NETS TO KNOTS:
THE ODYSSEY TO A BEYOND OF BARBARISM

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Bhi se ar intinn agamfdilte a chuir romhaimh as Gaeilge...

I was thinking of welcoming you in Irish but I was persuaded that the translation service already had enough to cope with, so I will get straight to the paper I have prepared for you.

The title of our symposium and Jacques Lacan's own remarks about how fateful had been his meeting as a young man with James Joyce might lead you to expect that Joyce had been one of his main interlocutors throughout his long career as a teacher and writer, especially as they both lived in Paris for nearly twenty years between 1920 and 1940.

I will leave it to the Joyce specialists to explore whether his torment over his daughter's schizophrenia ever made him aware of the existence of the brilliant young psychiatrist, consulted by Picasso among others, whose earliest publications included a revolutionary thesis on paranoia and a study on 'inspired writings'. But the expectation of a substantial Joyce influence on Lacan is strengthened by the fact that few analysts have given such a central place to the way in which the productions of literary and pictorial artists anticipated psychoanalysis in articulating crucial aspects of human subjectivity. For Lacan, this was not simply a matter of passing references. His extensive commentaries have often radically changed the way in which these artists are seen by specialists and has generated a sub-literature of its own. Let me recall some examples and stress that many of these themes return repeatedly as leitmotifs punctuating his writings and his seminars.

To illustrate the primacy of the Symbolic order he selected Edgar Allen Poe's *The purloined letter;* for the tragedy of desire he chose Shakespeare's *Hamlet;* for the ethics of psychoanalysis it was Sophocles'

Antigone; for the transgenerational reverberations of the transference, Paul Claudel's *Trilogy;* for the contingency of the freedom of the speaking being *The wager* as presented in Pascal's *Pensees;* for the genesis of a male homosexual position, Andre Gides's *Diaries;* and finally for the little o-object Holbein's *Ambassadors* and Velasquez's *Las Meninas.*

But to Joyce, before 1975, there was only a single reference in the seminars and a few allusions in the written work. It was only as he approached the end of his teaching career that he unexpectedly gave over the seminar on *The Sinthome* to a consideration of the way in which the art of Joyce could be seen as anticipating and articulating the new topology of the subject that he was devising with the help of his Borromean knots. Even this was a matter of luck since it grew out of an unlikely invitation from Jacques Aubert to address the fifth international symposium on James Joyce held in the Sorbonne in June 1975.

Here he revealed that in 1921 he had met Joyce at the historic reading of the French translation of *Ulysses* in Adrienne Monnier's bookshop, that this was an encounter that had profoundly influenced his destiny and that he had always carried about with him on his travels not only Joyce's works but also an even greater number of commentaries. Here too he referred to Clive Hart's *Structure and motif in Finnegans Wake* and even the slightest acquaintance with this book - and I am not a Joycean scholar - is enough to suggest why he felt that here indeed was a heaven-sent opportunity to exploit the art of Joyce in order to explore more profoundly the mysteries of the Borromean knot which so many of his listeners were finding impenetrable and irrelevant to their work as analysts (see Figure 1 below).

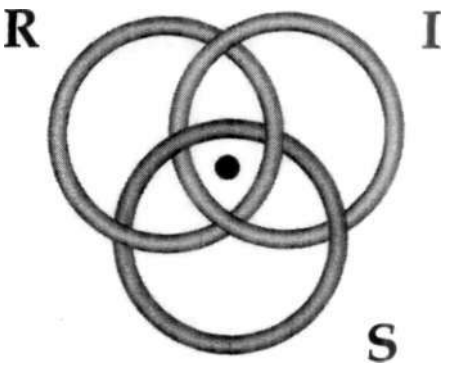

Figure 1

Shortly before receiving the invitation Lacan spotted an obviously baffled member of his audience trying to slip out quietly and called after him: *'You're leaving! Quite right too! I don't know how people put up with what I'm telling you!'*[1] And a few years later in a commentary on the *RSI* seminar Charles Melman recalled how he had told the executive of the *Ecole Freudienne de Paris* around that time that there were really only two members of the School - Pierre Soury and Michel Thome - since they were the only ones who had continued to follow Lacan's teaching once he had embarked on his adventure with the Borromean knot in the early 70's.[2]

So we can conjecture that when Lacan saw the way Clive Hart had presented the *Wake* by highlighting its topological aspects and in particular by introducing complex diagrams, from different sources, that were at least reminiscent of his own drawings of the Borromean knot, he saw how Joyce might play the same role as Claudel and Velasquez had earlier done in illuminating and making more relevant the obscurities of his teaching (see Figures 2-4 below).

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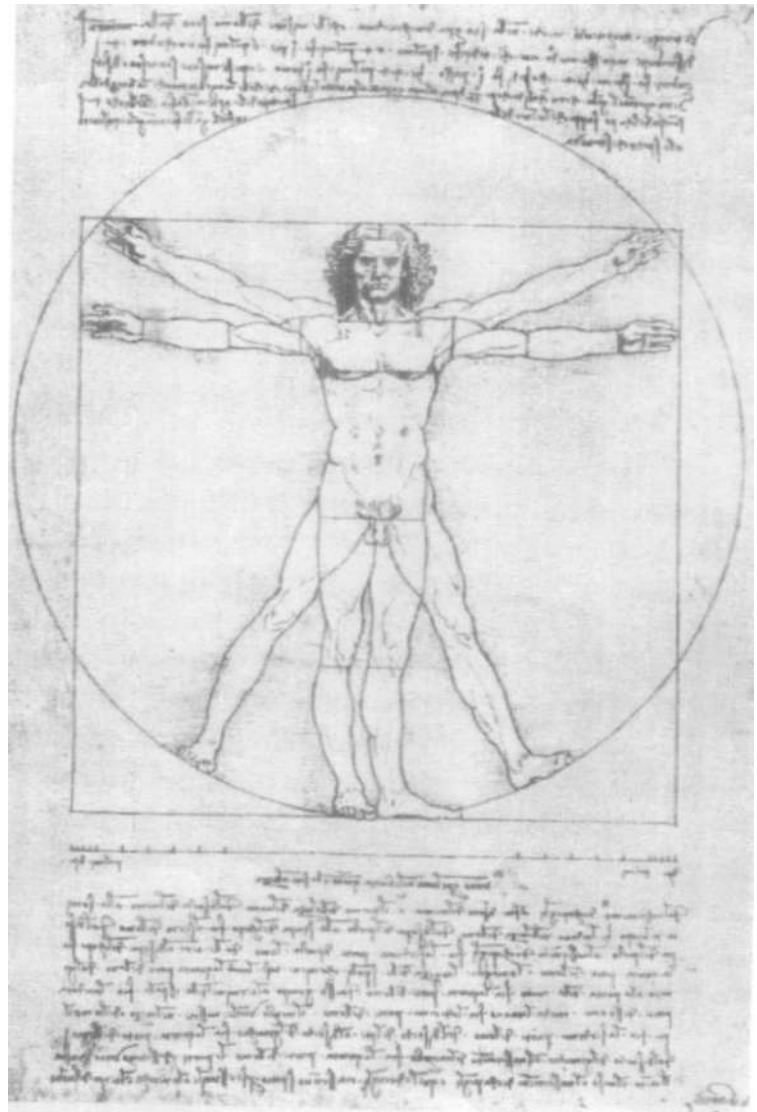
[1] J. Lacan. *Joyce and the Sinthome, Seminar XXIII.* (1975-76). Trans. C. Gallagher, unpublished. Session of 15th April, 1975. pp. 5-6.
[2] C. Melman. *Etude critique du seminaire RSI.* (1981). ALI, Paris, 2002, p. 75.



Leonardo—*Proporzioni del corpo umano*
(*See* Chapter Five, II)

Figure2

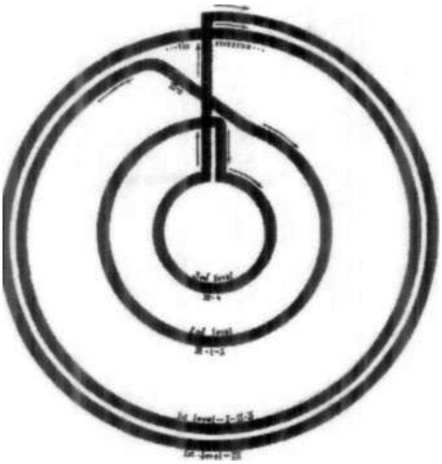


Figure II
'A conansdream of lodascircles'

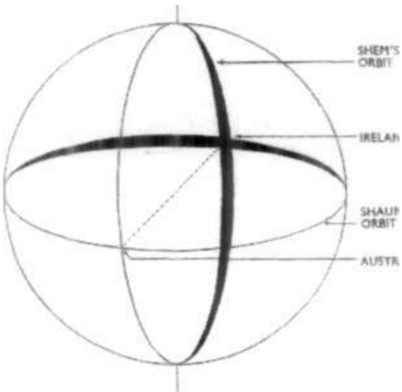


Figure III
'the map of the souls' groupography rose in relief'

Figure 4

For Hart, Joyce was the most spatially aware of writers who from *Dubliners* to *Finnegans Wake* had carefully planned not only the journeys and encounters of his characters but also the physical layout of every page, paragraph, sentence and even word on the basis of elaborate geometrical schemas. It was not for nothing that he compared his work to the intricate illuminations of the *Book of Kelts* and advised a younger colleague that if he wanted to learn how to write he could do nothing better than study how it was put together (see Figure 5 below).

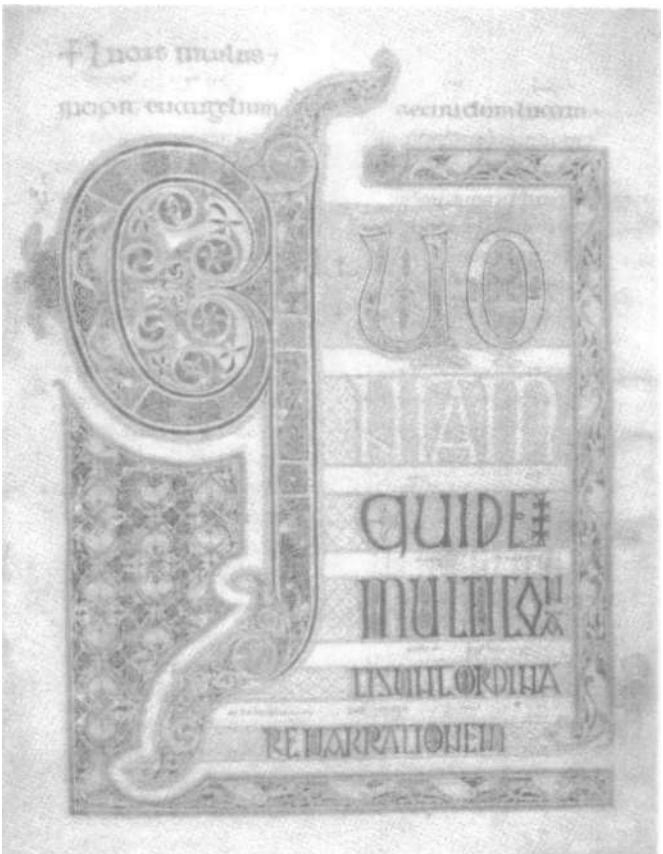


Figure 5

Lacan was particularly struck by Hart's insistence on the place of the circle and the cross as organising structures of Joyce's work, particularly in *Finnegans Wake* (see Figure 6 below).

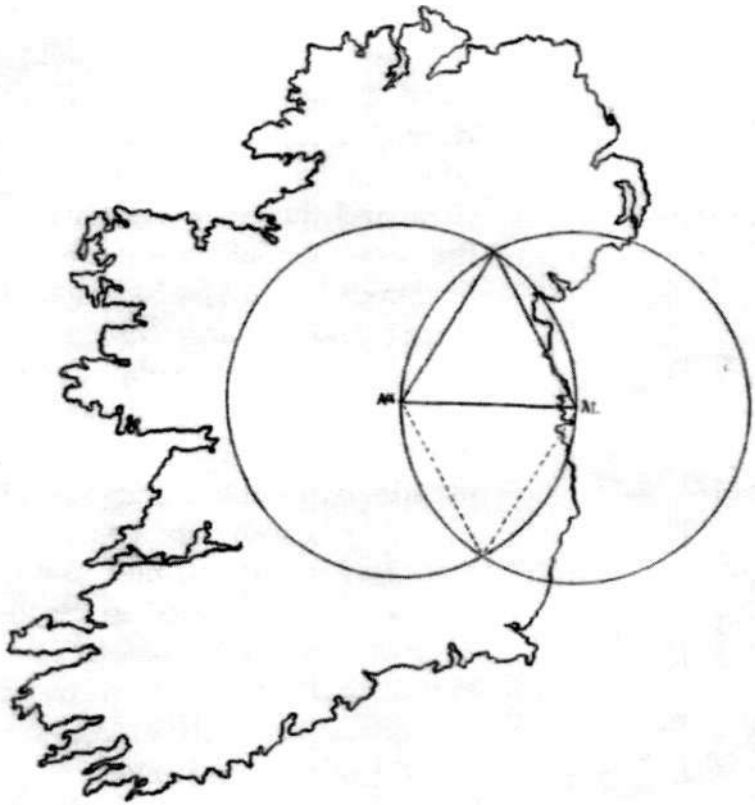


FIGURE IV
'Modder ilond'

Figure 6

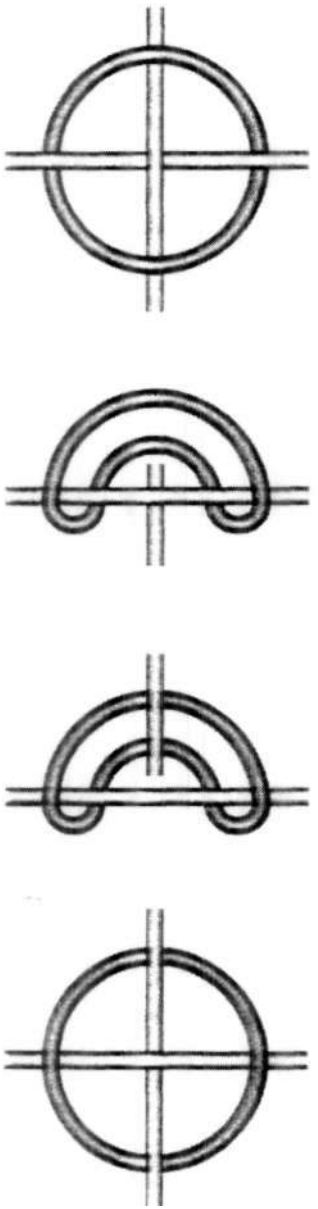


Figure 7

He links it to an interest in theosophy which Joyce shared with Yeats and many of his contemporaries, but Lacan is scathing about Madame Blatavsky and her *Isis unveiled* and even more so about her French counterpart Rene Guenon whom he had sought out about the same time as he met Joyce. The circle and the cross was for Lacan one of the most useful transformations of the Borromean knot and he would argue that Joyce's artistic effort was motivated by a desire to repair the defects in his own subjective structure - which he will illustrate by the knot - rather than by any pseudo-mystical tendencies (see Figure 7).

For Lacan too it was a matter of teaching his students how to write and he felt he had discovered in the Borromean knot a privileged object of study to introduce them to what he called the trinitary nature of the human subject. The word trinitary, borrowed from Charles Sanders Peirce, is used for the first time in the final sessions of *Sinthome* but the notion has a long history in Lacan's work. Indeed the very first paper he gave at the inauguration of the breakaway society he had helped to establish in 1953 introduced into psychoanalytic discourse a new trinity, the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real, to replace the old triads of conscious, preconscious, unconscious and

id, ego and superego around which Freud had organised his thinking. Not that Lacan abandoned Freud's topographies of the mind but in future and right up to the final seminars they would have to find their place in this new framework. Indeed almost his final words of the *Sinthome* are concerned with how the unconscious should be understood in terms of Real, Imaginary and Symbolic. What Lacan welcomed above all in the Borromean knot was that it finally gave him the support - he refused the word 'model[7] - he had been searching for to give a definitive articulation to each of these categories and to the subtlety of how they are interrelated in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis.

Given the different interests of the participants at this meeting it would perhaps be no harm to spend a little time stressing the importance Lacan attached to these registers or functions or categories, and how his evolving understanding of them parallels the development of his thinking. I have already referred to the seminar entitled *RSI* which immediately preceded *The sinthome.* But in their first presentation the order of the letters was SIR and this different order summarises in a sense the way in which Lacan's thinking was transformed from emphasising the primacy of the Symbolic order in the 1950's to his major preoccupation with the Real - and psychosis - in the last decade of his life. It may be worth mentioning in passing that Lacan credits R. M. Adams, a commentator he admired, with showing something like a presentiment of the distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic in his *Surface and symbol: the consistency of James Joyce's Ulysses.*

So what did he mean by these terms and why did he think it necessary to introduce them? The most straightforward response is that Lacan felt that the Freudian triads lent themselves to what he considered to be the major deviation and degradation of theory and practice among psychoanalysts - the stress on the ego and consciousness leading to the notion of the well trained analyst as having developed the superior ego strengths and heightened awareness necessary to 'emotionally re-educate' the inadequate people he treated.

In the first phase of his own psychoanalytic work, in particular in his long essay on *The Family,* Lacan had insisted on the crucial place of the Mirror phase in the crystallisation of the ego. Far from being an autonomous entity in direct contact with the external world, it was an imaginary construct which tried to persuade the child of his consistency and integrity over against the fragmentation and incompleteness that he experiences in his body. This narcissistic body image is the core of the category of the Imaginary and while recognising the power of the image in releasing biological effects in the body he always distrusted it as a guide to thought and action. It was only in the final years we are focussing on that Lacan began to recognise that the devalorising of this category had gone too far and the intertwining of the Borromean knot had helped him to see it as being of equal value in the subjective structure as the two other registers.

There is no doubt that the Lacan most of us have first come to, and most learned from, is the one who highlighted the primacy of the Symbolic order with the Name-of-the-Father as its centrepiece and linchpin. Several years ago Mary Darby and myself tried to show how the distorted body image so characteristic of anorectics could be understood in terms of the skewed position they had taken up in the Symbolic world constituted primarily by their family structure. This is the Lacan who transformed the talking cure by introducing into it the discoveries of the linguists and the anthropologists - de Saussure, Jakobson, and Levi-Strauss. Small wonder then that his masterful commentaries on literary texts taught us to focus above all not on the shifting sands of the signified affect but on the objectivity of the articulations of the signifier. But by the time he came to Joyce the Borromean knot had modified this approach and the new order of RSI showed the increasing role the category of the Real had begun to assume.

The Symbolic and the Imaginary can be intuitively grasped but the Real - precisely because it is defined as what can be neither imagined nor understood - is a different matter. By it Lacan does not mean reality, which for him is generated by a combination of all three functions and is

in fact designed to screen us from the Real in our everyday lives. It is a commonplace for Lacanians to think of the experience of the psychotic as one that plunges him into an unmediated confrontation with the Real and one of the most important aspects of Joyce is that he showed how the Real might be approached in a non-psychotic way.

In the question and answer session that followed the 1953 paper Serge Leclaire reproached him: *'You have spoken to us about the Symbolic and the Imaginary. But there is also the Real about which you did not speak.'*[3] Lacan reacts defensively saying that it could be understood as anything that the analysand comes up against - for example the silence of the analyst. But the category remains implicit and defined only negatively until he stumbled on what he has described as his only 'invention' in analysis - the *objet petit a*, which we in Ireland, in an effort at maintaining logical and historical consistency, have translated as the small o-object. The breast, the ass, the voice, the look are what Lacan describes as the objects that cause desire - objects that act directly on the subject without the mediation of language or image, and are characterised by their relationship to orifices, or better holes, that enclose nothings in the body. We suck, we shit, we hear, we look, actively and passively and, in a way that is made blindingly obvious in pathology, these are the activities around which we structure our lives. The hole is a constitutive locus even though it does not exist. The phobic object, the fetishistic object can be understood as manifestations of the hole, of the nothing, in our experience. Jacques Aubert in his paper to the *Sinthome* seminar showed how holes structured Joyce's writing in *Ulysses* - the suicide of Bloom's father, the abandonment of his name, the death of little Rudy, the rejection of his thoughts about Molly's infidelity. But clinicians too see how experience can be organised around holes, and, if we can return to our anorectics, one of Lacan's most illuminating insights is that rather than not eating, they literally eat nothing.

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[3] J. Lacan. *'Le symbolique, l'imaginaire, et le reel'*. In *Des noms-du-pere*. (1953). Ed. J.-A. Miller. Seuil, Paris, 2005. p. 53.

One of the things that Lacan most appreciated in the Borromean knot was that it offered a new type of geometry, a new *mos geometricus,* one which allowed him to situate his basic concepts entirely in the holes, in the interstices, in the gaps set up by the intertwining of his rings of string. All knots define a point, a point which is a hole. The defining feature of the Borromean knot is that in its basic form it consists of three 'rings[7] linked in such a way that if one is cut or removed the two others fall apart. This already introduces something that Lacan had not sufficiently stressed about the interdependence of R, S and I in the structure of the subject. When they hold together the three interlocking rings demonstrate the interaction of the three categories and can highlight in a completely new way how the hole where the three rings overlap can serve as a support for the little o-object. If a subject is to assume his desire and his sexed identity, his history and his own efforts must be activated to ensure that in one way or other this object is held in place. For Lacan, Joyce's family history and his father's role in particular contributed to a flaw in his subjective structure that he managed to supply for only by becoming the artist he made himself into.

But before focusing on the applications of the Borromean knot to Joyce it might be instructive to look at the curious way in which Lacan discovered it and how it came to inaugurate the final phase of his teaching.

In 1972, at the beginning of a session where Roman Jakobson had been unable to give his planned lecture, Lacan wrote on the board this enigmatic sentence:

'I ask you
To refuse
What I am offering you... because: it's not that.'
(Je te demande/de me refuser/ ce queje t'offre / parce que: c'est pas ga.y

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[4] J. Lacan. ...*Ou pire. Seminar IXX.* (1971-72). Trans. C. Gallagher, unpublished. Session of 9th February, 1972. p. Iff.

I do not know how that formulation emerged but Lacan relates it to Wittgenstein's well-known proposition:

> *... that I condense,* he says, *as, what one cannot say, well then, let us not talk about it... It is very precisely, it seems to me, what one cannot speak about that is at stake in what I designate by 'it's not that', which just by itself justifies a demand such as 'to refuse what I am offering you'...if there is something that is tangible to everybody, it is indeed this 'it's not that'. We are confronted with it at every instant of our existence.*[5]

This is particularly true of the psychoanalytic situation in which the analysand is constantly begging the psychoanalyst not to understand too quickly, not to approve of his formulations since this would lead to a foreclosing of any possibility of articulating his desire. Lacan tries various tetrahedral diagrams to show his listeners how they might understand this. But then came the revelation by a young lady mathematician, at a dinner the previous evening, of the extraordinary properties of the knot that constituted the coat of arms of the Borromean family. He saw in a flash that the verbs in his sentence are linked like the rings of this Borromean knot, in that they cannot hold up in two's, and that this is the foundation, the root, of what is involved in the little o-object. Demand, refusal and offer, he argues, only take on their meaning each from the other. If you take out refusal, what could the offer of a demand mean? It is of the nature of an offer that if you remove the demand, to refuse no longer means anything. So the verbs are closed flexible circles in which the presence of the third establishes a relation between the other two. You can read Lacan's account of all this in *...ou pire.*[6]

Jean-Michel Vappereau, a co-worker of Soury and Thome, has made the point that Lacan's career can be understood in terms of the geometry, the *mos geometricus,* that supported his thinking at different

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[5] ibid.
[6] J. Lacan. op.cit. (1971-72).

phases of his work. So that in the 1950's he used traditional Euclidean surfaces to support his drawings - *schema L, schema R* and even *the graph of desire.* But with the invention of the o-object and throughout the 60's there emerged a new type of geometry, topology, which is defined by its non-metrical properties and is represented by the *Moebius strip,* the *torus,* the *Klein bottle,* and the *cross cap.* These enabled him to develop in a new way his approach to the paintings of Holbein and Velasquez and to up-date the projective geometry of Desargues - all with the aim of further clarifying the object of psychoanalysis. But with his discovery of the Borromean knot he became obsessed with knot theory as the support he had been looking for to ground the post-Oedipal, post-Freudian psychoanalysis on which he had embarked. Some theorists see knots as a variant of topology but Lacan and his interlocutors saw it as a different branch of mathematics, adumbrated in the writings of some nineteenth century mathematicians but still in its infancy in the 1970's when Lacan tried to exploit it for his ends.

It is with the support of this inchoate knot theory that he will use his psychoanalytic concepts to tackle Joyce and in fact a major disappointment to the literary reader is that it is knots rather than Joyce that take centre stage in most sessions. Joyce is only there because Lacan feels he writes in a Borromean way and unlike his line-by-line commentaries on the texts of Poe, Sophocles, Shakespeare and others, it is only in the final session of the *Sinthome* that he analyses a Joycean text in any detail.

The passage in the *Portrait* which attracted his attention appears in the second chapter of the novel when, after being cast out of the leafy splendour of suburban Dublin and Clongowes Wood College, Joyce's alter ego Stephen Dedalus finds himself plunged into what he describes as *'an undivined and squalid way of life'* in the back streets of the inner city. After two years of misery with the Christian Brothers, his father's conniving ensures that he is once again in an upper-class Jesuit school and in his first term in Belvedere he had, though still an early adolescent, begun to win a name as an arbiter of literary taste.

One evening, near Jones' Road - which significantly runs from the major Catholic seminary of Clonliffe, past the headquarters of the Gaelic Athletic Association - he is challenged by three schoolmates about his choice of Byron as the greatest English poet. Byron is a heretic, he must retract. Joyce stubbornly refuses:

> *It was the signal for their onset. Nash pMoned his arms behind while Boland seized a long cabbage stump which was lying in the gutter. Struggling and kicking under the cuts of the cane and the blows of the knotty stump Stephen was borne back against a barbed wire fence...*
>
> *At last after a fury of plunges he wrenched himself free as his tormentors set off towards Jones' Road, laughing and jeering at him, while he, torn and flushed and panting, stumbled after them half blinded with tears, clenching his fists madly and sobbing.*

In the novel Joyce is recalling this episode during a later squabble with school friends:

> *...while the scenes of that malignant episode were still passing sharply and swiftly before his mind he wondered why he bore no malice now to those who had tormented him. He had not forgotten a whit of their cowardice and cruelty but the memory of it called forth no anger from him. All the descriptions of fierce love and hatred which he had met in books had seemed to him therefore unreal. Even that night as he stumbled homewards along Jones' Road he had felt that some power was divesting him of that suddenwoven anger, as easily as a fruit is divested of its soft ripe peel.*[7]

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[7] J. Joyce. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* (1916). Collins/Paladin, London, 1988. pp. 83-84.

What this incident suggests to Lacan is that Joyce is relating to his own body as something foreign, a form of letting drop the relationship to the body that is very suspect for an analyst - or a psychiatrist. If the body image, as core of'the function of the Imaginary, is no longer involved, it is clear that the RSI knot has come undone. In a sense Joyce is left with two of the three registers, the Symbolic and the Real, and these cannot support the o-object, the central constitutive hole, once the third has been removed. Hence Lacan's question: Was Joyce mad?

His answer is that he was saved from madness by his art. In terms of knots, the absence of the Imaginary ring left him with what the mathematicians call a null knot - a simple ring. This can be manipulated, as can be easily seen in practice, in order to produce what looks like a trefoil knot, but is not one because at a point where the line should have passed beneath another line it in fact passes above, leaving the pseudo-knot without what Lacan had called many years before a *point de capiton* around which the Name of the Father could be established (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

But Joyce, once again by his art, by having achieved an ability to do anything he wanted with language, had succeeded in making his own name supply for the missing Name of the Father, by developing what Lacan describes as a *sinthome,* not a symptomatic metaphor for a repressed

truth, but something that responds to a lack in the power of the Other to perform the act of nomination.[8]

And finally what of the odyssey of these two men to a beyond of barbarism? Barbarism, the concise Oxford English Dictionary tells us is a rude or ignorant mixing of foreign or vulgar expressions into talk or writing, and there is no doubt that on this score many readers have considered both Joyce and Lacan to be barbaric. But Joyce's apparent lack of art or taste has been amply justified as a demonstration of a mastery of language unrivalled in his time, and Lacan's tortured syntax and baffling neologisms also yield, with perseverance and experience, to the realisation that he has followed Freud in producing an unparalleled articulation of human experience. And as an antidote for barbarity? Lacan's delineation of the analytic discourse, highlighted the nature of the other discourses that have from all time determined the social bonds between speaking beings - that of the master/capitalist, the university and the hysteric all of which lead to the violence Leopold Bloom rejected:

> *Force, hatred, history, all that. That's not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it's the very opposite of that that is really life.*[9]

These discourses are the nets that Stephen told Davin he would fly by as they strove to prevent the emergence of anything that would disturb the general good and their *'lucrative patterns of frustration'*. They find an apt image in the philosophy based on the all inclusive sphere that Lacan illustrates by the circle of Popillius, the Roman envoy who drew his line in the sand around Antiochus Epiphanes, warning him, as Lacan puts it: *'You will not get out of there because I have made a ring around you, you will not get out of there before promising me something or other.'*[10]

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[8] D. Simonney. *'he sinthome'*. In M. Safouan. *Lacaniana* 2, Fayard, Paris, 2005. pp. 358, 369.
[9] J. Joyce. *Ulysses*. (1922). Penguin, London, 2000. p. 432.
[10] J. Lacan. op.cit. (1975-76). Session of 9th March, 1976. p. 6.

Joyce, unlike Yeats, would never have to lie awake wondering whether some play of his had sent out those comrades - Qancy, Kettle, Sheehy-Skeffington - that the English, and others, shot. As for Lacan with all his defiance of convention and good sense, he has left a legacy, after Freud, that has ensured that all over the world those who lead the ugly life of **the rejected** *'are somehow cheered in their bones'* and have found in the contingency of love a way of being reconciled to their being for death.

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