

The Meaning of Meaning in Joyce's Epiphanies

OVERVIEW

This presentation poses the question of “meaning” in James Joyce’s “epiphanies”; not what they mean, as such, but rather, the type of meaning that is at stake when it comes to epiphanies. It suggests that the type of meaning concerned relates to what Lacan is intimating when he plays on the term, *j'ouï sens* and when he says that this *j'ouï-sens* is the same thing as “to hear a meaning”.

Inquiring into the meaning of “meaning” in epiphanies begs the question of interpretation; are epiphanies to be interpreted or do they even need to be interpreted? The answer to this, of course, depends on the answer to the first inquiry here regarding the type of meaning that is concerned in Joyce’s epiphanies.

The main source and reference point for this expose is *Le Sinthome*. There are also some references to the Seminar from the previous year, *RSI*. For this presentation, the particular focus in *Le Sinthome* is Lacan on the subject of (a) Joyce’s writing and of (b) his account of Joyce’s epiphany.

There are also, of course, references to Joyce’s texts and to some pertinent texts of literary criticism relating to Joyce’s method and technique.

INTRODUCTION

Lacan begins and ends the Seminar, *Le Sinthome* (1975-76), with some relatively brief allusions and explicit references to Joyce’s Aesthetic theory, his Theory of Epiphany. For example,

- In the first lesson of the Seminar, Lacan alludes to Epiphany when he refers to Thomas Aquinas’s Latin term, *claritas* – a term which Joyce adopts from Aquinas to explain the essence of Epiphany.
- In this first lesson, Lacan also has a number of word-plays on the name of St Thomas Aquinas; for example, *Saint Thom* and *à home-rule* and *à sinthome-roule*. And there are many more.
- Then, at the very end of the Seminar, the end of the last lesson, in fact, Lacan is more explicit about Epiphanies. He delivers “some words” which he has prepared “about the epiphany, Joyce’s famous epiphany”.[1]

Although there are relatively few and relatively brief explicit references to Epiphany in *Le Sinthome*, the core ideas relating to epiphanies are, in fact, addressed throughout because the focus of this Seminar is the Borromean Knot and, as Lacan says, Joyce’s writing, Joyce’s text “is constructed altogether as a Borromean knot”.[2] Lacan is interested in Joyce’s epiphanies because they throw light on both the *form* and the *source* of Joyce’s writing; “...you will encounter them at every

turn”^[iii], Lacan says. This is quite true and is well documented in the texts of literary criticism. They, epiphanies, therefore, throw light on the construction of this particular Borromean knot, Joyce’s Borromean knot

Epiphanies are the *source* of Joyce’s writing and his recording of them is his epiphanising. What is also most interesting about Joyce’s epiphanies and his epiphanising is that Joyce himself theorises about epiphanies and the role of the artist in recording them. Joyce has his own aesthetic theory and he presents it to his reading audience as early as in his book, *Stephen Hero*. The fact that Joyce provides his own theory about the *source* and the *form* of his writing is enlightening in its own right but it is even more so for us because, according to Lacan, this theory of Joyce’s coincides precisely with Lacan’s own explanation of Joyce’s epiphanies.

The literary critic, Irene Hendry Chayes, in the book, *Joyce’s Portrait*, edited by Thomas Connolly (1962) writes, “...epiphany is not peculiar to Joyce alone [however]...What Joyce did was give systematic formulation to a common esthetic experience...”.^[iv]

Epiphany means ‘to show forth’. This is what the artist does, explains Joyce through the thoughts of his character, Stephen Dedalus, in the *Stephen Hero*. It is “for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments”.^[v]

LACAN:

In the last lesson of *Le Sinthome*, Lacan explains what it is that characterises Joyce’s epiphanies, all of them. He says that they are “the consequence that results from this error, namely, that the Unconscious is linked to the Real”.^[vi] He goes on to say that

“Joyce, for his part, does not speak any other way about it. It is quite readable in Joyce that epiphany, is there something that ensures that, thanks to the mistake, the Unconscious and the Real are knotted together”.^[vii]

Previously in the Seminar, Lacan had talked about the symptom being linked to the Real. It was during the lesson of 13th January 1976 where, in the context of talking about the clinic of psychoanalysis, he elaborated on what is meant by ‘meaning’. He begins by explaining that “Meaning...results from a field between the Imaginary and the Symbolic”.^[viii] He says :

“We must indeed make the knot somewhere, the knot between the Imaginary and unconscious knowledge, that we make here, somewhere, a splice. All that, to obtain a meaning, which is the object of the analyst’s response to the presentation by the analysand, all along, of his symptom”.^[ix]

However, he then goes on to say that :

“When we make this splice, we make another one at the same time...between precisely what is symptom and the Real. Namely...we teach him to splice, to make a splice between his symptom and this parasitic Real of enjoyment. And what is characteristic of our operation to render this enjoyment possible is the same thing as what I will write: *j’ouï-sens*. It is the same thing as to hear a meaning”.^[x]

This *second* splice – not chronologically; it is at the same time – this *second* splice is of interest here because it seems that the description of the occurrence of this *second* splice comes very close to how Lacan characterises Joyce’s epiphany, namely, that it is “the consequence that results from this error...that the Unconscious is linked to the Real”.^[xi] This would suggest that the achievement, or the event, which is called an epiphany, is something of the register of the Real, it is heard

and it is enjoyed.

What is more, and in relation to the question of interpretation, Lacan had said the previous year in *RSI*, that: “The meaning effect required of analytic discourse is not Imaginary, it is not Symbolic either, it must be Real” [xii] If this can be compared with what is happening in epiphany, then the epiphany is a meaning effect and it is Real. There would, therefore, be no question of interpreting it; it is just not an issue.

However, before exploring any further what Lacan says about Joyce’s epiphany in the last week of his seminar, we will first look at how Joyce himself describes and explains epiphany – keeping in mind that Lacan concurs with this description.

So what does JOYCE say?

Quoting from Joyce’s *Stephen Hero* (and the ‘he’ in the passage refers to Stephen Dedalus):

By epiphany *he* meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. [xiii]

The moment of epiphany, Joyce says, corresponds to the moment of *claritas*, the Latin term (translated as “radiance”) which Aquinas had used to designate the third stage of apprehension, or the third quality of beauty. *Claritas* is defined by Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist*. He says that it is :

...the instant wherein...the clear radiance of the esthetic image is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony in the luminous silent stasis of aesthetic pleasure. [xiv]

Note “pleasure” here, and also the term ‘stasis’; the instant is not kinetic, it is outside time.

“This supreme quality is felt by the artist when the aesthetic image is first conceived in his imagination” [xv]

In *Stephen Hero*, he says that *claritas* is the moment the “object achieves its epiphany” [xvi] This moment is distinguished from the two other moments of apprehension in Aquinas’s theory (or the two other qualities of beauty), namely, *integritas* (translated as ‘integrity’ or ‘wholeness’) and *consonantia* (translated as symmetry or harmony). [Joyce does not use the Latin terms in this text]

These two other moments of apprehension (besides *claritas*, that is) seem to come closer to representing an “understanding”, a “meaning”, that results from linking the Symbolic and the Imaginary. *Claritas*, on the other hand, seems to point to something in a different register, another type of apprehension. It is a type of apprehension in which something is actualised; it is real, the *effect* is real. Joyce says that “the *object* achieves its epiphany” [xvii], designating the “object” as agent, the active one, realising itself, as it were, while the artist is out of the scene. Joyce goes on, here, to say, “The artist, like the God of creation, within or beyond or behind or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, pairing his fingernails”. [xviii]

Stephen, in *Stephen Hero*, expands further on the term *claritas* in Aquinas’s theory. He says,

“For a long time I couldn’t make out what Aquinas meant...but I have solved it. *Claritas* is *quidditas*” [xix]

[The Latin term, *quidditas*, translates as ‘whatness’. Stephen continues:

“...finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognise that it is *that thing which it is*. Its soul, its whatness [son identité], leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the

commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany”.[xx]

An epiphany, therefore, is *not* an insight where the subject is the agent, the one who, as it were, works out something. An epiphany is *not* a “formation of the unconscious”; the unconscious is open; *le ciel ouvert*. In epiphany, it is the *object* that presents itself; it is real; it is the agent. It actualises a piece of the real. It is, therefore, akin to the *meaning effect* of psychoanalytic discourse, an effect in the real. *Claritas* is the moment of epiphany. *Claritas* is *quidditas*: it is the *whatness*. In *Portrait of the Artist*, Joyce repeats, that in *claritas*...

“You see that it is that thing which it is and no other thing. The *radiance* of which he [Thomas Aquinas] speaks is the scholastic *quidditas*, the *whatness* of a thing”.[xxi]

Joyce’s theory of epiphany is the same, Lacan says, as his own theory. His own theory is that what characterises epiphanies is that they are “the consequence that results from the error, namely, that the unconscious is linked to the Real”.[xxii] Lacan goes further and says that, in Joyce’s case, the Imaginary slips away; “the Imaginary relationship...has no place”.[xxiii] This has implications for “meaning”, *per se*, already referenced, the meaning that “results from a field between the Imaginary and the Symbolic”.[xxiv]

Joyce “compensates”, through his writing, his “artifice of writing”.[xxv] He compensates for this deficiency regarding the Imaginary. Earlier in the Seminar, that inspired his writing?”[xxvi] What inspired the enormous quantity of notes, his *scribblings*? Lacan refers to Thomas Connolly’s collection of these scribblings, a collection called, *Scribbledehobble* and says that, clearly, “*Scribbledehobble* is not random”.[xxvii]

In the following lesson, Lacan again addresses the question of what inspired Joyce’s writing; what is the source of these scribblings if they are not random? In *this* lesson.[xxviii] Lacan first speaks about the *sinthome* of one of his patients, a *sinthome* described by the patient himself as “imposed words”. (This patient was the subject of the case-presentation the previous week.) “A case of madness, assuredly”[xxix], Lacan says, and he speaks at length about how the patient describes the reality of “imposed words”. The patient called it “his telepathy”.

Lacan then goes on to explain that Joyce had spoken about his daughter, Lucia, saying that *she* was a telepath. However, it is Lacan’s thesis that Joyce: “attributes to her something, an extension of what I [Lacan] will momentarily call *his own* symptom”.[xxx] He says that, “...with respect to the word, one cannot say that something was not imposed on Joyce”.[xxxi] He goes on:

“I mean that in the more or less continuous progress that his art constituted, namely, this word, the word that had been written, to break it, to dislocate it, to ensure that, at the end, what seems, in reading him, to be a continual progress – from the effort that he made in his first critical essays, then subsequently, in *Portrait of the Artist*, and finally in *Ulysses* and ending up with *Finnegans Wake* – it is difficult *not* to see that a certain relationship to the word is more and more imposed on him.”[xxxii]

Lacan goes on here to say that, through his writing, “the word is decomposed in imposing itself”[xxxiii] and that there is an ambiguity:

“...as to whether it is a matter of liberating oneself from the parasite, from the wordy parasite...or, on the contrary,

something which allows itself to be invaded by the properties of the word that are essentially of the phonemic order, by the polyphony of the word.^[xxxiv]

It is *this* writing that compensates for the Imaginary that slips away. It is the *recording* of these “moments” of epiphany that comprises the *sinthome* that holds together the Borromean knot for Joyce.

Finnegans Wake, writes Irene Hendry Chayes, is an epiphany “that occupies one, gigantic, enduring “moment”...running through 628 pages of text and then returning upon itself”^[xxxv](p.215). Within these 628 pages, the polyphony of the word is completely evident in the *riverrun* writing which actually produces the waves of the river rather than merely *representing* them through words. *Finnegans Wake* is polyphonic. The words and the phrases do not *represent*, they *actualise* and they do this through their sounds and rhythm. They do not *represent* anything since the Imaginary has cleared off. Richard Ellmann, in the biography, describes how Joyce, while overseeing the translation into French of the *Anna Livia Plurabelle* section of *Finnegans Wake*, cared “more for sound and rhythm than sense”^[xxxvi].

The polyphony of the word is evident also in Joyce’s earlier and shorter epiphanies. For example, the well-known dramatic epiphany from his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

Pull out his eyes,

Apologise

Apologise

Pull out his eyes

Apologise,

Pull out his eyes,

Pull out his eyes.

Apologise.^[xxxvii]

It is not doing justice to this particular epiphany, for example, when one literary critic interprets it as “an account of a sensitive child’s confrontation with authority”^[xxxviii]. Instead, the *meaning effect* must be allowed to be what it is. It is to be heard and enjoyed.

According to Joyce, epiphany “is *that* thing which it is”^[xxxix] and in it, it is the *object* that achieves its epiphany. Epiphany is in the register of the Real. In epiphanies, there is a *meaning effect* in the Real rather than a meaning, *per se*, supported by the Imaginary. It follows, therefore, that there is simply no question of interpretation when it comes to epiphanies.

[i] J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book 23, *Le Sinthome*, 1975-1976. Trans.C. Gallagher. 11.5.1976, p.17. Available: lacaninireland.com.

[ii] *Ibid.*, p.14

[iii]

Ibid. p.17

[iv] Hendry Chayes, I. (1962). Joyce's Epiphanies. In T. Connolly (1962), *Joyce's portrait*. London: Peter Owen, p.206.

[v] Joyce, J. (1944). *Stephen Hero*. New York, A New Directions Book, 1959. p.211

[vi] J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book 23, *Le Sinthome*, 1975-1976. Trans.C. Gallagher. 11.5.1976, p.17. Available: lacaninireland.com.

[vii] *Ibid.*

[viii] J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book 23, *Le Sinthome*, 1975-1976. Trans.C. Gallagher. 13.1.1976, p.15. Available: lacaninireland.com.

[ix] *Ibid.*

[x] *Ibid.*

[xi] J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book 23, *Le Sinthome*, 1975-1976. Trans.C. Gallagher. 11.5.1976, p.17. Available: lacaninireland.com.

[xii] J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book 22, *R.S.I.*, 1974-1975. Trans.C. Gallagher. 11.2.1975, p.10. Available: lacaninireland.com.

[xiii] Joyce. J. (1944). *Op. Cit.*, p.211

[xiv] Joyce, J. (1916/1992). *A Portrait of the artist as a young man*. Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Classics. p.164.

[xv] *Ibid.*

[xvi] Joyce. J. (1944). *Op. Cit.*, p.213

[xvii] *Ibid.*

[xviii] Joyce, J. (1916/1992). *Op. Cit.*, p.166

[xix] Joyce. J. (1944). *Op. Cit.*, p.213

[xx] *Ibid.*

[xxi] Joyce, J. (1916/1992). *Op. Cit.*, p.164

[xxii] J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book 23, *Le Sinthome*, 1975-1976. Trans.C. Gallagher. 11.5.1976, p.17. Available: lacaninireland.com.

[xxiii] *Ibid.*, p.12

- [xxiv] J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book 23, *Le Sinthome*, 1975-1976. Trans.C. Gallagher. 13.1.1976, p.15.
Available: lacaninireland.com.
- [xxv] J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book 23, *Le Sinthome*, 1975-1976. Trans.C. Gallagher. 11.5.1976, p.13.
Available: lacaninireland.com.
- [xxvi] J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book 23, *Le Sinthome*, 1975-1976. Trans.C. Gallagher. 11.2.1976, p.2.
Available: lacaninireland.com.
- [xxvii] *Ibid.*
- [xxviii] J. Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book 23, *Le Sinthome*, 1975-1976. Trans.C. Gallagher. 17.2.1976.
Available: lacaninireland.com.
- [xxix] *Ibid.*, p.5
- [xxx] *Ibid.* p.7
- [xxxi] *Ibid.*, p.8
- [xxxii] *Ibid.*
- [xxxiii] *Ibid.*
- [xxxiv] *Ibid.*
- [xxxv] Hendry Chayes, I. (1962). Joyce's Epiphanies. In T. Connolly (1962), *Joyce's portrait*. London: Peter Owen, p.215.
- [xxxvi] Ellmann, R. (1959/1982). *James Joyce*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. New and Revised Edition
- [xxxvii] Joyce, J. (1916/1992). *Op. Cit.*, p.4
- [xxxviii] Walton Litz, A. (1991). *Introduction*. In R. Ellmann, A. Walton Litz & J. Whittier-Ferguson (Editors), *James Joyce – Poems and Shorter Writings*. London: Faber and Faber, p.159.
- [xxxix] Joyce. J. (1944). *Op. Cit.*, p.213