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THE REAL IMAGINARY

Lacan's Joyce

In his twenty-third seminar, Jacques Lacan framed the *sinthome* as a radical unknitting of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real. He offered *le sinthome* not as a mere technical addition to the battery of psychoanalytic tools, but as a concept of paramount importance, for its unique adequation to what he found to be a significant change in the conventional relation of subject to culture and of ego to other.¹ The *sinthome* denoted for Lacan a new way that the subject could confront the challenge posed by the rancid politics of our time—the politics produced by (or at least not precluded by) the traditional Borromean entwining of the three registers (symbolic, imaginary, real, or SIR). The corollary to Lacan's staking out this new ground is a surprising promotion of the imaginary to a principal role in the subject's relation to the real—of bearing more of this burden than he had previously thought. By the time of his twenty-third seminar, that is, Lacan realizes that the crucial task of mediating between the real and the imaginary for the subject could no longer be shouldered exclusively by a symbolic whose failings were increasingly (and alarmingly) apparent. The rupture that the *sinthome* indexes appears most importantly for Lacan in the art of writing—and in particular, the writing of James Joyce.

In the nineteen-sixties, Lacan began closely studying the work of Joyce, an interest enhanced when Hélène Cixous (who was writing a book on Joyce that drew on her affinity for Jacques Derrida's theses on "*écriture*") became Lacan's assistant.² From Joyce's proper name ("Joy-ce"/*jouissance*) to his family psychiatric history (Joyce's daughter Lucia was diagnosed as schizophrenic³), the Irish author clearly suited Lacan's abiding concerns. As the father of a troubled daughter and himself the son of a weak, alcoholic father, Joyce was, according to Lacan, marked by the failures of the paternal metaphor. In Seminar XXIII, Lacan posited that Joyce's artistic enterprise

¹ Seminar XXIII, 1976 in *Ornicar?* (1976): 6-11, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Luke Thurston. Unless otherwise noted, page numbers refer to Luke Thurston's unpublished English translation. I also refer to the often confusingly titled "Joyce the Symptom I" (as mentioned in note 1 of Thurston's translation; in manuscript), the address he delivered at the invitation of Jacques Aubert at the opening of the fifth international Joyce Symposium, 26 June 1975,

was his way of “making a name for himself,” of provisioning a necessary supplement, and Joyce’s art appears to be compensating for this paternal lack. Lacan says,

Joyce did this close-up: born in Dublin with a boozing, practically good-for-nothing father, [. . .] a fanatic with two families [. . .]. The phallus is the conjunction of this parasite, the little prick in question, and the function of language [*parole*]. And it is thus that Joyce’s art is the true guarantee of his phallus. (Seminar XXIII, lesson of 18 November, 1975, 3)

However, Lacan proposes a slightly new version of what he means by “father,” designating a “Borromean father” who *is not* the name, but the one who *names*. This father who *names* functions where the unconscious “is knotted to a *sinthome*” that is completely unique to and in each and every individual (JSI, 9).

Thus in “Joyce the Symptom I,” when Lacan says Joyce wants to *be* the symptom (“he displays the apparatus, the essence and the abstraction of the symptom,” JSI, 6), he does not intend the traditional or familiar psychoanalytic symptom (indeed, to his psychoanalytic students Lacan will remark, “the *Symptom* in Joyce is a symptom that doesn’t concern you at all,” JSI, 6). For Joyce’s writing urged upon Lacan a radically new definition of the symptom, one that emerges from Joyce’s singular (though not uncommon) situation with regard to language—or rather, to languages (or “*l’élanguages*”). Joyce is situated, Lacan says, not only by his relation to the English that he speaks and writes, but also to the Irish tongue that the British Empire has so forcefully cut out of his native Ireland. Imperial English is a language that is not Joyce’s own; it is instead a language that Lacan says he “plays upon [. . .] for his own was wiped off the map, that is, Gaelic [. . .] not his own, therefore, but that of the invaders, the oppressors” (JSI, 7).

In a recent essay I described Joyce’s peculiar linguistico-politico problematic in this way:

Joyce’s personal *malaise* in his own (Irish) civilization was that of a double encirclement by the hell of an English language that had been forcibly imposed over his culture and that had remained fixed at the moment of its imposition. It had no freedom to change or evolve. As the language of a conqueror forced upon his new subjects, it brooked none of the playful, metaphoric outlets for the *jouissance* that language represses—outlets open to any “native” speaking-being. English stagnated in its Irish iteration. (See *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in the passage where young Stephen

published in Seminar XXIII as “Joyce le Symptôme,” *Le Séminaire, livre XXIII: le sinthome*, texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005) 161-69. Hereafter JSI.

² From 1963 to 1965. In 1963, Cixous traveled to the United States to research Joyce at SUNY Buffalo, Yale University, and Robinson Jeffers in California. She was introduced to Jacques Lacan, who was interested in Joyce, by Jean-Jacques Mayoux. Lacan worked with Cixous for the next two years.

³ A diagnosis Joyce rejected, calling Lucia simply “telepathic” (Seminar XXIII, 43).

discovers he only knows what the English priest laughs at as the old-fashioned word for candle-snuffer [*tundish*], because it is no longer current in English usage.) The upshot was that Joyce was oppressed not simply by language. His oppression was aggravated specifically by its being the language, deeply foreign to his culture, of his imperial oppressor.⁴

What ends up intriguing Lacan in Joyce's writing is the manner in which Joyce responds to this double linguistic/political imposition-privation: the body of Joyce's work culminates in nothing less than the destruction (or deconstruction) of the English language.⁵ Lacan says:

sinthome is an old way of spelling what has more recently been spelt symptom. This orthographic modification clearly marks the date at which Greek was injected into French, into my language. Likewise, in the first chapter of *Ulysses*, Joyce expresses the wish that we should hellenise, that we should inject the hellenic language into something—one is not sure into what, since it is not Gaelic; even though Ireland is the subject, Joyce had to write in English. Joyce wrote in English in such a way that as [. . .] Philippe Sollers has remarked in *Tel Quel* the English language no longer exists. (Seminar XXIII, lesson of 18 November, 1975, 1)

Lacan will go even further: "It is hard not to see that a certain relation to language [*la parole*] is increasingly imposed on [Joyce], to the point where he ends up breaking or dissolving language itself, by decomposing it, going beyond phonetic identity" (Seminar XXIII, lesson of 17 February, 1976, 43).

Now, in Seminar XXIII, Lacan repeatedly remarks on his own feeble English, on his own inability to understand Joyce, his own uncertain reading, and his vain efforts to keep abreast of all the academic writing on Joyce, culminating in this confession:

It is obvious that I don't know everything, and in particular, I don't know, when I read Joyce—for that's what's frightful I am reduced to having to read him!—what he believed about himself. It is absolutely sure that I haven't analysed him—and I regret it. But anyway, he was clearly not very disposed to it. (Seminar XXIII, 10 February, 1976, 37)

⁴ Juliet Flower MacCannell, "Nowhere, Else: On Utopia," *Umbr(a)*, forthcoming, 2008.

⁵ The French manuscript reads a bit differently. Speaking of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Lacan says, "*il ne s'agissait pas du gaélic, encore qu'il s'agit de l'Irlande, mais que Joyce devait écrire en anglais, il a été écrit en anglais d'une façon telle que, comme l'a dit quelqu'un dont j'espère qu'il est dans cette assemblée, Philippe Sollers [sic], dans "Tel Quel", il l'a écrit d'une façon telle que la langue [sic, though the context surely requires la langue] anglaise n'existe plus. Elle avait déjà, je dirais, peu de consistance, ce qui ne veut pas dire qu'il soit facile d'écrire en anglais. Mais Joyce, par la succession d'oeuvres qu'il a écrites en anglais, y a ajouté ce quelque chose qui fait dire au même auteur il faudrait écrire l'élangues, les langues, les langues par où je suppose qu'il entend désigner quelque chose comme l'élation dont on nous dit, enfin, que c'est au principe de je ne sais quel sinthome que nous appelons en psychiatrie la manie.*" *Ornicar?* (Séminaire du 18 novembre, 1975): 6.

Despite these disclaimers, Lacan progressively unfolds something extraordinary, something radically *different* that he finds in Joyce's writing. It constitutes a new dimension to the subject's relation to language, speech, and finally to university discourse, which for Lacan correlates with the ethics of capitalism and is the dominant discourse of our time.⁶

Long before this seminar, Lacan had begun exploring a crucial change in the post-Kantian subject (see his seventh seminar on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*⁷). Now he realizes that if one is to have any hope of taking the full measure of the surprises to be encountered in Joyce (such as Lacan's own astonishment that Joyce is "not hooked up to the unconscious" [JSI, 5]), one must start down an unknown pathway. For while Freud discovered that the subject is a function of an endemic discontent with or malaise in civilization, he largely saw that malaise affecting the subject on the psychical plane. And although Freud clearly knew that it also acts on (and is obliquely expressed in) the political plane, it is Lacan who developed the analytic linkage. In his encounter with Joyce's writing, Lacan feels under pressure to frame a fresh concept that can recognize, name and define new factors in the relation of the subject to language, including the political factor. This he names the *sinthome*. It is by means of the *sinthome* that Lacan will courageously undertake a highly original reading of Joyce which will have, as crucial byproduct of recognizing these "new factors," an amazing reassessment of his own psychoanalytic theses regarding language and *jouissance*, the ego and the imaginary.

The crucial new "factor" in the subject's relation to language appears in Lacan's revitalized appreciation for what we call "tone" in the work of the signifier. The linguist Ferdinand de Saussure had already discovered that the "body" of language requires the addition of a new signifier in order to remain an open, generative system. It offers or promises the subject meaning and a certain place in the symbolic order (which it, of course, cannot really deliver) by its structuring of "meaning" on the basis of adding yet one more signifier. In Seminar XXIII, Lacan, however, remarks that psychoanalytic meaning is produced by a certain splicing of the imaginary and the symbolic in order to obtain "unconscious knowledge"—or as he puts it, "what the analysand reveals over time about his symptom."⁸ Here, he now suggests that given that the three registers are in reality separate ("imaginary, symbolic and real do not

⁶ For Lacan, university discourse is the dominant discourse of our post-Hegelian era. In the introductory section of "Joyce the Symptom I" entitled "University and Analysis," Lacan writes that Joyce may mean the closing or turning away from this dominant discourse: "In accordance with what Joyce himself knew would happen to him posthumously, the university in charge. It's almost exclusively academics who busy themselves with Joyce. [. . .]. And he hoped for nothing less than to keep them busy until the extinction of the university. We're headed in that direction" (JSI, 3).

⁷ *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1997).

⁸ Seminar XXIII, lesson of 13 January, 1976, 22.

intermingle⁹), any meaning, conscious or unconscious, that is produced in language is the byproduct of the knot. What “meaning” would there then be if this knot were undone—and undone by something so slight as an intonation, an overtone, a resonance?

In *Seminar XVII, The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (1969), Lacan introduced a new “tonal” factor when he says that the next signifier must “strike” the whole symbolic-linguistic order like a gong striking a bell.¹⁰ Only its *resonating* provides an opening out for (and of) the Order. Lacan then wonders how (and if) this new opening out can still take place once the “symbolic system” and its “order” follows an inevitable tendency to close in on itself: to regard itself as a finite, albeit vast, treasury of accumulated “signifiers” rather than as the bearer of infinite promise, including the never concluded promise of meaning.¹¹ Why do we need this opening? Why is a “next” or “new” signifier crucial to the symbolic order and (or as) its language? Why is the production of “the new” so important?

To understand these “whys,” one needs a basic knowledge of the semiotic production of “meaning” and significance, as identified by de Saussure. According to his semiotic theory of language, *meaning* emanates strictly from the procession and retroactivity of signifiers. There can be no “meaning” until a second or “next” signifier is added to a first utterance, S_1 , that only retroactively becomes a signifier (pointing to something else) when a second signifier is added to it. This second signifier endows the first with a significance it cannot have on its own. Moreover, this *meaning*, for psychoanalysis, is not only symbolic, but *unconscious*. It is that part of the first utterance that is lost when it becomes a signifier or a link in the chaining of meanings—the part lost we call *jouissance*. Lacan says, “If there is knowledge that is not known, as I have already said, it is instituted at the level of S_2 , which is the one I call the other signifier” (Seminar XVII, 33).

In Seminar XVII, Lacan describes our current relation to signifiers, in which we tend to regard signifying chains from the point of view of their already massive accumulation, as a “treasury” of meanings: a rich storehouse of already acquired “total” knowledge (or what he terms a Hegelian *savoir-totalité*). Lacan warns against any such dream of finalizing, quantifying and adding up all “meaning”: it is a variant of the death drive that necessarily results in the end of meaning-making:

This other signifier is not alone. The stomach of the Other, the big Other, is full of them. This stomach is like some monstrous Trojan horse that provides

⁹ Seminar XXIII, lesson of 13 January, 1976, 22.

¹⁰ *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007) 33. Hereafter Seminar XVII.

¹¹ An infinity that ironically (and we might even say tragically) always ends by forming itself into a circle, closing in on itself. On Lacan, the circle and infinity, see my recent work, “The City, Year Zero: Memory and the Spatial Unconscious,” *Journal of Romance Studies* 7.2 (2007): 1-18.

the foundations for the fantasy of a totality-knowledge [*savoir-totalité*]. It is, however, clear that its function entails that something comes and strikes it from without, otherwise nothing will ever emerge from it. And Troy will never be taken. (Seminar XVII, 33)

It is true that, under the rubric of postmodernism, the value of the *new* has recently come strongly into question. Lacan, however, remains true to the thesis that only the fact of a *new* signifier (that permits the next to emerge from the Order) grants knowledge (S₂), and the linguistic formations that support it, true symbolic standing. If this Order becomes (as it so often does) sclerotic, it is no longer enough simply to add on another signifier: it will offer neither promise nor hope. Rather, Lacan asserts here, something has to *strike* the signifiers it has amassed (like so much capital), and strike them in such a way as to realize the dimension in which they actually exist—that of fantasy.

The existence of the treasury of signifiers as a vast quantity of “ones” is a fantasy because it elides the fact that there is or can be no “one” without “zero.” Only the insertion of a zero, a gap, a rupture could hope to free up or loosen the “meaning” repressed in or under them. Only the revelation or articulation that the idea of accumulation (of knowledge, of power, of capital) is indeed a fantasy of full enjoyment without loss or lack might liberate us psychically from its domination.

To put it another way: the treasury of signifiers, like the wealth of nations, constitutes a new kind of *unconscious*, “the stomach of the Other” Lacan calls it, the belly of a “monstrous Trojan horse that provides the foundation for the fantasy of a totality-knowledge.” Because signifiers, when they become a simple unit of this mass, are effectively neutered, deprived of their creative force, what else is there to “strike” this mass, to deliver the creative blow? It could only be an evocation of what an S₁ actually starts out as: an utterance, a partial speech, an intonation that is not yet a “meaning,” not yet tied to a long chain of signifiers. One must rupture this chain to recall the full reserve power of that first signifier—the vocalization that has broken with nature, the animal, *jouissance* while retaining their echo—that permits it to break into the vault that holds (fantasmatically) the wealth of knowledge, power, and capital. “It is [. . .] clear that its function entails that something comes and strikes it from without, otherwise nothing will ever emerge from it” (Seminar XVII, 33), that is, only a signifier deprived of its fellows, reduced to nothing other than a rupturing sound, has the power to break into—or out of—this monstrous enclosure.

I have recently argued that the sclerosis that characterizes “the discourse of the university” and its twin, the ethos of capitalism, are both founded on making “accumulation” (in the case of university discourse, the amassing of “total knowledge”) the discursive *agent* of contemporary discourse.¹² (In the university

¹² Juliet Flower MacCannell, “More Thoughts for the Times on War and Death: Lacan’s Critique of Capitalism in Seminar XVII” in Clemens and Grigg, ed., *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII* (Durham and London: Duke University Press 2006) 194-215. (Previously published in Slovenian, trans. Alenka Zupančič,

discourse, the S_2 is positioned in the upper left hand.) But it has a peculiar “*mot d’ordre*,” one that (in contrast to the discourse of the master) demands not *work*, but simply *accounting*. In such a discourse, where can renewal emerge? Lacan makes clear that it no longer resides in the linguistic signifier (S_1) that originally functioned to purge us of a certain unbearable *jouissance* and to substitute unsatisfiable desire in its place.

Lacan defines the task of the signifier as that of carving a body out of animal substance, a process of carving away a *jouissance* that “returns” only as ghostly “letters” on the body that index what the organic, animal body has lost to the imperium of language. But by the middle of the seventies (and with the political history of the previous three decades in mind—the second world war, the nuclear threat, Nazism, collaborationism, the wars in Indochina and in Algeria), it had become painfully evident to Lacan that the linguistic-symbolic order was very much in need of renewal. And this was not only because the “discourse of the university” had become a closed, encyclopedic, comprehensive and self-satisfied compilation of the “known.” Lacan makes clear from his remarks in Seminar XVII regarding the rigidifying socioeconomic order that there are *political* consequences to making “language” the instrument for neutralizing or voiding *jouissance*. Language is a double-edged sword, indeed, for it also brings us what he calls in that seminar “*jouissance en toc*”: the pseudo *jouissance* of a world filled with little gadgets (*lathouses*), a phony *jouissance* that substitutes for (and militates against) the creative forces that resist the death drive.

In fact, after Seminar XVII it seems perhaps possible to place Lacan closer to the sentiments about language expressed by Roland Barthes in his *Leçon inaugurale* (on taking the chair of Semiology at the Collège de France): “*La langue est tout simplement fasciste*.”¹³ *La langue without lalangue*, “Language” without the “extra” dimensions that tone, babble, overlapping resonances bring to it, cannot empower its signifiers, cannot mobilize them against the entropy of the death drive. These other elements of *lalangue* alone permit language to engage its signifiers against drive energy (*jouissance*), but now do so without repressing it, while not yet being destroyed by it. If language has failed to remain a shelter against the real and has even become the instrument or bearer of threat and a danger itself, it is because it has to a large degree become tone-deaf. Thus it is that Lacan comes to a new conclusion about language:

Razpol 13 [2003]: 157-191).

¹³ “*La langue, comme performance de tout langage, n’est ni réactionnaire ni progressiste; elle est tout simplement fasciste; car le fascisme, ce n’est pas d’empêcher de dire, c’est d’obliger à dire.*” “But language—the performance of a language system—is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist; for fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech.” Roland Barthes, “Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France,” in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983) 457-78 (461).

There must be something in the signifier which resonates. It is surprising that this has been in no way apparent to the English philosophers. I call them philosophers because they are not psychoanalysts—they have a rock-solid belief that language has no effect. They imagine that there are drives and so on, [. . .], for they don't know what a drive is: the echo in the body of the fact that there is speech [*dire*]; but for this speech to resonate, [. . .], the body must be sensitive to it. (Seminar XXIII, lesson of 18 November, 1975, 4)

Lacan was ready for someone like Joyce, an author unhampered by concerns for meaning and whose *lalangue* formed a creative mode of writing that could convey (rather than cut away) the specific *jouissance* of its author. Lacan advises,

Read some pages from *Finnegans Wake* without trying to understand anything. It reads, but as someone of my circle remarked to me, that's because we can feel present in it the *jouissance* of the one who wrote it. (JSI, 5)

Noting that Joyce's name "echoes Freud's—Joyce is related to joy, to *jouissance*, as it is written in the English language," Lacan says,

this joy, this *jouissance* is the only thing that we're able to get a hold of in his text. [. . .]. Joyce gives it all the power of language without, for all that, any of it being analyzable, which is what strikes the reader and leaves one literally dumbfounded—in the sense that one is struck dumb. (JSI, 8)

Lacan needed a term for this singularly new entity, yes, but where is it located? (Recall that the *jouissance* Lacan encountered in Joyce is not "hooked to the unconscious.") Certainly not there where *jouissance* unconsciously persists (in the symptom) and not where this persistence is expressed only by denying it (in the signifier). He had to create a new term, *le sinthome*, for this signifier-symptom that could bear and not reject *jouissance*—but without being damaged by it.

As Lacan describes the variations on Borromean "knottings" that correspond to the *sinthome* in Seminar XXIII, he suggests that the *sinthome* is a "mis-tied" knot, a mistake that nonetheless transforms the traditional symptom and the symbol alike into a new hybrid form: a linguistic, or linguistically modeled, formation that somehow permits *jouissance* to flow through it rather than be repressed and hidden by it. The difference lies in where it is located. Lacan makes the point that the original conception of the symbolic is a choosing between two signifiers that privileges the "hole" between them: as Saussure taught us, it is the differences or the void between signifiers that is of paramount importance. However, Lacan says, this has led to the fixing of that hole by a "frame" which has taken on far too much importance:

The triplicity which the knot allows to be illustrated results from a consistence which is only feigned by the imaginary, a foundational hole which emerges in the symbolic, and an ex-sistence which belongs to the real, as its fundamental characteristic. *This method offers no hope of breaking the constitutive knot of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real.* [. . .]. [. . .] we observe desire. From

this observation we infer its cause is objectal [*objectivée*]. The desire for knowledge encounters obstacles. As an embodiment of this obstacle I have invented the knot.

The knot must come undone. The knot is the only support conceivable for a relation between something and something else.¹⁴ (Seminar XXIII, lesson of 9 December, 1975, 9-10; my emphasis)

“The knot must come undone.”¹⁵ Joyce’s writing has, it seems, confronted Lacan with a new means to the truth, which depends on a renewed sense of urgency, the urgency of art, the urgency of making psychoanalysis a part of this urgency, and reconnecting both to a freshly revalued imaginary. This new imaginary is (and must be) realized as providing something both completely new and yet very ancient: a confrontation with the real that the self-enclosed, self-satisfied “symbolic” no longer seems capable of confronting. The real, says Lacan, is always framed as seen through the hole—that hole gaping between two signifiers.¹⁶

In a fabulatory manner, I propose that the real, as I think it in my *pan-se*¹⁷ is comprised really—the real effectively lying—of the hole which subsists in that its consistence is nothing more than the totality of the knot which ties it together with the symbolic and the imaginary. The knot which may be termed borromean cannot be cut without dissolving the myth it offers of the subject, as *non-supposé*, in other words the subject as real, no more varied than each body which can be given the sign speaking-being [*parlêtre*]. Only due to this knot can the body be given a status that is respectable, in the everyday sense of the word. (Seminar XXIII, lesson of 9 December, 1975, 10)

But now Lacan proposes an alternative, an art that

has to do with a call/appeal to the real, not as linked to the body, but as different. At a distance from the body there is the possibility of something I termed last time resonance or consonance. In relation to its poles, the body and language, the real is what harmonizes [*fait accord*].” (Seminar XXIII, lesson of 9 December, 1975, 11)

This proposition, which places art and the imaginary at the heart of a new subjective relation, commands a corresponding alteration in the psychoanalytic structuring of

¹⁴ He cites the Borromean knot (as given on Seminar XXIII, 35, French edition).

¹⁵ Lacan says, “th[e] analytic grasp of knot is the negative of religion” (Seminar XXIII, lesson of 9 December, 1975, 10). This reflects on Joyce’s antipathy to the Jesuit education he received, and also on Freud’s anger that religion demands that certain fundamental things can never be questioned or made subject to proof.

¹⁶ Lacan says, “To produce a true hole, it must be framed by something resembling a bubble, a torus, so that each one of these holes is outlined by something which holds them together, for us to have something which could be termed a true hole. (Seminar XXIII, lesson of 18 November, 1975, 7).

¹⁷ Lacan plays on *panser*, to bandage, and its homonym, *penser*, to think.

the ego. Toward the end of his twenty-third seminar, Lacan makes the critical, even revolutionary discovery of an ego that is no longer bounded by the form of the circle, no longer defined as and by the two-dimensional imaginary barrier it erects (unsustainably) between itself and the twinned hostilities of the real (the id and/or the social order). But a form of ego that no longer defends itself with the armor of the symbolic or that escapes into the comforting fantasy of the circle (of imaginary enclosure) is an ego that has opened itself *to* the real *through* the imaginary: a new form of “ego” which Lacan pictures no longer as a vacant circle but as a set of open “brackets” (Figure 1).

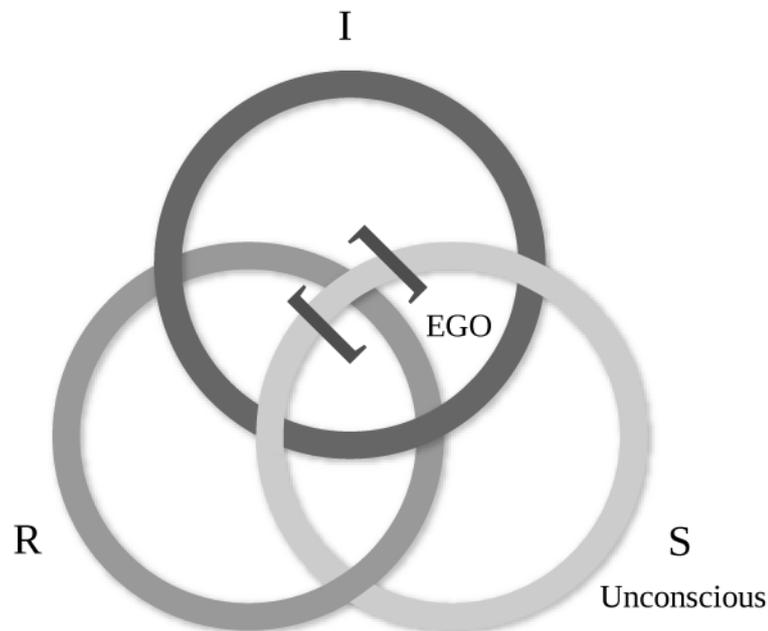


Figure 1

Lacan has encountered a fundamental alteration in the structure of the ego and for him it appears first in Joyce. This is an ego that is no longer determined by an imaginary, 2-D or flat relation to the body, to the “sack and cord” image that sustains the circular, closed ego. This is the very definition for Joyce of a hellish circle, mirrored by the sermons on Hell that fill so much of the middle of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. It is precisely this circle and this Hell that Joyce breaks into, and breaks apart. The scene where Lacan finds this new ego most clearly is the one where young Stephen is beaten mercilessly by his peers. Lacan says that Stephen’s response is unheralded: after the beating, rather than nourishing the wounds to his

ego, his pride, and his body, Joyce describes Stephen as literally “emptied out,” as having no relation to his body at all.

What this indicates, for Lacan, is that Joyce goes beyond an imaginary tied to the ideal of “consistency” that defines our “body”:

Joyce wonders why [. . .] he [Stephen] has nothing against [the boy]. [. . .] he metaphorizes nothing less than his relation to his body. He observes that the whole affair has emptied out; he expresses this by saying that it’s like a fruit being peeled.” (Seminar XXIII, lesson of 11 May, 1976, 59)

Lacan concludes that the fact that the body-image is *not engaged* in Joyce is a sign that the ego has a quite particular function—that of opening up, rupturing and freeing the imaginary from supporting the consistency of the body. The rupture of the ego “sets the imaginary relation free” (lesson of 11 May, 1976, 63). Lacan continues,

It is easy to imagine that the imaginary will bugger off—if the unconscious allows it to, and it incontestably does. [. . .]. One thinks against a signifier [. . .] one leans against a signifier in order to think.” (Seminar XXIII, lesson of 11 May, 1976, 63)

The way Joyce’s Stephen leaned against that fence . . .

What Lacan has done, it seems to me, is free the imaginary from its sterile relation to the “ego-as-circle” to which the traditional SIR Borromean knot seemed to consign it, putting it in touch with that other kind of ego that long haunted the work of a Rousseau, a Baudelaire—the one capable, as Baudelaire says, of taking a bath of multitude because it is open to other egos and not walled off from them. An ego that therefore becomes capable of opening the “Order” that only simulates a symbolic order in the old sense, had purchased its mastery at the expense of this different ego-other relation, that had used oppression, imperialism, coercion, and the demand for unquestioning faith.

In Joyce, Lacan discovered another kind of imaginary and another kind of ego, an open one: he diagrams the “open ego” as a set of brackets, rather than as a circular link (see again Fig. 1) through which experience flows—without being referred back to its effect on the fortress with which it has surrounded itself. This is an ego no longer ensnared in (and buried under) a mass of verbiage that tries to obscure the enormous power of the drives. That power remains key: for the drives constitute a demand to find ever-new ways of dealing with them. For this ego and this imaginary, the future might just be open, too. I would say that for Lacan, Joyce clears the way for a *second imagination* not limited to an imaginary homogeneity with the real—a real that has been flattened and enclosed—the “real” in a sack. This first form of the imaginary is stuck in a mirror, hemmed in by the limits that the symbolic demands be placed on it. But an imaginary that is freed, through a mis-tie, from its eternal imbrication in the triple knot, can address the elementary structuring of meaning that the knot affords. It is therefore something else, something not restricted by the ego’s

compass and not limited to an egosphere that, no matter how far it is stretched, remains a stifling container. With it, the *new* becomes once more possible.

Lacan places the imaginary in a direct relation with the real (in contrast to his original definition of the imaginary, where it flees the real). The reason why this is of extreme importance to us today is (as it should by now be clear) the unstated matter of my paper. As the globe is increasingly encircled by the plenitude of “known knowledge,” by an “*aléthosphère*” brimming over with the avatars of pseudo *jouissance* (*lathouses*), the negative effect on the individual of “the discourse of the university” (and its twin, capitalist discourse) needs to be much more fully assessed than one has thought. The globalized imperative to “enjoy” what is already accumulated, already at hand, is precisely what blocks desire: we want want, we lack lack, we can no longer desire. As such, we cannot therefore have any possible relation—desiring, analytic, knowledgeable, and yes, even unconscious—to our own *jouissance*.

Joyce, for Lacan, leads the way to untying the rigidifying knot, the hypertrophied Borromean knot, by breaking it apart, taking down the mechanisms by which it unsustainably sustains itself and its closed-up ego.