

A Portrait of the Artist as a Vanishing Genius

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I

“riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs” (*Finnegans Wake*, p. 3)

The reader, any reader’s, encounter with James Joyce, is traumatic, when confronted already in the first paragraph of Joyce’s last novel, with a flood that has the appearance of “into-the-midst-of-things” opening, yet most of which is almost totally incomprehensible. Joyce, consensually believed to be a revolutionary genius of modernism in literature, whose writing has many ardent fans but is hard to love, yet presents to its reader an insurmountable challenge of understanding.

What does incomprehensibility have to do with genius? Kant, in his aesthetics warned against “original nonsense” yet also described the genius as one whose creation cannot be deciphered by others, nor even motivated by the genius himself. Towards the end of his seminar of 1976, dedicated to Joyce, Jacques Lacan concludes that “not only is the Joycean text teeming with enigmas, but it could be said that he played on that, in the knowledge that there would be joyceans for two or three hundred years. These people are occupied uniquely with resolving the enigmas – namely, at least, why Joyce put it in that way” (p. 62). Although Joyce’s is a writing that offers no foothold for the interpreter, its unreadability, rather than having a voiding effect, appears to carry particular literary interest for generations of critics. Joyce, with his unique artistic practice can indeed epitomize the paradox of the genius as it looms in philosophical aesthetic discussions: being well-acquainted with artistic traditions, Joyce employs forms that are part of the training of artists (figurative language, narrative structures, etc.), yet, at the same time Joyce activates material that transcends all known concepts and schemes of understanding, and in *Finnegans Wake* he even transgresses the confines of any known language.

Joyce is historically and artistically distant from the genius, as understood by Kant in the context of 18th century’s aesthetics, yet Joyce realizes the paradox of the genius who produces the impossible thing that is

both determinate in form and indeterminate in “material”¹, free of rule and yet, a meaningful rule dwells in it to be revealed by others.² If we follow the implications of Lacan’s portraiture of him, Joyce may also seem to undermine some of the fundamental tenets Kant had about artistic geniuses, primarily the idea that the original indeterminate law with which the genius acts, can be codified into a communicable rule for the school of artists following him. From what is reflected in Lacan’s words quoted above, the hiatus between whatever directs the genius creative act and the attempt of Joyceans to understand or put his example into action, is unbridgeable. Joyce is not likely to be understood, no matter how much time goes by, no matter how many critics toil over the decipherment of his work. Thus, while Joyce is a Kantian genius who creates something previously unknown to the readers of literature, he is non-Kantian, if we follow the general orientation of commentators on Kant’s aesthetics, in the sense that Joyce, not being decipherable, cannot become exemplary. But is it indeed so? *Does the exemplarity of the work of genius entail turning the unknown rule of nature into a communicable rule of art?*

Joyce was a writer who could predict in a way what kind of desire his writing will elicit in others, yet Joyce is a unique case in his kind of address to his reader, in that he tricks his readers to look for meaningfulness in the “wrong place”. Yet, I would claim, that even in that Joyce represents something typical of the genius: that had the endeavor to “translate” the genius’ work into a meaningful message or to trace the genius’ resources, succeeded, the uniqueness of the work would be missed and the fervor of the critics would extinguish. Thus, Joyce’s case points at the fact that the genius’ exemplarity, the aptness of his work to serve as a model for others, does not involve comprehending or deciphering this work.

This, claims J-A. Miller, a psychoanalyst who follows the work of Lacan, this disruption between the particular creation of the artist and the critics’ tools for deciphering it, is caused by the fact that the only truth there is about a subject, is the truth that arises from the subject’s relation to language, and that relation is always traumatic. In other words, the subject’s relation to language is particular to that subject (a trauma is not a

¹ According to Kant the genius furnishes “rich *material* for products of fine art”; however, “processing this material and giving it *form* requires talent that is academically trained...” (p. 178). This distinction between form and matter is “quite unusual within the whole of the Third Critique” (Gasché, p.189)

² Joyce also realizes the paradox of the genius of modernism as formulated by Thierry de Duve, a contemporary Kantian: Joyce, while composing a text that breaks all known laws of syntax and semantics, thus implementing the modernist imperative of “do whatever” with language or paint, also creates an exemplary work that meets the mandatory “impossibility of the making” (to use Duchamp’s phrase) of the modernist artist. That is, an absolute mandate is met by the ultimate idiosyncratic act with language, thus producing something that is never a thing-in-general (De Duve, 352ff.) and is yet consequential for the world of art.

type of event in reality but a type of psychic registration of an event in reality) and hence cannot be made sense of in generalized terms, which explains why the interpreting effort of critics is bound to fail.

It was the genius of Joyce, or of any genius for that matter, to having been able “to articulate the trauma he received in his encounter with language, and in that he succeeded to cause the university a trauma” (Miller, p. 11, my translation). No form or concept that comes from the Other of language (i.e., from language as a universal arsenal of signifiers into which the subject is introduced to become a speaking subject) can account for the particular trauma of a subject: there is nothing generalizable about it. I will claim in this paper that the rule of genius must be kept indeterminate, uninterpreted, in order for the uniqueness of genius to be sustained.

Joyce’s art is unique: Joyce, claims Miller, wants “to wake literature up in order to signify its end, to awaken it to something of its structure, its truth, beyond phantasy, beyond idealization. It will be like crossing the literary phantasy, toward the real of writing, which is the pure relation to language”³ (9). How can the particularity of Joyce’s traumatic encounter with language, be integrated with the universal call of taking literature *beyond personal phantasy*? This is precisely where the uniqueness of Joyce’s genius lies: his traumatic encounter with language, which is particular to him and hence cannot be universally cracked through the interpretive endeavors of so many critics, takes the form of a “pure relation to language”, that is, of a formal envelope of the trauma emptied of its traumatic content. This is how the paradox of Joyce’s genius can be described following Miller: as a pure traumatic form void of concrete traumatic content. In that Joyce’s encounter with language can carry a meaningful weight for others although this encounter goes beyond the literary phantasy of joint, shared experiencing. The formal envelope of the trauma, unique and unknown before the genius, is something that is purely of the subject, and yet can elicit the interest of the reader.

This dialectic of the particular and the non-particularizable, is, I would claim, a productive way of characterizing genius and of addressing the central exegetic contention in Kant’s discussion of genius in the Third Critique, that of “exemplary originality”. The dialectic of the particular and the universal in the genius creation is also exemplified in the case of Joyce and in this paper the case of Joyce will serve to reveal and highlight some of the profound dilemmas around Kant’s idea of genius. My aim is to show that at the heart of Kantian discussion of genius lies the paradox of the particular subject in his traumatic encounter with the language of the Other.

³ ‘Awaken’ here is a play on *Finnegans Wake*.

It is an encounter that paradoxically stages the genius unconscious knowledge of how to create this encounter in forms that others can relate to, yet will always remain “other” to them. Genius’ creation can never be “translated” into a systematic, determinate new rule since the root of a particular trauma can never be articulated in its own terms but only through an indirect formation (i.e., the subject is constituted through what cannot be directly represented, which is why a subject, within psychoanalytic thinking, is necessarily a subject of the unconscious).

Joyce is taken here to illustrate the fundamental Kantian dilemma of “*exemplary originality*” and the link between Kant and Joyce is supported by Lacan’s approach to this case. Lacan who dedicated a whole seminar to this one writer (making almost no generalization about artists through this case of Joyce), resists diagnosing him, refuses to treat Joyce as a case. Joyce is a particular case and a non-particular one at the same time and hence cannot be diagnosed as diagnosis aims to give a name to one subject’s truth. Joyce, while his literature goes beyond any specific local meaning of this or other imaginary interpretation attributed to it by critics, and in that is totally unique, also refuses to be particularized, subjectivized. I will claim that diagnosing Joyce, that is, turning him into a subject of an (particular) unconscious, would have undermined the possibility of relating to him as genius.

The next section will concentrate on the Kantian dilemma and its interpretations, before going back to the question of Joyce, his genius, and the enigma of his writing.

II

“fine art cannot itself devise the rule by which it is to bring about its product. Since, however, a product can never be called art unless it is preceded by a rule, it must be nature in the subject that gives the rule to art; in other words, fine art is possible only as the product of genius” Kant *The Critique of Judgment*, (§46, 307-8).

The artistic trade-off between an “autistic” originality and a communicative relevance to the actual artistic scene of given forms and images, between “the originality of talent” and the mechanics of “academic correctness” to purpose (to use Kant’s words in §47), appears always to have been on artists’ minds, and it has found many and variable expressions over the years. Although a world of a difference seems to separate the Homeric bard from the Romantic free-associationist, the modernist doctrinaire of “everyone is an artist” from the postmodernist whose originality lies in a collage of allusions, the formula itself appears to constantly underlie every artistic production. Only recently, in a gallery talk of a contemporary

Israeli artist, I came across a new refreshing formulation of this artistic trade-off when the artist talked about: "being expressive in a non-whimsical way"⁴. This is just another way of phrasing the eternal dilemma detected by Kant, that between uniqueness on the one hand, and conformity to forms on the other hand.

This is the dilemma of every artist, and its highest instance is to be found in the practice of the genius, seized between creation and imitation. The genius produces objects that are conceptually classified as fine art and as having an artistic purpose, yet at the same time his products go beyond anything that could be implied by the concept of art at a given moment. The genius produces objects that present before the imagination material that is free from all guidance by rules, yet the genius also creates a rule in this very production. The genius produces what is characterized by an ultimate originality, not leaning on a model anywhere outside itself, yet it serves as a model for imitation by others.

Kant's notion of genius thus suggests an air of paradox. Genius is granted an originality that amounts to an exceptional gift and a uniqueness that cannot be generalized. Genius is led by nature to create his art; it is through him that nature gives the rule to art. Further, nature appears through the genius in the special talent of producing something for which no determinate rule can be given. The genius' endowment is not a skill that can be acquired by following a rule, but is described by Kant as an exceptional, extraordinary talent of the poet who "ventures to give these sensible expression in a way that goes beyond the limits of experience...And it is actually in the art of poetry that the power of aesthetic ideas can manifest itself to full extent. Considered by itself, however, this power is actually only a talent (of the imagination)" (§49). The genius' faculty of the imagination is exemplified in a presentation that exhibits a concept, yet it prompts so much thought as can never be comprehended within a determinate concept. The imagination is creative in the genius' case and it makes reason think more. Genius is not only endowed with a special gift, the beyond-the-ordinary nature of his gift is also manifested in the genius' own ignorance regarding the nature of this gift. Genius is a spontaneous faculty that resists being understood or explained:

But no Homer or Wieland can show how his ideas, rich in fancy and yet also in thought, arise and meet in his mind; the reason is that he himself does not know, and hence cannot teach it to anyone else... Moreover, the artist's skill cannot be communicated but

⁴ In a gallery talk of Maya Cohen-Levi, in Alon-Segev gallery, June 2004

must be conferred directly on each person by the hand of nature. And so it dies with him, until some day nature again endows someone else in the same way..." (§47, 309).

The creativeness of genius is a faculty that demands and can receive no interpretation or understanding. Kant's attempt here is to specify the nature of uniqueness, to articulate the particular endowment of the genius in order to account for the creation of beautiful art, reveals a paradoxical air when juxtaposed with the other side of the genius' picture. Kant also requires that the genius be trained in the purpose and concepts of art and that his creation becomes exemplary for others. Genius is a talent for art and as such it "presupposes a determinate concept of the product, namely, its purpose" (§49, 186). Presupposing the purpose of art means that the exceptional faculty of imagination with which the genius is endowed, is controlled by the demand to exhibit the concept of understanding associated with art, even if in ways that exceed the determinate nature of this concept. Genius' activity is guided by a conception of its desired outcome and the steps to be taken in order to achieve that outcome".⁵ Furthermore, genius is not only required to know about the purpose of art, but to be acquainted with a repertory of forms. The rich material provided by genius for products of fine arts, has to be processed by "giving it form" which "requires a talent that is academically trained" (§47, 178). To stand the test of judgment, the work of genius must be academically correct, rather than renounce all rules of academic constraint.

Genius is not only disciplined by his training and given knowledge, his work is restrained by another factor: it must have relevance to others. The most difficult passage regarding this requisite appears in §47: "Since the artist's natural endowment must give the rule to art, what kind of rule is this?... The rule must be abstracted from what the artist has done, i.e., from the product, which others may use to test their own talent, letting it serve them as their model... How that is possible is difficult to explain..." (177-8). With these words the genius turns out to be a paradoxical entity, both dwelling outside the domain of rules (a natural transgressor of the rule or concept) and inside the restraining domain of rules, as he realizes, with this very same act of creation, a rule to be abstracted by others. This "air of paradox" is what has mostly preoccupied commentators on Kant around the theme of genius. The question is, is the unknown rule of nature which directs the genius' creation, to be somehow transformed into a determinate rule in order for the work of genius to become exemplary? How is

⁵ Guyer, 2003:125.

exemplarity to be realized without compromising the unique, indeterminate achievement of the genius, or, where does the particularity of genius lie?

If we take the example of Joyce, the question is, how can a language that comes from the Other, be used to give expression to the unique, unprecedented work of genius, and how can the particular use the genius makes of language, be made communicable to others? In other words, in order to think of genius as exceptional vis-à-vis ordinary human beings, the unique/original core of his creation must be maintained even as his work is to be received as meaningful (rather than nonsensical) for others.

III

The products of genius must also be models, i.e., they must be *exemplary*; hence, though they do not themselves arise through imitation, still they must serve others for this, i.e., as a standard or rule by which to judge. (§46, p. 175)

The degree of incompatibility involved between 'originality' and 'exemplarity' is open to interpretation and ranges from referring to this double demand as paradoxical (Gammon), to finding no contradiction at all (Guyer 2003). In this paper I refer to this demand as in need of some explication.

The function of exemplarity, which the work of genius must fulfill, raises a twofold difficulty. The first one has to do with the association of genius to rule: although the genius' practice should be the embodiment of freedom from law, this freedom is subsumed under a number of constraints of taste that control and discipline but also enable the creation of the work of genius. The second difficulty has to do with the determinate nature the work of genius must assume to become relevant to others: the difficulty that arises here stems from the fact that the originality of the genius does not only give rise to an aping practice in the genius' followers, it cannot be established as an original work of genius without it. Originality and exemplarity although described by Kant as equally-weighting demands from the art of genius, appear to pose contradictory stipulations that dwell in the same entity, the genius, and account for the power which leads the genius artist along the road of creation. Genius is led from the forms and rules dominating the field of art (and exemplified in the genius' necessary training) to the realization of his natural capacity to freely use his cognitive faculties, and further to the eventual usefulness of his creation for others. That is, genius arises from the field of art, leaves it behind, so to speak, through his exceptional capacities, and returns to this field through exemplarity.

The work of genius is constituted/identified as being outside the domain of the rules of art (but in the domain of nature), and at the same time, the work in some sense stores a potential rule that will later be articulated by others. Philosophical commentaries on Kant propose different strategies for coping with this complex condition of “exemplary originality”. One strategy takes the path of reconciling these two apparently contradictory demands through the person of the genius, while the other strategy is that of unpacking originality from exemplarity, attributing each to a different agent.

Guyer (1996) claims that exemplarity refers to the “impulse to originality” and not to the actual product of the genius thus paving the way for reconciling the “individual’s need to define his aesthetic autonomy by originality and society’s interest in preserving its integrity by readily communicable traditions” (301). This clash, claims Guyer, is reconciled in section §50 when Kant obligates the genius to discipline his rich and original ideas since “it is necessary that the imagination in its freedom be commensurate with the lawfulness of the understanding”. The requirements of taste thus “clip the wings” of the artist, obliging him to sacrifice some imagination and spirit so that understanding and taste can be held tight. Originality is thus located in the impulse of the artist while exemplarity has to do with the requirements of taste compromising that impulse, so that the understanding remains unimpaired. Kant’s emphasis on the scholastic, cultural demands from the artist that discipline his impulse are taken to be the grounds for viewing the artwork of genius as a locus of compromise. In a more recent publication Guyer refers to §50 as a shift in Kant’s approach and stresses the fact that while genius invents aesthetic ideas, these satisfy the exemplary demand in being universally pleasing. That is, exemplarity is here primarily linked with Kant’s notion that successful art has an element of contingency or novelty, yet one that is pleasing in ways valid for all (2003:128).

Contrary to this idea of reconciling originality and exemplarity within the genius’ person, “exemplary originality” is described by Gammon (1997) as the making of grounds newly discovered – familiar. That is, the absolutely original opens the way for a non-original spirit of imitation. Gammon handles this paradox by following the historical course that the idea of exemplarity in Kant and other thinkers around his time, has undergone, thus exposing the variegated meaning that can be ascribed to exemplarity. This strategy, which I call the historical unpacking of exemplarity and originality, enables Gammon to attribute exemplarity to various groups of “others” exhibiting different ways of making use of the genius’ originality. Through a typology of the modes of genial influence,

and explication of the type of activity each one involves, Gammon shows that not all exemplarity is a way of re-working an already existing rule (592) and that the work of genius can become exemplary for others in ways that range from technical aping to the creation of another genius.⁶

The idea of historicizing the creation of genius in order to reconcile exemplarity with originality, is also exemplified in an argument such as Steinbrenner who addresses, after Danto, the theme of the unimaginability of future art as owing to the originality of creation. Unlike Kant's idea of spontaneous creation, Steinbrenner notes that artists work under the pressure of constantly coming up with something new. This constant demand drives artists to produce original work making us disabled regarding the imagining of the particular new artwork to appear in the future. Steinbrenner links Danto's unimaginable with Kant's genius by arguing that for Kant exemplarity has an institutional streak, that the artwork is exemplary in being a model for later schools or members of the art world. Thus, in addition to the rule-giving genius, the exemplary rests on the constitution of a school and as such, the essence of the work as exemplary, will first show itself only in future history. The exemplary characteristics of the work are not known to the genius, because they will show their face in the future, which is why the rule of the genius is not communicable. The genius "cannot exist without a historical framework", thus reconciling "exemplary originality" by postponing the exemplarity to the unimaginable art of the future.

Whether exemplary originality is solved by keeping the two ends apart or by reconciling them, it is clear that these strategies are fuelled by the need to account for the move from determinateness to indeterminateness (and vice versa), to locate where the uniqueness of the genius is maintained without compromising its potential consequence for the work of others. However, the attempt to reconcile the place of exemplarity and originality within the artist, which in a way considers the original standing of genius as already combining acquaintance with forms with a drive to express or bring into art exceptional material and unique forms, does compromise the uniqueness of genius. Genius is here presented as never actually leaving, through the path of creation, the language of the Other; genius is a locus of

⁶ "Historical" in the context of Kant, has a specific status. Although Kant raises in the context of genius some historical considerations (as his thesis regarding the "end of art", §47, 177), "exemplary originality" for Kant must refer to the epistemology of the subject and not to actual historical circumstances, unless we are already exceeding the confines of the Kantian mode of thought. Guyer (2003) for instance, refers to historical facts about the stimulating effects genius has on art, as motivated by Kant's very conception of genius, whose implication is that the history of art will be one of "constant upheaval in forms of artistic success" (132). History is hence relevant inasmuch as it is a logical consequence of epistemology.

compromise to start with. "Nature in the artist" or "the impulse to originality" in this context remains inaccessible.

The other philosophical solution seems to compromise the uniqueness of genius in another way, by making genius recognized as such only after the effect, once the work of genius has been codified into a communicable rule for art. It is in relation to an established rule of the school following genius, that his creation can be truly appraised. Both strategies compromise the original uniqueness of the artist by bringing his creation into the realm of the communicable and the understandable. Nature in the artist cannot be appraised unless passing the press of determination.

IV

The question of where to locate exemplarity vis-à-vis the originality of genius also implies different ways of addressing the *kind of entity genius is*: should he be regarded as a person with an exceptional psychology? Is he a structural constituent or a logical universal consequence of a theory of taste? Is he to be inferred from the non-linear changes in the history of art or is he the artist retroactively remembered from among the many artists of the past?

Kant's aesthetics has suggested to commentators that genius designates the complex relations between artistic form and the audience's response "both to the concepts the work embodies and to the freedom of the imagination that it represents and induces in themselves.. " (Guyer, 1996:157) In other words, the genius, just as the object deemed beautiful or sublime, is not somebody, a person endowed with certain high mental capacities, but genius, like beauty, is a way to account for the enactment in the subject of a "quickening of cognitive powers". Hence, as the whole *Critique of Judgment* is taking place in the subject, and can tell us very little, if anything about the nature of the object, so the genius is not a kind of rare mentality to be psychologically explored, but a constitutive requisite to be philosophically discussed as universal. Guyer opposes the idea that genius is a "rare talent" and locates genius as the point of harmony between nature and reason in a judgment of taste, that is, a point where the free play of imagination and understanding in the artist meets the free play of these faculties in the audience, in a way that is pleasing to the latter.

Guyer here presents an approach to genius as **structural necessity**, a direction further explored by Gasché who refers to genius as a paradoxical "entity", and claims that "the whole problematic of genius exclusively concerns 'a happy relation' of the faculties", and it consequently has "a primarily transcendental thrust." Unlike Guyer who relates the necessity of genius to produce successful art with the intention ascribed to the activity

of genius, Gasché's suggestion stresses Kant's claim that the product of genius is not accompanied by a conscious intent: the genius knows not how he came about producing the artwork in a certain way. He does not know his genius.

It is along these lines that Gasché's idea of the "denuding of the arts of determinateness" can be read. The determining judgment required by art as art, has to be stripped of its determining power in order for the power of the product to be asserted. Pure aesthetic judgments upon the beautiful require the absence of all determinate concepts, and such an absence for objects of art must be actively engendered in order for them to be judged beautiful. Gasché thus calls for a "double denuding": a denuding of the concept behind the beautiful object design and a denuding of the determining character of the act of judgment. This denuding can only be the task of the genius (p. 185). A genius is a necessary condition for producing beautiful art just as a formula is required for solving an algebraic equation. In order that no rule would show through a beautiful work of art, the genius becomes a logical requisite or, without the denuding function fulfilled by genius, the absence of rule will be interpreted as just the skilful dissimulation of a rule actually present. But the indetermination required in order to have beautiful art must be more radical than dissimulation. In the beautiful arts only an unknown rule is required, a rule that has not been known before it appears in an individual work of beautiful art, "a rule that has not yet been codified as a rule" (p. 186). Although an artistic school can later take the mere form (and not a determining or cognitive form) and codify rules according to it, the unknown rule indicates that only an entity called "genius" can accomplish the logical function of rendering the rule indeterminate.

Beauty can arise from indeterminacy when its source lies in the natural disposition of the subject producing it. "Thus the sole relevance of genius in Kant's aesthetics is to solve the paradox posed by the beautiful arts: namely, the idea that certain products of art can be conformed to a rule without a definite concept, and hence be beautiful". The paradox of the exemplary genius is thus solved by assuming the genius' gift of nature to be a prerequisite for beauty not to be linked with a determinate concept; genius is the missing link between the determining judgment of art and the indeterminate judgment of the beautiful in art. The rule eventually codified from the work of genius, hence cannot be a given rule actually present in the creation of genius. It is rather something intuited (and abstracted) *post facto* from the products of genius by other talented individuals (188). The genius acts freely, and it is through the genius as a paradoxical entity that "nature passes into freedom". (187) For Gasché then, genius mediates what

is impossible to mediate, unless an unsubjectified entity is assumed, to serve, in many respects, as the “black box” in which and through which the beautiful in art becomes a possibility.

Some of the commentary on Kant follows a different direction of stressing the unique cognitive disposition of a subject deserving the name of genius, as persona, as a personality. This direction is compatible with the idea that fine art, unlike nature, is a product of a conscious act and of specialized skill. In this direction, the psychology or empirical dimension of genius is explored in a way that can either be taken to divert from Kant’s naturally-endowed genius or to follow the idea of an exceptionally skilled producer of art. Genius must be unique and not universal and hence the genius as person, must have cognitive or psychological uniqueness. Thus Allison (2001), for instance, stresses the powerful imagination essential to artistic creation, an imagination that even when given to the confining forms of understanding, is still powerful enough to supply the material for fine art. Genius, claims Allison, creates what transcends conformity to taste. Genius is “someone who is blessed with the unteachable ability to produce coherent imaginative associations” (286), and hence exemplary originality includes understanding and judgment, together with “an *inventive imagination*” as essential components.

The emphasis put here on the genius’ cognitive faculty of imagination, points at the genius, as someone exemplifying exceptional, unique or extraordinary capacities.⁷ Yet such philosophical discussions of genius reveal the difficulty in generalizing about this entity, whether in terms of universal psychological traits or in the transcendental terms of an epistemic, structural condition. Kant himself, in characterizing the genius of art in opposition to the genius of science, claims in §47 that “the artist’s skill cannot be communicated but must be conferred directly on each person by the hand of nature. And so it dies with him...” (177). That is, there is something about the genius’ that refuses to be generalized in terms of a universal ‘Genius’. The Genius’ does not exist, if we take Kant words here to indicate that every genius is unique in its own way. The genius, as universal, is an impossible entity since, was he to exist, the very condition of indeterminacy and originality would have dissolved. At the same time, at the other end of a particularity that resists generalization, one can detect a tendency to de-particularize genius. Considering genius to occupy a slot in a structure, or characterizing him in general cognitive terms of the

⁷ To this branch of interpretations of genius, also belongs Denis Dutton’s review “What is Genius?”, which after the work (of Keith Simonton) on the origins of genius, explores the common personality and mental dispositions of geniuses in terms such as “inventive”, “introverted”, “unconventional” and the like.

unique harmony genius' accomplishes between imagination and understanding (demonstrated in aesthetic ideas), indicates that genius, while a unique creator, is not taken to be a particularized subject. Genius can become a model for others neither through a generalized notion about creation, nor by particularizing his specific act of creation into a communicable rule. It seems that Kant and his commentators do insist on defining the unique creation of genius without this creation becoming understood or deciphered.

Philosophical discussions of genius waver regarding the degree of particularity or universality to be ascribed to the genius. While attempts to particularize the genius at the moment of his advent or through his unique creation are problematic since his genius is non-communicable and will remain so, attempts to universalize genius in terms of cognitive or psychological attributes are problematic because they miss the unique revelation of genius at the moment of creation. This philosophical wavering between the particularity and universality of genius, and the dialectic genius involves in terms of how the name of genius is to be understood within Kantian aesthetics, may find its explanation in the notion of **vanishing mediator**⁸ proposed by Slavoj Žižek in order to come to terms with "exasperating abstract reflections on 'dialectical method'", of Hegel and his later readers (Žižek, 1991:182). Extricating Žižek's argument regarding the vanishing mediator from his reading of Hegel, this notion comes in as a surplus moment that indicates that the second moment of split (opposition) and the final reconciliation are tied through a dialectical necessity: the former creates the conditions for the emergence of the latter (Žižek, 1996:92). The vanishing mediator thus supplies a concrete content to a given structure whose constituents reveal an unavoidable discrepancy. Yet the concrete aspect of the vanishing mediator does not turn this factor into an empirical entity of any kind. The mediator is however "vanishing", that is, its disappearance is required to establish the terms of the opposition. The mediator is a particular repressed link that as repressed, can never be said to exist. To account for this vanishing, one can use as an example the analogous terms of a 'vanishing point' in visual art. Here, again, the

⁸ "Vanishing Mediator" is a necessary kernel that must be repressed in order for understanding to take place. This vanishing mediator, at least the concept, can be found in Schelling and is outlined in more detail in the work of Jameson and Žižek (when they talk about the quadratic structure of Hegel). The big Other is defined as the locus of the word, a locus always evoked once there is a work, this third locus which always exists in relationships to the other, small o, once there is signifying articulation. This Other as locus but at the same time perpetually submitted to the question of what guarantees it, is a perpetually vanishing Other and, by this very fact, one which puts us ourselves in a perpetually vanishing position (Lacan, seminar VIII, March 1st, 1961, p. 95).

vanishing point, disappears into the representation to enable the two-dimensional image to become a necessary condition for the representation of three dimensions. The vanishing point is, as if, the repressed, impossible point, between the two dimensions of the converging lines (in the picture) and the three dimensions of parallelism (in the represented object), the relatedness of which is enabled by this impossible point, precisely at its moment of disappearance.

To think about the genius in like terms would indicate why Gasché's regards genius as the paradoxical entity that denudes concepts of their determinacy, thus presenting a radical solution that turns the genius into a condition for the emergence of beauty in art, although a condition that is neither abstract (a logical slot in a structure), nor empirical (a psychological persona). The vanishing mediator is the impossible point in which the particularity of absolute uniqueness converges with the Otherness of the art world.

In what follows I will pick up again the case of Joyce, as analyzed by J. Lacan, to explore the idea of genius as a vanishing mediator, the concrete core constituting the inner relatedness between the general rule, the forms and modes of imaging that come from the Other: culture, artistic tradition, the school of art, and the originality of the subject capable of using these very forms to stir the cognitive faculties in ways that go beyond whatever can be determinately conceptualized. Genius is the concrete condition that enables the emergence of beauty in art by indicating the necessary yet concrete relatedness of the determinate to the indeterminate, the purposive to the nonpurposive, of art to nature, and by enabling this emergence, the genius as case, vanishes.

V

For Lacan the case of Joyce, rather than bringing up a literary or artistic question per se, touches on a psychoanalytic problem, that of "what it means to write" (p. 58). When someone turns up asking in the name of some inhibition, to be put in the position of writing, psychoanalysis should know it is worth looking long and hard into the question of what put this subject into the writing position. In this sense the path of writing must be considered a symptom of the writing subject and the turning to the territory of writing in the name of some inhibition, means that "writing comes from somewhere other than the signifier" (57), it is where the writing subject uses language for his own enjoyment.

To describe the symptom of writing is not difficult, since writing is *a priori* taken to have a symptomatic core (in the clinic of psychoanalysis, identifying the symptom with which the being of the subject is tied, in itself

involves considerable analytic effort). The works of Joyce, as a fact of writing, can be described pretty straightforwardly. Miller describes the fact of Joycean writing, "*le dispositif Joycien*" (the Joycean apparatus) in the following way. Normally, every word is susceptible to different significations, that are possible more or less forcibly. Departing from the same sound, multiple senses are possible and writing normally permits to know which sense is concerned when there is total homophony. With Joyce multiple senses are treated differently:

This marks the possibility of grinding the sound in order to make a juice of diverse meanings, a mixture... This is what Joyce exploits.... But, at a second moment he makes the initial sound of the word bring back all the echoes of this word...

This is then the route: from a word, one obtains other words that are phonically kin-words and possible effects of sense, while returning to the first word to modify its sense by condensing words into it. The result is that of a signifier of pure neologism. Joyce writes through an after-effect... it is the whole swarm that reverts to the initial S1 [master-signifier]. (13-14)

This account/diagnosis of Joyce however only formalizes Joyce's inventive use of language resources and is hence tantamount to the Kantian idea that genius must be trained in the forms of art and its traditions and must emerge from them. Yet, Joyce opts for forms whose ultimate effect is that of dropping the support of meaning and Joyce as genius is the name that marks the mediating factor between the formal unique use of signs and the dropping of meaning as a result.

Lacan's seminar focuses not only on the diagnosis of Joyce's symptomatic writing, but is oriented toward the far-reaching question of how such a mode of writing represents the particular desire of the subject Joyce, how can we explain his choice of *this path of writing*. In what follows I will trace the way this path of writing reveals the originality of Joyce, that is, the way in which these forms are tied to Joyce's particular necessity to be a writer. Yet, to the same extent that the determinate purpose of art cannot anticipate the way the work of genius will articulate this purpose, so the forms of language and their purposive meanings as these come from the Other⁹, cannot anticipate the purpose they would serve a particular writer. This "unimaginable" nature of the work of genius,

⁹ That is, in order to relate to others (Joyce critics, readers) Joyce has to place his writing in the Other of language as the locus of all signs. This Other, wherefrom the forms and meanings of language come, is not absolute but vanishes once these forms become part of the subject's own particular use of language, part of his invention.

constitutes the particular core of creation: it manifests a mode of articulating the ends of writing, as these serve the creating subject, without universalizing the genius' path of writing. Lacan's analysis of Joyce hence does not reveal, at the end, the genius as a particular subject given to analysis, but sustains the genius in the vanishing zone of non-particularity that yet cannot be universalized. Genius brings together the two ends: of the particular enjoyment (i.e., satisfaction, whether pleasurable or displeasurable) the genius derives from his art, and the universal forms that are in the Other; yet the genius is present in neither. It is this necessary non-particularity of the vanishing genius in terms of which we can understand the way "nature through the subject" is exemplified in the case of Joyce. It is exemplified in this case because Lacan resists diagnosing Joyce as a case. The uniqueness of genius cannot be fully articulated by codifying the rule of nature in the genius, turning it into a communicable rule for the use of all. The reasons and the meaning of this intricate status of Joyce as a symptom of writing, will be further dealt with below.

The facts of Joycean writing described above, refer to the way the subject chooses a language to write in. Yet, says Lacan, the subject in fact creates a language, "at each moment one gives the language which one speaks a little prod... It is only living in so far as it creates itself at every instant. This is why there is no collective unconscious, only particular unconsciouses" (52). The fact of writing is hence never just a way to use the language one speaks but a way to invent language so that it will give form to one's particular unconscious. Yet, invention relates to something which is the particular real thing about the subject, the unique thing that cannot be universalized in terms of a shared meaning.

Language for psychoanalysis assumes the Other as prior to the subject and as the locus from which signs originate (or, in other terms, it assumes the Name-of-the-Father as what is responsible for placing the subject in the social order under the law of the father's interdiction). The uniqueness of the subject is hence revealed when meaning is particularized as hole, when meaning gives way in a unique way to what cannot be formulated meaningfully. That is, the subject's particular being can be revealed in the ways the subject oversteps the Other, where he by-passes the Name-of-the-Father. When language is used by a subject, it reveals something of this subject concrete desire. When the language of the Other is written by genius, its meaningfulness gives way to a particular lack in which the genius does not appear as concretely present but as concretely vanishing.

In order to elucidate this point, we should move from the way every subject invents language while using it, to the genius' way with language. The genius has the capacity of articulating the traumatic encounter with

language by positioning himself in relation to the rule of the Other. That is, when Kant refers to the genius' ignorance regarding the source of his unique ideas, he in fact ignores the genius' "other" knowledge, which he uses to seize his readers through the original invention that comes to him unknowingly. The genius always knows something of the enjoyment of others. Every genius, in other words, has something of a God in him: he assumes the impossible position of the Other of the Other as someone who knows what the Other wants, what the Other means, what the Other enjoys. This position of the Other of the Other is non-human in many ways, as it assumes a subject, a genius, that takes a risk that humans usually do not take: the genius by-passes the appeasing law of the Father in order to reveal something about the locus of a hole in language ability to symbolize, a locus that resists signification.

A main thrust of Lacan's seminar on Joyce has to do with the particular position Joyce takes in relation to the Other. Joyce, who, in 1916, named his first substantial novel, the autobiographical *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, immediately gives rise to this quandary regarding his definitive gesture. Why, "the" artist, with a definite article? This, says Lacan, is owing to the fact that Joyce considered himself *the artist*, one that will keep the pens of critics busy for the next 300 years at least. Why is it that Joyce attributed such a godly power to his literature? Why is it that in his writing, from "the Dubliners" to *Finnegans Wake*, he keeps referring to himself as redeemer? Was this a way of marking his enjoyment from writing? Lacan would claim that Joyce's writing points at him as God the redeemer precisely because without this writing he would have been reduced to nothing. Joyce's writing constitutes him as artist, enabling him to bear a name, to create a name for Joyce, while cutting the reader off any knowledge regarding the "true nature" of his writing. Joyce considered himself the redeemer of writing, the creator of a language and as such no language can explain him. He is God-the-creator who knows something about the enjoyment of writing and in his act of writing he seals this enjoyment off from us. Joyce is the genius who knows something about the ways of language and uses it in order to transcend language and in this act creates an unbridgeable gap between himself and his addressees.

To grasp something of Joyce's link with language, of his particular encounter with it, his writing should be examined through what it grants the writer: Joyce's writing locates him within the symbolic dimension and it constitutes his 'ego', that is, it creates the vase/containing vessel of his writing, specifically shaped and sized, around what is the originality of Joyce. Lacan reads Joyce extensively, from his novels to his letters and daily notes, he reads hundreds of books of criticism dedicated to his

writing. He departs for a quest into which Joyce himself aimed to trap his readers, aiming to name the unknown meaning of his writing. Joyce pays much importance to the esteem his writing gains in the eyes of others. This need to have readers and critics as constant unchanging and puzzled crowd before his writer's eyes has to do with Joyce's position regarding the Name-of-the-Father: he does not assume the word of another as his law; he is rather the one who establishes the symbolic law for everyone else.

One's father is always the one symbolizing castration vis-à-vis a natural, godly enjoyment that was only granted the primordial Father. Phallic, castrated enjoyment, inherited by son from father, generation after generation, symbolizes that the exceptional primordial Father and the absolute limitless enjoyment lost with him, will always remain outside the communal, social structure. It is language, structured like the unconscious, that gives form to the relation between castrated enjoyment and lost enjoyment, through the signifier: the signifier of castration that eclipses the mythology of a lost enjoyment. The castration spared from the primordial Father, is also spared from God as the enjoyment of God, the absolute Other, is limitless ('God' here does not take theological implications but stands for any absolute Other, in whom knowledge of an enjoyment, lost for the subject, resides). Yet Joyce is a unique subject, says Lacan, as he forecloses any knowledge of castration. He wants to use the symbolic language without subjecting himself to the law of the Father that would reduce his enjoyment to that of a castrated subject, of the son. Joyce's encounter with language begins where writing is not subjected to the law, to the law of castration.

Yet, there is no denying that *Ulysess*, with its extensive preoccupation with Bloom's father, evinces Joyce as rooted in his father even when he denies it and this is exactly his symptom, his refusal to take on himself the Name-of-his-Father, through which his encounter with language would have been constituted. Joyce's language is a language from which the father is absent, as can be detected in the fact that Joyce writes without a Master-signifier, without a signifier that will determine the meaning and the location of all other signifiers. The absence of a Master-Signifier is noticeable in the fact that Joyce, in his writing, assumes no definite knowledge: all frameworks of knowledge are equally posited: languages, histories, myths, sciences. Moreover, epiphany, the moment of revelation, a typical moment in the Joycean apparatus especially in the early works, is linked by Joyce to the most mundane, insignificant, spiritless moments rather than to a moment of knowledgeable insight. Epiphany is manifested "in the vulgarity of speech or gesture... in a dialogue of nothing" (29-30). Within this writing, with no spirit or knowledge from a "fatherly" source, it

is Joyce's name which replaces the Name-of-the-Father, and it is this name of Joyce that grants his writing a consistency required to make his writing an original work of genius.

Joyce's father was never a father to him, and Lacan provides evidence that Joyce chose writing as a way to relate to the father's giving up on him, delegating the responsibility for raising him to the Jesuits' institute. The "boozing, practically good-for-nothing father" appears in *Ulysess* as someone who changed his name, not being able to hold to the name that should have symbolized what will pass on from father to son. This father cannot stand for the paternal law that will place the son in regard to that law. In this place with no law, where the signifier obeys no imperative, is where the body is located severed from a body-image (unlike the baby who sees an integrated image of his fragmented body in the mirror owing to the look of the Other, his m(O)ther). Joyce gradual movement in his writing away from sense, his dropping off meaning, is associated by Lacan with the idea that this subject, Joyce, is lacking a body-image. Thus, writing for Joyce becomes a critical matter: Joyce's writing not only registers, echoes the body through images of language, it has to constitute a relation of his body to language in a way that will sustain his being. The path of writing, as we see, is a serious matter, supporting the very being of the writing subject, the creating genius.

This way of accounting for Joyce's writing, can also be viewed as the psychoanalytic way of formulating the dilemma of genius in terms of a demand to by-pass the law of the signifier. Psychoanalysis, since Freud has been primarily a psychoanalysis of the unconscious, assuming the Name-of-the-Father and unconscious formations as the effects of castration. But later, psychoanalysis recognized that the Name-of-the-Father can be by-passed. Such is the writing of Joyce, taking the path of transcending the unconscious (the signifying formation that presentify what has been lost by repression), defying the phallic signifier, by-passing the law of the Father (see Harari, 2002). While the enjoyment of "ordinary" people is castrated, the enjoyment of God is an absolute one, not split by language, driving people to try and decipher the nature of this enjoyment that has no limit. Joyce is a writer who enjoys his writing in this Godly way, without it he would have been reduced to nothing, to a psychotic, says Lacan. It is for this reason that the world of the artist must remain forever unknowable, unimaginable. It is a world that eludes us, going far beyond what can be our enjoyment from the artist's product of creation; the genius for producing beautiful art and the taste for judging beautiful art, cannot involve the same position vis-à-vis the rule. This faint enjoyment of ours, as appreciators of art, is named 'aesthetic experience' and it predicates the

spirited action of bringing arsenals of meanings to decipher the work of genius. But the unimaginable enjoyment of Joyce is tied so intimately with writing that had the interpretive endeavor of appreciators of his work succeeded, nothing of Joyce's genius would have remained in the lines he wrote.

Joyce is the name of a particular hole in language, it is not the name of a particular subject, which is why the genius is a paradoxical entity. When Lacan was asked during his seminar if Joyce was mad, Lacan's retorted that Joyce had this desire to be an artist that preoccupies everyone, or at least as many as possible. For Joyce this over-estimation of himself was supposed to compensate for what was lacking in his estimation for everyone else, for the esteem that did not return to him from his father's gaze. His name, Joyce, came in place of the Name-of-the-Father and aimed to be bigger of any Master-Signifier. That is, if Joyce did not have writing to supplant the missing name of the castrating Father who should have constituted his son as a subject with castrated sexuality, Joyce would have been psychotic.

This is surely not a diagnosis of a case though, it only says what Joyce would have been like was he not a genius-writer. *If Joyce was to be diagnosed determinately by Lacan, he would no longer be a genius.* Diagnosing is turning the genius into a subject, giving a name to his unconscious, to his enjoyment as subject and not as genius. Diagnosis would have required to classify Joyce in terms that are in the Other and in which the particular originality of the genius would have vanished. Nature, claims Lacan in the beginning of his seminar on Joyce, is what disappears under its name; bearing a name makes nature risk being characterized by what lies outside nature.

As long as Joyce is not diagnosed, his genius is kept unarticulated but of real presence: it is nature not bearing a name. But as such genius cannot be characterized, the hole he creates in the symbolic cannot be particularized. Genius as the vanishing mediator is a paradoxical entity that cannot be articulated as subject and that vanishes as an impossibility once the nature of its originality bears a name.

Joyce acts with language as if one could explicitly articulate all echoes of a language. He provides the essence of language thereby destroying the very possibility of assuming knowledge or the very possibility of interpreting his writing knowledgeably. It is through this maneuver with language that Joyce turns himself into the subject-supposed to know, so that all literary experts will struggle with his writing for generations to come. Yet in taking over the resources of language Joyce gives up on something else. Lacan wishes to claim that Joyce lacks the fundamental

imaginary competence, that competence that enables us to construct meanings, sequences, consistent structures in language. To clarify the nature of imaginary competence and the implications of its absence, I will refer to the role of consistency in Joyce's oeuvre. Consistency is, in principle, what holds things together and as such is a fictional thing to which we attribute a real presence. We depend for instance on the imaginary consistency of our body, treating it as a container or a sack that holds the inside which we do not see. We are likewise trapped in the imaginary consistency of language, assuming that it can hold and convey determinate meanings in a systematic way. Joyce gave up, or gave up through a forced choice, on this consistency, but he did not simply violate its imaginary function (if he did, his work would have amounted to original nonsense at the most). The work of genius cannot be simply described as transgressive: originality takes a rule that cannot be known, while only an existent rule can be transgressed. For Joyce, claims Lacan, it is the language he actually writes that supplies the consistency that the body-image he lacks should have given him. Consistency is there, but it takes a *real* rather than an *imaginary* presence. Lacan demonstrates that Joyce lacks imaginary consistency through a story Joyce recounts in *The Portrait of the Artist* about an incident in which he was beaten up by his classmates. Following the incident Joyce wonders how come he felt nothing against the boy who initiated this painful beating. Joyce expresses the way he felt toward his body at that point with a metaphor: he noticed, he says, that the whole event emptied out, and he himself, was like a fruit peeled off. Joyce divulges here a strange attitude toward his own body considering the fact that the body is what gives us shape, protects us. The 'I', the sense of self one has, always depends on the image of one's body while Joyce remains unaffected by what his body went through, and the incident slides off him like a peel of a fruit. The violence leaves no trace because there is no body image to be affected by it. Joyce, like other people, does not *know* his body, as one's body is always alien to oneself as one can never fully identify with it. What we have from our body is the echo it leaves on our images and forms of language. In Joyce there is no body-image: after being injured, the I, the ego responsible for the subject's imaginary consistency, does not pop up to sustain it.

This lack of imaginary consistency attests to the particular encounter of Joyce with language, the traumatic encounter he articulates in his writing. Joyce's language is particularized by a hole that marks the missing consistency yet, at the same time, constitutes and locates the place of this consistency. Joyce lacks the imaginary consistency that gives an image to

one's body, but this lack must also take form, otherwise Joyce could not have become a writing-subject, a genius.

Kant's vanishing mediation of the case of Joyce, reveals a case in which genius invents language at every moment of using it. Joyce is a particular genius whose invention is that of going through language while omitting its imaginary dimension, by-passing the territory of meaning and sense. Joyce omitted this imaginary consistency but sent off a generation of critics to search after the meaning of his writing, just as Kant's genius, through whom the rule of nature appears in art, has sent many generations of commentators in search of the rule that will reconcile scholastic correctness with nature in this paradoxical entity.

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