The Irish Question[†]

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> *The last word which our century's 'inner experience' has yielded us its computation was thus articulated fifty years ahead of its time by the theodicy to which Schreber was exposed: 'God is a whore'.*
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> *We should try to detect this dramatic conjuncture at the beginning of each case of psychosis. ... it will always be found, and it will be found more easily if one allows oneself to be guided by 'situations' in the novelistic sense of the term.*
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> *Jacques Lacan, 'On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis'*

In 2004 I was considering whether to go to the Joyce-Lacan Symposium.[1] I had been to Ireland, and to Dublin, twice; my last visit was in 2000 and the first many years before. During this time I came across a review of a book on the history of Ireland in the twentieth century: *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000*. On my visit in 2000 I had gained an impression of significant change in Ireland and the title seemed to be a confirmation of this.

The last chapter of the book is devoted to the thirty year period which separates my first two visits, 1970 to 2000. Here the author, Diarmaid Ferriter, comments rather wistfully on the disappearance of an Irish identity, one which is linked to small independent rural communities and an acute sense of place. This Irish identity is, he says, 'if not dying by the close of the twentieth century, at least being left further behind by a pragmatic, dismissive and ideologically indifferent Ireland'.[2]

[†] This article is also appearing in *The Review*, the newsletter of The Association for Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy in Ireland (APPI). The APPI was the host association for the Joyce-Lacan Symposium 2005.

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Ferriter nominates the Irish novelist John McGahern as the writer who has most powerfully enunciated this conjuncture. This appears to be an assessment which is widely shared. One academic commentator has observed of McGahern's 1990 novel *Amongst Women* that it 'is seen by many ordinary Irish people as the essential chronicle of a whole phase of our nation's life'.[3]

In interviews McGahern has himself commented on recent Irish history, observing that the country has changed as much in the last twenty years as in the last two hundred. He dates the beginning of the 'collapse' of the Church to 1970; prior to that Ireland was a 'nineteenth century society'.[4] Most of the changes, including the decline in the influence of the Catholic Church over politics and sex, are for the better. But McGahern, who has been described as Ireland's rural elegist, alludes also to a loss. 'I love the description of Gothic churches before the printed word, that they were the bibles of the poor. The Catholic Church was my first book […]'.[5]

Amongst Women begins and ends with the death of a father, Moran. Moran made his name fighting with the IRA for Irish independence in the 1920s. In post-colonial Ireland he lives the life of a farmer. But as a father he remains tyrannical. Moran's older son Luke escapes early to exile in London, making a successful life for himself there by, as the husband of one of the daughters puts it disparagingly, 'turning himself into a sort of Englishman'.[6] Unlike Luke and like his three sisters the younger son Michael looks to the family home, known as Great Meadow, and to his father for 'a mark of his continuing existence'.[7]

When Michael asks Luke to return home to see his father before he dies he refuses, responding with a series of propositions in which the question of existence, his and his father's, is intertwined with the question of which of them is mad: 'There are lunatics right? There are fathers who must have lunatic sons. There must be sons who have lunatic fathers. Either I'm crazy or he is.'[8] Luke returns to this question of existence again, when, on the one occasion when he does return, for the wedding of a sister, one of the sisters asks him not to do anything to upset Moran: 'Of course not. I won't exist today.'[9]

Now it is the question of the madness of one man, James Joyce, which Lacan raises in *The Sinthome* seminar. And he makes frequent references not only to Joyce's biography but also to the portrait of Joyce which he reads in Joyce's writings. It was around the intrigue of this 'case of Joyce'[10] and related affairs, including the madness of Joyce's daughter Lucia, that there was some tittletattle at the Dublin Symposium.

In all this however we do need to allow for Lacan's wit and courage. Tittletattle has its interest. Joyce knew this when he demanded of his aunt Josephine all the information she could provide about Holles Street Maternity Hospital.[11] And Lacan tells us that he was embarrassed by Joyce.[12] Do we read here then that for Lacan Joyce's tittletattle is the symptom? And if we then step back from this entanglement and attend to its configuration can we not also allow that the manner in which Lacan raises this question is essentially the same as Luke's? The madness which Lacan puts into question here turns on how from a father a son can subtend his existence, and, as 'the case of Joyce' demonstrates, by the method of tittletattle.

Twenty years before *The Sinthome* seminar Lacan was already referring madness to the question of existence. In *The Psychoses* seminar Lacan's primary text was more rigorously autobiographical: the writings which constitute the case of an undoubted madman, President Daniel Paul Schreber. But Lacan arrives at the conjunction of existence and madness through an essential detour: he examines narratives of tittletattle. These arise in cases not of psychosis but of that form of neurosis known as hysteria. In following Lacan on this trajectory we will be assisted by our reading of McGahern's *Amongst Women*.

It is Moran's three daughters in whom he is most wholly 'implanted', a connection which the daughters actively maintain. But Moran senses that there is something rather dangerous in being, in this way, 'amongst women'. Here is how the novel begins:

> As he weakened Moran became afraid of his daughters. This once powerful man was so implanted in their lives that they had never really left Great Meadow, in spite of jobs and

> marriages and children and houses of their own in Dublin and London. Now they could not let him slip away.[13]

At the end of the novel, after the death of Moran, there is a transformative moment, one which Moran feared; the daughters assume his identity:

> It was as if their first love and allegiance had been pledged uncompromisingly to this one house and man and that they knew that he had always been at the very living centre of their lives [...]. Their continual homecoming had been an affirmation of its unbroken presence, and now, as they left him under the yew, it was as if each of them in their different ways had become Daddy.[14]

If the women have become Daddy where does this leave them in relation to the men? The final paragraph of the novel gives some indication. As the sisters walk away from the graveside accompanied by Moran's second young wife they leave their husbands and their brother Michael chatting and laughing with the children. At this point one sister remarks triumphantly "'Will you look at the men. They're more like a crowd of women," Sheila said, remarking on the slow frivolity of their pace.'[15]

The scene is of course reminiscent of Freud's account of primordial, formative identification and, in particular, of the mythical scene of the killing of the father depicted in *Totem and Taboo*. But there is a striking difference. This difference could be read in terms of the *dramatis personae*. It is the daughters who, in identifying with the father, 'kill' him and make the pact amongst themselves. The sons, now displaced, become what is to be shared: women.

But such a reading would, again, be to confuse the ins and outs of tittletattle with what it tells of structure. Let us turn then to reading Lacan's examination of the tell-tale drama of hysteria in *The Psychoses* seminar.

In considering Freud's portrait of Dora[16] Lacan argues that the reason Dora broke off her treatment was that her true love object was not Herr K. but his wife. But Herr K. nevertheless has an

important function for Dora. Herr K. mediates as a fourth element in the love triangle formed by Dora, her father, and her father's lover Frau K. Dora locates her ego through imaginary identification with Herr K. In being Herr K. she sustains herself in a *situation* in which she and her father have the same love object. Through the medium of her identification with Herr K. she places herself as her father's rival for the love of a woman. It is only in this way that, in turn, she maintains an identification with her father.[17]

No doubt for Dora there is some enjoyment in this drama. Instability is only introduced, Lacan infers, following the scene by the lake and Herr K.'s subsequent withdrawal. It is then that Dora's attitude towards her father becomes more aggressive. She demands that he break off his affair with Frau K. and accuses him of 'handing her over' to Herr K. as the price of this relationship. It was at this point that, to use Freud's own words, her father 'handed her over' to him for treatment.[18]

Lacan observes that Dora's accusations against her father have a somewhat persecutory and paranoid quality, but he insists that this paranoid behaviour does not make her a paranoiac. What is of primary importance here, and the reason Lacan spends so much time discussing hysteria in a seminar devoted to psychosis, is that what insists for Dora in the aftermath of her encounter with Herr K. is a question. In its most general form Lacan frames this question in the context of a discussion of a case of male hysteria: 'What is at issue for our subject is the question – What am I? or Am I?'[19]

This very possibility of such a question being posed for the subject by the dramatic situation depends on the subject's access to the symbolic. In posing the question of existence for the subject what emerges in such a situation is a primordial signifier. This is the same signifier whose institution is related by the myth of *Totem and Taboo*, the signifier which Lacan names as the paternal signifier. It is when, from the Other constituted by such a situation, that the subject is hailed as a *you* that this signifier is evoked.[20]

It is because of the neurotic's access to the symbolic that this interpellation does not produce the purely imaginary compensation which leads to the delusions of a psychosis. Rather it poses itself to the subject symbolically and is re-presented, in one way or another, in the form of a symptomatology. It is only in support of the inquiry set by that question that imaginary identifications are produced. As Lacan puts it, '[t]he domain of knowledge is fundamentally inserted into the primitive paranoid dialectic of identification with the counterpart.'[21]

Nevertheless, there remains a problem for the neurotic. Though the question of Being is posed, necessarily, in the symbolic, that is, in terms of the chain of signifiers, it cannot be answered in the symbolic:

> There is, in effect, something radically unassimilable to the signifier. It's quite simply the subject's singular existence. Why is he here? Where has he come from? What is he doing here? Why is he going to disappear? The signifier is incapable of providing him with an answer, for the good reason that it places him beyond death. The signifier already considers him dead, by nature it immortalizes him.[22]

Whether it is in the form of maternity or paternity there is in the tittletattle which surrounds procreation something which is radically unassimilable to the signifier: 'The entire symbolism declares that creatures don't engender creatures, that a creature is unthinkable without a fundamental creation. In the symbolic nothing explains creation.'[23] In other words, The Woman, as the Other of the Other, does not exist.[24]

What is required then, in this absence, is a *fundamental creation*. For the neurotic this necessity will be held in the form of that fantasmatic self-conception known as the symptom. For Schreber at the moment of the onset of his psychosis it is in imaginary form that this self-conception insists; he is invaded by the image of The Woman

succumbing to intercourse. It is this image which makes of Schreber the divine Creator's Woman.[25]

And yet in the novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* it is just such a fundamental creation which Joyce has Stephen Dedalus enunciate as his ambition. One such formulation is quoted in the first chapter of *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000*: to become 'himself his own father'. Ferriter argues that this is to be aligned with the ambition of the Irish people as a whole to assume 'a European perspective after a century of dreary provincialism. […] less an assertion of traditions long-denied than an insistence that the Irish people have the freedom to conceive of themselves.'[26] Indeed, at the end of *A Portrait* Stephen places himself as the very Creator of this Irish self-conception, famously uttering these dramatic, and clearly mad, sentences: 'Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.'[27]

The madness of Stephen's purpose marks a relation to the necessity posed by the question of Being which is different to that of either the psychotic or the hysteric. As one commentator has observed, it is at the point in the novel where this purpose is enunciated that there is a change of discourse. Leaving behind the third-person narrator, Stephen Dedalus is now asserted as an I.[28] Lacan reads this as Joyce writing himself. Choosing exile from the fall of the father, Joyce becomes the necessary son of the sham that is his fatherland. Joyce is called from that exile to be the one who does not stop writing the tittletattle of his fatherland's uncreated self-conception.[29]

This Joyce-of-Lacan is that symptom by which the lack in the tittletattle of the Other is harnessed to writing the very necessity of that lack. It thus provides an escape from the madness which ensues when that lack collapses into the image of the Other. But nor does it plug that lack by being fixed in a form which, in being historical, is hysterical. It no longer represents a self-conception of the form to-be-made-known, rather it demands the knowing of a self-conception which incessantly re-writes itself.

As with John McGahern, for Joyce-of-Lacan the Church is the first book.[30] By the time of my first visit to Ireland in 1971 that Book was already collapsing. And, anticipating Georges Bataille by more than thirty years, even at the beginning of the century President Schreber's Book had announced its last word: God is a 'public whore and insane'.[31] And now, in exile from Home Rule, we no longer have the Word. But, if we can bear it, it is from that very silence that the Irish question's call for cunning resounds.

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[1] Four members of The Freudian School of Melbourne, Linda Clifton, Tine Norregaard-Arroyo, Michael Plastow and I, attended the Joyce Lacan Symposium. The Freudian School of Melbourne was a convoking association. The Symposium was held at Dublin Castle, Ireland, 16-19 June 2005. As well as commemorating Bloomsday it was the thirtieth anniversary of the Fifth International James Joyce Symposium held in Paris, 16-20 June 1975 at which Lacan gave the opening address. A version of this address has been published under the title 'Joyce le Symptôme I'.

[2] Ferriter, Diarmaid. *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000*, London: Profile Books, 2005.

[3] Kiberd, Declan. Quoted in 'Ireland's Rural Elegist', *The Guardian*, January 5, 2002.

[4] 'A Family Touched with Madness', *The Observer*, August 28, 2005.

[5] 'The Whole World in a Community', *The Observer*, January 6 2002.

[6] McGahern, John. *Amongst Women*, London: Faber and Faber, 1991, p. 148.

[7] *Ibid*, p. 147.

[8] *Ibid*, p. 146.

[9] *Ibid*, p. 152.

[10] Lacan, J. *The Sinthome*, lesson of 10.2.76. I have followed the unpublished translation of Cormac Gallagher entitled *Joyce and the Sinthome 1975-1976*. For the French text I have consulted the unpublished version produced by l'Association Freudienne Internationale. The seminar has however recently been published in French: *Le séminaire livre XXIII: Le sinthome*, Paris: Seuil, 2005

[11] In 1920 Joyce wrote to his aunt in Dublin saying that he was unable to complete two chapters of *Ulysses* until he had received 'all the information you can give, tittletattle, facts etc about Holles Street maternity hospital'. (*Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Ellmann, Richard, New York: The Viking Press, p. 248)

[12] 'Je suis embarrassé de Joyce comme un poisson d'une pomme', Lacan, *ibid*, lesson of 20.1.76. 'Embarrassé' has the sense both of embarrassed and entangled.
[13] McGahern, John. *Amongst Women*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
[14] *Ibid*, p. 183.
[15] *Ibid*, p. 184.
[16] In lesson 9.3.76 of *The Sinthome* seminar Lacan refers to a play called *The Portrait of Dora* by Hélène Cixous which was being performed in Paris at the time, thereby playing on the name of Freud's patient and one of Joyce's book titles.
[17] See Lacan, J. *The Psychoses: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III 1955-1956*, ed. Miller, Jacques-Alain, tr. Russell Grigg, London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 91-2 and pp. 174-5.
[18] See Freud, S. 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria', *The Standard Edition,* Volume VII, London: The Hogarth Press, 1953, pp. 3-122.
[19] Lacan, J. *The Psychoses: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III 1955-1956*, *op. cit.*, p. 170.
[20] See *ibid*, p. 305-6.
[21] *Ibid*, p. 177-8.
[22] *Ibid*, p. 179-80.
[23] *Ibid*, p. 179.
[24] Lacan, J. *The Sinthome*, *op. cit.*, lesson 16.3.76.
[25] See Lacan, J. *The Psychoses, op. cit.*, p. 192.
[26] Ferriter, D. *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000, op. cit.,* p. 93, quoting O'Farrell, Patrick, in: *Ireland's English Question.*
[27] Joyce, J. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1977, p. 275.
[28] Deane, Seamus. In: 'Introduction' to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, op. cit.*
[29] See Lacan, J. 'Joyce le Symptôme II', www.ecole-lacanienne.net /documents/1975-06-20.doc. I have also consulted the unpublished translation of Dominique Hecq.
[30] Lacan, J. *The Sinthome*, *op. cit.*, lesson 10.2.76.
[31] Bataille, Georges. 'Madame Edwarda', tr. Austryn Wainhouse, *The Olympia Reader*, ed. Girodias, Maurice, New York: Black Watch, 1965, p. 668.