

## CHAPTER ONE

Après mot, le déluge: *the ego as symptom*

On July 20, 1998, the editorial board of the Modern Library, a division of Random House – a jury made up of ten writers, critics and editors, among whom were A. S. Byatt, William Styron, Gore Vidal, Shelby Foote and Christopher Cerf – revealed to the public the list they had drawn up of the hundred best novels of the twentieth century. Joyceans from all over the word could rejoice: *Ulysses* came up first, soon followed by *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in the third position. More unexpected but quite as heartening for fans was the fact that *Finnegans Wake* had found its way into the list as number seventy-seven. No doubt Joyce would have loved the elegant numerological progression: 1 – 3 – 77. As a new century begins, perhaps the time has come for another assessment: will Joyce's stature still tower above the English-speaking world in the twenty-first century, or was this critical acclaim just a way of leaving behind us an embarrassing literary monument? In 1998, moreover, the backlash was immediate, the ten jury members were denounced as elitist and sexist by disgruntled cavilers. Had they been twelve, they might have been identified with the apostles of a new Joycean creed – as the famous collective study *Our Exagmination Round His Factification For Incamination of Work in Progress* launched the ironical concept as early as 1929, just before the world economy collapsed and Joyce's personal life became fraught with difficulties.

Readers of the American press, for the majority of whom the best novel of the twentieth century would obviously not be *Ulysses* but *The Great Gatsby*, perhaps *The Fountainhead* if not *Atlas Shrugged* (I have not referred to Ayn Rand at random, as will become clear in the second part of this chapter), had been prepared for Joyce's triumph by the issue of *Time* magazine date June 8, 1998. There, under the general heading of "Hundred Artists and Entertainers of the Century" one observed the figure of Joyce looming large among "geniuses" like Pablo Picasso, Charlie Chaplin, Igor Stravinsky, Bob Dylan, and Elvis Presley. In this

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issue, Joyce was the only novelist to whom four pages of text and several photographs were devoted. The presentation by Paul Gray<sup>1</sup> wryly concluded on the obscurity of the *Wake*: “Today, only dedicated Joyceans regularly attend the *Wake*. A century from now, his readers may catch up with him.” This echoed, consciously or not, the famous opening of Richard Ellmann’s 1959 biography, that was to enshrine Joyce’s life for so long: “We are still learning to be James Joyce’s contemporaries.” (*JJII*, 3) – while confirming the hope expressed by its author that *Finnegans Wake* was in advance of its times. When he had to defend the seeming madness of his project, Joyce defiantly stated: “Perhaps it is insanity. One will be able to judge in a century” (*JJII*, 590).

The current tendency, however, would be to consider *Finnegans Wake* less *sub specie aeternitatis* than as a product of its own times, to see it as a book that is typical of the thirties, of a moment when experimental writing in an international and multilinguistic context could appear as the only logical outcome of Modernism. Before the term Post-Modernism had even been invented, most Modernist writers felt caught up in a sweeping movement that led to a rejection of parochialism and pushed to a generalized “Revolution of the Word.” Like most revolutions of this century, this too would fail – or at least be met with incomprehension from the audience, while attracting cult-like followers enamored with obscurity itself. *Work in Progress*, in spite of the numerous allusions to contemporary events scattered by Joyce in his literary maze until the completion of the book in the late 1938, has still today the reputation of being isolated from politics, ethics, and broader cultural concerns that ought to dominate in dark times of war, crisis, and dire survival. This has been triggered by the undeniable difficulty of deciphering the topical echoes and allusions in the obscurely punning polyglottic prose of *Finnegans Wake*.

Was this a writer’s blindness which could be blamed on the spirit of the times, or should one recall Joyce’s gnawing awareness that he had to publish his last novel before another world war started, otherwise it would simply disappear? I would like to suggest here that Joyce’s ultimate literary gamble, a gamble that might have to be left to this century’s close to be assessed fully, has to do with a collective utopia blending language and politics, a radical utopia with avant-gardist and anarchistic overtones shared by the *transition* group led by Eugène Jolas. This is why I have chosen as an epigraph for this first chapter a limerick written in honor of *transition*’s editor, a homage to the publication of Jolas’s polyglottic poems

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entitled *Mots Déluge*. In “Versailles 1933,” Joyce also puns on his own name that he uses as a verb:

So the jeunes joy with Jolas  
 Book your berths: Après mot, le déluge!

Joyce’s witty re-writing of the cynical motto of France’s *ancien régime* – as King Louis XV allegedly stated, offhandedly brushing aside importunate criticism of his extravagant spending, and also probably aware of the impending storm that would erupt with the 1789 Revolution: *Après moi, le déluge!* (“After me, the deluge!”) – into “After (the) word, the deluge” shows very clearly the multiple links between an embattled ego, the ongoing “Revolution of the Word” and an apocalyptic consciousness of time’s end. Some of the difficulties Joyce faced when he attempted to create not only a new language but also a new reader, as I will show in the last chapters, had to do with his having completed his last book at a time when Modernist beliefs in progress were being rapidly replaced by a more cynical awareness that history (in the sense of a meta-narrative, or of “universal history”) only progresses from catastrophe to catastrophe. Joyce was still creating his *A la Recherche de l’histoire perdue* just when real history seemed to confirm Walter Benjamin’s apocalyptic vision.

In the limerick that gleefully associates Joyce with *les jeunes* (this was the typical Modernist expression that would be used by Pound and Lewis as, with more distance, of course, by Woolf), one sees all the young and happy creators embarking on a super-cruise promising not just “berths” but infinitely new “births” – births interestingly dependent on a “Book!” which replays the Mallarmean dream of *Le livre* as a simple imperative ticket-buying. Meanwhile, the old ego of the patriarchal and doomed king (no more the resplendent *roi soleil*, not yet the beheaded corpse of another decade) figuring “his majesty the *Moi*” has been replaced by a *mot* – less a “word” than “the word,” as in French with *le verbe*, in Hebrew with *dabar*, in Greek with *logos*, in Latin with *verbum*. This word/verb condenses – this is my main thesis – all the qualities and properties formerly associated with an egoistic or egocentric subject. The fact that Joyce wrote the limerick at Versailles in 1933 (hence its title) gives it a sense of ominous foreboding – as if the fragile Versailles Treaty has less contained than helped unleash the forces of darkness and destruction that started sweeping across Europe after 1933. The deluge would come, for sure, and it would not be just the wonderful new flood of river-names Joyce had gathered in *Anna Livia Plurabelle*. Joyce’s witticism seems to

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renew Freud's insight in his most political text, a contribution to a book published after his death: his decision to debunk President Wilson's character so as to avoid, for another time at least, the mistakes already committed. Freud believed that Wilson's messianic delusions, his religious phraseology, and his lack of human warmth and perception had played a key role in the creation of a new Europe in which defeated and humiliated nations would seethe with a resentment that would then easily be exploited by demagogues. This ineluctably led to the collective psychosis that accompanied the rise of the Nazi movement. For Freud, Wilson could have said "*Après moi le déluge!*" even though his talks were full of peace projects and schemes about the future Society of Nations.<sup>2</sup>

Freud and Bullitt see as Wilson's main symptom his identification with "God and Christ," (*TWW*, 170), and his tendency to believe his own words to the detriment of facts:

Wilson's apparent hypocrisy was nearly always self-deception. He had an enormous ability to ignore facts and an enormous belief in words. His feeling for facts and phrases was the exact reverse of the feeling of a scientist. He could not bear to allow a beautiful phrase to be slain by a refractory fact. He delighted in allowing an unpleasant fact to be annihilated by a beautiful phrase. When he had invented a beautiful phrase, he began to believe in his phrase whatever the fact might be" (*TWW*, 193)

As we will see, the Modernist impulse was not only directed at the creation of a new language, but of a new ego who can adapt to new "facts," whatever they may be. In this context, it is tempting to see a link between Wilson's dream of a "War to end all wars" (*TWW*, 171) – a neat phrase that could be used to justify many things, including the American intervention – and Joyce's *Ulysses*, a novel that was often described as a "novel to end all novels."

I will examine at some length Joyce's relation to Eugène Jolas in the Parisian context of the thirties, so as to engage with what could be called Joyce's late Modernism, to borrow Tyrus Miller's apt expression.<sup>3</sup> Let us just remember how quickly and easily Jolas became Joyce's confidant, and an editor who would allow him the luxury that Darantière's printers and Sylvia Beach's finances had generously granted for *Ulysses*: the ability to work endlessly on large page proofs, those *placards* Joyce filled with interpolations and late additions as he would today with a computer. Confirming Joyce's use of his own name as a verb, it is Jolas who explains in his autobiography that the printers would have learned to expect Joyce's last minute corrections, but would accompany them with

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a peculiar oath. They would then say “Joyce, *alors!*”<sup>4</sup> Joyce was delighted to see that his name could not only be distorted into French speech as “*jouasse*” (a slang term meaning “happiness”) but could also turn into a printer’s swearword!

After Jolas and his friends of *transition*, the critic (if the term can apply at all) who has done the most to restore the meaning of enjoyment as a verb to Joyce’s name is Jacques Lacan. By way of introduction to the problematic of egoism, I will assess briefly a few important features of Lacan’s groundbreaking contribution to Joycean scholarship.<sup>5</sup> As a growing number of scholars have begun to realize, following Jacques Aubert’s inroads into Lacanian readings,<sup>6</sup> Lacan’s terms provide a strong frame of reference allowing for a general assessment of Joyce’s works. In France and Latin America, thousands of new readers have discovered the pleasure and hardships of a textual battle with the intricacies of *Finnegans Wake*, spurred on by the influential readings provided by Lacan’s seminar in the middle of the seventies. I would like to explore the curious “coincidence” of such a late meeting between the two writers.

When Aubert invited Lacan to open the 1975 International Joyce Symposium he was organizing in Paris, he was forcing the reputed psychoanalyst to return once more to literature (after what I have called Lacan’s “literary decade” in the fifties and sixties), but in a way that would durably change his entire theory. Lacan gave his talk, entitled “Joyce the Symptom” at the Sorbonne on June 16, 1975, starting from his own encounter with James Joyce at Adrienne Monnier’s bookstore and his having heard the memorable first *Ulysses* reading when he was twenty.<sup>7</sup> Lacan’s encounter with the Irish writer in 1921 could be seen as an omen, a fateful coincidence reawakened some fifty years later. The most striking feature in this presentation – in the context of last century’s evaluation – was that Joyce did not appear essentially as the author of *Ulysses*, a novel mentioned in passing and merely to dispel the notion that it might be based on Homer’s *Odyssey* (*JAL*, 27), but as the writer of *Finnegans Wake*, a text described as his “major and final work” (*JAL*, 26). Lacan began by disclosing his central insight immediately – that Joyce embodied the “symptom,” a symptom written *sinthome*, to revert to an older form of the word already found in Rabelais. This allowed him to present Joyce not only as a literary saint – a depiction that accords quite well with the way Joyce saw himself and projected himself to his contemporaries – but also to call up at once Aquinas (in French “*saint Thomas d’Aquin*”), “sin” and literature (“tomes”). He concluded his lecture with

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the idea that the major “symptom” was contained in Joyce’s name, a name embodying *jouissance* (a key Lacanian concept compounding “enjoyment” in all its meanings, along with sexual bliss and property rights).

Even if the focus was on Joyce’s ecstatic *jouissance* of language in *Finnegans Wake*, Lacan’s reservations were numerous. When Joyce plays with many languages, the dimension of truth risks being lost. He provides a diagram of all symptoms, pointing to their determination by the “Name-of-the-Father.” He is busy erecting a literary monument in place of his father’s real-life shortcomings, thus making up for failings that he excuses, negates, and sublimates at the same time. No matter how hard Joyce tries to become the *sinthome*, he nevertheless produces a text that cannot engage deeply with his readers, since everyone is only interested in her or his personal symptom. Joyce appears out of touch with the Freudian and Lacanian Unconscious when he flirts with Jung and Mrs. Blavatsky. He is marked by literary megalomania and uses *Finnegans Wake* as a simple “stool” with which he assumes that he will reach immortality. In fact, he will owe this immortality to the toils of thousands of scholars who all labor under the delusion that they will crack the code. Finally, the *jouissance* he ends up bequeathing is the mere hypostasis of his name, a name that becomes a common noun when it translates Freud’s name as *jouissance* and as an intransitive verb, *jouir*. Joyce’s mastery of style is self-serving, tautological, and finally masturbatory, when he attempts to suture his own knot with his proper name, a name he identifies with universal literature.<sup>8</sup> In this talk, Lacan was sketching the main themes developed in his seminar of the year 1975–76, “The Sinthome.” The forceful confrontation with Joyce obliged him to overhaul his theory of the three interlocking circles of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic to show that their knotting depends on the function of a fourth circle, called Sigma for the Symptom.

As the excellent biography written by Elisabeth Roudinesco<sup>9</sup> has noted, Lacan’s starting point is unabashedly biographical, which leads him to miss or erase the important distinction between Stephen Dedalus and James Joyce. Lacan explains Joyce’s choice of an artistic career as a wish to compensate for a lack on the part of his own father, John Joyce. According to Lacan, James Joyce remains caught up in his father’s symptoms even while rejecting him: both are spendthrifts, they drink heavily, seem unable to keep their families sheltered from disaster. Joyce’s daughter Lucia’s deepening schizophrenia seemed to confirm that Joyce’s literary fascination with psychotic discourse was not purely literary.

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Lacan's reading is in fact not that far from Jung's interpretation of Joyce; like Jung, he stresses Joyce's wish to defend Lucia against psychoanalysis so as to ward off any suggestion that his own writing could be seen as "schizophrenic" or "psychotic," and like Jung he admits that Lucia drowns in the waters of the unconscious where a more experienced swimmer manages to reach back to the surface.<sup>10</sup>

The last sessions of the Joyce seminar were devoted to discussions of the four knots and Joyce's *jouissance*. In March 1976, Lacan announced new developments on the function of the ego, an ego he contrasted with Joyce's tendency to move toward a Jungian version of the Collective Unconscious, as if Lacan's main insight into the ego had been undissociable from a concept of a "community of Egoists" (to use Max Stirner's phrase).<sup>11</sup> In the last seminar, Joyce's ego was described as occupying the place of the fourth circle: Joyce's ego had become identical with the symptom. The same "mistake" in the knotting of the three circles of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, was compensated by the ego, in Lacan's drawing not a circle any more, but double square brackets, which then played the role of clamps keeping the circles together; the clamping effect is achieved by a writing which is as much a rewiring as a rewriting. "What I am suggesting is that with Joyce, the ego comes to correct the missing relation. The Borromean knot is reconstituted by such an artifice of writing."<sup>12</sup> Joyce's ego, atoned with the *sinthome*, turns into a literature of supplementary chains, bypasses, ducts, and prosthetic devices.

Why was Lacan's designation of the centrality of the ego in his knot so paradoxical? This can be best appreciated when we remember that Lacan's entire system had been erected as a war machine against "ego-psychology." Since the 1950s, his main polemical thrust had been directed at Anna Freud's legacy in a wholesale critique of the "Americanization of the Unconscious" that occurred when the first generation of Freud's disciples elaborated in his name a practice aiming at increasing ego-defenses. Lacan's first publication in English, "Some Reflections on the Ego,"<sup>13</sup> had postulated that language was constitutive of the ego, and situated in the dimension of hallucination, therefore of delusion. The denunciation of subsequent ego-psychology would be reiterated in countless statements, often quite ironical, as is the following with its revealing English phrases italicized in the original: "A team of *egos* no doubt less equal than autonomous (but by what trade-mark do they recognize in one another the sufficiency of their autonomy?) is offered to the Americans to guide them towards happiness, without



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upsetting the autonomies, egoistical or otherwise, that pave with their non-conflictual spheres the *American way* of getting there.”<sup>14</sup> Here is Lacan’s fundamental tenet, and it was therefore a completely unexpected move to see the old ego resurface with Joyce, even if was to introduce the ego as a writerly knot of letters somehow precipitating the symptom as *sinthome*.

When Lacan gave a written version of his talk for the publication of the symposium proceedings,<sup>15</sup> the new text did not explicitly stress the role of the ego in the knot, although its submerged influence was noticeable. This version, completely different from the oral presentation, looked like a pastiche of Joyce’s Wakese. Lacan’s style in this text published in 1979 is at its most obscure and punning. It jump-starts with a covert reappearance of the *moi*: “*Joyce le Symptôme à entendre comme Jésus la caille: c’est son nom. Pouvait-on s’attendre à autre chose d’emmoi: je nomme*” (*JAL*, 31). (“Joyce the Symptom to be heard as *Jésus la caille*: this is his name. Could one expect anything less from meself: I name.”) The reference to Francis Carco’s novel portraying Parisian pimps and prostitutes, *Jésus-la-Caille*, ironically replaces Joyce’s name in the Montmartre and Pigalle scene of pimps and prostitutes, adding to Joyce’s nickname a populist twist (the hero of the novel, *Jésus-la-Caille*, is a drag queen and a male prostitute who falls in love with the mistress of the most dangerous pimp of the boulevards). With “*emmoi*,” Lacan punningly links *de moi* (“of me”) with echoes of Emma Bovary through a submerged quote of Flaubert’s famous “*Madame Bovary, c’est moi*.” By stressing the homophony of “*je nomme*” (“I name”) with “*jeune homme*” – the “young man” of Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist*, Lacan follows in the steps of a “young man Joyce” with whom he shares many characteristics – a common religious education, a subsequent revolt against the bourgeois order of their youth, finally the creation of a radically new language allowing them to think originally. The Irish writer acts as Lacan’s double, turns into a literary *Doppelgänger* thanks to whom he can justify his own baroque style, while permitting the return of the repressed “ego.” Joyce, who consistently refused to be psychoanalyzed, and who duplicates Freud’s name translated into English, plays the part of Lacan’s lay psychoanalyst, perhaps the only psychoanalyst he could acknowledge, unearthing in him the most stubborn ego-narcissism.

This is why the question of Joyce’s madness becomes so crucial. If Joyce was psychotic, was Lacan psychotic too? Lacan wonders thus in February 1976: “After which point is one mad? Was Joyce mad? . . . I began by writing *Inspired Writings*, this is why I should not be astonished



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to find myself confronting Joyce, and this is why I dare pose the question: Was he mad? By what were his writings inspired to him?"<sup>16</sup> This reference to the 1931 publication of "Ecrits inspirés" in *Annales médicales* sends us back to one of Lacan's earliest articles, when he was trying to understand the logic of psychotic discourse. In this early essay on "Inspired Writings," Lacan had marked his refusal of a medical approach that tended to see the texts of psychotics as "degenerated" or "degraded" by a distortion of affects, and he compared them to the linguistic experiments produced by the Surrealists to point out similar features: "The experiences made by certain writers on a mode of writing they have called Surrealist and whose method they have described very scientifically show the extraordinary degree of autonomy that graphic automatisms can reach, outside any hypnosis."<sup>17</sup> In a bold move for someone who was working within the French psychiatric institution, Lacan refused to distinguish the artful simulation of psychotic delirium such as one finds in *The Immaculate Conception* by Breton and Eluard from "authentic" verbal productions of institutionalized patients: all these texts evince the same structures, are determined by pre-inscribed rhythmic formulas that are subverted and filled with other meanings.

In fact, Lacan was not working in total isolation. More or less at the same time as he was writing "Inspired Writings," Eugène Jolas and Stuart Gilbert were busy collecting and publishing some of these "inspired writings" for *transition*. They were hoping to establish links between Joyce's new language and the language of the mad. This is why in *transition* no. 18 (November 1929), Roger Vitrac devotes a long article in French to "Le Langage à part" ("The language apart") that extensively quotes medical treatises on language trouble in alienated subjects before alluding to poetic texts by Prevert and Desnos as illustrations of the same linguistic process.<sup>18</sup> In his essay, Vitrac quotes not only Seglas but also Baillarger, who worked on aural hallucinations among patients and asserts that "alienated patients fail to recognize their own voices just as one does in dreams" (*ibid.*). Vitrac provides one example:

Unconsciously. – Madame Dubois.

Consciously. – I don't know her. I come from the countryside.

Unconsciously. – Saint Thomas is as white as death.

Consciously. – A saint would have appeared to me? (*ibid.*)

He then generalizes: "What a strange ventriloquism, in which unconscious language has not lost its color and charm. One understands better the lyricism of asides, the occult power of confessions, everything that

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makes these individualists tick and act, these impulsive egoists of thought, these dreamers entirely possessed by themselves.”<sup>19</sup> Vitrac seems to connect these linguistic creations of the insane with an entrenched egoism that has similar roots: madness consists in a linguistic autarchy that can be charming but also betrays an inability to communicate on a social level. However, Vitrac does not suggest a similar derivation for the linguistic experiments of the “Revolution of the Word” launched by Joyce. In the same way, in *transition* no. 26 (1937) Stuart Gilbert publishes an essay on “The Subliminal Tongue” in which he starts with Joyce, then examines a few cases of psychotic language, such as various cases of invented “Martian languages.” These include the famous Hélène Smith, observed by Doctor Flournoy, and Patience Worth, whose dissociated personality was the object of psychical research on dissociation of personality by Morton Prince, all quoted in *Finnegans Wake*.

The question of Joyce’s potentially psychotic structure remained a haunting one for Lacan, and for the generations of Lacanian psychoanalysts who started reading Joyce in the hope of understanding psychosis. The possible diagnosis of Joyce’s psychotic structure can be seen as the result of several related factors: a systematic linguistic deregulation, a re-knotting of the four circles providing a new place for an ego that occupies a crucial but fragile position since it depends entirely upon language to “hold,” and more importantly perhaps, the determination of the whole structure by a *jouissance* of language experienced as raw material yielding enjoyment but produced outside the social norms of accepted meanings. It is indeed the “crazy” Joyce of the *Wake* who is given as a model for the new millennium.

#### THE EGOIST’S DAUGHTER

Lacan’s concept of “*jouissance*”<sup>20</sup> – so important to grasp Joyce’s new knots – is fundamentally egoistical, since it occupies the opposite pole of a desire marked by the Law of the Other. In a more recent discussion of Lacanian terms, Jacques-Alain Miller confirms this idea: “Lacan took masturbation as an example to show how *jouissance* in itself does not comprise the Other sex . . . When we think of *jouissance*, for instance, of the kind we possess, it is the *jouissance* of the psychical apparatus. It is something which has nothing to do with anyone in the word.”<sup>21</sup> This can be brought to bear on Lacan’s critique of a residual “Jungism” when he talks about the anonymous dreamer in *Finnegans Wake*. For if we return