

A LETTER, A LITTER.

Christiaan Vereecken.

'There was much debate in Joyce's literary circle about these two words' writes Lacan in 'The seminar on the purloined letter' (Écrits), referring to Our exagmination round his factification for incamination of work in progress. The little book dating from 1929 is a collection of 12 articles by different authors (like the 12 apostles) including the young Samuel Beckett. It was first published by Adrienne Monnier (Shakespeare and company) and is now available in Faber and Faber.

At the end of the booklet there are two 'letters of protest'; the last bears the title 'A litter to Mr Joyce' and is signed 'Vladimir Dixon'. It is not difficult to see that the author is Joyce himself writing about the 'work in progress' with a number of jokes in the style of Finnegans wake. Proper names come in the place of common names; 'being laid up' for instance becomes 'being Leyde up'; 'influenza', 'in flew Enza' (through the window of course); 'average mentality', 'Averroege men's tality'; 'some aspect which is unclear', 'some an pecked which is uncle Lear'.

There are interferences between English and French: 'to ridiculize' becomes 'to ridicul' (de sac!); 'mister', 'mysterre'; in the place of 'work' we find the French word *travail*. 'Coverlyette' an imaginary trade name for blankets includes the English 'to By' and also the sound of the French word for 'blanket', *couverture*, and the French word *layette*. One also finds a German word for 'convinced': *Überzeugt*.

There are also puns on Joyce's name: 'Germ's choice' and 'Shame's voice', and naturally portemanteau words; 'signicophant' includes 'significant' and 'sycophant', a perfect characterization of the supposed author of the 'litter'. Perhaps the most difficult to understand is the word for 'understand': 'onthorstand' (perhaps a play on 'author').

The sense of the text is obvious, but what do the neologisms mean? Many of them are there for the mere pleasure in the fun; but there are also allusions and cultural references: the most clear is 'uncle Lear', a homage to the father of nonsense poetry. But what to think about 'Leyde' or 'Averroes'? We may refer to the hemispheres of Leyde, Lucas of Leyde, the university of Leyde. We may remark that the Dutch name of the city 'Leiden' sounds like the verb *lijden*, to suffer in Dutch. Ellmann says that Joyce, during a stay in Ostend, had a number of Flemish lessons.

We can go on indefinitely with such considerations. This is the trap for the academics that Joyce has deliberately worked out; and we now find the theorisation of this practice in the Derridian idea of infinite reading.

Concerning the psychoanalytic aspects of the work, one might think that the puns are motivated by the author's unconscious.

We might think for instance that 'Enza' is an affectionate name for a certain lady Mackenzie, and search for such a being in the biography of the writer. But Lacan asserts that Joyce in Finnegans wake 'est *désabonné à l'inconscient*' (this literally means that he 'cancels his subscription to the unconscious'). He also says that Joyce's work shows that he reached the furthest that one could hope to get from an analysis at its very end.

This may appear very strange and even *unheimlich* to those who have got into the bad habit of classifying Joyce as psychotic; he certainly had all the necessary qualities to become a psychotic, all, that is, except his famous 'symptom'.

'Cancelling one's subscription to the unconscious' may be an answer to the danger inherent in the end of an analysis, in other words an undivided attention paid to the unconscious, attention that leads to ever new forms of stupidity.

But we are now dealing with another period in Lacan's teaching, when he wrote Lituraterre. The word *Lituraterre* which is a spoonerism on *littérature*, is based on the pun letter/litter.

Litura in latin means 'erasure' or 'blotch'.

A manuscript is 'liturarius' when full of such things, when the letter becomes a litter. 'Liturarius' is the letter of HCE that the hen Biddie Doran discovers on a dunghill, in chapter five of *Finnegans wake*. This chapter includes an implicit theory of reading. We find expressions like 'Master Kong's doctrine of the meang'. 'Meang' is a portemanteau word which includes the Chinese word 'ming' and 'meaning' (master Kong is Confucius). But this is not a real reference to Chinese philosophy, but a play with sounds. A theory of reading is affirmed in the famous sentence 'The quad gossellers may own a Targoum but any of the zingari shooleerim may pick a peck of kindlings yet from the sacks of Auld Hensyne'.

The expression 'zingari shooleerim' may cause some difficulty. The final 'im' is the sign of plurality in Hebrew; *zingari* means gypsies in Italian. A Targoum is a translation in Aramaic of a part of the Bible.

'Shoole' (and not 'school') is in assonance with the yiddish 'schule' (synagogue). This is an opposition between the translation as a whole, and picking the sense in terms focusing on isolated words.

Auld Hensyne evokes the New Year song, but 'Hensyne' includes 'hen' and 'enseign', which leads to the French 'enseignement' (teaching, philosophy). The picking of the hen is a metaphor for the correct way to read Joyce; you have to read the text letter by letter, before deciding what it means.