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Joyce
e l'inconscio

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Lacan and Joyce.
An Interview with Jacques Aubert

Erik Schneider

The interview which follows took place in Jacques Aubert's home in Lyon, France, in September 2010. I had met Jacques in Trieste the year before, when he had presented the new French translation of *Ulysses* at the James Joyce Summer School. I asked him if he would be interested in being interviewed for a documentary on James Joyce and Pyschoanalysis which I had begun working on in Trieste. The interview was filmed and conducted in English and lasted about 45 minutes, and then Jacques recapitulated many of the essential points in French. I, of course, knew of his key role in inviting Lacan to speak on Joyce at the James Joyce International Symposium in Paris (1975), which led to his seminar *Le sinthome* (1975-1976) later that year, but even I was not prepared for his extraordinary mastery of that seminar and related issues. Jacques was that rarest of scholars: someone who could speak with equal competence and insight on both Lacan and Joyce, and all with the most self-effacing modesty and objectivity. Now that Jacques is no longer with us, I hope the interview can also stand as testament to scholarship, and to his role as "midwife" to what, to my mind at least, constitutes one of the key encounters of the last century, that between James Joyce and Jacques Lacan.

Jacques Aubert, in terms of the sinthome *you were there "at the creation" as it were, in the sense that you were the person who suggested or convinced Lacan to do this now very famous seminar on Joyce. Can you tell us exactly how this came about? What made you suggest to Lacan that he do something on Joyce and what did you think he could contribute to Joyce?*

Well, there were a number of reasons. The most evident reason was the publication of the *Écrits* (1966) in which his interest in language, the connection between language and the Unconscious came to the fore. So that was a good reason to be attentive to what he was doing, and, in fact, his teaching had been a considerable help to me and some of my friends teaching literature at the University. But more specifically, three or four years before the Symposium was going to take place Lacan had published *Lituraterre* (1971) in which he made explicit reference to Joyce. And this was the confirmation of a number of indications to be found in the earlier seminars... while my personal interest in Joyce had been centred on *Finnegans Wake*... One of the reasons I've dedicated so much time in my life to Joyce was due to the personal impact on me of *Finnegans Wake*, and probably confirmed by Thomas Stearns Eliot's selection of passages from *Finnegans Wake* in his book, his introduction to Joyce, that volume. That had convinced me that, although *Finnegans Wake* was extremely difficult to read, there might be some possible approach to the text, to the book, that it was not totally hermetic. Obviously, you could find some way of approaching the book.

At the time that I organised – at the request of my friends in the James Joyce International Foundation – the Symposium in Paris, we were, in France, in the middle of a turmoil of ideas and theories and my initial aim was to invite all the people who seemed to be interested in Joyce in the Paris intellectual scene to take part in the Symposium. And that is why I invited Phillipe Sollers, Hélène Cixous. I also approached other people like Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida both of whom declined, they didn't want to take part.

Did they give a reason for their refusal?

They were intimidated by Joyce, they didn't dare say anything. I mean... in the 70's so much had appeared especially in the wake of American criticism and American scholarship concerning Joyce that a number of people were frightened by the prospect of getting themselves involved. You needed some other kind of incitement, which might be provided by theory. But people who had no theory ready to apply to Joyce like Roland Barthes or even Derrida at that period, in spite of his interest, probably triggered by Helene Cixous, those people said "O well I'm not in a position to speak..."

So that was when you first approached Lacan? You said you had read the Écrits *but had you had a personal relationship with him, had you attended any of the seminars?*

I had worked in a cartel, a reading group in Lyon, of people who belonged to Lacan's school and who had been really formed by Lacanian analysts. Some of them directly by Lacan, but basically

once removed. That had taken place in the late 60's, after the publication of *Écrits* and the early 70's. We had worked not specifically on Joyce but I remember discussing Kafka and other people with a group of analysts.

Do you remember your first encounter with Lacan, when you approached him about Joyce. Did you call him up and say "Hey, let's do Joyce!"? How did that happen?

(Laughs) Well, quite easily. Well, the general idea was more to provide for the Joyceans coming from all over the world – we were 300-400 people from countries all over the world – to provide them with an idea of what the French "scene" might contribute to Joyce studies. In that sense, Lacan was one of the possible participants. Now there was an additional inducement, linked not only with my personal interest in Lacan and Lacanian theory, which had been produced and developed in those groups' work, but also linked with my connection with Maria Jolas. I remember telling her... among the people [to invite] there's also Lacan, and she said "O do call Jacques" because Maria Jolas was a close friend of Lacan. I don't know exactly when their friendship began, possibly in the 30's, but it is my contention that it probably began in the 30's.

Through Transition*?*

Exactly. And so she gave me his phone number, which I could have found in the telephone Directory, and then I called, and I don't remember exactly how it came about... or Maria called me

saying "Go and see him on Saturday", I don't remember exactly how it came about. Anyway, I had an informal appointment with him on a Saturday in January 1975. And, of course, there was a wonderful *acte manqué* to begin with which he thought was a very good sign, a very interesting indication of my interest in the topic. Anyway, he opened the door and said "Come in" and so on. And then I explained to him what the Symposium was, that several hundred people around the world who were working on Joyce were going to be at the Sorbonne. I thought that he might give the introductory lecture because to me he was on a different level from other people in terms of personal presence and also in terms of theory... people like Philippe Sollers, Hélène Cixous, and writers like Michel Butor, for instance, who I invited because I knew him personally. To me, Lacan provided a broader perspective on Joyce and on theory in general because of his interest in both the Unconscious and Language. Those were the two major points, of course. So, I said you have this opportunity to speak to these specialists and I remember specifically saying "*vous avez l'occasion de parler... les choses a dire et il y a les choses a casser...*" ("there are a number of things to break").

What did you have in mind specifically that Lacan would "break"?

A kind of traditional, old fashioned approach to Joyce in terms of, let's say, the traditional approach to the novel for instance, or to modernism which, in fact, was more historically oriented, rather than theoretically productive, fertile. Some analyst friend of mine, someone who was quite close to Lacan in those days said "tout le monde casser à morceaux". You may not know the French phrase, it's colloquial, it means "tell the truth". Which is

used in particular with criminals. It may have been in my Unconscious... (laughs). So, I said "*casser en morceaux*" and he listened to me, and asked me about what I had been doing, what I'd been working on, if I had anything to show to him in terms of literary publication. I sent him a book I had written on Joyce's aesthetics, which needed revisions, in fact. But I wanted to get rid of it, so it was published. I know why he was interested in that.

The common interest in Aquinas?

Yes, that was one of the aspects. And also the question of the aesthetics of pleasure and *jouissance*. Because obviously one of the problems on which Joyce's theorising went wrong was on the question of *jouissance*. He didn't have the concept which at the time Lacan was working on, in fact. That's probably one of the reasons he didn't dismiss this book of mine, which to me is outdated in a sense. I brought in a number of things, in particular concerning Joyce's sources but I didn't go far enough, of course, in the question of *plaisir, jouissance*... Only pointing out the point at which Joyce had to stop.

This leads into the next question I wanted to ask you: why did Lacan turn to Joyce so late in his career and so late in his teaching, in addition to this thing that may have pricked his curiosity or seeing something that others hadn't seen? Were there other aspects that made Lacan turn to Joyce in terms of his own needs, his own concepts, and so late... 30 years of being an analyst, 22 seminars...?

Well, of course, it's a long story. I just wanted to add a word about the way he responded to me. He said "You call me next week. You call me Monday morning". And I called him and he said "*Ok, qu'est-ce que vous voulez mettre sur les dos*".

It's a point I developed when I spoke at the International Symposium. In fact, it had all begun several decades earlier in the 20's and 30's. There is one basic fact which shouldn't be forgotten about this connection between Joyce and Lacan; they were practically contemporaries. There was a difference of 18 years but that is not enough to create such a distance. Lacan was at pains to remind people that he had met Joyce when he was 20, on several occasions at "La Maison des Amis des Livres" when he was quite young, he says 17 years old. That's not possible... let's say 20, later he said 20... And then later, on the occasion of the first reading of the translation of *Ulysse*s in 1929. But, in fact, it appears, it was one of the things I discovered, that he was a friend of Maria Jolas and a friend of Armand Petitjean, who belonged roughly to this generation, who was a young man in the 30's and who was one of the first translators of Joyce. Armand Petitjean who translated *From a Banned Writer to a Banned Singer* (1932). The reason I know about this connection is because Lacan invited me to dine with him. In the months and years that followed this encounter with Lacan he'd say "O well, Armand Petitjean is in Paris, let's get together". And I met Petitjean later on in his place in Provence and we discussed things and so on. So obviously Lacan was in contact with a number of people who were themselves close to Joyce, Maria Jolas, Armand Petitjean, among others and la "Maison des Amies des Livres". Even if in the 30's the relationship between Adrienne Monnier and Joyce went through a difficult moment.

Another proof of Lacan's early interest in Joyce is in his personal library. An extraordinary library, a full building in his country house. It was absolutely amazing the number of things you could find there! I remember seeing among other things the pirated edition of *Ulysses* by Samuel Roth in 1927.

The Two Worlds...

Exactly, the Two Worlds edition, and he had those in his library which is proof of his interest in *Ulysses*. And then, of course, in the succeeding publications of *Transition*.

In these contacts did he give you a specific reminiscence or recollection of those two encounters with Joyce?

I didn't ask him questions. It was part of our mutual understanding. I'd ask questions, of course.

But not of a personal or probing nature...

I might have asked him. There was absolutely no difficulty in asking such a question. Contact with him as far as I am concerned was extremely easy. You can imagine how impressed I was when I met him, especially after missing... with the wrong address and so on. He made things extremely easy and he was incredibly attentive to people, insisting on taking me to the train station and saying "I'll come back to see that you take the train" and when I wasn't there... calling my wife: "He's left me" (*Me a abandonè*) and so on (laughs). So, just a way of saying that it was fairly easy to have this exchange, which in fact was based on this common interest in some of the most intriguing aspects of Joyce.

The fact that he attended the session on the translation of *Ulysses*... And his obvious interest – I have no direct proof, he didn't say anything about this – in *Transition*, but it couldn't not be connected with his friendship with Jolas.

Getting close to answering the question about the reason why Lacan was moving from one position to another concerning the Unconscious, concerning Psychoanalysis. The basic point is his position regarding language and linguistics. His formation as an analyst coincides in time with the development of linguistics, especially American linguistics. Broomfield, *Language*: 1933. Lacan's doctoral thesis: 1932. For a person interested in the development of the human sciences (*les sciences humaines*), especially what belongs to language... And after all, Psychoanalysis has to do with language, doesn't it? Now, at one point Lacan was disappointed with the result he got in the development of Psychoanalysis. He thought limits had been reached and, in particular, he examined the possible failure of *parole* to account for the basics of analysis. So, his move towards another type of position is connected with a revision of this basic question of *parol*e, in favour of a more radical position from a point of view outside of linguistics, in a sense. Outside the traditional position of language. Insisting on the Letter was a way of taking his distance, as we say in French: "*prendre son distance avec la langage parlée, avec la parole*". The standpoint was such, of course, that he still had to tackle the question of *parole*. But he pointed out the connection between *parole* and *jouissance*. And that is the turning point which begins with *Seminar XX*. The question of *jouissance* becomes the starting point of his theorising. So that's the point at which Joyce came in.

He says in Encore*, the famous phrase,* "Joyce n'est pas a lire"*. What is your interpretation of that phrase? Is that part of this fascination with Joyce?*

I think it has to do with the question of *jouissance* as eluding the subject and what he may have meant – I'm improvising at this moment – is that *Finnegans Wake* is a work which suggests that there is some *jouissance* which we cannot locate. One aspect of this is what happens to people who want to tell the whole truth of *Finnegans Wake*. People who want the definitive edition of *Finnegans Wake*. People who want to explain the totality of *Finnegans Wake*. People who want to translate *Finnegans Wake*. All of them reach or try to reach the limits of *jouissance*. Many of them may lose much of their personality in the process, even their life. In a sense, it may mean that *Finnegans Wake* embodies *jouissance* at its most extreme, in a sense. *Jouissance* in relation to language or rather to writing, to the Letter. And this, I think, is the basis of his commentary on *Litturaterre* (1971).

There seems to be an ebb and flow in this seminar. On the one hand, Lacan treats Joyce as a case, a symptom, something to analyse. And then there's all this discourse about the knots and so forth, which to me at least gives a sense of something very restrained, knotted up, almost of paralysis. And we have a situation which Jean-Michel Rabaté describes as Joyce being Lacan's symptom. On the other hand, we have Lacan and the sinthome*, Joyce as the* sinthome*, in which Lacan is moving beyond his own system, in which he's using Joyce to move beyond Psychoanalysis. He says this explicitly in the next seminar* (L'insu que sait de lune-bévue s'aile à mourre, 1976-

1974), *he says "Well you know, Freud, he was a Viennese physician who discovered a few things... But I'm now somewhere else". Do you have a comment on this?*

There are a lot of contradictions, of course. Because the fact of pulling down the structure that he had put together, the *Réel- Symbolique–Imaginaire*, by pulling to pieces his own theory at one point created a lot of theoretical confusion or difficulty. It's in the later seminars that he tried to reconstruct something, which is what Jacques-Alain Miller is trying to do at the present moment. But I'm not prepared to go into that because I haven't myself examined the question.

Lacan seems to propose an almost para-psychotic or frozen psychosis for Joyce. He begins that one lesson saying: "Was Joyce mad?", and then later with his comments on epiphany. What is your feeling about this idea of Joyce as "mad", or of his force coming from or related to a psychological matrix which is very close to psychosis? When Lacan said: "Was Joyce mad?" what was your reaction to that, then and now?

Speaking as a layman, I'm not a psychiatrist, I would say that he managed to survive through writing, through a certain relation to writing. This is roughly what I would say. He didn't commit suicide. He didn't go as far as President Schreber in terms of a special relation to God and sexual fantasies and so on... What strikes me is the way Lacan insists on Joyce's dictum: "I am going to give the academics

work for 300 years". Which is a way of transferring his problem to others. Which is exactly what happened.

Why do you think Joyce refused Psychoanalysis? One of the things that attracted Lacan to Joyce, this came out in the interview I did with Luke Thurston, was Joyce's refusal of Psychoanalysis. The famous incident in Zurich where his patroness Edith McCormick, who was giving him a lot of money, wanted him to be analysed by Jung and Joyce said it was "unthinkable". Why, do think, Joyce not just refused, saying "no thank you", but saying that it was unthinkable*, something that didn't even enter into the antechamber of his being, (i.e.) the thought of being psychoanalysed by someone?*

Well, the question is whether he was thinking of Psychoanalysis in general or Jungian Psychoanalysis. It's obvious that the whole approach of Joyce to language had nothing to do with the type of Unconscious that Jung was interested in, myth and so on. Though he uses myth in *Finnegans Wake*. I remember telling Lacan that, of course, there was no point in trying to fish out the myth in *Finnegans Wake* because all of them are there from the beginning. So, there was no point in trying to make an inventory of them. In terms of Jung, precisely the answer seems to be Lacan's relation to the concept of *lalangue*. You know the concept of *lalangue*? And obviously the whole of Joyce's approach to and handling of language is best explained by the concept of *lalangue*. He's interested not in language as such, but in what is specific in the linguistic process. And in terms of theory *lalangue* is precisely... I'm quoting Miller: "*la parole avant son inscription dans la lexicographie et la grammaire*". It's a kind of

nascent stage of language before it is organised by culture or by whatever you want to call it. It's this particular point which is in the background of what is commonly called *la monologue interieur* and the type of language that Joyce tried to record in Dublin. So, this the first level in Joyce's approach to *lalangue.*

Since 1975 our knowledge of Joyce has increased enormously, especially our textual knowledge, and especially for Finnegans Wake. *Now it has been demystified to some degree because of the genetic work and the great number of critics working on it. And also on the biographical side we know much more than Lacan could have known or even Ellmann knew about Joyce's father, about Lucia and about Joyce himself, with all the unpublished letters and so forth. This extraordinary increase in the "archive", let's say, what effect does it have on the validity of* Le sinthome*? What survives in the* Seminar*, what remains absolutely pertinent? Does this genetic work alter our perception of the* Seminar*?*

Concerning Joyce scholarship... in fact in the 70's we already had the best part, the best scholarship. I mean, even in those days it was infinitely easier to read *Ulysses*, even *Finnegans Wake* when books like *The Books at the Wake: A Study of Literary Allusions in James Joyce's* Finnegans Wake (by James Atherthon, 1959) were published. I may have introduced Atherton to Lacan, I remember speaking about Atherton's book to Lacan. I take this as an example, but already Clive Hart's *A Concordance to Finnegans Wake* (1963) was there. All the books on allusions in *Ulysses*...

You're saying that Lacan had what he needed to do the Seminar *and that in the last 30 years we've basically built on that and it hasn't added...*

Exactly... and Hayman, I remember inviting Hayman to dinner with Lacan.

Tell us about that. I think they had this encounter and Lacan wanted to know something very specific from Hayman and there was this very strange non-communication between them.

I told Lacan that "David Hayman is in Paris, would you like to meet him". "O yes of course" so we had dinner together. There were other people there, Phillipe Sollers, I think, my wife and a couple of other persons. But, in fact, almost nothing occurred in the first place because of linguistic reasons. Because Hayman who knew French well, in the sense of reading it easily, was a bit apprehensive about speaking French. Lacan was extremely silent during dinners, very very silent. Basically because it was taking place after very long days. On seminar days for instance, when he came back to his studio, to his place, there were occasionally a number of people who had come to Paris to his Seminar and who wanted to meet him. So at 7 o'clock he was really exhausted. It was also a matter of temperament. No, very little took place on that particular occasion and I remember David wrote a piece on that. I remember Phillipe Sollers was there and he's much more articulate than the two put together.

After the Seminar did Lacan continue to think about Joyce or elaborate other ideas about Joyce?

O yes. In terms of the relationship there was an understanding that whenever I was in Paris, I called him and we had dinner together. Particularly on Seminar days, I attended his Seminar from 1975 until the end and every night... and also on his birthdays and on other occasions when he asked me to talk. So, his interest in Joyce didn't relent. He was very interested. Although I couldn't say more than that in terms of specific points that he would tackle. This, in fact, applies to all the relationship that we had. From the beginning as I said, it was understood that I was welcome to call him about something that I thought might interest him and he sometimes contacted me on some phrase or something.

What was the influence of Svevo on Joyce? What did Svevo give to Joyce, particularly through a book like Senilità*? Do you think Svevo was an important element in moving Joyce away from* Portrait *towards* Ulysses*.*

Svevo is very important to Joyce both in respect to Jewishness and Psychoanalysis. I wouldn't be ready to pinpoint specific influences between Joyce's and Svevo's work, but in terms of general atmosphere, their closeness, their friendly relations, their discussion especially, concerning the Jewish tradition and also Psychoanalysis which somehow interconnected in those days in Trieste, as far as I understand. But you know more than I do on the

subject. A number of the analysts that settled in Trieste were Jews, I think.

Edoardo Weiss. Joyce probably encountered Psychoanalysis around 1910-12 and began buying texts. He bought Ernst Jones on Hamlet and Oedipus. He bought Jung on the importance of the father and other early Freudian texts...

Theodor Reik on the Hero or something.

And then he went to Zurich where, of course, Jung was a major presence and there were many psychoanalytical texts in the Public Library there. How important was Psychoanalysis and how did Joyce use Psychoanalysis? Would Ulysses *have been a different book without Psychoanalysis or had Joyce already arrived at many of these conclusions on his own, and Psychoanalysis just reinforced his own conclusions?*

I would rather think in terms of reinforcement. This is how I feel about this. Joyce wasn't the type of person to be really influenced by books, apart perhaps from the Fathers of the Church (laughs).

The Maynooth Catechism*...*

After all, concerning *Ulysses,* the shift from *Portrait* to *Ulysses* takes place in the shift from Stephen to Bloom, or from Catholicism to the Jewish tradition, or something which has to

do with the relation of Gentiles or Catholicism to language and the Jewish tradition of language.

Perhaps Svevo is L'insu que sait*. I think Joyce was fascinated by someone who was a failure, the pun* insuccess*, but Svevo knew something, he was older, he came from a completely different tradition, a completely different background, different family history, so disjunct. I see* Ulysses *almost as a detour. I think Joyce wanted to write about his father and then he comes across this fellow who has* L'insu que sait*...*

And you think Svevo represents...?

An unknown knowledge... in Giacomo Joyce *he says the Jews have "owl's wisdom", "the darkness that shines". And then one day Svevo, or other Jews or of Jewish extraction, begin to talk to him about Psychoanalysis and they give it a name: this unknown knowledge is called the "Unconscious" and it's related to the father.*

I totally agree with you. I think you're right. I think it's quite pertinent, quite relevant to what was taking place.

Perhaps this is what you were saying earlier, that the jouissance *is something that's beyond language, beyond what's verifiable or certifiable or whatever...*

The point is the type of ordering the Letter provides. Now Lacan speaks of the *jouissance* du blahbahblah... Freewheeling *parole,* speech. And that can be taken care of by using the Letter and this is where the Jewish tradition comes in. The Talmudic

reading of *Finnegans Wake*. *Finnegans Wake* is only the lay version of that Talmud...

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