

**Art and Anxiety, or:
Lacan with Joyce**

Professor Ruth Ronen

The advent of modernism has put aesthetics in a predicament since ways of reconciling the interests of an aesthetic investigation with the anti-aesthetic face of contemporary art are far from obvious. Modernism, so it seems, has conflated everything: beauty, ugliness, form, formlessness, pleasure, displeasure, satisfaction, repulsion, to the point of undermining the usefulness of these concepts in delineating the nature of aesthetic experience. When the correlation assumed between the aesthetic domain and the affect of pleasure is confronted with art whose affect cannot be easily classified, this raises an obvious difficulty. In the attempt to secure the place of aesthetics as a distinguished field of thought, many, committed to the interests of aesthetics, attempt to reconstitute a place for displeasure and for negative aesthetic values within the framework of aesthetics, while keeping displeasure as a clearly demarcated category.

It is in reference to this situation in the aesthetic discipline that this paper will address the kind of "aesthetics" constituted through Lacan's references to art in terms of anxiety and through his particular interest in James Joyce's literary writing. Joycean art is clearly one that questions the validity of traditionally solid aesthetic values such as meaningfulness and pleasure and as such posits a challenge before any aesthetics. Yet, rather than weighing the relative effectiveness of Lacanian psychoanalysis, as opposed to philosophical aesthetics, in dealing with modernist instances of art of the kind Joyce presents, this paper will follow a different route. With the aim of consolidating an aesthetics that goes beyond the correlation of the aesthetic experience with pleasure and its related affects, I intend to formulate a route that starts from the foundations of Kant's distinction between pleasure and displeasure, passes through the anxiety that since Freud's "The Uncanny" has dominated the psychoanalytic approach to art as an alternative to philosophical aesthetics, to the affect of Joyce's writing, diagnosed

143

by Lacan as being that of unreadability. This line of argumentation, will open the possibility of naturally investing psychoanalytic aesthetics in the history of the aesthetic discipline with its philosophical dilemmas, without reducing psychoanalysis to "a way of reading" philosophical texts. As mentioned above, this investigation can lead to the possibility of an aesthetics that is beyond the pleasure principle, a possibility that, maybe, somewhat counter to our intuition, is already opened with Kant, and is concluded, not with Freud and Lacan's work on 'anxiety', but with the Lacanian analysis of the case of Joyce in one of Lacan's last seminars.¹

a. Anxiety: *between desire and jouissance of the Other*:

My point of departure for this pursuit is Lacan's qualification of anxiety in *Seminar X* (1962-3) as signaling the distance between desire and *jouissance*, between the subject and *das Ding*. That is, anxiety according to Lacan arises in-between a threatening encounter with what is prior to signification (*jouissance, das Ding*), and signification itself (where the subject

of desire is represented by a signifier). Following this point of departure, anxiety as an aesthetic affect, can be located between judgment (of something as pleasurable or displeasurable, beautiful or ugly, meaningful or nonsensical) and what is prior to any judgment and to signification. In enquiring what constitutes an aesthetic affect in view of this way of locating anxiety, I will propose to examine the route from Kant to Joyce through Lacanian anxiety in terms of the relation of each of these affects to the pleasure principle (which supports the distinction between pleasure and displeasure) or to what is beyond the pleasure principle (and transcends the distinction between pleasure and displeasure). And further, by looking at the kind of support each of these affects receives from the *order of the image* (or signifier), always coming from the Other but in which the subject seeks its own identity. Pleasure for Kant, anxiety for Freud and Lacan, and Joyce's particular symptom of writing (for which Lacan invents the notion of "the *sinthome*"²), each is located differently in relation to the pleasure principle and in relation to the image which determines the subject in the field of sight of the Other.

144

What does *affect* mean in the present context? In the beginning of Lacan's seminar on anxiety, anxiety is claimed to be *an affect, not of the order of the signifier*. While the signifier stands for a differential dialectic between S1 (that represents a subject) and S2 (that stands for all other signifiers that come from the Other), anxiety is produced, in a *non-dialectizable* manner, by the Other as absolute. In other words, the subject in the field of the Other is represented by a signifier, one from among the treasury of all signifiers, and as such the subject is dialectically tied to this signifier, that while representing the subject is also unable to represent the subject's real particularity. Anxiety as affect, in opposition to that, is a non-signifier which means that the subject fails to see himself represented/registered in the Other. Anxiety confines the subject to a domain outside any meaning-producing dialectic. As a signal and not a signifier, anxiety is imposed on the subject from the realm of *das Ding*, from the realm which is beyond the ability of attributing sense to the Other, and as such, as a *primordial affect*, anxiety does not deceive.

These are Lacan's words regarding anxiety and he refers to the non-deceptive nature of anxiety in order to indicate that anxiety as affect is not a product of interpretation; it is rather imposed on the subject by what cannot be attributed sense. Roberto Harari, one of Lacan's interpreters, describes this absolute domain of an Other that cannot be made sense of, a domain imposed on the subject through anxiety, in the following terms: the desire of the Other is what turns back, ungovernable, towards the subject, thus arousing anxiety. A dimension of devouring is thus manifested and lurks behind anxiety.³ This observation that *anxiety is not a signifier but a signal*⁴ (or affect), can be illuminated with an example Lacan provides of the praying mantis, a voracious insect, often devoured by its female after mating: "since I did not know what kind of mask I was wearing you can easily imagine that I had some reason not to be reassured, in the case where by chance this mask would not have been unsuitable for drawing my partner into some error about my identity, the thing being well underlined by the fact that I had added that in the enigmatic mirror of the ocular globe of the insect I did not see my own image." The

145

subject masked as a praying mantis, but unable to see his own image, is affected by anxiety not because of his desire dialectically linked with the desire of whatever stands in front (as

represented by the doubt that can be phrased as: "what is it in me that can make the Other desire me?"), but because wholly given to the *unknown desire of the Other* threatening to devour the subject. Anxiety emerges in the subject to mark the closing distance between the subject (as image) and the unknown, yet unequivocal desire of the Other, a desire that is prior to any judgment, as the subject cannot tell what would count as "an error of identity" for the Other, be it male or female. The subject, masked as insect, also cannot control what is to come by warding it off as evil or inconsiderate. Such complaints would clearly be irrelevant.

Yet in front of the absolute Other, anxiety does not only signal a threat, but it also guarantees that the subject, masked in the image of an insect, is safely distanced from absolute Otherness. The protective dimension in the image has to do with the particularity of the subject behind the mask, with that something that falls from the subject in anxiety, and makes the total reduction of the subject to the locus of the Other impossible. In anxiety, what negotiates the irreducible real of the absolute devouring Other with the image masking the subject is not an object in reality, but something, an object that has fallen off the subject. Anxiety as affect hence guarantees the distance between the Other as absolute and the image of the ego (formulated in questions such as "who am I", "what is my identity"?) by producing the *objet a*. It is for this reason that Lacan describes anxiety as "not without an object": its object being the *objet a*, that peculiar object guaranteeing that the subject is not annihilated by the devouring Other.

If anxiety as affect refers to the primary encounter of the subject with *das Ding*, with the unknown and unknowable enjoyment of the Other, it may appear that anxiety is indeed beyond the pleasure principle. Yet anxiety is synchronically tied not only with *das Ding* but also with the subject of desire, that is, with the subject aiming to sustain the desire of the Other, aiming to know what the Other wants, to articulate the lack in the Other into meaningful signs. Anxiety, as will be shown in

more detail below, being given to binaries such as love/hate, pleasure/displeasure, is hence still tied with the pleasure principle, a possibility suggested by Freud himself (see p.149 below). Anxiety is hence what signals the distance between what is given to judgment (to the law of the signifier as binary) and what is beyond any judgment (given to the Other as absolute).

b. *Pleasure and displeasure in Kant:*

If anxiety as a primordial affect is also related to the pleasure principle, how should we approach Kantian pleasure on the one hand and the unreadability of Joyce on the other hand? In what sense are these *affects*? First, let us look at Kant's judgment of taste which accounts for the binary distinction between pleasure and displeasure, a distinction more complex than may seem. To clarify the far-reaching implications of Kant's idea of aesthetic pleasure, I will address one interpretive difficulty raised in commentaries on Kant's third Critique.⁵ In Kant's method displeasure turns out to function as more than the Other of aesthetic pleasure, that is, as structurally integrated into Kant's conception of the aesthetic domain, a fact often overlooked, for obvious reasons, by the practitioners of the aesthetic field.⁶ The very idea that displeasure has a necessary place within the structure of aesthetic experience, already suggests that traditional aesthetic models may go beyond the dogmatic correlation of the aesthetic with pleasure.

Section §9 in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is notorious for its enigmatic formulations and the wide scope of commentaries given to it. This is the kernel of the difficulty involved: "Now

this merely subjective (aesthetic) judging of the object, or of the presentation by which it is given, precedes the pleasure in the object and is the basis of this pleasure, a pleasure in the harmony of the cognitive powers." Beyond the various proposals made by commentators for unpacking this passage, it is agreed that Kant here refers to two separate moments of pleasure in the act of aesthetic judgment, one associated with the presentation given to the free play of the faculties, the other linked to the result of the harmony between these faculties. As passage §9 indicates, pleasure is what accompanies a given presentation restricted by no determinate concept, that is, given

147

to the free play of the faculties of imagination and understanding, and is also what accompanies the specific case when this free play concludes in a state of cognitive harmony. To use the words of Rodolphe Gasché in his reading of this passage, "the pleasure to be predicated follows the pleasure felt," that is, the fact that we enjoy looking at something is to be differentiated from judging this enjoyment to be the outcome of an encounter with a beautiful object. The pleasure felt cannot serve as criterion for knowing the source of this pleasure; the pleasure felt rather marks the distance between the feeling of pleasure and the cognitive state that qualifies this pleasure as aesthetic. The distinction between the pleasure that precedes judging and serves as its condition and the pleasure that follows the state of harmony, is a distinction crucial to our understanding the nature of judgments of taste, their being concerned with the *a priori* rather than the empirical.⁷

Aesthetic pleasure is distinguished then from the feeling of pleasure, the feeling of pleasure being prior to the judgment of taste itself. In order to have aesthetic pleasure, pleasure should function as the retrospective cause of aesthetic judgments' communicable nature, of their universality. Commentators on Kant propose different solutions for this distinction *between pleasure and aesthetic pleasure*, yet they share the idea that **aesthetic pleasure is a consequent moment in the act of judgment**, even though a necessary moment if the object is to be taken as having beauty. Even in front of a beautiful image, the pleasure felt is indicative of nothing regarding the object but of the very activity of the senses. We need to locate pleasure as retroactively attributable to the harmony of the faculties in order to experience pleasure as aesthetic. A judgment of taste, as Gasché emphasizes, is a matter of transcendentalism rather than of empirical facts and the location of pleasure is the fundamental condition for sustaining a notion of *aesthetic* experience.

Pleasure being always the same, and the subject not being the last authority on the nature of the pleasure involved, touch on the need to establish the logical limit of pleasure. Aesthetic pleasure is the conclusion of a cognitive process in which the subject ascertains the aesthetic nature of his pleasure.

148

Pleasure, to be considered aesthetic, has to be indicative of what the cognition of the subject reveals, not individually but as a universal demand. The same argument also establishes the place of *displeasure* as a possible conclusion of an aesthetic judgment; pleasure and displeasure are signals of alternative cognitive routes of the judging subject. Note however that neither pleasure nor displeasure can represent a "fit" between a mental state and an object. In the context

of aesthetic experience, "the [cognitive] powers of imagination and understanding that become attuned in a judgment of taste are still free."⁸ While judgments of taste manifest the a priori transcendental condition of every cognition, "what keeps a judgment of taste from becoming a logical judgment is ... the 'without' of 'without interest', 'without concept', 'without purpose'... etc."⁹ A judgment that concerns the beautiful "is not without an object," to use Lacan's expression. It is not without an object because the judgment does not end in a knowledgeable fit with the object, but remains associated with a free play.

Pleasure or displeasure felt are kept at a distance from pleasure and displeasure as aesthetic signifiers relating to two cognitive routes made by the judging subject, one concluding in the judgment of the object as beautiful, the other in its judgment as ugly, revolting, etc. It should also be remembered that a felt displeasure can result in aesthetic pleasure when the case of the sublime is concerned. In the case of the sublime, when confronted with objects of magnitude in nature, imagination fails to find a unity for this manifold, thus causing pain. This, even if temporary, inadequacy of the imagination as a sensible faculty, to comprehend a manifold, can precede any judgment of taste, as a moment of pain intermediary between faculties of the senses and the higher cognitive faculties (that already rely on the determining role to reason and its unifying power beyond the sensible).

In view of this versatile experience prior to aesthetic judgment, and the distance between the pleasure and displeasure felt, and pleasure and displeasure emerging as immanent to aesthetic experience, Kant's distinction between pleasure and displeasure can be re-interpreted. Kant establishes the necessary distance between two moments: a moment of what is

felt prior to judgment (and can be deceptive) and a moment of the judgment of taste, where pleasure and displeasure are non-deceptive because of leaning on the binary law of the Other that distinguishes positive from negative judgments.

"Is this image an image of a beautiful object?" What determines the status of the image/form observed as beautiful, sublime or ugly, is the relation between the image and the possible universality of the pleasure felt as indicated by by a transcendental state of harmony. The judgment of taste is only retroactively linked with the pleasure or displeasure felt prior to judgment. What enables us to link a sense of either to a definite judgment of taste is an Other that supplies the law according to which the subject could know, not the object, but the foundations for recognizing the divisions of the pleasure principle. It is under the law of taste that the pleasure or displeasure felt are divided into positive and negative judgments of taste.

If we return now to Lacan's example of the praying mantis, we can see that the situation here is similar to the one portrayed by Kant surrounding the moment before judgment. The praying mantis is anxious in front of the indeterminate identity of the Other before it. Likewise, the moment prior to aesthetic pleasure or displeasure in Kant is a moment that must be anxiety-provoking for the judging subject not knowing what is before him and having an indeterminate object to guarantee the validity of the judgment. Not knowing what the encounter with the image will entail, indicates a moment prior to judgment, in which *felt pleasure or displeasure are all alike*. 'Am I going to be devoured or courted?' wonders the praying mantis; 'am I going to confront the image of my self-perfection or the lack that splits my image?' asks the subject before the mirror; 'will my reason produce a unity in this manifold my senses fail to grasp?'

doubts the subject engaged in aesthetic judgment. "It is what we always expect when the curtain rises, it is this quickly extinguished brief moment of anxiety, but which is never lacking to the dimension which ensures that we are doing more than coming to settle our backsides into a more or less expensive seat ... And without this, this quickly elided introductory moment of anxiety nothing could even take on the value of what is going to be determined as tragic or as comic..." (*SeminarX*, p.65).

150

Anxiety is hence what emerges retroactively at the moment prior to any judgment of the object as tragic or comic, as beautiful or ugly, as harmonizing or as conflicting. The support of the beautiful image comes from the harmony of cognitive faculties by necessity preceded by a moment of anxiety. Likewise displeasure can be perceived as the signal indicating that the support of the image has failed in producing harmony. In such cases the anxiety persists as aesthetic displeasure.

3. *Joyce le sinthome*

In Kant pleasure/displeasure are both affects (imposed on the subject prior to judgment) *and* signifiers (dividing the subject's judgments into the positive and the negative) and the same holds for anxiety. Lacan's formulations about the art of Joyce appear to stand in opposition to both, since "the writing in question comes from somewhere other than the signifier."¹⁰ Furthermore, anxiety emerges in front of an *image* that encapsulates the desire of the Other in its absoluteness, while Joyce's writing, so claims Lacan, is disengaged from the imaginary. In Joyce, the Borromean knot that ties together the three orders of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, has let the ring of the Imaginary fall out. It is only through his writing that Joyce can fill in for the missing ring to avoid the collapse of the three rings of the knot one onto the other. How can these two observations regarding the art of Joyce mark a shift in the kind of aesthetics his art calls for?

The affect produced by the writing of Joyce has to do with the fact that with Joyce the support of the Imaginary has collapsed. Lacan associates the collapse of this support with what appears to be Joyce's lack of an image of his own body. The image of the body projected onto the mirror is the substantial support of the imaginary ego, and when such an image is missing, the imaginary support of the ego is absent. But in disengaging Joyce's writing from the Imaginary a further effect is produced: since meaning is produced when the Imaginary intersects with the Symbolic, in Joyce's case, meaning as the effect of the Imaginary cutting the Symbolic is thwarted. What is the meaning of this disengagement of writing from the Imaginary? Joyce, rather than counting on forms that are in the

151

Other, on the treasury of forms and images provided by what can be called "literary language" (a language that could have distinguished the meaningful from the nonsensical), constitutes in his writing an Other as absolute, putting himself as the absolute redeemer, the ultimate artist. In other words, the Other, of Joyce's writing is not an Other determining and responsible for the meaningful imaging produced by writing, but rather the Other is replaced in a way by Joyce himself. Thus while the reader of Joyce feels a kind of anxiety in front of the unreadable text,

Joyce and his characters experience epiphanies where writing transcends the binaries of meaning, where the symbolic collapses unto the real. To put it differently, Lacan qualifies the writing of Joyce as a writing whose moments of aesthetic pleasure are those in which the support of the image has given way to an encounter with the real that transcends any production of meaning. But these moments entail anxiety for the reader, which is how I propose to grasp the idea of unreadability as an aesthetic affect.

Does Joyce introduce a new dimension into the domain of the aesthetic, a dimension condensed in his *sinthome*, in his enjoyment in writing? Does Joyce's art produce the other major affect of art, the Other of anxiety, where meaningfulness is not even an option? I will suggest that reading the notion of anxiety retroactively, from the perspective of *Seminar XXIII* on Joyce, may show how anxiety is still given to the domination of the pleasure principle, and that it is only with Joyce that art can go beyond the pleasure/displeasure divide. My proposal leans first on what may appear as a radically deviant assertion made by Freud in his 1938 "An Outline of Psychoanalysis," a very late piece in Freud's career, where he binds anxiety to the pleasure principle saying that "the ego strives after pleasure and seeks to avoid unpleasure. An increase in unpleasure that is expected and foreseen is met by a signal of anxiety."¹¹ While Lacan's anxiety can be read as the primary affect prior to the pleasure/displeasure divide, anxiety can also be regarded as a kind of displeasure given to the binary opposition pleasure-displeasure. It could be suggested that only with Joyce do we go beyond the vacillations of tension that determine the possibility of pleasure. Harari refers to this point when enquiring

after the meaning of Lacan's assertion that Joyce experienced *jouissance* in writing. *Jouissance*, unlike the pleasure principle does not tend to reduce tension toward zero. Joyce's *jouissance* is not a matter of hedonism. "The increase of tension yet does not necessarily imply suffering, just as its diminution does not always lead to a feeling of well-being ... It is a question of a dimension of the speaking being that should not be conceived of in hydraulic terms of rise and fall of tension" (109-10).

Against the hydraulic terms of the economy of pleasure, Joyce presents a different case and the question remains of how does Joyce's *sinthome* lead us beyond the pleasure principle, and how is the unreadable affect of Joyce to be considered as located beyond anxiety. Beyond the pleasure principle (if we take Joyce's art as paradigmatic in principle of an aesthetic possibility), art is no longer supported by the image and by the symbolic dimension of meaning. In the seminar on Joyce Lacan will describe Joyce's writing with the challenging figure of the fruit letting its skin be detached and fall out. This figure is used in order to illuminate Joyce's experience reported in "A Portrait" where after being beaten up by other boys, the hero describes his "dropping out" of his own body, dropping out of the ego that supports the image of the body, thus letting himself fall into forgetfulness. This incidence and its analytic significance indicate why the question of Joyce's masochism is being put forward by Lacan, as the masochist is the one who puts himself in place of the *petit a* in front of the Other who lacks nothing, thus letting himself drop out of the game. The writing subject, Joyce, unlike the speaking one, can make up for this elision, taking his leave from the Other: "the ring 'I' slips away. The imaginary relation has no place. It has no place in this instance, and this makes us wonder whether Joyce's intense interest in perversion had perhaps a different signification. Maybe the beating did disgust him; maybe he was not a true pervert. Because it is quite a task to imagine the reason why Joyce is

so unreadable. If he is so unreadable, it is perhaps because he arouses no sympathy in us ... for he manages to become detached from himself." In the case of Joyce, the Borromean knot has to account for an ego of a totally different kind than other subjects;

153

it should knot together the real and the unconscious, the Symbolic with *jouissance*. The masochist feels no anxiety but elicits it in the Other. Joyce is probably no pervert, so does he feel anxiety? This is quite unlikely since anxiety has its support in the image, an image whose wholeness is undermined by what cannot be specularized, the *objet petit a* that falls from the subject in anxiety. Joyce's writing lacks this support and presents a process of de-imaginarization of language. Yet, we should not forget the defensive function of anxiety, of securing the necessary distance between desire and *jouissance*, between the Symbolic and the Real. The anxiety felt when these become too close, when the distance threatens to be eliminated is precisely the anxiety felt by the reader in front of the unreadable text when the symbolic and the real have indeed collapsed in a moment of epiphany.

Is it possible to regard Joyce's art as a different kind of art, one that explodes the signifier, decomposes words, transmutes sense? This is Harari's claim that Joyce invokes a "complete reversal of the Freudian view of art"¹². But is it indeed so or is it just as any aesthetic potential of art to produce an unreadable kind of writing that will occupy critics for three centuries? I suggest to read the route leading from Kant to Joyce through the notion of anxiety as a route that first introduces the moment of pleasure or displeasure as a moment of anxiety that conflates the binary distinction derived from the pleasure principle prior to judgment itself. It is only when the law of the Other comes into play that we can tell pleasure from displeasure. Moving to anxiety suggests the notion of affect as referring to aesthetic experience outside the order of the signifier, but still corresponding with the axis of pleasure and displeasure. Lastly, the unreadability characteristic of Joyce's writing, lies beyond the pleasure principle. Anxiety, unlike Joyce's *sinthome*, can only suggest the possible collapse of the imaginary distinction between pleasure and displeasure as what attracts us to art. With Joyce the danger signaled by anxiety, of the collapse of the Symbolic into the Real, has become a fact of writing.

154

Endnotes

¹*Seminar XXIII*, "Joyce le *sinthome*", 1975-76.

²*Le sinthome*' refers to Lacan's view of the symptom in his late teaching as carrying the trace of the particular ways of the subject's "*jouissance*".

³Roberto Harari, *Lacan's Seminar on "Anxiety": An Introduction*. New York: Other Press. 2001.

⁴The idea of anxiety as signal already appears in Freud's "Inhibitions, Symptom, Anxiety".

⁶*Aesthetic domain* refers here to the fundamental idea in aesthetics that beyond beauty, pleasure and maybe the sublime, we arrive at the limit of the aesthetic; most accepted notions about the nature of aesthetic experience hence assume such a space or domain as their defining concept.

⁶Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by W.S. Pluhar, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. 1790 [1987].

⁷Rodolphe Gasché *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant's Aesthetics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003. p.50-51.

⁸p. 48.

⁹Ibid. p.57.

¹⁰Lesson from May 11th, 1976.

¹¹*SE XXIII*, p.146.

¹²Roherto Harari, *How James Joyce made His Name: A Reading of the Final Lacan*. New York: Other Press, 2002, p.82.