys is enjoyment of the organ' (ibid.: 13).

The contradiction is clear: the first proposition states that there is jouissance of the Other, even though it is not a sign of love and the second says that no man ever enjoys a woman’s body because he only ever gets enjoyment from his organ.

The apparent contradiction, and hence a lot of the confusion, arises because of a failure to recognize the ambiguity that exists in French with the term la jouissance de l’Autre, where, specifically, the genitive de has a subjective and an objective sense. In the subjective sense, the jouissance is ‘the Other’s jouissance’, its jouissance—or more appropriately, her jouissance, since this is the famous feminine jouissance that Lacan introduces—or, as it is sometimes translated by Bruce Fink, ‘Other jouissance’. On the other hand, the genitive use of de in the objective sense means that there is a subject who enjoys the Other and has la jouissance de l’Autre, enjoyment of the Other. In this second, objective sense, one’s jouissance of the Other is phallic jouissance.

And we now get, in a nutshell, Lacan’s thesis that there is no sexual relationship. On the side of the objective genitive, we have phallic jouissance, which is introduced by castration and regulated by language, is subordinate to the symbolic order and is an obstacle that prevents access to jouissance of the Other. From this side, there is no possible access to jouissance of the Other; one is left with nothing but one’s jouissance of the idiot, as Lacan puts it. The other side, which is that of the subjective genitive, is that of the Other’s jouissance. The

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2 The original French expression is ‘La jouissance de l’Autre, du corps de l’Autre qui le symbolise, n’est pas le signe de l’amour’ (Lacan 1975: 11).

3 The original French expression is ‘La jouissance phallique est l’obstacle par quoi l’homme n’arrive pas, dirai-je, à jouir du corps de la femme, précisément parce que ce dont il jouit, c’est de la jouissance de l’organe’ (ibid.: 13).
French have become accustomed to calling this meaning of ‘la jouissance de l’Autre’ ‘la jouissance Autre’, which translates as Other jouissance, but this is because in French, there is no obvious way of resolving the ambiguity of ‘la jouissance de l’Autre’. It can be resolved in English by calling it the Other’s jouissance.

So, then, what can we say about this question of the Other’s jouissance? To begin with, I think that the French term jouissance Autre, Other jouissance, is misleading because it suggests that Lacan is referring to a form of jouissance that lies beyond, somewhere else . . . follow my gaze, my son, my daughter. The reference to Saint Teresa suggests this too, with the notion of an Other jouissance that reaches out to a beyond.

But I believe this is an incorrect conception. For Lacan—and he is explicit about this—the Other’s jouissance remains nevertheless jouissance of the body; it is always and everywhere jouissance du corps de l’Autre, jouissance of the Other’s body, or, to make it even more explicit, the Other body’s jouissance. Lacan’s intention is not to refer to some ‘Other jouissance’, as if it were an experience from the Other side, which would have the effect of making it religious and mystical. The Other’s jouissance is the Other’s bodily jouissance, and it is, by definition, inaccessible to anyone whose jouissance is solely phallic.

So, the Other’s jouissance is in a sense the mystic’s jouissance—but the ambiguity lies in the fact that the latter can be seen as lying in a beyond and occurring out of the body. Or it can be seen, and I think correctly so, as a form of bodily jouissance that escapes the phallic economy. The reference to the mystic’s jouissance has to be seen in this context and it is intended to entail that feminine jouissance is not the exclusive property of women but, since there are male mystics, is also known to men. It goes beyond the logical closure of the phallic economy regulated by the symbolic. It goes beyond language and lies outside discourse even as it finds expression within the body.

As has often been pointed out, the formulae of sexuation are about the ways in which the sexual relationship fails. These two forms of jouissance are two forms of the impossible, and hence failed, relationship between the signifier

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4 One of the best discussions of this is to be found in Copjec (1994). See also Shepherdson (1994).
and the real. The phallic form is this impossibility that is experienced as a failure. The form of the Other's jouissance is this impossibility that is experienced as a beyond. There is, then, no sexual relationship because the juxtaposition of these two kinds of jouissance does not result in any kind of correspondence between man on one side and woman on the other.

To return to my theme, there is enigma in both phallic jouissance and the Other's jouissance. Indeed, the Other's jouissance is only an enigma, since it is defined by being enigmatic and, as such, calls incessantly to be rendered and regulated. Phallic jouissance, although in principle regulated, is susceptible to find expression in forms that escape regulation. The psychotic experience is a case in point. And, to make one last point, a speculative one, if in Schreber there is a thrust-towards-the-woman, une pousse-à-la-femme, then he can be compared with mystics—an idea that would no doubt have appealed to him.

The relationship between jouissance, meaning, pleasure and desire is complex and a fuller analysis than I am able to give here is called for. Nevertheless, a few broad conclusions can be drawn. The opposition between jouissance and signifier is situated within the semantic field. The opposition between jouissance and desire is making the wrong contrast because they are not alternatives—one of the meanings of jouissance is that it is synonymous with the satisfaction of desire. Even the opposition between jouissance and pleasure is not a hard and fast one, since it only applies where repression is concerned. And finally, jouissance cannot be equated with transgression without further comment, since, as the case of Antigone shows, it is precisely by cleaving to the moral law itself that jouissance arises. These are, I acknowledge, mainly negative conclusions, even if prompted by discussions of jouissance in the literature. They do show the complexity of the concept, even its polysemy. I am inclined to think that the multiple meanings of the concept are a significant factor in thinking about Lacan's claims, but this range of meanings has its limits and we must also acknowledge that the substantive claims Lacan makes about jouissance change, which means there is an internal criticism of his views, not simply an attribution of a different meaning to the term on different occasions.
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