

The Letter: From Lacan to Joyce and Back

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Abstract

This paper explores the abiding influence of Joyce on the thought of Jacques Lacan. The influence is traced specifically in the latter's play on graphemic shifts and in the richly varied symbolic roles of the letter "N / n," whose multivalence in mathematics alone leads in several directions at once. These directions in the paper below comprise the act of naming, the logic of substitution, and the significance to Joyce's development of boundless *jouissance*.

The connection between Jacques Lacan and James Joyce may seem irrelevant to many Joyceans, especially those who did not attend the Paris Symposium in 1975. I, however, believe that it testifies to the impact of the latter on modern culture even beyond literature proper, and that, by the same token, it sheds additional light on his artistic development.¹

It is now an established fact that James Joyce's work had a decisive impact on the development of Dr Jacques Lacan's theorizing. The impact accounts in particular for the special emphasis Lacan put on the letter in the last phase of his teaching, a phase which is in striking contrast with some of his best-known pronouncements, and which opens with Seminar XXIII, "Le Sinthome",² recently published in its definitive form.

What immediately strikes the French reader is the peculiar spelling of "sinthome" for "symptome", which Lacan seemingly justifies as a 16th century spelling, to be found in Rabelais among others: a scholarly, philological observation hardly in keeping with his usually ironical attitude towards academics, "les universitaires," as he describes them.

Lacan may of course have wished to draw our attention to the historical coincidence in the Renaissance of the emergence of the symptom and of the modern subject. Other observations have been made, sometimes based on on Lacan's punning on Saint Thomas Aquinas ("sinthomadaquin"³), or on "sin", a most welcome connection with

Joyce's insistence on various forms of "faults", whether in life or in language. *Felix culpa* indeed.

I personally am tempted to make another suggestion, which perhaps opens a Pandora's box of sorts. My first observation is that Lacan is obviously playing down the notion of "fall" implicit in the Greek root *pt*, at the same time as he lays emphasis on the letter "n".

Algebra indeed

Now "n" is not an ordinary letter: it introduces a mathematical dimension into common language. The *Oxford English Dictionary* informs us that it is "a unit of measurement", and may be used as "an indefinite number", especially in such phrases as "to the nth". Not only would any French dictionary, beginning with Emile Littré's, agree here: "n" is not only a letter, it is an international, *inter-*, or *trans-linguistic symbol*. In such a perspective, "sin-" may be construed as French "*si n (a telle valeur. . .)*", "if n . . .", as the preamble, the hypothesis preliminary to a mathematical calculation, or a logical demonstration. It is worth pointing out that this is consonant with a reading of "sin" as Latin *sin*, meaning "but if, or if, if on the contrary", etc.

This approach may be relevant to Joyce even beyond the fact that Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* is supposed to provide an algebraic solution to "the Hamlet problem": we are indeed at the heart of symbolic language. For the notion of "n" as an index of *substitutive places* becomes prevalent when it is capitalised as "N". Hence, we may imagine, its current use in touristic advertisements to describe hotels of various excellence (N, NN, NNN): are not hotels by definition empty places to be occupied by successive personal identities?

Names (of the Father?)

More seriously, and significantly, it has its full, forceful value in liturgical language, for example in the Roman Catholic Church, in such most symbolical situations as funeral masses, where it indicates the point at which the name of the faithful deceased should be solemnly introduced by the celebrant. Here, "N" is not properly speaking a letter in the alphabet, but *the symbolic space* in which the major function of language, *naming*, has to be actually uttered in order to keep the structure *alive*.

The idea of "the Name-of-the-Father" is somehow common to both James Joyce and Jacques Lacan. The two authors differ in some respects, but do converge in essentials, and that accounts for the interest of the

latter in the work of the former. According to Lacan the Name-of-the-Father is a concept at the heart of the symbolic order and process: it does not of course mean that a given subject may be identified in terms of family name, but rather describes the key structural function of naming.

On the other hand, James Joyce, all along his various, experimental texts, from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, through *Exiles* and *Ulysses* to *Finnegans Wake*, seems to be groping in search of the right name for the subject at the center of his creation, Stephen Dedalus, Richard Rowan, Leopold Bloom, Shem the Penman, etc., as if, again in his case, the function had been more important, indeed more essential, than any actual patronymic.

“A Portrait of the Artist”: the Unnameable?

James Joyce’s earliest production corroborates such an interpretation, and helps us to assess his literary programme. “A Portrait of the Artist” (1904) is the first text that he offered for publication, in January 1904, to the editors of the newly-created Dublin magazine, *Dana*, subtitled “A Magazine of Independent Thought”. They, W. K. Magee, best known, especially to readers of *Ulysses*, as “John Eglinton”, and F. Ryan, refused it. Typically, various explanations have been given for their decision. According to Magee himself, he read it in his office at the National Library, in Joyce’s presence, and explained that he could not publish what he himself did not understand.⁴ Stanislaus Joyce thought that the refusal was due to the sexual episodes James alluded to,⁵ adding that his brother thought that they objected to the fact that the text was too self-centered. As a matter of fact, the three explanations converge: the idea that Joyce was engaged in a very personal meditation on the enigma of sex, on the very possibility of “writing”, of giving scriptural, logical form to the relation between the sexes.

The title of the manuscript is remarkable in at least two respects. First, it is dated 7 January, in other words the day after Epiphany, a coincidence that any reader of Joyce is bound to find highly significant: the author is indeed writing a memorial post-script to a major individual experience, he is hard at work taking stock of that experience, in a self-analysis of sorts formulating the general orientation and the basic points of his artistic programme. Then, we must observe that the so-called “subject of this portrait” remains nameless all along the sketch, although it is possible to argue that he ultimately manages to formulate one, to write it out.

A few weeks or months later, in the spring of 1904, in the course of writing *Stephen Hero*, Joyce set about developing a whole theory of “epiphanies”, the context of which sheds interesting light on the underlying issues of what appears to be an existential, rather than purely esthetic, questioning. The preceding page has shown us Stephen Dedalus’s conflict with his mother, who is ready to follow her confessor’s advice and to throw him out of home:

The general attitude of women towards religion puzzled and often maddened Stephen. His nature was incapable of achieving such an attitude of insincerity or stupidity. By brooding constantly upon this he ended by anathemising [sic] Emma as the most deceptive and cowardly of marsupials. He discovered that it was a menial fear and no spirit of chastity which had prevented her from granting his request. Her eyes, he thought, must look strange when upraised to some holy image and her lips when poised for the reception of the host. He cursed her burgher cowardice and her beauty and he said to himself that though her eyes might cajole the half-witted God of the Roman Catholics they would not cajole him. In every stray image of the streets he saw her soul manifest itself and every such manifestation renewed the intensity of his disapproval. It did not strike him that the attitude of women towards holy things really implied a more genuine emancipation than his own and he condemned them out of a purely suppositious [sic] conscience. He exaggerated their iniquities and evil influence and returned them their antipathy in full measure. He toyed also with a theory of dualism which would symbolise the twin eternities of spirit and nature in the twin eternities of male and female and even thought of explaining the audacities of his verse as symbolical allusion. (SH 210)

It would not be enough to describe the situation in terms of the seduction of women by priests: behind it, Joyce detects an unknown quantity, woman’s *jouissance*, which obviously appeals to him as close to his own, and which seems to bring them both close to some ineffable, quasi-mystical experience, into a world radically beyond meaning.

Now, an interesting point here is the next step in his account: he acknowledges his proximity to, indeed jealousy of, woman’s *jouissance*, and at the same time the inner necessity to write about it, specifically to find a poetic style formulating the enigma of the relation between the sexes. The following page, however, clearly shows a gap which illustrates

this enigma: the gap between two accounts of a paradigmatic epiphany, “The Villanelle of the Temptress”: “ardent verses”, which remain unquoted, on the one hand, and on the other a pedestrian, *literal* recording of an exchange between “Lady” and “Gentleman” which amounts to a succession of points of suspension (*SH* 211): these points of suspension indeed tell us of the impossibility of conveying meaning, and at the same time open up an immeasurable space for the play of letters as such.

Naming: an impossible task

The first part of this early portrait concentrates on the hero’s early religious experience, and on his irritation at the way the Church invades the University, and indeed the whole cultural and political scene. Joyce’s disappointment is all the more serious as he had obviously hoped to find there, at least and at last, the conditions proper to a reexamination and rehabilitation of what he considered the shortcomings of Irish society at the turn of the century. The Alma Mater and Holy Mother Church are identified, playing the role of father as well as mother, and reduce the subject to the status of a Redeemer whose only destiny is to be sacrificed for the salvation of the community. That is what James Joyce tells us in so many words, when he describes himself as assuming “the air of a false Christ”, or grants that he is prey to “that ineradicable egoism that he was afterwards to call redeemer . . . he imagined converging to him the deeds and thoughts of the microcosm”.

Egoism, self-sufficiency, centrality: such is his diagnosis of his position, a position inseparable from, and tantamount to, this subjection. Subjection indeed, though not submission, and that is precisely what he eventually does make clear. And the words he uses to describe the way in which he manages to make himself free and autonomous, those words are remarkably lucid: “His Nego . . . written amid a chorus of peddling Jews’ gibberish and Gentile clamour, was drawn up valiantly. . .”.

We, as readers of the previous self-diagnosis of “ineradicable egoism”, must inevitably connect, and contrast, this flamboyant statement with it, and so analyse his *Nego*: the noun, duly capitalized as a name, is at the same time appropriated by him as *his* own true name. Here we have at last the *real name of the artist* that he had been groping for in the preceding confessional pages.

This name can be considered as playing a decisive part in Joyce’s elaboration of his literary enterprise. *Nego* can read as *N-ego*, and so conflates imaginary identifications (implicit in any egotistic posture) and symbolic enunciation (what could be described as “the N function”). It

will take him some time to *traverse*, as it were, this position, to “fly by the net” of imaginary identifications, the first of which being “Stephen Dedalus”, in which he shows himself still a prisoner of the Church (wasn’t “Stephen” the first martyr of the Church, who assumed the symbolic position of staking his life for something he had not experienced directly: Christ’s predication and message?). The Blooms were to be the next step, temporarily, presenting the human condition in all its complexity, and embody two aspects of it: Woman’s inaccessible *jouissance* as well as man’s phallic *jouissance*.

“*Language comes in as a substitute for meaning*” (Jacques Lacan)

James Joyce obviously came to the same conclusion as Lacan, basing himself on his own most personal experience as a young man immersed in Catholic culture and theology: an ambiguous experience assuredly, in which “Nego”, to be read as “N . . . ego”, is not a pure and simple negation of “Credo”, but invites a new apprehension of language. The suggestion is that writing may, or in the case of some artists should, be approached from its most paradoxical and enigmatic angle, namely the letter, which is by nature not simply non-sensical, but radically “hors-sens”, beyond the realm of meaning, whatever the culture, Jewish or Roman Catholic (*a chorus of . . . gibberish and . . . clamour*): an angle which is most probably what Joyce described as “the cunningest angle”.

Joyce’s inquiry and discovery developed in stages, with several turning-points: “The Dead”, which provided a long-eluded final punctuation of *Dubliners*;⁶ the whole process of writing *Ulysses*, where some of the episodes in particular, or some stylistic experiments in general, indicate a definite shift towards a general manipulation of letters to be given fuller scope in *Finnegans Wake*.

A curious parallel may strike the modern reader. James Joyce came across Freud and the Freudian approach to the unconscious in Trieste (when Ferdinand de Saussure, not so far away, was teaching a new approach to language). Jacques Lacan remembered attending public readings of Joyce’s works in Adrienne Monnier’s bookshop in the 1930’s (at a time when modern linguistics was developing decisively). I feel that the parallel suggests an essential connection, in modern culture, between writing and deciphering, between the letter and the unconscious: a connection of which the 1904 “A Portrait of the Artist” bears unmistakable traces.

Notes

¹ N.B. The present paper has been presented on the occasion of a lecture delivered at the “Séminaire de la Bibliothèque” of L’Ecole de la Cause Freudienne, Paris, 11 April 2005.

² Le Seuil, 2005.

³ Le Seuil, 2005, p. 14.

⁴ See William Kirkpatrick Magee, *Irish Literary Portraits* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935).

⁵ See Stanislaus Joyce, *The Complete Dublin Diary of Stanislaus Joyce*, ed. George H. Healey (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971).

⁶ See Jacques Aubert, “D’un Joyce à l’autre”, *Lacan, l’écrit, l’image* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000). A Spanish translation of this volume was published in Mexico a few years ago.