

The Boy's Voice and Voices for the Boy in Joyce's "The Sisters"

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Abstract

This essay approaches Joyce's short story "The Sisters" from a psychoanalytical perspective that focuses on the question of the voice as the *object a* of the Lacanian algebra. Whereas the most relevant Lacanian readings of the tale tend to concentrate on the gaze in both its normalising function and its objectual status, this paper pays attention to three different modalities of the object voice (*lalangue*, superego, and silence) at work in the boy protagonist's relationship with Father Flynn which is radically different to the way the other characters in the story relate to the priest. As the voice *qua* object, in contrast with the gaze, has received a full systematisation only very recently (in Mladen Dolar's *A Voice and Nothing More* [2006]), this essay goes into much theoretical discussion in order to establish more firmly its central tenets and the novelty of the approach.

Keywords: voice, *lalangue*, superego, silence, Mladen Dolar, Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, "The Sisters"

1. Introduction

One of the most relevant differences —and there are a few— between the two published versions of Joyce’s “The Sisters” (*Irish Homestead* [1904] and *Dubliners* [1914]) is the addition of the dream episode in the last one. In the earliest version, readers are already told how the boy’s queer relationship with the paralytic, mentally deranged and snuff-addicted Father Flynn develops most intensely inside the dark backroom of the priest’s sisters’ “unassuming shop” (*D* 3). The 1914 text adds some more details to the account of the boy’s visits to the priest and explores more deeply the effect that this father-figure had on him through the inclusion of the boy’s dream. The dream seems like an extension of the goings-on inside the backroom, which are rendered in what narratologists call “summary” (Genette 95-99), bespeaking a frequency in tune with the compulsive nature of the boy’s subjective involvement. It is obvious for any reader —as well as for its many critics and for the other two male characters that speak in the story (old Cotter and uncle Jack)— that there is an element of perversion and obscenity in the boy/priest relationship. In this paper I have recourse to recent developments in the psychoanalytic theory of the voice, most notably, Mladen Dolar’s book-length study *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006), in order to explore how the boy’s attachment to Father Flynn not only makes him experience the inconsistency of the symbolic order and its normalising function (that regulates the discourse and behaviour of all the other characters, —Father O’Rourke, an important background figure, included—), but, in line with that, also (1) triggers his sensitivity to the pure sound of words (to the aural reverberations and similarities that constitute that defining feature of Joycean poetics which Lacan dubbed *lalangue*, “that part of language that reflects the laws of unconscious processes” [Rose 46n11]); (2) binds the boy to the agency of the superego reformulated by Lacan, in opposition to Freud, as a mortifying, obscene agency that unrelentingly

demands us to derive surplus enjoyment (*plus-de-jouir*) from our submission to the Law (*Encore* 3, 16-17; Žižek *Metastases* 67-68) and which he identifies with the voice as partial-object (“Remarks on Lagache” 572-573); and (3) makes the boy, potentially at least, responsive to the “silence,” to the lack of “sound,” with which the Joyce story closes (*D* 10, 11), a silence that Dolar labels “ethical voice,” “a silence that cannot be silenced,” “*enunciation without statement*” that pushes us, subjects, either into the moral decision of supplying “the statement ourselves,” or into the un-ethical gesture of avoiding our responsibility by submitting to the superego and stuffing this silence with its “the gross voice,” “*la grosse voix*” (*A Voice* 98; Lacan, “Remarks on Lagache” 573).¹

So, three modalities of the voice (*lalangue*, superego, and silence) are sequentially at work in a narrative focalised through the mind of a boy and that of his older self, who tells the story—though we cannot be certain about how much time has elapsed between the events and their telling so as to conclude that the narrator is an adult (this aspect remains ambiguous in the tale). The approach to “The Sisters” I rehearse in the ensuing pages, which begins with a survey of relevant criticism on the story that allows me to introduce some important background aspects, finds its closest and unique precedent in Maud Ellmann’s 2009 article “Joyce’s Voices,” a reading of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* also informed by Mladen Dolar’s study which focuses on how “Joyce [in these novels] draws our attention to the noises of language, the acoustic detritus that cannot be assimilated into meaning and intention” (384).²

2. Lacanian Criticism on “The Sisters”

Garry M. Leonard’s “The Free Man’s Journal: The Making of His[S]tory in ‘The Sisters,’” chapter 2 of his 1993 book *Reading Dubliners Again*, remains the most comprehensive Lacanian approach to the Joyce story. Leonard’s central thesis

is that “The Sisters” dramatises the boy’s painful birth as a speaking subject capable of telling his story in ways radically different to those of the adults around him, an undertaking that makes him “aware of some lack at the center of his own being that he would like to fill with the truth about himself” (Leonard 26). This lack is caused by what psychoanalysis calls “castration”: the access to the primordial object of our attachment (the mother) is blocked, prohibited, and this prohibition opens up the field of symbolisation, the order of language *and* social regulations that organises reality and where the subject finds his/her place and derives his/her identity as a speaking being.

Leonard focuses on how the boy in “The Sisters” is driven by an impulse to complete himself, to make up for the loss of the primordial object that leaves a gap in his being; this being the reason why he is recurrently “drawn to those objects whose presence is undercut by an absence (the geometric figure of the *gnomon* is the primary example)” (26). This impulse, Leonard states, is what Lacan calls “desire,” which is unappeasable for a subject. Indeed, the subject is not only aware of his own lack (represented by Lacan as \$, the desiring subject traversed by a gap, which is the line that splits the S), but experiences the lack of the Other, the symbolic order

(which is also crossed out: “Ø”).³ Leonard rightly identifies this division at the heart of the symbolic order that permanently undermines its coherence as the Lacanian “Real,” and he interprets the narrator’s initial reference to “some maleficent and sinful being” (*D* 3) who carries out “its deadly work” in terms of the unsymbolisable Real. Part of Leonard’s discussion focuses also on how critics and readers have traditionally tried to avoid the traumatic awareness of their own incompleteness as subjects in their engagement with the story by producing totalising interpretations that are not sustained by (unambiguous) pieces of textual evidence, the most obvious and recurrent being the idea that the boy’s conflicts are caused by the priest’s sexual abuse. I agree with Leonard in that “Joyce is extremely careful to have the text offer no real

authority for having taken this way out" (30), even if, as Tejedor Cabrera has thoroughly established, the pervert in the next story of the collection, "An Encounter," echoes many defining traits that go into the characterisation of Father Flynn in "The Sisters" (28, 348-349n17). This does not mean, however, that the priest is not firmly associated with obscenity and perversion in the mind of the boy as in the dream he inhabits "some pleasant and vicious region" (*D* 5). Moreover, even those firmly inserted in the symbolic order and operating according to its norms⁴ betray an attitude of tolerance and/or repressed criticism towards child abuse inside the institution of the Roman Catholic Church, still a topical issue. The adults' awareness is hinted at through broken sentences like old

Cotter's "'theory'" that Father Flynn's is "'one of those ... peculiar cases ...'" (*D* 4). The implicit expression of a general awareness of an obscene element present in clerical instruction is condensed in the double meaning of the word "wish" in uncle Jack's statement on the priest's plan for his disciple to enter the seminary: "'they say he had a great wish for him'" (*D* 4). As Slavoj Žižek has repeatedly argued, the symbolic order of the Law has an obscene underside which many know about but which must remain silenced, particularly within institutions themselves, where it may function, paradoxically, as binding force: that is, as a "'dirty secret,'" an "inherent transgression" (*Plague* 57, 77) of the Law that is publicly disavowed yet helps cement the community.⁵ Though I will not develop this specific idea, my analysis of the boy's relation to the superegoic voice in section 5 below is to a certain extent related to it.

As Leonard explains, the boy's progress towards "gaining his own word" (25) and becoming a speaking subject begins with his attempt to free himself from what, in Lacanian terms, is the "'normalising' gaze" (38) of the adults. In the initial supper scene, when the three adults are discussing Father Flynn and his relationship with the boy, old Cotter's censorious gaze is singled out as the object of the boy's aggressiveness:

I knew that *I was under observation* so I continued eating as if the news had not interested me [...] Old Cotter *looked at me* for a while. *I felt that his little beady eyes were examining me but I would not satisfy him by looking up from my plate.* [...] I crammed my mouth with stirabout for fear I might give utterance to my anger. Tiresome old rednosed imbecile! (*D* 4-5, emphases added)

Leonard has recourse to the Lacanian difference between *moi* (ego) and *je* (the speaking subject) to explain what is at stake here. The pre-symbolic (imaginary) identification with an ideal of oneself (which finds its origin in the famous mirror stage) is mediated by the gaze of the Other when one becomes a subject of the symbolic order: “subjectivity depends on the imagined gaze of the Other” (43).⁶ The boy changes the locus of this authorising gaze from the adults around him —there are hints in the text that old Cotter might have played a reassuring role for the boy in the past— to Father Flynn, who fails to work as such as the dream demonstrates. The Real exerts its pressure in the dream, spoiling the coherence of the symbolic order and upsetting whichever balance the subject reaches at the conscious level in his or her recourse to the Other to reconfirm his or her identity. Leonard states that “What one might call the Real subject is unconscious and beyond *moi* constructions and *je* dialogues” (34). The boy experiences in the dream the disquieting fact that the Law has no origin, that it can be transferred, that roles can be reversed. Hence, whereas Father Flynn’s smile served to “authenticate and authorize the boy’s mass responses” when awake, it is eventually transferred in the dream to the boy, who smiles while listening to the priest whose “voice [...] is n]othing more or less than his [the boy’s] own earlier conscious *je* ramblings that he pattered while Father Flynn smiled” (Leonard 39, 53). The dream reveals to the boy that what he took to be his own discourse in conscious

life does not belong to him, that it always comes from the Other.

In a previous Lacanian approach to “silence in *Dubliners*,” Jean-Michel Rabaté, whom Leonard duly quotes, had already stressed how the coherence and unity of the symbolic order was undermined in “The Sisters.” The pieces of information that the boy gathers from the adults lack full validity for him as interpreter, so that, when he recalls his dream, “it becomes obvious that the symbolic realm of interpretation exhibits gaps which are soon filled by imaginary fantasies [that] contaminate the interpretive process” (Rabaté 49). The issue of the lack at the heart of the symbolic order that structures reality in “The Sisters” is approached by Laurent Milesi from the perspective of the notion of anamorphosis on which Lacan drew to develop his theory of the gaze found in *Seminar XI (Four Fundamental Concepts 67-119)*. Anamorphosis is a pictorial technique in which an image appears distorted to the front view and reveals its true shape only when looked at sidewise. Lacan’s favourite example is Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533), a portrait of two diplomats who stand in a proud attitude surrounded by the symbols of human knowledge and power (a globe, a musical instrument, books, etc.) with an elongated and enigmatic white blot seemingly floating in the foreground which catches our attention and shrinks back into the actual shape of a skull when observed from the far right. Historically speaking, the skull works as a reminder of the (Renaissance) viewer’s death and of the vanity of human achievement. From the structural point of view, the anamorphic blot is there to show to us that “as subjects, we are *literally* called into the picture, and represented there as caught” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 92, emphasis added). In sum, the blot is the blind spot in the visual field (picture or observed reality at large) which gazes back at us, escaping and undermining our power of scopic control.⁷ Laurent Milesi cleverly reads “The Sisters” as a struggle for scopic control beginning with the boy “doggedly refus[ing] to raise his eyes to the self-righteous

assembly” and “turning the priest into an object [... in order] to divest the cleric of his symbolic function as father” until “a literary transposition of the optical process of the anamorphosis can be seen at work near the end of ‘The Sisters’” (93, 97, 105). Indeed, Eliza Flynn’s account of how “‘Father O’Rourke and another priest’” found her brother “‘sitting up by himself in the dark in his confession box, wideawake and laughing-like softly to himself’” after a desperate search for him “works as an anamorphic erection insofar as it confronts them with the vanity and vacuity of (religion in) their own lives which gazes at them/they gaze at but which they do not want to see” (*D* 11; Milesi, 108). Milesi concludes that, in a like manner, readers should not be blinded by their scopic drive to impose a finalising perspective on the story, but, rather, to see that which in the text “is looking at us or concerns us.” (112)

3. From gaze to voice as Objects

It is evident from what I argued above that Lacan-inspired approaches to Joyce’s “The Sisters” have privileged the visual over the aural, the gaze over the voice. The gaze, as we have seen, either fulfils a normalising function by binding the subject to the Law, or dismantles the coherence of symbolically-organised reality and upsets the balance of the subject’s relation to it.⁸ It is in this second sense that the gaze comes closer to Lacan’s conception of it as a partial object, as *objet a*, which he adds to the list of partial objects “described by [previous] analytic theory: the mamilla, the feces, the phallus (as an imaginary object), and the urinary flow” (“Subversion of the Subject” 693). The section on the gaze as one of the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis in Lacan’s *Seminar XI* is unequivocally titled “Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 65), and it is there where we come across the definition of *objet a* as “a privileged object [...] which has emerged from some primal separation, from some self-mutilation induced by the very approach of the

real” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 83). In more clear terms, *objet a* can be defined as “a paradoxical object, which is the remainder of the real in the subject and the Other. [...] It is associated with the real of enjoyment in the form of the remainder of enjoyment which we gave up in ‘castration,’ and can only accede to in the form of the mysterious surplus, or *plus-de-jouir*, of the law” (Kay 165-166). So, the Lacanian object —I will refer to *objet petit a* simply as “object” from now on— is, as Kay says, “paradoxical” in the sense that for reality to constitute itself, for the subject to have an experience, a sense of reality as consistent, it must be excluded, subtracted. If it is included, if it becomes too present, then, as with the blotch/skull in *The Ambassadors*, reality becomes incoherent, loses its consistency, disintegrates. As Mladen Dolar argues in relation to the mirror stage:

The gaze as the object, cleft from the eye, is precisely what is dissimulated by the image in which one recognizes oneself; it is not something that could be present in the field of vision, yet haunts it from the inside. It appears as part of the image [...] it immediately disrupts the established reality, and leads to catastrophe. (*A Voice* 41)

Yet, apart from the gaze, there was another relevant object added by Lacan to the set of partial objects: namely, the voice. The novelty and potential of the object voice as a concept was, however, soon overshadowed and thwarted by the gaze, which was risen to the status of a fundamental psychoanalytical notion in the work of Lacan and his followers.⁹ This being so, it comes as no surprise that Lacanian approaches to Joyce’s “The Sisters” have obviated the role of the voice in the story and focused instead on the gaze as the *object* of critical interest. The underdevelopment of the voice as a technical concept in psychoanalysis is quite striking, considering that psychoanalysis is a practice based precisely on

listening to someone speak. Similarly, the significance of the voice *qua* object has passed virtually unnoticed for psychoanalytic criticism on “The Sisters,” a story of a boy’s relation to a priest who is presented as little more than a voice (a narrating, questioning, instructing, laughing, murmuring and, eventually, silent voice), a narrative that is told from a subjective perspective that systematically zooms in to focus on the priest’s mouth, lips, tongue, and teeth, and never on the eyes, which are not even mentioned (unlike old Cotter’s). But, of course, while Lacan produced a full-fledged theory of the gaze, he did not bequeath to his followers a fully-developed theory of the voice that critics could use. The concept of voice object was later elaborated by Slavoj Žižek, Michel Chion and Mladen Dolar, whose 2006 book *A Voice and Nothing More* is a long due systematisation of this concept, a successful attempt of, in Dolar’s own words, “[r]edressing the balance” (*A Voice* 127).¹⁰

How are we, then, to define the object voice? What is its distinguishing trait? The most clear-cut answer to this question is to be found in chapter 2 of Mladen Dolar’s book: “It [the voice] is a non-signifying remainder resistant to the signifying operations, a leftover heterogeneous to structural logic, but precisely as such it seems to present a sort of counterweight to differentiability” (*A Voice* 36). This is exactly what the vector going from “Signifier” to “Voice” expresses in the second graph of desire in Lacan’s “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” reproduced below:

THE BOY'S VOICE AND VOICES FOR THE BOY

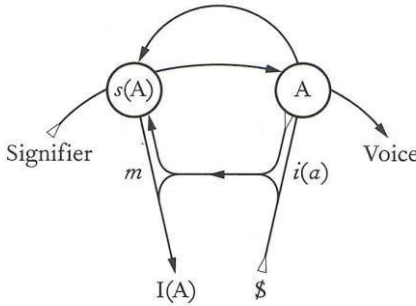


Figure 1. Lacan's Graph 2 of desire ("Subversion of the Subject" 684)

This graph, which Dolar takes as his starting-point, represents the crossing of two major vectors: one going from "\$" to "I(A),"¹¹ symbolising the process of the subject's assumption of a social ideal articulated in language (akin to the constitution of subjects in ideology through interpellation of the Althusserian model I will mention later) and the other one going from "Signifier" to "Voice" through $s(A)$ and A , which stands for "the signifying chain reduced to its minimal features, which yields, as a result or as a leftover, the voice" (*A Voice* 35). What Lacan expresses in schematic fashion and what Dolar develops at length in his study is the idea that the voice is neither some raw material that passes through the grid of differentiability and is drained of its substance in the meaning-making process, nor is it to be reduced to a set of phonological features, nor to be confined to some realm completely alien to signifying operations: the voice is, rather, a residue of these operations: in sum, "the object in the Lacanian sense" (*A Voice* 36).¹² The three modalities of the voice mentioned at the beginning of this essay (*lalangue*, superego, and silence) must, therefore, be understood in terms of the voice *qua* object, of the object voice. If psychoanalytic criticism on "The Sisters" has viewed the story by *focusing on the gaze*, I want to *prick up my ears and listen attentively to the voices to be heard* in the account of the boy's relation to the priest.

4. *Lalangue ab ovo*: the Beginning of “The Sisters”

Like the gaze, the object voice troubles the subject's relation with the Other, it undermines the coherence of the symbolic order and unsettles the functioning of its normalising identifications. The boy's attachment to Father Flynn makes him confront the rest of figures of authority, subjects firmly inserted within the symbolic order who act, speak and think according to its rules, to the Law. These characters react to

Father Flynn's case and his relationship with the boy according to the symbolic positions which, as subjects, are allotted to them by dominant patriarchal ideology. Thus, whereas women behave as caring, humane, self-denying, naïve beings who either lament their brother's suffering and insanity (the Flynn sisters), or cannot figure out what could have been wrong with the boy's close relationship with the priest (aunt), men either consider unbecoming the boy's close intimacy with “one of those ... peculiar cases” (*D* 4) (old Cotter and, along with him, uncle Jack), or stand as apt substitutes for Father Flynn as authority figures (Father O'Rourke). The adults' subjective position is stable and the consistency of the language they use is never compromised: even if they ignore some facts or are troubled by what they cannot understand, their words communicate meaning clearly and their silences hide what must be left implicit. As Tejedor Cabrera points out in relation to old Cotter and Eliza: “their discourses are established by the community, and both characters say what they are supposed to say, so that it should be easy to ‘reconstruct’ or ‘normalise’ their elliptical phrases.” (26, my translation)

With the boy, however, it happens otherwise. His relationship with the priest affects his perception of and sensitivity to language in a way that it becomes for him a more unstable medium whose constitutive elements (words) produce strange echoes and reverberations. This is most apparent in the famous opening paragraph of the story, in which the narrator recalls reading the luminous signs in the priest's window and

drawing the conclusion that he had died. But, despite all the references to the boy's gazing, seeing, inspecting and studying, his frame of mind is singularly predetermined by some phrase the priest had pronounced in the course of their meetings and which is, revealingly, the only instance of the priest's speech quoted directly in the story: "*I am not long for this world*" (D 3). He can read the visual signs easily (he knows the priest is dead because he is acquainted with the practice of funereal rituals), but is mystified by the sound of words, by the sheer *objective* materiality emanating from three signifiers that are interconnected in his mind:

He had often said to me: *I am not long for the world*, and I had thought his words idle. Now I knew they were true. Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word *paralysis*. It had always sounded strangely in my ears like the word *gnomom* in the Euclid and the words *simony* in the catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work. (D 3)

The three signifiers come —as all signifiers do— from the Other, from the symbolic order, from (in this case) the educational-religious institutions that shape the boy into a subject that should occupy an appropriate position within discursively-structured social reality. The process through which the symbolic order addresses the subject to make him/her occupy his/her position within the structure, carry out the functions appropriate to this position and, in return, derive a sense of identity as a social being is called by Louis Althusser "*interpellation*" ("Ideology and ISAs" 115-120). It is through the discourse deriving from, and the practices carried out within, the Ideological State Apparatuses (the ISAs: family, school, church, etc.) that the dominant ideology that structures

a given social formation perpetuates itself. Although Althusser's functionalist theory serves to explain the attitudes and views of the rest of the characters as social subjects, it falls short in accounting for the boy's predicament in the story as the latter experiences how the symbolic order (taken as a rough synonym of Althusser's concept of ideology) is inconsistent, how the Other (the order of language and social regulations) is also traversed by a lack (\emptyset). If the subject in the Althusserian model comes down to being little less than an automaton programmed by the ISAs,¹³ in Lacan the speaking subject is the subject of a desire he cannot appease through recourse to the

Other because the latter "is also *barré*, crossed-out [..., that it] is in itself blocked, desiring; that there is also a desire of the Other." (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 122)

According to Sheldon Brivic, Lacan and Joyce share the view that reality is symbolically constructed and that this construction is mutable and unstable, rather than fully coherent. Thus, in reference to Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Brivic writes: "In his [Stephen's] impression that life is made up of language that comes from an unknown source and keeps changing, he grasps the actuality not only of his life, but of all life in Joyce, and these uneasy reflections lead ultimately to the wordshifts of *Finnegans Wake*" (2). Stephen's experience of the wordshifts —Brivic's example is the shift from "ivy" to "ivory" in Stephen's mind after hearing the first word repeated in a drivel when walking to the University (*P* 179)¹⁴ —is in line with his early approach to language, to men's conversations in pubs in particular, in which twelve-year-old boy Stephen exhibited a compulsory fascination with the sound of words beyond or before meaning: "Words which he did not understand he said over and over to himself till he had learned them by heart: and through them he had glimpses of the real world around him" (*P* 62). These two moments from Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist* illustrate, respectively, the boy's attention to the materiality of words and an interconnection among signifiers in the mind of young Stephen which is not based on difference (the way signification

ascribes signifieds to signifiers), but, contrarily, on similarities, echoes, reverberations, co-sonances among words that distort clear communication and, according to psychoanalysis, “are the ‘raw material’ of unconscious processes” (*A Voice* 139). Commenting on Freud’s analysis of the slips of the tongue in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), Dolar states:

Words, quite contingently, sound alike, to a greater or lesser degree, which makes them liable to contamination; their mutual sound contacts can transform them, distort them [...] In this contamination a new formation is born—a slip, which may sound like nonsense but produces the emergence of another sense. (*A Voice* 140)

Around the words that make up a signifying chain (words as signifiers) there float a number of words (words as sound objects) absent from the chain which bear some phonetic resemblance with the former and which lie in wait to erupt and undermine the process of signification based on a clear-cut differential logic. But, as Dolar argues, “the sound conflation functions as the break of signification and *at the same time the source of another signification*,” of a new sense (*A Voice* 144, emphasis added). Dolar highlights the fact that structuralism itself drew a firm boundary between “sound” (object) and “sense” (signifiers). As the work of Roman Jakobson demonstrates, linguistics deals with words “on the level of meaning [...] deprives them of their phonic substance and reduces them to purely differential entities,” while poetics focuses on the phonic substance of words, on how they reverberate and produce aesthetic effects without making sense (*A Voice* 147). In a similar vein, Lacan distinguished throughout most of his career between “signifier” as the bearer of meaning and “voice” as “the object presenting a heterogeneous moment of enjoyment [*jouissance*] ‘beyond’ language,” going as far as to say that “*jouissance* is prohibited

to whoever speaks, as such” (*A Voice* 144; “Subversion of the Subject” 696). But in his later years, from *Encore* (1972-1973) onwards, Lacan undid this distinction between language and *jouissance*, between words as signifiers and words as sound objects, and brought them together under the concept of *lalangue*. *Lalangue* means that the split between what belongs to language and what is external to it is relocated *inside* language itself and becomes “the internal split of language as such” (*A Voice* 144). The signifier and the voice relate in their divergence *inside* language, so that “enjoyment becomes the inner element of speech itself—it inundates speech, yet without engulfing it; it invades it in such a way the logic of difference constantly intersects with the logic of similarities and reverberations” (Dolar, *A Voice* 144-145). Reversing Lacan’s dictum from “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” enjoyment is awarded to whoever speaks, or, as Dolar puts it, “every sense is always *jouis-sens, le sens joui*.” (*A Voice* 145)

Through Joyce’s *oeuvre* the presence of co-sonances, puns, reverberations, and echoes grows larger and larger, and intersects more and more intensely with the logic of difference that produces clear-cut meanings, making Joyce’s texts increasingly more difficult to read. In *Encore*, a work saturated with wordplay *à la Joyce*, Lacan stated that if *Finnegans Wake*, an unreadable and untranslatable work, is not simply nonsensical, “[i]t is because the signifiers fit together, combine, and concertina [... so] that something is produced by way of meaning that may seem enigmatic, but is clearly what is closest to what we analysts [...] have to read—slips of the tongue” (37).¹⁵ Joyce is indeed the author of *lalangue par excellence*.

If Joycean *lalangue* reached its apex in *Finnegans Wake*, we can find it *ab ovo*, in a nutshell, in the passage from the first paragraph of “The Sisters” quoted above. This early text is much more readable than Joyce’s later works in spite of its numerous ambiguities and silences, yet the combination of *paralysis*, *gnomon* and *simony* in the mind of the boy is an early example of the *lalangue* intersections that were

increasingly exploited by the author in his work. Undoubtedly, as a myriad of critics have stated, those three words have multiple symbolic meanings that work as interpretive keys not only for the rest of the story but for *Dubliners* as a whole by virtue of being located at the beginning of the collection and, particularly in the case of *paralysis*, by echoing Joyce's diagnosis of turn-of-the-century Irish society in his correspondence.¹⁶ Critics and editors have provided readers with a set of meanings for each of the three words and have established their interrelations on the basis of their scriptural, intellectual and scientific history.¹⁷ This set of meanings and historical interrelations may account for the fact that *paralysis*, *gnomon* and *simony* are linked in the mind of someone who seems to be a diligent schoolboy and devoted acolyte. However, if we attend to the sound of these words, as the boy does, then, their association can be seen under another light, as regulated *also* by a different principle that lies before and beyond acquired knowledge. I am referring to echoes and phonic similarities linking, in the order in which they appear in the text, *paralysis* to *gnomon* through the absent term *parallelogram* (which is present in the definition of *gnomon* the boy read, probably aloud, in Euclid),¹⁸ and *gnomon* to *simony*. Intersecting with the logic of differentiability that yields clear-cut meanings, we find the logic of sound similarity and reverberation in an early example of Joycean *lalangue*.

5. The Obscene Voice of the Superego: the Middle of “The Sisters”

The close connection between superego and voice was already established by Freud in his earliest formulations on this mental agency. In “On Narcissism: An Introduction” (1914), the superego (which at this point Freud still calls “conscience”) is an internalisation of “parental criticism” and of that coming from the social environment at large which is “conveyed to him [the individual] through the medium of *the voice*” (408,

emphasis added). Later on, in “The Ego and the Id” (1923), Freud stated categorically that “it cannot possibly be disputed that the super-ego, no less than the ego, is derived from *auditory impressions*” (714, emphasis added). The superego in Freud is the mental agency that regulates an individual’s adaptability to the social ideal he/she identifies with by delivering pleasure (love) when he/she does adapt to this ideal and inflicting pain (guilt) whenever he/she is not up to the ideal both in thought and/or action.¹⁹ The Lacanian superego is likewise a voice, but a voice whose main characteristic is that of being an awe-inspiring senseless sound object:

the superego, in its intimate imperative, [...] is a voice first and foremost, a vocal one at that, and without any authority other than that of being a [...] gross] voice: a voice that at least one text in the Bible tells us was heard by the people parked around Mount Sinai. This enunciation echoed back to them their own murmur, the Tables of the Law being nonetheless necessary in order for them to know what it enunciated.

Now, for those who know how to read, what is written on those tables is nothing but the laws of Speech itself. In other words the person truly begins with the *per-sona*, but where does personality begin? An ethics arises, which is converted to silence, but not by way of fear, but of desire; and the question is how analysis’ pathway of chatter leads to it. (Lacan, “Remarks on Lagache” 572-573)²⁰

Leaving aside for the moment the crucial link that Lacan establishes between silence and desire as the ground of ethics in the second paragraph,²¹ it is clear (despite Lacan’s proverbially difficult style) that, in the end, the Law derives its authority from a pure, meaningless voice which is only later normalised, made sense of by being enunciated in the

prescriptions of the Law that bind subjects to the Other (in this case, the Ten Commandments). Lacan's reference to the Tables of the Law is not gratuitous, or in any way metaphorical: it literally refers to the Biblical episode that, for Lacan and for Dolar, after him, best exemplifies the general, universal principle of there being "a voice without content that sticks to the Law, the support of the Law, underpinning its letter" (*A Voice* 54). In *Exodus*, the people of Israel led by Moses hear "a very loud trumpet blast" in the midst of "thunder and lightning" and "they all fear and trembled," wanting Moses to speak to them but not to let "God speak to us, or we shall die" (*Exodus* 19:6 and 20:18 qtd. Dolar, *A Voice* 54). This sound of the trumpet as the fearful and traumatically incomprehensible voice of God is what is reproduced in Jewish religious rituals in which a primitive horn called *shofar* is blown. Lacan, following Theodor Riek, interprets the *shofar* as the dying cry of the obscene primal father of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* whom his sons had to murder in order to establish a balanced society based on the prohibition that each of its members had access to the *jouissance* that the primal father of the horde had enjoyed in full (Dolar, "Object Voice" 25-28; Dolar, *A Voice* 52-55). Stuck to the Law, to any power edifice or historically specific social formation structured by a given dominant ideology, there is always an obscene remainder, a senseless supplement, a traumatic leftover of its very foundation which bears witness to the lack in the Other (Ø) while at once covering this lack, stuffing it with its sound objectuality (object voice, voice as *objet petit a*). As Dolar writes, "[t]he law itself, in its pure form, before commanding anything specific, is epitomized by the voice, the voice that commands total compliance, although it is senseless in itself." (*A Voice* 53)

What has been argued above provides the necessary background to understand why Lacan qualified Freud's theory of socialisation substantially by holding that the superego is an obscene agency that not only commands us to submit to the Law, but also to derive enjoyment from this subjection. As he states downrightly in *Encore*: "The superego is the imperative

of jouissance — Enjoy!” (3). In binding the subject to the Law, “the Name-of-the-Father,” the agency of symbolic authority that bars *jouissance*, needs the collaboration of “the reverse side of the Father that Lacan calls *le-père-la-jouissance*” (Dolar, *A Voice* 55). As Lacan did with Freud, so Slavoj Žižek does with Althusser and his theory of the ideological constitution of subjects. Subjects are interpellated, assume an identity in ways similar (Althusser quotes Lacan) to the baby’s identification with the image in the mirror, and behave accordingly to the ideals, values and beliefs dominant ideology instils into them through the Ideological State Apparatuses.

One of Althusser’s key contributions to the theory of ideology was his view that ideology was not simply a question of ideas, values and beliefs, but of how those ideas, values and beliefs are inscribed in the practices carried out by subjects within the ISAs. Furthermore, quoting a fragment from Blaise Pascal’s *pensée* 233 (“Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe”), Althusser put forth the anti-intuitive thesis that practice *comes first* and beliefs, values and ideas follow as a result (Pascal qtd. in Althusser 114). Žižek’s turn of the screw to the Althusserian model is his presupposition of an initial, unconscious belief that had led Pascal’s sceptic to kneel down, pray and consciously think that he did it because he believed.

In sum, in ideology what is at play is a “*belief before belief*” (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 40). Žižek adds the first element in the following series: belief-practice-belief. Quoting a passage from another of Pascal’s *Pensées* where unconscious habit is considered the presupposed ground of belief,²² Žižek says that the bottom line of our ideological constitution as subjects is “that we must obey it [the Law] not because it is just, good or even beneficial, but simply *because it is the law*” (*Sublime Object* 37). The superego as a senseless, irrational force is a voice that binds us *unconsciously* to the symbolic order, and what we get in return is not just a conscious sense of identity and a pacifying integration in society, but also a *plus-de-jouir*, a surplus of enjoyment for having obeyed its imperative which is traumatic because we feel guilty for not being faithful to our

desire. Lacan states in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* that “[T]he only thing of which one can be guilty of is of having given ground relative to one’s desire” (319). The superego turns out, *contra* Freud, an un-ethical agency whose voice must be dispelled through the steadfast commitment to a desire whose status is truly ethical and which is linked to silence.²³

In “The Sisters,” this obscene underside of the Law remains totally unconscious for the adult characters. They are perfectly integrated within the symbolic order in which a new figure of paternal authority, Father O’Rourke, seems to have occupied the place left by Father Flynn, a character who failed to measure up to his position of symbolic authority, to act as he was expected to act. Thus, we listen to Eliza and the boy’s aunt say about Father Flynn that “[t]he duties of priesthood was too much for him,” that “his life was, you might say, cross,” that “he was a disappointed man,” that “[he] was so nervous” and that, even “one night he was wanted for to go on a call and they couldn’t find him anywhere” (*D* 10-11). Despite all the trouble and the pain for their loss, things run smoothly in the social universe these characters inhabit. But in the boy’s case, it is otherwise: his is a traumatic discovery of the obscene reverse of ideological interpellation and practices, of which the rest of the characters are unaware. They are not conscious of the enjoyment involved in normative practices, in, for instance, the responses in the mass ritual which they utter automatically, or in prayer itself, as in Pascal’s example.

Enjoyment has to be adequately administered by power as its necessary supplement, yet if subjects are too exposed to it, too conscious of it, then it may prove traumatic in its excess. The dark backroom of the sisters’ shop is indeed the privileged scenario of the boy’s ideological interpellation and practice.

The initial stages of his instruction seem to run smoothly, yet it becomes increasingly traumatising for him. In the narrator’s summary account of his encounters with the priest, we can soon detect subtle traces of obscene innuendo which increase till it culminates in a dream that is thematically and spatially continuous with the backroom goings-on. To express it

graphically, the course of the boy's relationship with Father Flynn progresses along a Moebius strip: it begins at a point of absolute normality and propriety and moves on till it reaches its obscene, luxuriant reverse. This progression is accompanied by an ongoing reduction of the priest's body: first it fades into the darkness of the room, afterwards it becomes just a head, and finally it turns into a drooling, smiling mouth that ends up uttering a senseless murmur to which the boy attributes a meaning in the dream.²⁴ I quote from the text, highlighting in italics relevant words and phrases:

he [Father Flynn] had taught me to pronounce Latin properly. He had told me stories about the catacombs and about Napoleon Bonaparte and he had explained to me the meaning of the different ceremonies of the mass and of the different vestments worn by the priest. Sometimes he had *amused himself by putting difficult questions to me*, asking me what one should do in certain circumstances or whether such and such sins were mortal or venial or only imperfections. His questions showed me *how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the church* which I had always regarded as the simplest acts. The duties of the priest towards the eucharist and towards the secrecy of the confessional seemed so grave to me that I wondered how anybody had ever found in himself the courage to undertake them: and I was not surprised when he told me that the fathers of the church had written books as thick as the post office directory and as closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper elucidating all these intricate questions. Often when I thought of this *I could make no answer or only a very foolish and halting one upon which he used to smile and nod his head twice or thrice.*

Sometimes he used to put me through the responses of the mass which he had made me learn by heart: and *as I pattered he used to smile pensively and nod his head, now and then pushing huge pinches of snuff up each nostril alternately. When he smiled he used to uncover his big discoloured teeth and let his tongue lie upon his lower lip—a habit which had made me feel uneasy in the beginning of our acquaintance* before I knew him well. (D 6-7, emphases added)

The priest's face becomes a detached persecutory object in the dream (or in the transition to the dream) which along with the motif of the drooling mouth link the following passage to the last lines of the one quoted in the first place. Though the first part of the narrator's account of the dream precedes the passage about the visits to the backroom, the former is a prolongation of the latter. Both passages are physically located in dark rooms:

In the dark of my room I imagined that I saw *again the heavy grey face of the paralytic*. I drew the blankets over my head and tried to think of Christmas. *But the grey face followed me. It murmured and I understood that it desired to confess something. I felt my soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region and there I again I found it waiting for me. It began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why the lips were so moist with spittle.* But I remembered that it had died of paralysis and *I felt that I too was smiling feebly as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin.* (D 5, emphases added)

In the passage right after the first one, the narrator completes his relation of the dream which he cuts short saying he could

not remember—a forgetfulness that could be taken as an index of repression at the moment the oniric experience of *jouissance* became unbearable:²⁵

As I walked along in the sun I remembered old Cotter's words and tried to remember what had happened afterwards in the dream. I remembered that *I had noticed long velvet curtains and a swinging lamp of antique fashion. I felt that I had been very far away, in some land where the customs were strange, in Persia. I thought. But I could not remember the end of the dream.* (D 7, emphasis added)

By rearranging the passages in a sequence that fits the course of events in the story, it becomes apparent that Father Flynn's voice works functionally at the beginning (the priest perfects the boy's Latin, and teaches him church history and rituals), but soon acquires a tinge of obscenity ("amused himself") when the priest bombards the boy with questions that perplex and mystify him and puts him through the responses of the mass —smiling whenever the boy fails to provide an adequate answer or when he patters mechanically phrases learned by heart. The boy's calm denial (at the end of the first passage) of being troubled by what he perceived in the priest as odd and disquieting (smile, teeth, tongue lying on lower lip) belies a profound anxiety that shows in a dream in which he is persecuted by that very face and "its" drivelling mouth that spits out a meaningless murmur —Tejedor Cabrera rightly describes it as "pre-verbal more than verbal," "*a voice without words*" (33, 44, emphasis added, my translation). The boy's attribution of a specific meaning ('confession') to the priest's murmur goes hand in hand with a reversal of roles (the acolyte becomes the confessor and the priest, the confessed) in an a growingly lubricous, licentious atmosphere that mutates into "some pleasant and vicious region" of loose Oriental sensuality about which the narrator can give only some initial details

because the boy “could not remember the end of the dream.” (D 5)

We can go a step further and conclude this section on the superegoic object voice by arguing that the relationship boy-priest exhibits the unequivocal signs of how power is sexualised. There are no textual evidences of sexual activity in the story. To the question posed by one of Joyce's editors, George Roberts (Maunsel & Co), whether there was “sodomy also in ‘The Sisters’” (*Letters II* 305), the most plausible answer for me is “no,” or “there is no way for us to know.” As I stated at the beginning of this essay, I agree with Garry M.

Leonard's criticism that to entertain the idea that the boy had been sodomised by the priest is an easy and illegitimate way of explaining away the boy's real traumatic experience.²⁶ But this does not mean that sexuality is not involved: it is, and very profoundly, because sexuality contaminates the process of the boy's socialisation in the hands (mouth, actually) of a priest whom he chooses as the figure of paternal authority. This contamination also entails the reversal of roles witnessed in the dream. Yet, how can this happen? “how does a power edifice become [...] sexualized?” Žižek asks in *The Plague of Fantasies* (71). It is worth quoting Žižek's answer to this question because it helps us to delve deeper into what the text *does tell us* about the boy's predicament in the “The Sisters”:

When ideological interpellation fails to seize the subject (when the symbolic ritual of a power edifice no longer runs smoothly, when the subject is no longer able to assume the symbolic mandate conferred upon him), it ‘gets stuck’ in a repetitive vicious cycle, and it is this

‘dysfunctional’ empty repetitive movement which sexualizes power, smearing it with a stain of obscene enjoyment. The point, of course, is that there never was a purely symbolic Power without an obscene supplement: the structure of a power edifice is always minimally

inconsistent, so that it needs a minimum of sexualization, of the stain of obscenity to reproduce itself. Another aspect of this failure is that a power relation becomes sexualized when an intrinsic ambiguity creeps in, so that it is no longer clear who is actually the master and who the servant. [...T]his radical ambiguity confers on the scene the character of perverted sexuality. (71)

In the boy's mind, the voice of the priest soon loses its normalising power and becomes a superegoic voice that orders him to enjoy participating in a perverse drama in which the roles are reversed. The obscene underside of power, which must remain unconscious and controlled, shows openly, and this manifestation proves traumatic.

6. The Forking Paths of Silence *qua* Object Voice: the End of "The Sisters"

The affirmation that "the subject is no longer able to assume the symbolic mandate conferred upon him," in the above-quoted passage from Žižek's *The Plague of Fantasies*, applies equally well to Father Flynn. He fails to fulfil his duties, including that of instructing this promising young fellow on his way to priesthood. The reason for Flynn's failure is, of course, his mental imbalance. Critics have attributed the priest's madness to causes like syphilis (Weisbren and Walzl), demoniac possession (Friedrich), masturbation (Tejedor Cabrera 42-43), the broken chalice (Eliza),²⁷ and so on. But if we look at this question from the perspective of the voice as obscene supplement of the Law, then, we can come up with just another hypothesis.

One of the most important cases in psychoanalytical studies of serious mental disturbances is that of Judge Schreber. Though based on the patient's own published

Memoirs and not on direct interviews, Schreber's case is central in Freud's study of paranoia and Lacan's comments on the psychoses.²⁸ Žižek, for his part, complements Eric Santner's previous thesis that Schreber's case has to be interpreted within the context of the period's "crisis of investiture" (incapability of assuming a position of authority; a promotion in the judicial career in Schreber's case). For Žižek, the reason why Schreber fell ill and began to have "psychotic hallucinations about being sexually persecuted by the obscene God," just when he was about to assume a public position of relevance, was his inability "to come to terms with the stain of obscenity which formed an integral part of the functioning of symbolic authority" (*Plague* 72-73). The cause of Flynn's insanity may be somehow interpreted in similar terms: there could have been a point in his career in which the obscene underside of religion became unbearable for him so that he lost his mental balance and ended up "in the dark in his confession box, wideawake and laughing-like softly to himself" (*D* 11). As I commented on in the previous section, the founding manifestation of this obscene superego in the Judeo-Christian tradition is God's voice in *Exodus*. It is not so much God's silence that might have affected Father Flynn so profoundly, but, rather, God's gross voice, that voice that echoed the murmur of the awe-stricken people of Israel to which the Tables of the Law gave *a posteriori* a meaningful articulation, rephrasing Lacan's statements in "Remarks on Daniel Lagache's Presentation." Whereas organised religion can deal with the "remainder of a presupposed and terrible Father's *jouissance* which could not be absorbed by the Law" through ritual practices such as the sounding of the *shofar* which work as the Law's enabling supplement, if its senseless sound becomes too strong, it falls fatally beyond the written Law's power of absorption (Dolar, *A Voice* 55).²⁹ Father Flynn's discourse articulated his traumatic experience of this drowning effect of aural obscenity on the written Law, provoking the boy's uneasiness and mystification: "he told me that the fathers of the church had written books as thick as the post office

directory and as closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper elucidating all these intricate questions” (*D* 7). Are we to believe that the mysteries of faith and religion are safely contained (“elucidated”) inside these pieces of prolix writing considering Father Flynn’s unsound behaviour? Furthermore, we could interpret Eliza’s relation of how she often found her brother “with his breviary fallen on the floor, lying back in the chair and his mouth open” in terms of a fatal detachment from the written Law, the breviary being an important part of a priest’s daily practices, a book which he normally takes with him to places like the confession box where the more openly obscene episode in the story takes place (*D* 10). Perhaps, for Father Flynn, the chain of written signifiers in which the Law is articulated could no longer absorb its non-signifying remainder: namely, God’s object voice.

Whereas the boy recognises Father Flynn as a figure of symbolic authority, the rest of the characters can no longer do so. Father Flynn inhabits what Žižek, following Lacan, calls a space “between two deaths” (*Sublime Object* 135). We all must die twice: a biological death, the death of our physical being, and a symbolic death, “the accomplishment of a symbolic destiny” (*Sublime Object* 135). Two characters from tragic drama exemplify the two possible modalities of the interspace between two deaths: Old King Hamlet (who died biologically, but not symbolically because he had not settled his accounts) and Antigone (who died her symbolic death, was excluded “from the symbolic community of the city” after disobeying Creon, yet had not died biologically) (*Sublime Object* 135). Flynn’s case fits the second type better than the first. We can say that his symbolic death precedes his biological death as he failed to fulfil his priestly duties, “began to mope by himself, talking to no-one and wandering about by himself,” abandoned his symbolic position, and was eventually confined to the dark backroom where he was kept warm, fed, and provided with loads of snuff — a specific formation of *jouissance* he was hooked on, by the way.³⁰ By the time he received the extreme unction from Father

O'Rourke, he was already symbolically dead. When he dies physically, the community performs the proper funerary rite so that he may rest in peace. Eliza is sure her brother is enjoying eternal bliss. As she tells the boy's aunt: "Ah, well, he's gone to a better world. [...] He had a beautiful death, God be praised. [...] She [the woman that came to wash the corpse] said he just looked as if he were asleep, he looked that peaceful and resigned. [...] H[e]'s gone to his eternal reward." (D 8-9)

Towards the end of the story, the boy, who is attending Father Flynn's wake, sits quietly in the backroom with his aunt and the two sisters after seeing the priest's confined body in another room upstairs. He is sensitive to a silence that frames Eliza's relation of the episodes of the broken chalice and the confession box:³¹

A silence took possession of the little room and under cover of it I approached the table and tasted my sherry and then returned to my chair in the corner. Eliza seemed to have fallen into a deep reverie. We waited respectfully for her to break the silence: and after a long pause she said slowly: [...] She stopped suddenly as if to listen. I too listened but there was no sound in the house and I knew that the old priest was lying still in his coffin as we had seen him, solemn and truculent in death, an idle chalice on his breast. (D 10-11, emphases added)

It seems clear that for Eliza the priest's silence is pacifying: she "know[s] he is gone" to his eternal salvation so that order will be re-established after performing the appropriate funerary rites. Her integration in the symbolic order is unaffected and her position as subject has not changed substantially. This is also the case with the rest of the adults, but it happens otherwise with the boy. This silence that closes on him and closes the narrative —though the very last words are Eliza's echo of the confession box affair— is equivocal to

say the least. For, does this silence mean, as he presumed or expected earlier, that he “had been freed from something by his death” (*D* 6)? The answer is: it depends, it depends on whether he would take the ethical road of responsibility, or remained bound by the obscene superegoic pressure to which he had been exposed. Because the thing is that silence is linked in the text to the dead priest as, *at once*, an authority figure that inspires reverence (“solemn”) and an obscene, aggressive presence (“and *truculent* in death, an *idle chalice* on his breast”).

As it eludes the field of the audible, Žižek states paradoxically, “the object voice par excellence is, of course, silence” (“I Hear You” 92). For Dolar, silence *qua* object voice “appears as the non-signifying, meaningless foundation of ethics” (*A Voice* 98). The crucial question regarding the boy is whether or not he will compromise his desire by alienating himself in a symbolic order whose lack he had come up against and whose configuration was a combination of Law (“solemn”) and superego supplement (“and truculent”). As we have seen, desire for Lacan is an ethical faculty attached to silence which is our duty to exercise. Dolar elaborates on this thesis by pointing out that silence as the ethical object voice is

“*enunciation without statement*,” “injunction without positive content” and that it is our responsibility as ethical desiring subjects to provide an enunciated, a statement ourselves (*A Voice* 98-99). But the ethics of desire does not presuppose a subject beyond the Other. The Other is not discarded in this process precisely because the “voice comes from the Other without being part of it; rather, it indicates and evokes a void in the Other, circumscribing it, but not giving it a positive consistence” (Dolar, *A Voice* 102). The silence that the boy confronts at the end of the story has the ambiguous status of the ethical voice: “if it is at the very core of the ethical, [...] it is also at the core of straying away from the ethical, evading the call [...] The psychoanalytic name for this deflection is the superego” (Dolar, *A Voice* 99) Silence led the boy to a fork in the road: it is my impression he might have taken the truly

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ethical path, but I am not sure judging from what his older self tells us. His narrative, if not a true ethical statement, it is indeed a statement none of the other characters in the story could have uttered.

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Notes

¹ Actually, Bruce Fink translates of “*la grosse voice*” as “a loud voice,” whereas Dolar prefers “the fat voice” (*A Voice* 99). If I have opted for such an odd-sounding translation as “gross voice,” it was not only because of its phonetic resemblance to the French original, but also to retain the vulgar, luxuriant and obscene connotations and overtones of this French-derived English word.

² There are, of course, other critical works, some of them canonical, that explore the issue of voice and sound-effects in Joyce’s works. It could not be otherwise taking into account the prominence of this aspect in Joyce’s *oeuvre*, particularly in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Hugh Kenner, for example, argues how the narrator’s voice is taken over by the characters’ own through the use of free indirect discourse (15-38). Derek

Attridge, for his part, highlights the importance of what he calls “non-lexical onomatopoeia”: that is, “the use of the phonetic characteristics of the language to imitate a sound without attempting to produce recognizable verbal structures, even those of traditional ‘onomatopoeic’ words” (*Peculiar Language* 136). According to Attridge, non-lexical onomatopoeia is most fully exploited in *Ulysses* where “Joyce, far from trying to escape from the complications that prevent direct imitation of sounds in language, exploited

them brilliantly, just as he exploited most of the conventions governing the genre of the novel” (“Joyce’s Noises” 475). Finally, for Vincent J. Cheng, Joyce’s use of prosody and metrics goes beyond the much-commented “modernist rapprochement between poetry and prose” as “[f]or Joyce, it wasn’t a question of one becoming more *like* the other, or vice versa: in his works, the poetic could be, and was, incarnate, manifest and contained (and functional) *as poetry*, within the body of his narrative prose. This isn’t rapprochement; this is generic miscegenation and incorporation” (393, 398).

³ For an explanation of this double crossing-out in Lacan see Žižek, *Sublime Object* 122.

⁴ As Jean-Michel Rabaté argues: “The child encounters language issuing from the beings that surround it, and whereas it can identify these beings as others similar to itself, there is also within them another agency at work enabling them to speak language and *marking them as having submitted to the Law*” (56, emphasis added).

⁵ In his published work, Žižek illustrates the thesis of the existence of an obscene supplement of the Law with examples that range from army life and Ku Klux Klan to Nazism and Stalinism. (*Metastases* 54-58; *Plague* 54-60) For Žižek’s brief statement on paedophilia as *the* obscene inherent transgression inside the Catholic Church see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_rNjLWZi2w

⁶ This is the difference between “ideal ego” (imaginary identification) and “ego-ideal” (symbolic identification) as developed by Lacan in *Seminar I (Freud’s Papers* 129-142). Žižek reformulates the distinction in the following terms: “imaginary identification is identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, with the image representing ‘what we would like to be,’ and symbolic identification, identification with the very place *from where* we are being observed, from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love” (*Sublime Object* 105). Žižek stresses the fact that there is a hierarchy of identifications, the latter regulating the former: “imaginary identification is always identification *on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other*. So, apropos of every imitation of a model-image, apropos of every ‘playing a role,’ the question to ask is: *for whom* is the subject enacting this role? Which *gaze* is considered when the subject identifies himself with a certain image?” (*Sublime Object* 106).

⁷ Lacan recalls a disturbing experience of his youth in Brittany, when out on a boat with some fishermen someone named Petit-Jean “pointed out to me something floating on the surface of the waves. It was a small can, a sardine can. [...] It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me —*You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn’t see you!* [...] To begin with, if what Petit-Jean said to me, namely, that the can did not see me, had any meaning, it was because, in a sense, *it was looking at me, all*

the same. It was looking at me at the level of the point of light, the level at which everything that looks at me is situated —and I am not speaking metaphorically” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 95, second emphasis added).

⁸ We can find both versions of the gaze in Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* depending on our point of view as observers: if we look straight at the picture, we see the diplomats’ gaze, the normalising gaze of authority, of the bearers of power and knowledge presiding over a coherently organised reality; yet, if we take a sidewise view, the foregrounded blot reveals its true shape while the rest of reality disintegrates and we, as subjects, are gazed at by what had fallen out of our scopical control. Of course, the gigantic blot already catches our attention (our “desire,” Lacan says) from the very beginning as something that should not be there, something that disrupts our view of the picture and our relationship to the normalising gaze of the two men (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 92).

⁹ See Dolar, *A Voice* 127. One of the reasons why the gaze became the object *par excellence* in Lacanian theory is Lacan’s affirmation that all objects share a common imaginary, visual trait: “A common characteristic of these objects is that they have no specular image [...] It is to this object that cannot be grasped in the mirror that the specular image lends its clothes.” (Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject” 693)

¹⁰ Dolar advanced part of the contents of this book in previous essays like “Hitchcock’s Objects” (1992) and, particularly, “The Object Voice” (1996). See also his lecture, “What’s in a Voice?” (14 November 2008) at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uwb36p_Oh_8

¹¹ This vector could be read as follows: the subject’s symbolic identification with the ego-ideal I(A) through the Other (A, *Autre*) to which he/she addresses his/her demand the meaning of which is determined/supplied by the Other (*s(A)*), with the process of imaginary identification of the ego (*m*) with its the ideal (*i(a)*) in between. For a clear explanation of Lacan’s graphs of desire see Bruce Fink 106-128. Like Lacan, Fink does not comment on the “Voice,” a capitalised word which in the complete graph of desire is hierarchically similar to “Jouissance,” “Castration” and “Signifier,” three central terms in Lacanian psychoanalysis.

¹² The concept of the object voice is, therefore, at a far remove from Derrida’s critique of the voice as the support of presence, essence, self-presence and auto-affection detectable in the history of metaphysics, which is to be contrasted with writing, the trace, and so on as the source of recalcitrant, radical, original alterity. Alongside Derrida’s exhaustive survey of the role played by the voice as the safeguard of presence in the history of philosophy supported, as Dolar admits, by numerous pieces of incontrovertible evidence, Dolar traces “a different history of voice, where

the voice far from being the safeguard of presence, was considered to be dangerous, threatening, and possibly ruinous” (*A Voice* 42-43, see also 36-52).

¹³ The criticism launched against the sheer functionalism of the Althusserian model should be qualified. See Jorge Larrain 98-106 (particularly 97).

¹⁴ The word “ivy” triggers a whole chain words linked by sound similarity. Here is part of the passage:

Did any one ever hear such a drivel? Lord Almighty!
Whoever heard of ivy whining on a wall? Yellow ivy: that was
all right. Yellow ivory also. And what about ivory ivy?

The word now shone in his brain, clearer and brighter
than any ivory sawn from the mottled tusks of elephants. *Ivory*,
ivoire, *avorio*, *ebur*. (*P* 179)

¹⁵ Therefore, Lacan links the language of Joyce’s last work to unconscious processes (slips of the tongue), as the mechanisms of the unconscious are the same as those upon which “poetry relies” (Dolar, *A Voice* 149). What we may call “the poetry of the unconscious” gains more ground in Joyce’s production so that in his final work readers witness what goes on within the confines of a dream, the scenario of the unconscious *par excellence*. As Sheldon Brivic has stated: “external language and what is clear [in Joyce’s works] are usually less important than the unclear flow of language within [the mind]. This tendency grows stronger through Joyce’s career, ending in the *Wake*, which takes place within the mind of the dreamer.” (8)

¹⁶ As early as August 1904, Joyce wrote to his friend Constantine Curran: “I call the series *Dubliners* to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city” (*Letters I* 55). Almost two years later, on 5 May 1906, he stated that, in writing *Dubliners*, “[m]y intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis.” (*Letters II* 134)

¹⁷ Tejedor Cabrera is particularly enlightening in this connection (23-24, 31-32, 45-46). Apart from Margot Norris’s 2006 Norton edition of *Dubliners* from which I quote, see also Terence Brown’s edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992, 238-39n1-4) and Jeri Johnson’s edition (Oxford: Oxford UP, [2000] 2008. 196-197n3.9-11)

¹⁸ Gerhard Friedrich established this connection to support his gnomic reading of “The Sisters.” (422)

¹⁹ I cannot go into a detailed descriptions of the process of socialisation based on gratifying love and rectifying guilt drawn from Freud’s works —from, for instance, “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning” (1911) to chapters VII and VIII of *Civilizations and Its*

Discontents (1930; 1931) through “On Narcissism” (1914) and “The Ego and the Id” (1923)

²⁰For the reason why I depart from both Bruce Fink’s and Mladen Dolar’s English versions of “*la grosse voix*” see note 1 above.

²¹The excerpt reproduced above is taken from the final part of his *écrit* “Remarks on Daniel Lagache’s Presentation,” titled precisely “Towards and Ethics,” ethics being precisely the theme that Lacan developed at length in his seminar of that period on “the ethics of psychoanalysis” (1959-1960). The ethics of psychoanalysis comes down to being the ethics of desire as that which is “specifically our business,” the specific concern of each of us as desiring subjects (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 319). The affirmation “what is written on those tables is nothing but the laws of Speech itself” expresses how for Lacan the symbolic order is the order of language in which the Law that binds the speaking subject is inscribed. So, when we speak, as I do throughout this essay, of the Lacanian symbolic order, we refer to the social order of language *plus* the order of regulations, prescriptions, prohibitions, responsibilities, work, authority, the Law, etc.

²²“For we must make no mistake about ourselves: we are as much automaton as mind. [...] Proofs convince the mind; habit provides the strongest proofs and those that are most believed. It inclines the automaton, which leads the mind unconsciously along with it” (Pascal qtd. in Žižek, *Sublime Object* 36, brackets added).

²³For a summary of Žižek’s substantial modification of Althusser’s theory of interpellation see Kay 104-108.

²⁴In Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* there is a similar reduction at work in the character of the Cheshire cat whom Alice meets towards the end of chapter 6, “Pig and Pepper,” where we read: “‘All right,’ said the Cat; and this time *it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.* [...] ‘I’ve often seen a cat without a grin,’ thought Alice; ‘*but a grin without a cat! It’s the most curious thing I ever say in my life!*’” (58, emphases added). At the end of chapter 8, “The Queen’s Croquet-Ground,” the Cat reappears in mid air again first as a grin (“*she made it out to be a grin*”), then as a mouth (“*How are you getting on?*” said the Cat, as soon as there was mouth enough for it to speak with), and finally as just a head (“*The Cat seemed to think that there was enough of it now in sight, and no more of it appeared*”) (Carroll, *Alice* 74). For a discussion of the Cheshire Cat’s smile in connection to the voice as a partial object in its nightmarish dimension see Žižek’s *The Pervert’s Guide to the Cinema* (Dir. Sophie Fiennes, Vienna/London: Mischief Films/Amoeba Film, 2006). It is in Carroll’s *Alice*, as Dolar reminds us, that we come across a slogan that best exemplifies the divorce between sense and voice as a sound object:

“Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves,” the Duchess advises Alice near the beginning of chapter 9, “The Mock Turtle’s Story.” (Carroll, *Alice* 79)

²⁵ As Freud argues in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “psychic censorship” (call it *repression*) is at work in “dream-forgetting” (442-443).

²⁶ See also Dilworth 100.

²⁷ Eliza is reproducing the general opinion about Father Flynn’s madness. Dilworth does likewise consider the broken chalice as the root cause of Father Flynn’s illness (neurosis) and death as confession cannot alleviate his sense of guilt for this sacrilege (104-105).

²⁸ Respectively, “Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)” (1911) and *Seminar III: The Psychoses*. (1955-1956)

²⁹ Žižek summarises this point very neatly in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*: “The difference between Law and superego also coincides with that between writing and voice. Public Law is essentially *written* — precisely and only because ‘it is written,’ our ignorance of Law cannot serve as an excuse; it does not exculpate us in the eyes of the Law. The status of the superego, in contrast, is that of a traumatic *voice*, and intruder persecuting and disturbing our psychic balance. Here the standard Derridean relationship between voice and writing is inverted: it is the voice that supplements the writing, functioning as a non-transparent stain that truncates the field of the Law, while being necessary for its completion.” (57)

³⁰ See Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* 49.

³¹ Silence has been a major focus of critical interest in “The Sisters.” Virtually all the critics mentioned in this essay have touched on this topic from different perspectives to the one I adopt here, though there are inevitably some points of contact. As to other critics I have not mentioned:

Joseph Chadwick argues that silence protects the boy from the adults’ voices and from the equally authoritative voice of the reader; A. James Wohlpart focuses on how Father Flynn cannot fulfil his role of purging “the sins of Dubliners” (the sacrament of penance) because his “vow of silence is at the foundation of the sacrament of confession” (409); Nels Pearson holds that silence in *Dubliners* indicates Joyce’s sensibility to the speech of the colonial subaltern who “rather than speaking of being spoken for, [...] resist[s] the manufactured occasion for speaking” (144); and, finally, Gerald

Doherty, who sees in the story a dialectic between two modes of scrutinising reality: on one side, theological discourse (with no holes or silences, as it is complete in itself and can provide all the answers and explain everything) and, on the other, pathological discourse (historically more recent, and which silences the diagnoses of mental disturbances and leaves gaps).