

'IRELAND, MOTHER IRELAND': AN ESSAY IN PSYCHOANALYTIC SYMBOLISM

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Introduction

On June 21 1922, as the Irish War of Independence was tipping over into the Civil War, - two months later Harry Boland, Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins would all be dead - on the longest day of 1922 then, Ernest Jones read a paper to the British Psychoanalytical Society entitled: 'The island of Ireland: a psychoanalytical contribution to political psychology'.¹

In it, he argued that the geographic fact that Ireland is an island has played an important and underestimated part in the idea that the Irish have formed of their own country. The signifier 'Ireland' has become particularly associated with the unconscious maternal complex to which all kinds of powerful affects are attached and this in turn has played a part in the formation of Irish character and in the age-old refusal of the Irish to follow the Scots and the Welsh along a path of peaceful and beneficial co-operation with England.

The 1922 paper applied to Anglo-Irish relations, which then as now were at a crucial turning point, the theses of Jones' classic 1916 article on *The Theory of Symbolism*² which is known to contemporary psychoanalysts mainly through a long and detailed study of it by Jacques Lacan. Lacan argued that far from being of merely historical or even pre-historical interest this paper articulated issues that are still at the heart of the debate concerning the proper object of psychoanalysis and the clinical impasses that result from a failure to articulate correctly the status of this object.

¹ E. Jones. *The Island of Ireland: a psychoanalytical contribution to political psychology* (1922) in *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis*. London, Hogarth, 1964.

² E. Jones. *The Theory of Symbolism* (1916) in *Papers on psychoanalysis* (Fourth Edition). London, Balliere, Tindall and Cox, 1938.

In particular, he felt that the harmful effects of hermeneutics and psychology - which he again tried to counter in his 1965-1966 seminar on *The Object of Psychoanalysis*³ - could be usefully illustrated by an analysis of this work which still retains the freshness of the early psychoanalytic discoveries, dating as it does from shortly after the Freud/Jung split.

The dismissive attitude today's reader may be tempted to adopt towards the apparent naivete of some of Jones' theses about Anglo-Irish relations - they do not sit too well with the contemporary concept of *Ireland pic* - needs to be countered by the fact that for Lacan, he was one of few, after Freud, to have brought anything new to psychoanalysis. He praised his work on *The Nightmare* as 'a book of incomparable richness' and saw him as the main architect of the theories of feminine sexuality which dominate English-speaking psychoanalysis to this day.

But when he wrote *To the Memory of Ernest Jones*⁴ in 1959 (with a long addendum in 1966) it was to his theory of symbolism that he turned. He argues that its treatment of a problem that is so crucial in psychoanalysis best illustrates the essential strength and weakness of Jones' contribution to psychoanalysis. On the one hand he provided a solid bulwark against Jungian mysticism but on the other he failed to recognise the core of the Freudian discovery and laid the foundation for a tradition that has culminated in the contemporary dominance of psychology in analysis.

The present paper is an attempt to explore the value of Jones' theories by considering their application to the way in which symbolism affects the relationships between England and Ireland. It will also discuss Lacan's critique of these theories, with a view to seeing whether his perspectives enable us to query the way in which the words and deeds of Irish nationalists apparently verify them. This has the practical consequence of putting in question the legitimacy that a wide body of Irish opinion instinctively accords

³ J. Lacan. *The Object of Psychoanalysis, Seminar XIII*, (1965-66). Trans, by C. Gallagher, Dublin (unpublished).

⁴ J. Lacan. 'A la memoire d'Ernest Jones: sur sa theorie du symbolisme (1959) in *Ecrits*. Paris, Seuil, 1966. (I would like to express my thanks to Nessa Breen for allowing me to consult her unpublished translation of this text.)

to the struggle - armed or otherwise - to bring about the full independence of the island from England.

La géographie est le destin du peuple

Napoleon's dictum on the fatal impact of geography on the destiny of a people might well have served as an epigraph for Jones' article on *The Island of Ireland*.⁵ Without underestimating the importance of 'historical, racial, dynastic, religious' and other factors, or the 'dragooning, despoiling and bullying' of the English, Jones feels that the resistance of the Irish to a sensible union with Britain derives to a considerable degree from the unconscious complexes attached to the idea that they have of their own country.

For most peoples the idea of their native land is associated with the idea of a female having both virginal and maternal attributes, as instanced by the names of Britannia, Columbia, Germania, Italia and others. And for island people this association is particularly strong:

The complexes with which an island home tends to become attached are those relating to the ideas of woman, virgin, mother, and womb, all of which fuse in the central complex of the womb of a virgin mother.⁶

But nowhere, Jones argues, is this identification of native land to virgin mother stronger than in Ireland. The evidence for this is to be found not only in the multiplicity of female names given to Ireland - *Erin, Banba, Fodhla, the Cailleach Beara, Dark Rosaleen, Kathleen Ni Hualicain* - but also in literature, folklore and popular songs and, most surprisingly, in the speeches and declarations of political leaders. In addition, the idea of the existence of a marvellous island in which all desires will be satisfied is widespread in Irish mythology. This idea of an island paradise is also linked to womb phantasies and with unconscious feelings, as he puts it, about birth, death and mother.

⁵ E. Jones (1922). op.cit., p. 196.

⁶ *ibid*, p. 198.

The theory of symbolism'

The notion that conscious ideas and actions act as indirect representations - or symbols, in the widest sense - of unconscious material is a commonplace of psychoanalysis and is familiar to other branches of knowledge such as anthropology and art history. What it means is that a large part of our conscious interests and convictions derive their intensity from primary ideas which throughout life retain in the unconscious their original importance even though the memory of them has been repressed.

Jones states that it was the resistance he encountered to the clinical and other applications of this notion that prompted him to write his *Theory of Symbolism*. His principal goal is to define more closely what he calls 'true symbolism' as opposed to the symbolism attributed to any kind of indirect representation. His conclusion is that the psychoanalytic theory of symbolism, initiated by Freud, Rank and Sachs, offers the best path to this truth with its touchstone that 'only what is repressed is symbolised; only what is repressed needs to be symbolised'.⁷

He demonstrates the new clarity that psychoanalysis brings to symbolism by his striking claim that the number of repressed primary ideas which express themselves in conscious symbols are extremely limited and are in fact only five in number:

All symbols represent ideas of the self and the immediate blood relatives or of the phenomena of birth, love and death. In other words they represent the most primitive ideas and interests imaginable.⁸

Each of these ideas may include others, so that for example the idea of the self comprises the whole body or any part of it, giving rise to perhaps twenty different ideas, and so on with the other fundamental ideas.

In the case of Ireland, the idea of an island home draws its power from its link to the repressed primary idea of Mother, the closest of all immediate

⁷ E. Jones (1916). op.cit, p. 158.

⁸ ibid, p. 145.

blood relatives, to which powerful unconscious affective interests remain attached. Ideas related to Ireland such as her flag, her national anthem, her independence and her territorial integrity also contain an unconscious maternal dimension without which the intensity of feeling associated with them cannot be understood.

Psychoanalysis vs hermeneutics

This notion of primary ideas, to which the interests of conscious life can be referred back, is praised by Lacan for the barrier it sets up against the 'hermeneuticisation' of psychoanalysis by Jung and Silberer. Without defining hermeneutics in any exact way - he sees the way it is used as an excuse for every form of laziness in philosophical thinking - he savagely attacked Paul Ricoeur's well-known book on *Freud and Philosophy*, in 1966, on the grounds that it had misappropriated his own teaching to put it at the service of philosophy and religion. The multiplicity of interpretations that hermeneutics allows, with one meaning being as good as the next, is for Lacan a pernicious deviation from the search for the singular truth that he, after Freud, saw as the goal of psychoanalysis.

The type of hermeneutics Jones singled out in Jung and Silberer was their tendency to refer symbols, not to the primary unconscious ideas referred to above and their associated affects but to a wide variety of abstract or theoretical notions. Two brief examples will serve to illustrate:

According to the Jung-Silberer school the image of a serpent in a dream will symbolise the abstract idea of sexuality more often than the concrete idea of the phallus, whereas to the psychoanalytical school it only symbolises the latter, though of course it is commonly associated with the former ...⁹

... the unconscious wish to kill the father merely 'symbolises' such tendencies as the desire to overcome the old Adam in us, to

⁹ *ibid*, p. 170.

conquer the part of us that we have inherited from the father, or, even more generally, to overcome a previous point of view.¹⁰

This amounts to changing true material symbolism into the harmless functional kind and fatally diluting the discoveries of psychoanalysis.

'Ireland, Mother Ireland'

The *prima facie* evidence for Jones' assertion that Ireland is a mother is everywhere to be seen in ancient and modern texts. A popular ballad gives the tone:

*If you cry we hear you, If you zveep we weep,
In your hours of gladness, How our pulses leap,
Ireland, Mother Ireland, Let what may befall,
Ever will I hold you, Ever will I hold you
Dear one, sweet one, best of all.*

In a brief ninth century poem adapted by Patrick Pearse, leader of the Easter Rising of 1916, Mother Ireland speaks in her own name:

*Mise Eire
Sine me na an Cailleach Bear a
Mor mo ghloir,
Me do rug Cuchulainn Croga.
Mor mo ndir,
Mo chlannfein a threig me*

*I am Ireland
I am older than the Old Woman of Bear e
Great my glory,
I that bore Cuchulainn the valiant,
Great my shame*

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 172.

My own children that sold their Mother.

In *The Spiritual Nation*, Pearse wrote:

When I was a child I believed there was actually a woman called Erin, and had Mr Yeats' *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* been then written and had I seen it I should have taken it not as an allegory but as a representation of a thing that might happen any day in any house.¹¹

Jones in fact picks out Yeats' play as providing 'the most moving description of all' of mother Ireland as 'maiden, old woman and queen' and we know how Yeats tortured himself towards the end of his life with the question of whether 'that play of mine send out certain men the English shot'.

'A Mother Country'

But it is not simply the mystical nationalists and the poets who speak of Ireland as Mother. In an article written after Eamonn de Valera had rejected the treaty that ended the War of Independence and led his 'women and childrens' party out of Dail Eireann, Michael Collins, the ruthless and pragmatic leader of the guerrilla war against England wrote:

... at a Conference in London with the British representatives I made it quite clear that Ireland was a MOTHER COUNTRY, with the duties and responsibilities and feelings and devotions of a mother country.¹²

De Valera on the other hand was telling his followers on Patrick's Day 1922 that they 'will have to march over the dead bodies of their own brothers. They

¹¹ P.H. Pearse. *'The Spiritual Nation'* (1915) in *The Best of Pearse*. eds. P. MacAonghusa and L. O'Reagain. Cork, Merrier Press, 1967. pp. 152-3.

¹² M. Collins. *'Alternative to the Treaty: Ireland A Mother Country'* (1922) in *The Path to Freedom*. Cork, Merrier Press, 1966. p. 37.

will have to wade through Irish blood' - the blood that is of the faithless sons who have shamed their mother by vowing allegiance to an English king. The refusal of the symbolism of the Oath of Allegiance, more than any other factor, was responsible for the bloody Civil War that was soon to break out among those who had been intimate friends and brothers in arms.

Neil Jordan's film *Michael Collins* recently brought the events of seventy-five years ago vividly to the attention of a vast Irish audience. The look of horror and revulsion on Harry Boland's face, as Collins confirmed that such an oath did indeed form part of the Treaty to which he had agreed, argues that what was at stake went to the core of his unconscious attachments.

To return to the present, one can note in the autobiography of Gerry Adams, leader of the political wing of the Republican movement in Northern Ireland, the dominant role that he accords to his mother and his grandmother as formative influences in his youth, while his father only really finds a place as a leader of the 'boys' as the IRA were affectionately called in many parts of Ireland.

And if the role of the mother in the imagination of nationalists is taken to be a piece of fanciful theorising, consider the maternal symbolism at work in the most powerful weapon in the IRA's arsenal. The death of British MP Bobby Sands and nine other young men, after they had refused food for up to seventy-five days, punctuated the Summer of 1981 in a way that can only be compared to the executions of the leaders of the 1916 Rising and evoked a world-wide response that can scarcely be accounted for on rational or pragmatic grounds.

Jones' thesis that the symbolism of their deaths can only be understood in terms of a reference back to one of the primary complexes that provide the motive force for mental life appears to be justified here in a particularly striking way.

The practical political conclusion to be drawn from an application of Jones' ideas is that if Irish nationalists unconsciously link their notion of Ireland to the primary idea of Mother, their thoughts and actions will have such a compulsive force that no amount of reasoning or concession will modify them. And those who know how to play on this unconscious association - as Yeats thought he had - will always find young men who are

prepared to die in the service of the cause, even if, or perhaps especially if, it is a lost one.

In Jones' view it took a Welsh wizard to realise that the way to make peace with Ireland, the virgin mother, was to woo her with the offer of an honourable alliance rather than ravishing her as though she were a harlot. In other words, Lloyd George acted like a contemporary psychoanalyst by offering a substitute gratification to the Irish for the imaginary frustrations of the past.

Lacan's critique of Jones

Despite the verification it appears to receive from the words and deeds of nationalists, Jones' application of his theory of symbolism to Anglo-Irish relations offers a vivid illustration of what Lacan considers to be the major vice of contemporary psychoanalysis. This is its reliance on theories of development borrowed from psychology or even physiology and the neglect of its original focus on language and desire.

Melanie Klein, to whose theories Jones was to offer such support, is the most influential promoter of this orientation, with her notion that phantasies are to be understood as emerging 'genetically' in parallel to the organic development of the child. In this perspective, analytic repetition involves the re-emergence in adult life of the demands associated with a real phase of development - typically a phase in the early relationships with mother - rather than the insistence of a contingent signifier which for Lacan is what characterises the Freudian discovery. An example of this being the way in which the Ratman's father's prophecy that his angry son would become a great man or a criminal, structured his desire and echoed down through the years to be unconsciously inserted into the text of his first interview with Freud.

The foundation of Jones' deviation lies in the dominant role accorded to mother-child relations and the consequent emphasis on oral demands in the structuring of human personality. The idealisation of the island of Ireland derives, for him, from the most profound tendency of the human being - the wish to return to the intra-uterine and early infancy state in which oral needs were perfectly satisfied.

Lacan first of all questions whether intra-uterine life is any more completely gratifying for the child than it is for the mother who is carrying it. He goes on to propose that this conception of the bliss of intra-uterine life is a neurotic myth that has been taken up by psychoanalysts as a scientific theory. Of course such a theory is repeatedly verified in experience, precisely because analysts work with neurotics who remain captives of this myth. Lacan's refutation of it, in a case reported by Pearl King, is well known to those who are gathered here.

In the present instance, Jones' 'contribution to political psychology' appears to be verified for the same reason. The concept of an imaginary situation in which all needs would be satisfied, best articulated perhaps in some of Pearse's work,¹³ is based on a fundamental confusion between the dimensions of demand and desire. The ethics of psychoanalysis requires that analysts find a way of leading political groups, no less than individual clients, to the realisation that human subjectivity thrives not on a foundation of gratification but of lack.

The influence of the maternal complex on the words and deeds of Irish nationalists is unquestionable, but that does not justify them, any more than the neurotic's myth of maternal deprivation is enough to justify his or her complaints.

The primacy of metaphor

The core of Jones' error, for Lacan, lies in the way he formulates his notion of the concrete, primary ideas that are thought to be the motive force for all our mental life. These ideas are certainly primary but the most concrete thing about the self, blood relatives, life, love and death is precisely their signifying context. It is not their primitive affective nature that gives them their power but rather their structure as the most fundamental linguistic operations that human beings are called on to perform. Metaphor, not feeling, is what lays out the lines of destiny for peoples and as well as individuals.

¹³ C. Gallagher. *Tir Gan Teanga, Tir Gan Anam: An Irish Stew* in *The Letter*, Summer 1994, pp. 1-16.

This is a notion which Lacan sees as guiding Jones in his work on symbolism, despite his explicit rejection of it:

... if there is any truth at all in psychoanalysis, or, indeed, in any genetic psychology, then the primordial complexes displayed in symbolism must be the permanent sources of mental life and the very reverse of mere figures of speech.¹⁴

In other words, Jones thinks that it is the signified rather than the signifier that is primordial, and, for him, this signified becomes more insubstantial the more it becomes a figure of speech.¹⁵ The materiality of language and the very real knots within which it can bind subjective functions was hidden for him because of his focus on affects which he, against Freud, insisted formed part of the unconscious.

This is at the basis of the distinction that he draws throughout his article between true symbolism and metaphor. True symbolism refers back to concrete affect-laden ideas. Metaphor is a mere figure of speech that he assimilates to analogy and simile. The metaphorical sense of a word is contrasted with its literal one as, for example, when we evoke the depths of the sea in speaking about the depths of despair. Here, there is no necessary reference to repressed primary ideas. The wedding ring may be a metaphor for the abstract idea of marriage but is a symbol of the female genitals.

The distinction can be further illustrated by Jones' insistence that symbolism goes in one direction only - from the conscious symbol to the repressed primary idea. '... A church tower in a dream ... symbolises the phallus, but a phallus in a dream is never a symbol of a church tower'.¹⁶

To this example Lacan retorts with an ironic dream, invented by Jean Cocteau, in which the image of a black man sexually assaulting the dreamer is to be interpreted as a reminder that she left her umbrella behind on her last visit to the analyst.

¹⁴ E. Jones (1916). op.cit, p. 167.

¹⁵ J. Lacan (1959). op.cit., p. 705.

¹⁶ E. Jones (1916). op.cit, p. 157.

Psychoanalytic symbolism is to be understood in terms of the metaphorical substitution of one signifier for another rather than as a regression to a concrete idea. But this notion of metaphor was not available to Jones, since it was only the work of Roman Jakobson and Lacan in the 1950s which finally resolved the confusion of the notion which had dogged rhetoricians throughout the ages.

So that Ireland may well be a symbol for mother. But mother is not a primary given, but rather a notion based on kinship relations, relations which have been eternally ordered around the metaphor of the Name of the Father. It is this latter metaphor which appears to be so singularly lacking in the nationalist discourse which we have been discussing and which accounts for the pervasiveness in it of maternal imagery.

The heroes of Ireland are not father figures - where do we find an Irish Moses? - but rather sons and brothers who have been willing to lay down their lives to defend the honour of their mother.

A corrective to this point of view and a stimulus to finding a new way of talking about Ireland and Irishness, comes in another text published the same year as Jones' *Theory of Symbolism*. In the final sections of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce struggles against the seductive appeal of religion and nationalism, as proposed to him by his closest friends, to conclude with an 'I will not serve'. An 'I will not serve' with which he also steels himself against the prayers of his mother who wanted him to perform his Easter duties. Demands, appeals that he felt would stifle the soul that he was trying to allow to come to birth in him.

When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight... I shall try to fly by those nets.¹⁷

Conclusion

Hermeneutics and psychology are the nets that Lacan, in his seminar on *The Object of Psychoanalysis*, sees as threatening to ensnare the soul of the

J. Joyce. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). London, Paladin, 1988.

analyst and to divert him or her from the primary responsibility to language without which analysis is nothing. Their influence, in our day, in providing a framework of explanations for public or private human events is subtle and all pervasive. But their radical incapacity to articulate a true notion of human subjectivity only accentuates the discontents of our society and makes the task of deepening our knowledge of the object and ethics of psychoanalysis all the more urgent and serious.

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