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### Title

“The Open Ego: Joyce, Woolf, and the ‘Mad’ Subject”

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/993415tb>

### ISBN

9781315742755

### Author

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### Publication Date

2015

Peer reviewed

THE *OPEN* EGO

## Woolf, Joyce and the “mad” subject

*Juliet Flower MacCannell*

Virginia Woolf and James Joyce: two “mad” authors of the early twentieth century. One a woman, one a man; one English, one Irish. Each equally revolutionary for their “stream of consciousness” literary techniques; each equally refusing the premises of psychoanalysis. Woolf declined analysis, fearing harm to her creativity; Joyce rejected it for his schizophrenic daughter Lucia: she was merely “telepathic,” he said.<sup>1</sup> Each regarded *writing* as freeing them from the conditions that ordinarily shape the child, its cast of mind, its ego. Which elements configuring their egos—family, language, gender, or the political discourse that encircled them—explain why Woolf’s rebellious ego ends with despair and “madness” (and her suicide), while Joyce’s opens jubilant possibilities for art and thought?

The Lacanian psychoanalysis developed in Freud’s wake confirmed his thesis that the unconscious is linked to language—to what is said and what cannot be said. The ego makes every effort to repress the unconscious, barring by means of its power of formalization, from entering linguistic expression. Woolf and Joyce both broke radically with such ego-centered policing of language, to be sure, but how did their particular writing egos permit this? And what was the effect of this rupture on their own psyches?

Woolf and Joyce both wrote *against* their families of origin, but their antagonism cannot be termed simply Oedipal. Rather, their work attests to how the family by their time had *already* become effectively post-Oedipal. Whether for its subjects or its masters, British imperial order destroyed something vital in the family, in society, and in literature. Woolf knew this all too well, as its victim and its (literal) daughter: the government official who organized the British Empire on the model of a patriarchal family was her very own grandfather, and her father’s Milton-inspired misogyny curtailed his daughter’s reading and writing on the theory that they harmed her mental health.

James Joyce’s revolution in language was also aimed at his own family, according to Lacan, particularly at his hapless alcoholic father, who railed impotently against British rule. But Joyce had another objective in his sights: he could see that his father’s malaise was rooted in the contemporary sociopolitical

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order of Ireland, disfigured as it was by an empire that had colonized its language its culture, its men and women.

Virginia Woolf began her revolt by rewriting the feminine story in opposition to the authorized male ego empowered by empire, and she became the theorist of a *feminine ego* that could challenge the unrestricted dominion the male ego exercised over culture. Her work has resonated throughout the years with women and feminists of all kinds. But Joyce more radically aimed to overturn, at its linguistic root, what was impeding his people, men and women both, from saying what very much needed to be *said* and *written*. He would moreover ultimately address a greater stumbling block than colonial (and male) rule. Only if the ego itself were reconfigured would it ever really be able to *speak*. Joyce reinvented the ego as what I call "the *writing* ego" and he did so for the sake of man and woman, family and nation.

One may object that Joyce has a thoroughly masculine voice and that, apart from Molly Bloom's infamous soliloquy in *Ulysses*, he is seldom called a feminist. I do not intend to call him one here. However, while he comes at writing from the opposite side from Woolf, like hers his writing seeks to un-house and de-throne the insufferable male ego at the center of a destructive political order, an order that had mythified and reified that ego. And he was perhaps the more effective of the two.

### The family and the ego—under imperialism

The *primary family* shapes how an individual child comes to terms with its drives, destructive to itself and to the society into which it is born. Families prepare children for social coexistence: getting children to manage their drives is the precondition for all socialization, the most important task for any family formation—matriarchal, patriarchal, clan, et al. Contending with our drives' lethal power forces us into cultural creation: aesthetic enjoyments, especially, would literally be unthinkable were civilization's strictures, sacrifices and limitations not imposed.<sup>2</sup>

Even repressed, however, drives linger in the unconscious, where unavowable fantasies of their *satisfaction*, impossible in society, nourish conscious desires. Although they always seem oppressive to the child whose enjoyments they check, *Oedipal families* by and large succeed in preparing their children for social coexistence. (Women often complain that the Oedipal family schema places them too sternly under paternal authority.)<sup>3</sup>

However, in the *post-Oedipal* family (as experienced by Joyce and Woolf) the subject is no longer required to *inhibit* its lethal drives, but to *give in* to them. And this is the crux of the matter. Woolf's family exemplifies this. Her grandfather James Stephen, Permanent Under Secretary for the Colonies, was the architect of British "benevolent imperialism." He is known for popularizing the phrase "the mother country" for Britain, promoting the Empire as a parent and benign protector of its children.<sup>4</sup> The British Empire, colonizing much of the world by professing

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to offer it a better and more powerful mother, in reality visited upon its children the *destruction of the family*, for the Empire's model family this "mother" brooded over required absolute male supremacy, according to Stephen, with women and those deemed culturally inferior (like the Irish) tightly controlled or suppressed.<sup>5</sup>

For Joyce, the decimation was not just of his immediate family, but of Ireland itself. It was absent a whole, fully formed Irish society for its families to contribute their children to—whether as simple "citizens" or creative "artists." Under English rule, Irish subjects were born to a condition that permitted them to form only small, politically impotent social circles (like that of the maiden aunts Morkan in Joyce's "The Dead"). Irish paternal authority was debilitated since its Irish children could see there was *no society* their fathers could prepare them for. The over-inflation of patriarchal power in the empire's own core seemed to extract its sustenance from the far-flung fathers it colonized.

Woolf's own family, of course, was very much in charge, on top. Yet it, too, suffered from the very patriarchal tyranny it helped to create. It granted its male members far too much unchecked power for their own mental good. Woolf's grandfather would overwork himself, often on purpose, to induce a nervous collapse. He would then take time off to recover from the breakdown, after which he would start right in again, working himself once more into madness, and "curing" it once again with rest.<sup>6</sup>

A longstanding human essential—the *paternal* family—had become, under imperial sway, a brittle, rigid *patriarchy*, formed around a puritanical ideal of misogyny that was especially detrimental to its daughter Virginia, whose texts illustrate its awful effects on all women. But Woolf did not fully realize how destructive it was also for the men themselves who administered it. Because they could discount half of humanity, the Stephen men became in essence less than men.

Woolf tried valiantly to free herself from the blighting effects of the masculine ego her family inflicted on her, by meeting its overwhelming power with a strong, resistant female ego. But her efforts were stymied by her implicit acceptance of its definition of masculinity. She was unable to see the feminine as anything other than a wavering subjectivity in unhappy communication with the disorders of Nature and the vagaries of the body and its emotions—the very things the severely formal masculine ego casts out of its purview. Any opening or weak spot in the feminine was to her a potentially incurable wound.

In her novel *The Waves*,<sup>7</sup> sometimes called her "portrait of the artist," Woolf meticulously enters into the consciousness, individual and collective, of a set of male and female children to explore the correlation between their egos and their language use. She divides the male children (whose aim, she says, is the fixation of a sturdy self, a tree that goes to "the root of the world") from female ones, who are always in imminent danger of losing themselves—their bodies, their faces, their separate identities, the unity of their bodies and their heads. All the children in the novel at one time or another hold to an ideal of merging indistinctly into all the others, but none, not even the girls, can let go of the opposing ideal of

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possessing a firm, clear, distinct ego. For all the subjectivity revealed by the stream of consciousness style Woolf perfected in her rendering here, none of the children, not even the girls, has the ability, the empathy, to grasp the small *o* other as a subject. And none attempts to reclaim the enjoyments taken from them by the political, symbolic, educational, military and religious orders in which they are placed.

Woolf attacked the male ego by conjuring a feminine one, but she never quite managed to question the very structure of the ego itself—which is why centering on the ego may have been the real trap for her. Despite her direct attacks on male rule, in the end she feels the ego *must* be closed; it *must* defend itself against the dissolution that always threatens it. Her comment on the courtesan Harriette Wilson's memoirs illustrates this:

Across the broad continent of a woman's life falls the shadow of a sword. On one side all is correct, definite, orderly: the paths are strait, the trees regular, the sun shaded, escorted by gentlemen, protected by policemen, wedded and buried by clergymen, she has only to walk demurely from cradle to grave and no one will touch a hair on her head. But on the other side, all is confusion. Nothing follows a regular course. [. . .] The trees roar and rock and fall in ruin.<sup>8</sup>

This is a striking description. On one side, "phallic" order (I use this term technically) positions her as a defined object in a patriarchal culture of militarily organized formal arrangements that constrain both Nature-in-General and her specific Nature-as-Woman. She is confined to walking straight paths, just as the trees are constrained to grow in rows. Policemen regulate her public behavior while husbands and clergymen manage her private love life. On the other, Woolf sets up a wild Nature free of all restriction, all order. This alternative site potentially locates woman outside the shelter of phallic order, along with the pleasures of the sublime—terrifying excess.

Woolf's description is hardly reassuring. Her point seems to be that in either case, woman is reduced to impotence, to being overwhelmed—it makes little difference whether by male dominated society or by lethal Nature. But to assume Woolf imagines that woman's only options are these two versions of powerlessness would be a mistake. There was something else, indefinable (to or by her), that she desperately wanted. To see better what that is, let me turn to Lacan and his conception of how language and sexuality are linked.

#### Language and sexual difference

[Man] thinks as a consequence of the fact that a structure, that of language—the word implies it—carves up his body, a structure which has nothing to do with anatomy.<sup>9</sup>

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Lacan explains how masculine and feminine subjects differ. Each speaking being adopts a certain logical position in its unconscious, and this, Lacan says, is either masculine or feminine. It is not correlated with one's biological or anatomical gender. The "carving" of the body is universal—it works this way for all humans, who become bodies-without-organs under the regime of language. Such bodies are neither constrained nor governed by their physical organs: sexual difference has nothing to do with anatomy. Rather, the basic unit of language, the signifier, has a phallic function,  $\phi x$  (the phallic signifier,  $\phi$ , structures the subject). It "castrates" masculine and feminine subjects differentially.

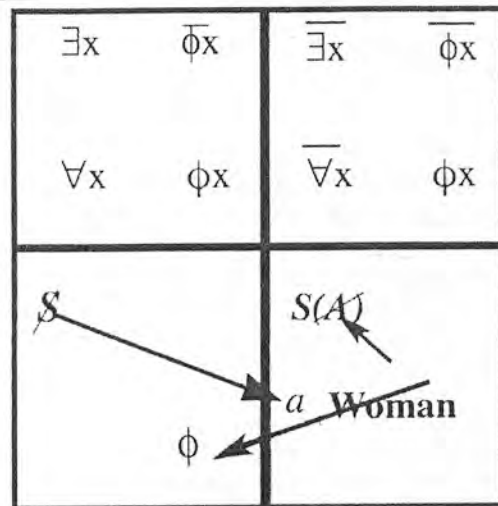


Figure 14.2 Jacques Lacan's diagram of sexuation in Seminar XX: Encore, Lacan (1998), p. 78.

Lacan provides a diagram of the two logics.<sup>10</sup> On the left (masculine) side, all *people* are seen to be organized by the phallic signifier—and unconsciously by the object *a* (the little residue of enjoyment—half real, half imaginary—of the signifier's cutting process). In masculine logic, castration by language is universal: all are under the phallic function, all but one. Just one escapes castration: the unbarred Other, the all-enjoying totemic father; the exception that proves the rule.

The logic of femininity, on the right, offers no such absolute clarity. Its rule is equally universal—everyone is submitted to castration. But the structure of negation for the feminine universal is of a different order from the masculine exception. There is no one exempt from castration—except for some. Not all are submitted to the phallic function: not all people, and not all of my particular body either.

Feminine logic makes the phallus her subjective focus (see the arrow pointed at his  $\phi$ ). The masculine subject's focus is her object *a*. So far, a traditional view

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of sexuality: she envies his phallus (and cultural power); he desires her *a* objects (her breasts, et al.).

Masculine logic fits the feminine object into the phallic order, policed and arranged like the trees in Woolf's description. Masculine unconscious logic demands she be his object if he is to submit to castration.

But feminine logic, unlike the masculine, has a dual focus. Castration organizes only one of her facets, her objective side (the part that is object for and objective of the masculine). The other face of her logic, her subjective side, is not all under the phallic function. Instead, it is organized by something that compensates her for being used as an object in the phallic regime: the *S*, the sign, the word, of the ~~Other~~ (A). Her second arrow points, let us note, away from the phallus, toward this barred ~~Other~~.

Lacan is indicating that the feminine requires a sign from the ~~Other~~ that supports the non-phallic side of her being—the part to which phallic eyes are blind. Only a word (of love) from the ~~Other~~ permits her to go beyond her phallic definition as an object, and grants her existence other than as Victorian “angel in the house,” or servant of the phallic order.<sup>11</sup>

What did Woolf really want, then? She needed affirmation of this “other” side of her being. She declared repeatedly in her letters to her husband, Leonard (Freud's English language publisher) that she depended on his love to support her existence. In the end, even Leonard's words of love were not enough; still signifiers, they seemed unable to support her against her own death drive. Why? She was never convinced that any man worthy of the name must be prepared to face down the death drive—his and hers. In this she was, at the last, her father's daughter. To her, the feminine ego was incurable and undesirable: trapped by her idealization of a decisive masculine ego, the feminine ego she proposed was insufficient to ward off the damage caused by a patriarchal family that kept Woolf (like all women) forever at a disadvantage.

Joyce found what Woolf missed in her battle with the signifier, something that might have offered her deliverance. I hinted at the matter of openness to the other above: that the subject struggles not only against the death drive (lethal jouissance), but also for an enjoyment lost to Oedipus (and more so to the pseudo patriarchy)—lost, first of all, by means of our language practices.

Each of the ever-proliferating signifiers that make up language is meaningless in itself. Signifiers can only point to other signifiers, promising possible (future) meaning. But meaning as such is never finally delivered: living languages require a “next” signifier to produce the semblance of meaning. Full meaning=dead language.

Signifiers are also the bearers of our desires, of the promise that someday they will deliver the very enjoyment they have carved away. The structure of deferred satisfactions is the same as what holds for language's promise of finally meaning—satisfactions are necessarily deferred until death. These are, it seems, the rules for speaking beings.



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But Joyce changed the rules. He found his way to an enjoyment carried by the signifier, not repressed by it. Which is why his joy-filled writing does not take language (or the phallic signifier) entirely seriously.

## Joyce's "The Dead"

My approach to Joyce, language and the ego differs from Jean-Michel Rabaté's in *The Politics of Egoism*,<sup>12</sup> mainly because I look for Joyce's writing ego less in his major stylistically innovative novels than in one short story, written in plain style, from *Dubliners*.<sup>13</sup> In "The Dead," Joyce frames a new masculine ego and a new feminine one with, I believe, revolutionary effect. In it he paints a devastating portrait of the fatuous male ego produced by the deadened language of patriarchal/imperial order. The story's hero, Gabriel Conroy, is a "writer": he pens book reviews for *The Daily Express*. (Miss Ivors, an Irish political agitator for Home Rule, chides him for writing for such a paper, saying he is becoming a West Briton (188).) He also composes speeches for his aunts' annual Christmas dance.

As he and his wife Gretta arrive for the party, Gabriel contemplates the evening ahead. He takes in the party so he can fine-tune his speech, going over the headings used to organize it, rather a sad catalogue of clichés from hospitality in Ireland, the Three Graces, Paris, sad memories, Browning (192). He worries it will not come up to the standard of last year's speech, and wonders if the partygoers will applaud as much as they usually do.

His aunts fawn over his writing talents and his deftness at steering the party's guests away from anti-social behavior—guests must not become intoxicated or enter into political and religious quarrels. (Only differing opinions on classical music are allowed at the holiday table.) Aunt Kate is relieved to have Gabriel there, and Gabriel succeeds at weaving the gathering together in a kind of impartial order, an achievement topped off by his carving the Christmas goose perfectly and serving it around in equitable portions.

His speech is well received, the more so—he believes—as he has taken pains to adjust it to his audience's lower culture literacy by removing some arcane poetic allusions. Yet Gabriel is at a loss for words (as is everyone else in the company) when the inebriated Freddy Malins disrupts the discussion of an opera at the Theatre Royal by praising a singer at the low-brow Gaiety pantomime, describing a Negro chieftain who had one of the finest tenor voices he has ever heard (198). When the partygoers silently smirk at his opinion, Freddy demands to know why the chieftain cannot also have a voice, wondering if it is because he's only a black. Apparently, these cultivated Irish subjects of the British Empire have unwittingly adopted its views of racial superiority—the same views used against them by the British to smother their own "inferior" Irish voices.

Toward the end of the evening, Gabriel accidentally catches a faraway look in Gretta's eyes as she listens to an unseen pianist playing an old ballad. He sees grace and mystery in her pose—she seems to him to be a symbol of something (210). He would name a painting of her "Distant Music."



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Gabriel imagines her dreaminess echoes his desires for the passionate evening her romantic mood would only enhance. He eagerly anticipates their arrival later at the hotel room (for once, without the children) and vows to use this night to erase their years of dull existence; to recall their ecstatic moments. He feels sure that despite their dull marriage, children, his writing and her household duties their souls' "tender fire" has not died out (214).

Gretta is his "angel in the house," her feminine life cramped by maternity and housewifery. But not by these alone: for, as Gabriel admits, she has also been stifled by his writing.

What follows is one of the most horrifying affronts to a self-centered male ego—and to the bad writer Gabriel unmistakably is—ever depicted. Alone together in the hotel, Gabriel is stung to discover that he has been quite mistaken about his wife's reverie. She tells him the song she overheard at the party, *The Lass of Aughrim*, made her sad (218–19). When he asks why, she says it recalled to her the memory of a boy, Michael Furey, who loved her and who had sung that song for her. The boy had died. He had stolen out of his sick bed to stand in the cold rain under her window one night to say farewell to her before she went away to convent school in Dublin. Already so ill, the exposure to the damp chill hastened his end; he did not last a week after she left.

Gabriel, upset at having his designs thwarted by the memory of his wife's lost love, and more than a little jealous, asks snidely what he had died of so young, venturing the ever-romantic "consumption" as his guess. Gretta answers that she thinks he died for her (220), in response to which Gabriel is seized by a vague "terror," just when he had hoped to triumph.

Why "terror"? Because although he was only a boy, Michael Furey was more of a man than Gabriel could ever be, and Gabriel knows it. Furey's dying for her voids the claim of Gabriel—who smugly thinks one night will make up for the years of their dull existence together, and who has surely never sung to her—to be his wife's true lover. At seventeen, Furey was already constituted a man, defined by his willingness to face death for his love.

Gabriel was "the man of the hour" at the party, the center of attention of the close-knit society around him that has willingly given him the dominant role. He was even a hero: he "saved" the party from the poor drunk Freddy Malins; he was gracious and treated everyone respectfully, although he stumbled a bit with the serving girl, Lily. Yet, alone before the other, his Gretta, the small *o* other, he is dispossessed of the verbal and social powers granted him by his adoring little circle. Facing her, he sees himself as a fatuous, inconsequential little creature, humiliated by this dead figure. He sees himself for what he is: ludicrous, a "pennyboy" for his aunts, writing for the vulgar.

His sheer unawareness of Gretta's unfathomable subjectivity—that she has an interior life ungoverned by his stale narratives—exposes his ego's superficial narrowness and obtuseness, as well as what a bad writer he is. From an artistic point of view, his every thought is conventional and hackneyed (including his imagined portrait of his wife as a symbol of "something").

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Joyce lets us know that Gabriel's person and his writing are products not of a lack of talent, but of an ugly and oppressive political order. Gabriel's entire existence is under the thumb of the English and of an English language that restricts him to writing innocuous reviews and making pointless little speeches to his small circle of family friends. And if Gabriel is a model patriarch, secure at the center of a family circle sustained by the work of women, the tragedy is that he is merely a pale imitation of the real imperial patriarchy that rules him.

He has literally, that is, been confined to his small circle. He exercises no power in the wider world, nor can he. Even when Miss Ivors challenges him to put his writing in the service of Home Rule, he knows deeply that he can have no real say in an Ireland ruled from afar by the Empire. And because Irish society does not depend on his contributions, his manliness is diminished. He is reduced to being an unexceptional man—but an exceptionally good servant of the tyrannical order that has robbed him of the kind of masculinity that might have allowed him, as a man, to see Gretta as a subject. He cannot afford to realize even himself as a subject.<sup>14</sup>

A postgraduate student of mine objected to my interpretation. He admitted that Joyce does see Gabriel this way, but claimed that egocentrism is the very essence of masculinity: the very definition of a "man" is that he is a self-centered, insensitive creature, domineering over his women and children. Besides, he added, haven't feminism and popular culture taught us that men are simply egotistical brutes that can never change? When I countered that Joyce was suggesting Gabriel was rather less than a man because he was not prepared to give his life for others, the student bristled: we can't possibly hold men to that standard in this day and age.

The judgment the serving girl Lily in "The Dead" passes on men—that nowadays they are all talk, and what they can get out of a girl (178)—constitutes her bitter reproach to men who have used her, a proto-feminist sentiment. And it is perfectly applicable to Gabriel himself who, despite his moderation and tact, is nothing but his "palaver" (talk) and what he can "get out of" Gretta later in the hotel room. This is why Michael Furey's gesture, more than his words, moved Gretta: it was the subjective support she needed, this sign of love from a barred *Other*.

What then is the shape of the writing ego Joyce attempted to set in the place of the destructive ego (and bad writing) engendered—and gendered—by the politics of the day? Why did Joyce need to assail language to make it accomplish, or be the accomplice of, a liberation from personal and political oppression? For clearly Joyce did change something essential in the operations of language itself.

One enjoys fully, we thought we knew, only in the unconscious. Unconscious enjoyment was, for Freud, lodged in the symptom whose unspeakable jouissance is brought to light only in slips, and it can be dispelled only by analytic treatment. Joyce, however, found his own way to untangle enjoyment from the symptom that

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impounds it under a phallic regime that has stolen it from us unawares. He altered the very way the signifier works, inventing something Lacan named the *sinthome*—a signifier that, rather than sequestering *jouissance*, frees and opens it to conscious experience.

### Language and the ego

Lacan tells his students: “The symptom in Joyce doesn’t concern you at all,”<sup>15</sup> and he is both astonished and excited to discover that Joyce is “not hooked up to the unconscious” (*JSI*: 5). Extrapolating from Joyce’s proper name (*Joy-ce*’/ *jouissance*) and his family psychiatric history, Lacan finds that Joyce does not exhibit the psychosis that would be expected by his rejection of the Name-of-the-Father. Rather, something unparalleled emerges from the Irish author’s singular (though not uncommon) relation to languages (*l’élargues*). Joyce is situated, Lacan says, by the *English* he speaks and writes, but also by the *Irish* tongue the British Empire so forcefully cut out of his native Ireland. Imperial English is a language Joyce “plays upon” because “his own was wiped off the map, that is, Gaelic [. . .] not his own, therefore, but that of the invaders, the oppressors” (10). The manner in which Joyce responded to this double linguistic/political imposition/privation culminated in a revolution in language—and something more.

In his late work, Lacan recognized that the crucial task of mediating the Real and the Imaginary is no longer shouldered by language / the Symbolic / the paternal metaphor. Language not only fails to be a shelter against the Real any longer; it has become a threat, a danger in itself. Nearly dead, language has ceased to shape our bodies. It seems to proffer unlimited *jouissance* to (some of) its (male) subjects—and none to others. It pretends to free us from Oedipus, claiming we have no need of symbolic language to render us human. Yet the dead language this leaves us with lacks poetic, metaphoric resonance—and it is a straitjacket far worse than any Oedipal constraint.

Lacan says that the menace of and to language arises where the signifier has become tone-deaf, if it has no echo, no resonance in or for the body any longer. “There must be something in the signifier which *resonates*. [. . .] [P]hilosophers 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. For speech to resonate, [. . .] the body must be sensitive to it” (*Sem*. 23: 4). Such was the tone-deaf Anglo-Irish tongue that found itself very much in need of a Joyce to recalibrate its relation to the subject, to civilization. But Joyce also had to overcome the specific deadness of the languages at his disposal. He had to reintroduce language to the body it would affect with its resonance, its poetry. First Joycean revolution, then: “Joyce wrote in English in such a way that [as] . . . Philippe Sollers has remarked in *Tel Quel* . . . the English language no longer exists.”<sup>16</sup>

He did this by inventing the *sinthome*: a unique adequation to a fundamental discursive shift in the relation of subject to culture, of ego to other—and of men

to women.<sup>17</sup> It also provided a fresh way to confront the challenge posed by the rancid politics of his time—and ours.<sup>18</sup> Joyce did more, that is, than shake off the fetters of colonial English. He created a *lalangue*, a babble that conveyed without repressing the specific *jouissance* of its author:

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. [. . .]

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 [. . .].

(*JSI*: 5; 8)

Thus the second Joyceian revolution: he had to alter the very form of the ego, which could no longer be modeled on the phallic signifier. To refashion the subject's relation to language and oppressive discourse,<sup>19</sup> Joyce had to play with language(s), a play that was deadly serious in its urge to reinvent the ego itself. Not the indefinite ego of Woolf's feminine; not the imperial male one, closed, armored; not even an Orlando-like androgynous one: but instead, an open ego.

Recall that Joyce's very definition of Hell was that it was an unbreakable circle, the walled in Hell of the *Portrait's* sermons. Joyce broke this circle, broke this Hell of an ego, smashing it apart, along with the colonial English that was strangling him.

### The open ego

Toward the end of *Seminar 23*, Lacan describes an ego not bounded by the form of a circle: an ego that has opened itself to the Real through the Imaginary. The armature of symbolic language is gone: it is a set of open 'brackets' (Figure 14.2). He discovers it in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Stephen Dedalus, beaten mercilessly by his peers, responds as if there has been no assault on his body, no wound to his ego. One cannot therefore imagine his ego as a closed circle, a walled in fortress that if breached wreaks havoc. Stephen, Joyce writes, is simply "emptied out," without rancor toward his tormentors. This puts Stephen, Lacan says, beyond the ideal of the ego as an intact body—and vice versa (*Sem.* 23: 59).

If a body-image is not engaged in Joyce, Lacan says, it can only be a sign that the ego has a quite particular new function—that of opening up, rupturing and freeing the imaginary from supporting the consistency of body, of mind and body. Joyce "set the imaginary relation free" from control by the signifier: "One thinks against a signifier [. . .] one leans against a signifier in order to think" (*Sem.* 23: 63).

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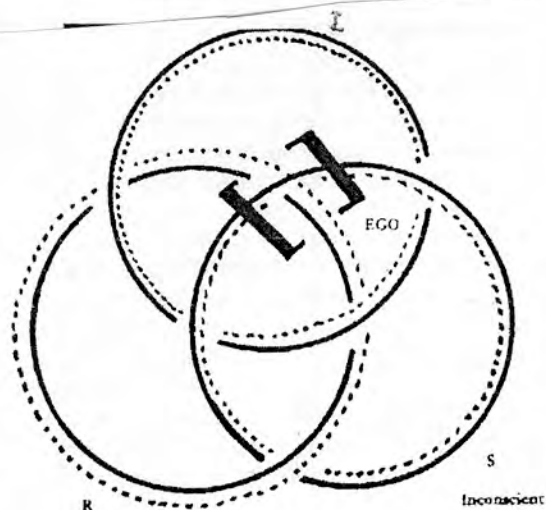


Figure 14.2 [Author tbc]

To free the Imaginary from its sterile relation to the ego-as-circle is to put it in touch with another kind of ego—one capable, like Baudelaire's, of taking a "bath of multitude." An ego open to, not walled off from other egos. Experience and enjoyment flow through the open ego—out of the fortress of the closed ego.

### Notes

- 1 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar 23*: 43. "Le Sinthome," 1976, in *Ornicar?* 6–11, 1976, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. L. Thurston. I used this translation, with occasional references to the manuscript of the French seminar because I did not have access to the published edition. I refer to "Joyce the Symptom I," the address Lacan delivered at the invitation of Jacques Aubert for the opening of the fifth International Joyce Symposium, 26 June 1975, as *JSI*.
- 2 "[Drive] is [...] a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work." Sigmund Freud (1895) *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, *SE I*, p. 317.
- 3 ~~Woman's~~ inability to place herself entirely under the Oedipal phallic signifier is, for Lacan a valuable cultural resource Freud overlooked. See my discussion of Lacan's sexualization formulae regarding the way the feminine responds to castration.
- 4 See Jane Marcus (1987) *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 83. "The mother country" is, psychoanalytically, a triumph of political perversion: according to Lacan, the sadist's fundamental fantasy is that the Mother possesses uncastrated power. See my *The Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, on the sadistic superego displacing the paternal with the patriarchal.

## WOOLF, JOYCE AND THE "MAD" SUBJECT

- 5 The era's proponents of male superiority (e.g., the secret society at Cambridge, The Apostles, to which Woolf's brothers belonged) based their claims on the ideology of colonialism. Marcus writes, "[...] Virginia Woolf's grandfather was more than a petty patriarchal tyrant over his own family. He was actually the architect of an ideology of oppression that used the model of patriarchal domestic tyranny as a basis for colonial imperialism" (Marcus 1987: 83).
- 6 Marcus 1987, p. 99.
- 7 Woolf (1923) *Jacob's Room & The Waves*, New York: Harcourt Brace and World, Inc.
- 8 (1947) *The Moment, and Other Essays*, New York: Harcourt Brace, p. 179.
- 9 J. Lacan, *Télévision*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974, p. 16 [English, p. 6]. « L'homme [...] pense de qu'une structure, celle du langage—le mot le comporte—de qu'une structure découpe son corps, et qui n'a rien à faire avec l'anatomie. »
- 10 See Joan Copjec's unsurpassed exposition of the diagram: "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason," in her (1994) *Read My Desire*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.
- 11 Feminist efforts to return the male gaze try to turn his symbolic phallus into an object *a*, if not a purely physical organ. This puts them on the "masculine side," an undesirable outcome for most.
- 12 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- 13 (1960[1916]) "The Dead," in *Dubliners*, New York: The Viking Press, 1960, pp. 175–224.
- 14 Most people do not, of course, read Joyce's story this way. The last film by the great John Huston was *The Dead*. Despite his feel for literature, Huston treats Gabriel as a decent, sensitive husband. But the story is written otherwise; it is Joyce's stinging critique of the brittle, controlled male *ego* – a brittleness that voids Gabriel of any originality, sensitivity or passion, controlled by prevailing colonial powers.
- 15 Encountering Joyce altered Lacan's own psychoanalytic theory.
- 16 *Seminar 23*, 18 November 1975. The French manuscript reads a bit differently.
- 17 From "master's" discourse to "university discourse," correlated with the ethics of capitalism: (1976) *Seminar 23*, in *Ornicar?* 6–11, 1976.
- 18 "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. [...] 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. [...] 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." Juliet Flower MacCannell (2008) "Nowhere, Else: On Utopia," *Umbra*.
- 19 In the introduction, *Joyce the Symptom I*, "University and Analysis," Lacan writes that Joyce means the turning from this dominant: "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) 9.

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