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Joyce the Letter and the Feminine Principle

Lacan demonstrates in his Seminar *The Sinthome* that the Joycean text concerns the letter. Here the letter is not a vehicle for truth or desire nor the material basis for the signifier. It is a letter made for jouissance and it is what allows us to touch the singular real of the body as this letter is a residue of speech that can border jouissance. The real is the responsibility of the analyst in a time when Oedipal solutions of meaning and truth are not so prevalent anymore. Something must be fashioned with regards to the singular real of the body and Joyce showed Lacan the way. In the Seminar Lacan says that Joyce didn't know he was fashioning the *sinthome*, he was a pure artificer, a man of know-how, an artist.^[1] Just before this Lacan said that Joyce's praxis concerns a saying.^[2] This is crucial because a saying is not the said. The fact of a saying ex-ists outside any truth or meaning and is a hole in language. The said of the statement contains meaning and can be true or false.

Why is this important for psychoanalysis? We target the real of symptoms and we do this without recourse to the father and we do this beyond meaning and truth which is not to say that these latter two don't play a role. It implies that we move beyond truth and meaning because these always miss their target. If saying ex-ists language and yet makes use of it, it can target the letter as that where something of language, *lalangue*, borders on the singular real. The letter, as Joyce has demonstrated, elides meaning and indexes a hole at the heart of language. Can we say this relates to language as a material, its *moterality*? Stephen Dedalus was mesmerized by the materiality of language, by the letter and indeed also by voices and their sound materiality rather than what they said. Two examples: the first epiphany^[3] and the incident in Cork when Stephen, struck by his father's voice, suffered a derealisation he then recovers from by pacifying this body event with a rhythmic repetition with the letter and names.^[4] These show that Joyce was extremely sensitive to the jouissance of the letter. Indeed, they were a jouissance object for him whilst for most of us this jouissance remains hidden within established discourses which were not to Joyce's taste (his *nego* – his heretical No! to these discourses). However, this jouissance implies that there is an aspect to language, a real jouissance, that is not-all in relation to meaning and truth.

It is on this point that we can say that there is an affinity between Joyce's special relationship to the letter and the feminine principle. Joyce enjoyed playing with letters and it seems as if he had a lot of

freedom here. This is an indication of Joyce's particular and precarious anchoring in *lalangue* with the result that the symptom was not embodied and had not clapsed onto the real. This is echoed in the tearing apart of his discourse as an attempt to revert back to letters without an appeal to the Other; a movement which produces and condenses his jouissance. This is his symptom and as Lacan said "the pure symptom of what is involved in the relationship to language".^[5] Apart from the fact that Joyce's body thus requires regulation with his writing, there are two other implications: 1. Not unlike a woman, Joyce is open and sensitive to a jouissance that is Other; 2. If his art-saying was his symptom then *a* woman could not be a symptom for him according to Lacan's statement that *a* woman is a symptom for another body.^[6] She could not cause a body-event in him as for an event to register you need an incorporation of language and its material. Joyce was not prone to give himself to the body-event. Lacan: "Joyce takes himself for a woman on occasion only to reach fulfilment as a symptom".^[7] Joyce could not be a woman as he could only be the symptom for himself, Joyce-the-symptom, and thus *a* woman could not be a symptom for him. Not a woman for Joyce, but The Woman, Nora Barnacle, as she whose skin gave Joyce an envelope for his body. Lacan said: "She was absolutely pointless" and chose her "by virtue of the strongest depreciation".^[8] These are apparently contradictory statements but not if you consider that Joyce absolutely needed Nora, not as *a* woman and not as a symptom that could cause a jouissance-event in him. You could say that this is the depreciation of *a* woman as someone who is a symptom for another body.

Why was Joyce so important for Lacan? Because the letter of his writing bordered on a real as a limit to an endless production of meaning and thus as a condition for an end of analysis. But the letter of his writing is also crucial for grasping that every speaking-being is concerned with the feminine principle and that an analysis must aim at a signifier that has the function of a letter as something that skirts around the hole of feminine jouissance which has a feminising effect at the end of an analysis. It pushes him or her to articulate his or her relationship to feminine jouissance.^[9] To be a Lacanian after Joyce-with-Lacan means to be a sufferer of language but also to manage some freedom from that by making room for desire.

[1] Lacan, J. (1975-76). *The Sinthome*, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII (ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. A.R. Price), Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016, p. 99.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Joyce, J. *Poems and Shorter Writings* (eds. R. Ellman, et. al.), London: Faber & Faber, 1991, p. 161.

[4] Joyce, J. Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, in *A James Joyce Reader*, London: Penguin Books, 1976, pp. 342-3.

[5] Lacan, J. (1975), Joyce the Symptom, in *The Sinthome*, (trans. A.R. Price), Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016, p. 146.

[6] Lacan, J. (1979), Joyce the Symptom, in *The Lacanian Review*, issue 5, p. 17. 2018.

[7] Lacan, J. (1979). Op. cit. p. 18.

[8] Lacan, J. (1975-76). Op. cit. p. 68.

[9] Monribot, P. (2013). "There is no sexual relation" in *Hurly-Burly* issue 10, p. 161.

Availability of References

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[1] Lacan says that Joyce didn't know he was fashioning the *sinthome*, he was a pure artificer, a man of know-how, an artist.[1]

NOTE : This is referenced as p77 of Adrian Price's translation. The quote is given below. However, the following reference is I think nearer to Rik Loose's comment.

p56 of Adrian Price's translation

Seminar XXIII : 13th January 1976 : pIV 12 (part 1) of Cormac Gallagher's translation.

I said that he was the symptom. His whole oeuvre is one long testimony of it.

Exiles, is truly the approach of something which is, for him, in short, the symptom. The central symptom in which, of course, what is at stake is the symptom constituted by the deficiency proper to the sexual relationship, but this deficiency does not take on just any old form. This deficiency must indeed take on a form. And this form, is the one that knots him to his wife, to the aforesaid Nora, to the aforesaid Nora during whose reign he lucubrates Exiles, Les Exilés, as it has been translated, even though this may just as well mean Exils. Exils, there could be no better term to express non-relationship. And it is indeed around this non-relationship that everything in Exiles turns. Non-relationship is indeed the following, it is that there is truly no reason why he should hold One woman among others to be his woman, that One woman among others is moreover one who has a relationship with any other man whatsoever. And it is indeed this any other man whatsoever that is at stake in the character that he imagines, and for whom at this date of his life, he knows how to open up, to open up the choice of the One woman in question, who is none other, on this occasion, than Nora. The portrait, the portrait that he completed at the time, the one I evoked in connection with the uncreated conscience of his race, in connection with which he invokes the artificer par excellence which his father is supposed to be; while it is he who is the artificer. That it is he who knows, who knows what he has to do. Who believes that there is an uncreated conscience of some race or other. Which is where there lies a great illusion. That he also believes that there is a 'book of himself'. What an idea to make oneself be a book! This could truly only come to a stunted poet. To a pig of a poet.

See [Seminar XXIII: The Sinthome or Joyce and the Sinthome: 1975-1976: beginning on November 18th 1975 : Jacques Lacan](#) : Details of translations, notes & references [here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=971](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=971) : p77 of Jacques-Alain Miller (editor), Adrian Price (translator) = Seminar XXIII : 17th February 1976 , pVII 5 (Part 2) of Cormac Gallagher's translation from unedited recordings. : This is what I put forward very gently the last time. And, I revoke it for you incidentally, I thought – you can make what you wish of my thinking – I thought that it was the key to what had happened to Joyce. That Joyce has symptom which starts, which starts from the fact that his father was lacking (*caerent*): radically lacking he talks of nothing but that.

I centred the matter around the name the proper name. And I thought that – make what you wish of this thought – and I thought that it was by wanting a name for himself that Joyce compensated for the paternal lack. This at least is what I said. because I could say no better. I will try to articulate that in a more precise way. But it is clear that the art of Joyce is something so particular, that the term *sinthome* is indeed what is, what is appropriate to it.

[2] Just before this Lacan said that Joyce's praxis concerns a saying.[2]

As [1] See <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=971> Seminar XXIII : 17th February 1976 , pVII 5 (Part 2) of Cormac Gallagher's translation from unedited recordings : Probably... Namely, at the same time if the Symbolic is freed, as I clearly marked formerly, we have a way of

repairing that, which is to make what for the first time I defined as the sinthome. Namely, the something that allows the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real, to continue to hold together, even though here no one of them is held by another, thanks to two errors.

I have allowed myself to define as sinthome not what allows the knot, the knot of three, to still make a knot of three but what it preserves in such a position that it seems to be a knot of three. This is what....

[5] This is his symptom and as Lacan said “the pure symptom of what is involved in the relationship to language”.[5]

[Joyce the Symptôm \(Sinthôme\) I & II : 16th June 1975 : Jacques Lacan](#) : Information on translations available, notes & references [here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=11952](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=11952) : Joyce the Sinthôme I (from Éric Laurent’s notes) : p146 of Adrian Price’s translation = p4 of Aaron Benenav’s translation : That is what makes itself heard, in what makes Joyce the symptom, the pure symptom of the relation to language, insofar as one reduces it to a symptom – reduces it to that which it has for an effect, when one does not analyze that effect – I would say more, that one is forbidden from playing with any of the equivocations that would move one’s own unconscious.

= p22 of Dominique Hecq’s translation (See www.Freud2Lacan.com / Joyce-le-Symptôme-1-5-col,) : This is exactly what is noticeable in what turns Joyce into the symptom, the pure symptom of what makes his relation with language when reduced to the symptom – that is to the effect it has when the effect isn’t being analyzed – I’d go as far as saying that one forbids oneself to play on any equivocality that is likely to move anyone’s unconscious. [166]

NOTE : “du rapport au langage” is translated as ‘relationship’ by Adrian Price & ‘relation’ by Aaron Benenav & Dominique Hecq. Both translations can be questioned. It may be that ‘regarding’ or ‘vis-à-vis’ are nearer. The French word ‘relation’ is nearer to the English ‘relation’. Watch out!

[6] If his art-saying was his symptom then *a* woman could not be a symptom for him according to Lacan’s statement that *a* woman is a symptom for another body.[6]

See [Joyce the Symptôm \(Sinthôme\) I & II : 16th June 1975 : Jacques Lacan](#) : Information on translations available, notes & references [here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=11952](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=11952) : Joyce the Sinthôme II (from notes given by JL to Jacques Aubert after the conference) : p17 of Adrian Price’s translation = p11 of Domenick Hecq’s translation given at www.Freud2Lacan.com /lacan /Joyce-le-Symptôme-2--3col : Thus it can well be that some individuals amongst those Aristotle mistakes for bodies are by symptoms compared with other bodies. A woman, for instance, is the symptom of another body.

If this is not the case, she remains a symptom, says the hysteric – the ultimate symptom.

[7] Lacan: “Joyce takes himself for a woman on occasion only to reach fulfilment as a symptom”.[7]

See [Joyce the Symptôm \(Sinthôme\) I & II : 16th June 1975 : Jacques Lacan](#) : Information on translations available, notes & references [here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=11952](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=11952) : Joyce the Sinthôme II (from notes given by JL to Jacques Aubert after the conference) : p18 of Adrian Price’s translation = p13 of Domenick Hecq’s translation given at www.Freud2Lacan.com /lacan /Joyce-le-Symptôme-2--3col : Joyce occasionally takes up the position of woman so that he can become a symptom. It’s a good idea, but it falls flat. One could say that he is a symptomatology. No need then to call him by the name that fulfils his wish,

[8] Lacan said: “She was absolutely pointless” and chose her “by virtue of the strongest depreciation”.[8]

See [Seminar XXIII: The Sinthome or Joyce and the Sinthome: 1975-1976: beginning on November 18th 1975 : Jacques Lacan](#) : Details of translations, notes & references [here](#) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=971> : p68 of Jacques-Alain Miller (editor), Adrian Price (translator) = Seminar XXIII : 10th February 1976 , pVI 8-9 of Cormac Gallagher’s translation from unedited recordings. : I am not proceeding by chance along this laborious path. It is because from all time, with *a* woman, since make no mistake, for Joyce, there is only one woman. She is always based on the same model and he only puts her on like a glove with the most extreme reluctance. It is only, this is tangible, by the, the greatest disparagement that he makes Nora into a chosen woman. Not alone must she fit him like a glove but she must squeeze him like a glove. She is absolutely useless.

[9] Monribot, P. (2013). “There is no sexual relation” in Hurly-Burly issue 10, p. 161. : Available to download from www.LacanianWorksExchange.net /authors a-z or authors by date (2013)