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FRANCA RUGGIERI

ENRICO TERRINONI

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Address: James Joyce Italian Foundation
Dipartimento di Lingue, Culture e Letterature Straniere
Via Valco di San Paolo, 19
00146 Roma
joyce_found@os.uniroma3.it
franca.ruggieri@uniroma3.it

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LACAN AND THE JOYCE-EFFECT¹

I

My starting point will surely be familiar to Joyceans: that Docteur Jacques Lacan, responding to my invitation, opened the V International Joyce Symposium at the Sorbonne on June 16th 1975; the topic he had chosen for his lecture was “Joyce le Symptôme”. This choice in its turn, and rather to the surprise of his followers, led to his decision to change the topic of his seminar planned for the following season, and to choose as its title “Le Sinthome”. The announcement of this seminar, duly posted in strategic places, also warned his audience that they should read *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as soon as possible, and preferably in the Viking Critical edition. So it was that that seminar, together with the strange word that it promoted, proved to be a major landmark in the development of Lacan’s teaching.

Actually we now have two versions of the Sorbonne talk. The first one is a transcript of a recording made on the spot, at my suggestion, by composer Jean-Yves Bosseur, who, later in the Symposium, staged a performance of a fragment of *Finnegans Wake*. Jean-Yves Bosseur played the recording of the lecture to Lacan, who did not like his performance at all, (though I took the liberty, later, to print it in a collection of essays, *Joyce avec Lacan*, 1987). But when a couple of years after the Symposium, collecting a few of the papers read at the Symposium, I asked his permission to print those pages, he immediately accepted, and delivered a document which had been not only typed properly, but corrected in his own hand: and the manuscript proved to be strikingly different in style, though not really in contents, from the initial transcript....

¹ I am not particularly satisfied with the title of my paper, but after all it may be ambiguous enough to coincide with what both Joyce and Lacan represent in modern culture. Such is my purpose today, and I will begin by examining the Lacan-Joyce connection in the light of my personal experience.

Now, this clearly shows that Lacan's interest in Joyce was not accidental, not even of the type one can expect from a psychoanalyst confronted with an exceptional artist: the period I have just gone through cannot be considered apart from his formative years in the 1920s and 30s. Indeed, he himself, in both versions of "Joyce le Symptôme", told his audience that, when in his twenties, he had met Joyce on two occasions at Adrienne Monnier's bookshop: one at the launching of the book in December 1921, when he was barely twenty,² then on the occasion of the publication of the French translation in 1929, when he was a medical student beginning to specialize in psychiatry.

This duality of interest, in art as well as medicine, was certainly common in his generation, but it was particularly remarkable in the case of Lacan, who obviously was not satisfied in the sole company of Adrienne Monnier's customers. He appears to have been particularly fascinated by an artist, who deserves mention at this point because he alludes to her in the revised version of the Sorbonne talk, in the course of a pastiche of *Wake* language:

LOM, LOM de base, LOM cahun corps et nan-na Kun.

[*cahun* stands for *qu'à un corps*, a familiar, colloquial spelling of *qui a un corps*]

Now this was an addition in the second version of the talk, and it obviously points out the presence of Lacan's major interests early in his development: not only an interest in the arts, but also his promotion of the concept of *jouissance*, which he explicitly associates with the body, and which he later detected at the very center of Joyce's case, as you will see in a moment. Claude Cahun was an artist whose studio³ Lacan attended more or less regularly in the 20s and 30s. Her biographer has described her identity as "exotisme intérieur" (a term that had become a familiar concept in the psychiatric circles of the time), and there was much indeed in her personality to fascinate a medical student specialising in mental health. She was a libertarian in many aspects of her life, pleading against the assignation, or rather, she thought, the imposition of patronyms:

"La gêne des mots, et surtout des noms propres est un obstacle à mes relations avec autrui, c'est-à-dire à ma vie même. Obstacle si ancien qu'il m'apparaît en quelque sorte un trait congénital [...] Ô mal nommés, je vous renomme ! Ô bien aimés, je

² He obviously did not check the dates.

³ 70bis rue Notre-Dame des Champs. Art exhibitions were held there, attracting a number of artists and intellectuals.

vous surnomme ! [...] Ailleurs la modification ou suppression du nom propre m'est dictée par le sentiment profond du caractère sacré d'un être. Aucun nom, dès lors, n'est assez grand, n'est assez beau pour lui".

"The nuisance with words, and particularly names, is that they are an obstacle to my relations with others, that is to say to my life itself. Such an ancient obstacle in fact that it almost seems to be a genetic characteristic of mine [...] Oh, you the badly-named, I re-name you! Oh, beloved ones, I nick-name you! [...] What's more, the changing or suppression of proper names is dictated to me by a profound sense of the sacred nature of a being. From this it follows that no name is grand enough or beautiful enough for such a being".

What is no less remarkable is the fact that she not only rejected her patronym, but assumed a long series of pseudonyms. But in her case this attitude was coupled with the way she treated her own image, both in actual fact, when she deliberately distorted her features, and in the innumerable photographic self-portraits she then produced. For us Joyceans, both features (self-portrait and patronyms, the idea of **forging a name for himself**) not only echo some of Joyce's themes, especially *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which Lacan explicitly recommended to his prospective audience, but **foreshadow Lacan's reading of Joyce's case: Cahun's symptoms** were indeed exceptional, and were at **the crossroad of art, language and mental health**.

Lacan seems to have been still in contact with Claude Cahun in the 30s, especially on the occasion of more or less informal meetings (one of them, it seems, in Lacan's flat), where topics were political as well as connected with the most recent developments in psychiatric theory.

Those years, which proved to be so decisive for the western world, were also crucial in Lacan's history. In October 1932 he submitted his doctoral thesis on *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité*. But, as early as 1931, several publications testified to his desire to connect his professional interests with the arts, and especially literature, which comes as no surprise in view of his contacts with the Surrealist group⁴:

- "*Écrits 'inspirés': schizographie [...]*", *Annales médico-psychologiques*, 1931, t.II, p.508-522.

⁴ André Breton himself had been a medical student.

- "Le problème du style et la conception psychiatrique des formes paranoïaques de l'expérience", *Minotaure*, n°1, 1933.
- "Motifs du crime paranoïaque", *Minotaure*, n°3, 1933.

The first article establishes a connection between a psychiatric case and poetic production, referring the reader to André Breton (*Manifeste du sur-réalisme*), André Breton and Paul Eluard (*L'Immaculée Conception*, 1930), Benjamin Péret and Robert Desnos. Like James Joyce himself at the time, Lacan insists on "**la lecture à haute voix**" which reveals the essential role played by rhythm. And, we may add, the **human voice**. But all this does not detract from his interest in epistemology: for instance he forges a new concept, "*schizographie*", a pun (already!) on the model of Kraepelin's "*schizophasie*". And on another page, he refers his reader to Henri Delacroix's book *La Langage et la pensée* (Alcan, 1930), a book which drew on Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1915). And there is a real question I would like to ask: to what extent was Lacan already toying with the notions of "*signifiant*" and "*signifié*"? Was he not, in those days, in contact with Edouard Pichon, a linguist as well as an analyst?

In short, in 1975, there is ample proof that Jacques Lacan was clearly recollecting this earlier period, not on purely sentimental lines, but rather in terms of intellectual, theoretical investigation. For 1975 was the year when he finally decided to republish his out of print doctoral dissertation, and now completed with the articles I have just mentioned, which he had for years decided to ignore, and refused to republish.⁵ But he was not nostalgic in any way. These memories were recurring because they echoed the questions which were then engrossing him. Among them, of course, James Joyce's works.

At this point, I would like to mention a problem that I failed to solve: to what extent had Lacan been previously familiar with the *Work in Progress* published in *transition* in the 30s? Had he already met the Jolases then? I missed the opportunity to ask Maria Jolas and/or Lacan, and Lacan's family could not tell me either. What I do know is that Maria and Jacques were on first name terms in 1975, and that their weekend houses were in the same part of the country. And Maria did encourage me, and helped me, to approach him. In short, this relationship made it appropriate for Maria to introduce him at the Sorbonne on the opening day of the Symposium.

⁵ See Lacan (1975). The volume he dedicated to me and my wife, is dated "Ce 23.VI.1975", the week after the Sorbonne lecture.

II

But enough of this historical background. Let us now have a look at the substance of the connection between Joyce and Lacan, and try to take a synthetic view of the issues involved.

There is ample proof that Joyce had been present in Lacan's thoughts and writings for years. But why? I think that, more or less consciously, Lacan felt that they had much in common, that they were more or less on the same track: their generations, though different, did to some extent overlap, and their Roman Catholic upbringing had much in common, with consequences I will soon point out.

Symptom versus Symbol

At this point, I can perhaps sum up the matter by way of a little anecdote. Some time in May 1975, a couple of weeks before the Joyce Symposium, Jacques Lacan took me with him, on his way to consult a doctor. As we were travelling in a taxi, he said: "They are going to print invitations for my talk at the Sorbonne, and ask me what the title is going to be. Should I say '*Joyce le Symbole*' or '*Joyce le Symptôme*? What do you think?" Without giving the matter a thought, but asking "Like 'Jesus la Caille'?", I immediately answered "*Joyce le Symptôme*", and Lacan answered, "Yes, you are right, it's what I had in mind", and then he added: "as could be expected", "they" would insist on "*symbole*" rather....

It was typical of Lacan, I was beginning to realize, that the signifier 'symptom' had to have pride of place as he was going to consult one of his colleagues.... But he was also addressing me as a person who was also investigating "The Joyce case": the case of a writer who had been a medical student, had just failed to be a doctor in his own right, and had begun his career as a writer by presenting himself not only as the reader of his fellow-citizens in terms of a collection of symptoms, but as a therapist who could cure them through his writings. And Lacan somehow felt that he was on common ground with the writer, dealing with symptoms as **coincidences observed as both significant and enigmatic**.

Now, this was more or less Joyce's position with the epiphany, as the **blinding revelation of Meaning and Being**: a conception he had tried to connect with aesthetic jouissance in a global theory, trying to enlist Thomas

Aquinas for the greater glory of the said theory: and for the greater glory of James Joyce, forgetting that he was himself a Dubliner, virtually subject to the same treatment.

What he also gradually discovered, or rather re-discovered, was that ultimate 'jouissance' is not pleasure, but rather lies beyond satisfaction ("elle s'ajoute à l'acte, comme à la jeunesse sa fleur", "it is a supplement to the 'act', as fulfilment, just as youth is enhanced by its **bloom**"). It is enigmatic and opaque by nature, and that is what Joyce explores at the beginning of the "Proteus" episode, when he broods on the problem of transparency, the diaphane, and concludes on the importance of the "adiaphane", a forgery of his own based, however, on substantial philosophical lore. This provides the occasion for poking fun at his own epiphanies, in which he feels he has missed something essential: the blind moment attendant upon the supposedly sublime revelation of ultimate Meaning.

Now, here lies an epistemological problem, involving the contrasting concepts of real and reality, which Gaston Bachelard, in *Le Nouvel Esprit Scientifique*, has summed up in a famous formula: "*Le réel n'est jamais ce qu'on pourrait croire, mais toujours ce qu'on aurait dû penser*", "The real never is what you might believe [i.e. just anything], but always what you should have thought out [i.e. what you actually missed]". Lacan's conclusion would be that "reality is what you rely upon in order to go on dreaming". The best illustration of this is to be found in Joyce in the concluding pages of "The Dead", with the discovery of fundamental misunderstanding in the relation between the sexes. Gabriel Conroy, after asking the question "what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a *symbol* of?", discovers that such a woman, and probably any woman, is for any man more like a symptom. So that the next questions are: "what becomes of the symbolic relations between human beings?", "what becomes of language itself?", then "How is it that this woman is literally petrified? What has occurred in her mind, but also in her life, that is creating such an effect? And ultimately: how can one be so totally in the dark about the person who is supposed to be closest to you, about the **jouissance of this particular woman**?" Joyce's development as a writer began when he gave up his ambition to tell the whole Truth about Beauty he imagined he had experienced, and tried to write out what had been Real in his own particular, symptomatic experience, which, we know, was in fact not *La Femme*, but a particular woman, Nora.

Joyce among the analysts

In the summer of 1975, Lacan was still working on Joyce, and he and I remained in contact. I lent him, among other books, my much scribbled on working copy of *A Portrait*. He was then preparing a lecture he was due to give, in Geneva, early in October to a group of analysts⁶. The subject was ‘Le Symptôme’, in which he not only reminded his audience of some basic points, but insisted on such notions as *jouissance*, when he says: “*Ce que Freud a apporté, c’est ceci, qu’il n’y a pas besoin de savoir qu’on sait pour jouir d’un savoir*”, “Freud’s contribution was, that there is no need to know what you know, in order to enjoy some knowledge”. He insisted on the notion of ‘symptom’ as *événement de corps*, “body-event”: “*c’est toujours avec des mots que l’homme pense. Et c’est dans la rencontre de ces mots avec son corps que quelque chose se dessine*” “[Man always thinks with words. And it is in the encounter of these words with his body that something takes shape]”. Hence his forging of the notion of ‘materialism’ to describe his philosophical position.

Lacan’s approach, however, led him to forge another, more central notion, *lalangue*, which describes the condition of language before it has been organised and codified, when it lends itself to ambiguities and misapprehensions. And he adds: “*C’est dans la façon dont lalangue a été parlée et aussi entendue pour tel ou tel dans sa particularité que quelque chose, ensuite, ressortira en rêves, en toutes sortes de trébuchements, en toutes sortes de façon de dire*”, “It is the way ‘lalangue’ has been spoken as well as heard by such and such individual, that something will come out later in dreams, in all sorts of slips of tongue and tripping-ups in expression”. A reader of *Finnegans Wake* will be tempted to add “stutterings” to this list...

Le Sinthome

The next step in Lacan’s reading of Joyce was the re-writing of his lecture, and, to begin with, of its title, which became “Joyce le Sinthome”. By so doing, he not only revived an old spelling of “symptôme”, but added to it a very Wakean polysemic dimension, created by phonetic ambiguity. A

⁶ *Le Bloc-Notes de la psychanalyse*, review edited by Mario Cifali. All rights reserved.

French speaker when hearing “*saint homme*”, will be reminded of Joyce’s apparent reverence for Thomas Aquinas, of the centrality of Aquinas in his theorizing, and of the many references to sainthood as a possible stance of Stephen Dedalus. But what Lacan also does is to enhance the question of spelling, of the ambiguous status of **the letter**. Spelling, he says elsewhere, is a legacy of the turmoils of History, and is often born of errors and misapprehensions, and implies “the abnihilisation of the etym” (*FW* 353.22): it does not mean anything in itself. As Jacques-Alain Miller pointed out, “*le destin de la lettre se disjoint de la fonction du signifiant [...] elle inclut cette jouissance que Freud découvre comme limite du pouvoir de l’interprétation*” (Aubert, 1987, 10-1).

Now, this was a way of pointing out that a symptom, being of the order of the letter, has less to do with the Word, with Meaning and Being, than with the writing process as a fundamentally enigmatic process: or, to use Lacanian categories, less with the Symbolic than with the Real. Let it be understood, at this point, that we must refine somewhat the concept of ‘Real’: Bachelard’s definition, because it refers to science and truth, and although it quite rightly points out the idea of error, of failure, is not totally pertinent when we deal with the unconscious and *jouissance*. We all know how Joyce himself felt that ‘error’ and erring were part and parcel of an artistic vocation, as well as life: “*To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life!*” (Joyce, 1977, 172)

Lacan’s *sinthome* appears to suggest that there is a way of dealing with the Real in each particular experience through a particularized type of ‘writing’. By so doing, quite logically, the emphasis will have to be on the enigmatic nature of enunciation, not on the supposed clarity of *énoncés*.

This is where Lacan proves to be revolutionary in his own field. Jacques-Alain Miller has pointed out, as early as 1987, that “*il s’agissait [...] du questionnement le plus radical jamais formulé du fondement même de la psychanalyse, conduit à partir du symptôme comme hors-discours*” (Aubert, 1987, 11), “The matter in hand [...] was the most radical questioning ever formulated of the fundamentals of psychoanalysis, taking the symptom, not discourse, as starting-point”. This was the last phase of a radical revision of orthodox Lacanian theory, which had given absolute prominence to the Symbolic as the locus of the Other, a revision which had begun with Seminar XX.

Among the consequences of this new stance is Lacan’s observation concerning Joyce’s evolution, which, he says, remarkably enough,

took place without his having recourse to psychoanalysis. But that is another matter.

Materialisme and literature

Lacan has observed that Joyce is heading towards the end of literature, and he was not the first to do so. But, contrary to many others, his 'sinthome' helps us to grasp what is at stake in Joyce's progress and ultimate production, *Finnegans Wake*. The motto here may be "materialisme", a notion which is double-edged. On the one hand, it lays emphasis on reading as fundamentally literal, non-idealistic, which is exactly what Joyce pointed out with his pun on 'letter' and 'litter'. On the other hand, as a consequence, he invites the reader to play that game, and to invest in the process his own symptom: his very body, his own relation to language, i.e. also his unconscious and history.

I will take as an example the sentence from *Finnegans Wake* quoted by Lacan in his lecture: "*Who ails tongue coddeau, aspace of dumbbillsilly?*" As Joyce insisted, the text must be read aloud, is dependent on the voice of a speaker. But then, the possibility of giving meaning to the enigmatic sentence will depend on who and what he is, on his singularity. If he is French, he may possibly hear "*Où est ton cadeau, espèce d'imbécile?*", but a suspicion remains that the person is not actually French, but is speaking with some foreign accent. The question becomes: how should the person who is reading aloud pronounce the sentence? Which creates a suspension in the very utterance, a sort of hesitancy affecting the meaning. And also a suspicion concerning the speaker, who sounds very much like a prostitute asking her customer to give the usual, traditional 'cadeau', which is supposed to testify that the sexual act, beside its commercial aspect, implied, beside even its symbolic dimension, an additional *jouissance* (Lacan would say *plus-de-jouir*). In short, what Joyce offers the reader is a variety of coordinates, and it is the latter's task to organize them. Which leads me to my final observation.

The operative concept here may be 'encadrement', that Lacan uses in connection with the lists of correspondences for each episode of *Ulysses* Joyce publicised. The word suggests a desire to draw attention to an image or a statement, and invites the reader to participate in the reading process, invest his desire in the book (N.B. the negative form "*je ne peux pas l'encadrer*", meaning "*I just hate him*", provides confirmation). Which is exactly what many innocent readers of the book cannot possibly do.

To conclude

I would like to point out that some writers have been themselves drawn into the peculiar logic Joyce chose to develop when he abandoned the mysteries of the Church in favour of the enigmas of language. They found in him subject matter for their own creative investigation into the possibilities of language, having been taught by Joyce that the Real is tantamount to ‘the possible’ as “what may not take place”. Only, perhaps, be displaced.

There is no doubt that James Joyce was both fascinated and somehow repelled by global systems, whether political (the British Empire, Irish nationalism), religious (the Roman Catholic Church) or even philosophical (Aristotle). It was difficult for him to conciliate universals and his singularity. His answer to the dilemma was symptomatic. On the one hand he based himself on the enigma specific to any symptom as totally outside accepted discourse, on the gap in meaning which attends it, since it seems to be inscribed in the body, not in written language. On the other hand, his whole effort, from *Dubliners* (explicitly symptomatic in approach) to *Finnegans Wake*, would seem to be to re-integrate it into such language, by exploiting all the possibilities offered by imaginative syntax and vagaries in lexicology. Such a re-integration is what one could describe, after Jacques Lacan, as “sinthome”, with its suggestion of ‘fault’ (sin) and redemption (ascetic sainthood).

By so doing, he was taking his reader, willy-nilly, along the way he had opened for himself. The path was steep, too steep for many so-called common readers. But a number of writers found in his achievement, if not the model that it could not be, at least an enterprise consonant with their own predicament.⁷

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⁷ See Rios (2007) and Forest (2011).