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The Veil of Signs: Joyce, Lacan, and Perception. Sheldon Brivic. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991, 207 pages, \$29.95 hard, \$10.95 paper.

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Sheldon Brivic has an immediately idealist and ultimately religious view of language and literature; he is devoted to Berkeley and Hegel, turns phenomenology into what he wittily calls "phonemonology" (p. 24), and is much preoccupied with the individuality, personality, and god-like authority of the author. For Brivic, history is mainly important insofar as it passes through the mind of the author (p. 32), and political criticism is readily construed as "narrowly political" (p. 60), particularly if it seems insufficiently respectful of a favored character. With the partial exception of phonemonology, these are not habits of thought with which I instinctively sympathize, though I do respect them and would certainly expect to learn something from them, especially when it comes to the practical criticism of Joyce, which is what I found most rewarding in the book; Brivic has a sensitive chapter on the consciousness of Stephen in the "Proteus" episode of *Ulysses*, as well as some noteworthy ideas on the echoing interactions between Stephen and Bloom and the more contentious relationship between Shem and Shaun in *Finnegans Wake*. Though he doesn't use the term, the homosocial bond would seem to be his long suit; since he does on page 160 use the phrase "between men," I think he could profitably have consulted Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1985 book of the same name.

It is probably this same facet of Brivic's imagination which leads him so unerringly to what I consider the most interesting idea in Ellie Ragland-Sullivan's *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*, the notion that the Lacanian subject can be seen as two modes of meaning fighting to occupy the same space. This Brivic turns into an original but slightly awkward pun on "moi" and "je," Mutt and Jeff, "Moi"tt and "Je"ff (p. 158). In a parallel but more satisfying formulation at the beginning of the book, Brivic speaks of "every word" (p. 2) as combining a stable component with a dynamic one. Later, however, he seems quite untroubled by the gender-political difficulties involved in identifying stability with masculinity and dynamism with femininity (p. 27). If he subscribed directly to the theory of *écriture féminine*, we might try to balance the political problems of the idea with its political claims. Instead, he first declares that masculine and feminine are social and linguistic constructs and then proceeds (in the same sentence) to a view more commonly associated with essentialist feminism, that words whose meanings are fixed are masculine while words whose meanings shift or slide are feminine (p. 27).

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This serves as the index of a more general uncertainty or willfulness about theory. What I find most puzzling about *The Veil of Signs* is its view that Lacan and Derrida are also idealist and religious thinkers, and what I find most disappointing is that the kind of argument that such a position entails is never really made. According to the back jacket blurb, "This is the first book to make use of Lacan's writings and seminars on Joyce"; as such, I would expect it to work harder to explain a use of Lacan which at one point it concedes is "unlikely" (p. 24). For example, on page 23 Brivic quotes Lacan on *Totem and Taboo* to the effect that "the true formula of atheism is not 'God is dead' . . . the true formula of atheism is 'God is unconscious.'" In my view, Lacan is not endorsing religion, but enlarging on the Freudian psychoanalysis of an illusion whose future is all in front of it. Two sentences later, however, Brivic tells us that "Father William Noon observes that Joyce puts the unconscious in the place of God . . . and this corresponds to [Jacqueline] Rose's observation that for Lacan, the place of the Other is the place of God." I don't question that the observation of a Catholic priest "corresponds" to that of a socialist feminist; it just seems to me that this is a choice of words which confounds more than it clarifies. The same could be said of Brivic's use of the word "transcendence" in the declaration that Derrida "always returns to a moment of deferral that he invests with great transcendence" (p. 34).

Brivic would do better, I think, to openly declare that his view of Lacan is a possible but unusual one, based on a few textual warrants. Though I think that Brivic tends to confuse a reference to religious thinking with an endorsement of it, I do say that his is a possible view; Lacan was raised a Catholic, had a brother a priest, and speaks in Book Two of his Seminar of knowing members of the Surrealist group who were afraid to blaspheme. One of Lacan's early students (Father Beirnaert) was a Seminarian in a double sense, one of his American commentators (William Richardson) is a Jesuit, and such followers as Phillippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva went through a period toward the end of the 1970s in which analysis seemed to merge with religion. Brivic likes to make "parallels" with Derrida, and to make one here, we could cite the book by Susan Handelman which argues for his proximity to Jewish religious thinking.

However, the requisite sense of cultural, intellectual, and philosophical history is not strong in *The Veil of Signs*, perhaps because of the idealism, even voluntarism, which causes the book to downplay history per se. Thus the surprise of what Brivic calls phenomenology. Opening a book subtitled *Joyce, Lacan, and Perception*, I had anticipated an emphasis on the phenomenological Lacan of the 1940s and 1950s, with perhaps a reference to Merleau-Ponty, perhaps an account of the subsequent contest between phenomenology and structuralism, perhaps even a reference to Lyotard's effort in *Discours*, *Figure* to reimagine phenomenology from within post-structuralism. What I got begins historically with Berkeley, who according to Brivic has "proved that everything we see is made up of language" (p. 5). I doubt that a proposition of this type meaningfully admits of proof, but Brivic passes on to Hegel, reduces what is most commonly meant by phenomenology to one reference to Sartre, and sets about reconstructing Lacan as someone like Berkeley who believes that "neither existence nor perception can take place . . . except as a looping involvement of words" (p. 3). I commonly found Brivic's formulations a bit partial, but to be fair I should say that the sentence I have just quoted is the one formulation in the book which strikes me as plainly wrong. The reason is that Lacan's routine reference to the animal kingdom in accounts of the Imaginary and of human infancy would seem to indicate his belief that existence and perception do indeed

take place apart from words; Lacan offers a theory of how human existence and perception come to be predicated on words, not an argument that they don't otherwise occur. Since Brivic once or twice discusses human/animal encounters, such as Bloom's musings on how the cat might see him (p. 7) and Lacan's recounting of a fable in which a Chinese philosopher meets a butterfly (p. 157), this oversight is not without its later consequences.

However, it's not Brivic's main point that Lacan and Derrida are religious thinkers; this is something that he says mostly at the beginning and the end of the book in order to enable something more central, which is that the god-like authority of Joyce is everpresent in the texts insofar as he "plays the role of the unconscious or Other" (p. 74). With this, I think Brivic is onto something of basic and great importance, both for Joyce and for all literature. For any reader informed by psychoanalysis, the question of the place of the unconscious in the text is as insistent as it is difficult to decisively answer. Brivic doesn't hesitate, however, to identify the textual unconscious with the author and to argue that it is a guarantee of his or her authority. Since Joyce is said to "play the role of the unconscious or other," this authority is perhaps only virtual, but no less absolute for that: "The illusion of Joyce as artist in the role of the Other is central to the coherence of the fictional world. This coherence is as strong as Joyce's deconstructive incoherence and inseparable from it" (p. 63).

What follows in the practical criticism is much attention to what another kind of critic might see as narrative irony, i.e., all of the ways in which the author is visible through and behind the characters: "The basis of the narrative agencies that Joyce projects in his work is the Joycean personality that is withheld from his creatures and so constitutes the unreachable otherness out of which they spring, the unknown that defines and energizes them" (p. 61). Most typically, Brivic focusses on the Joycean felicities of expression which cannot realistically be ascribed to the likes of Stephen and Bloom and Molly. Thus, in the "Sirens" episode of *Ulysses*, "Croak of vast manless moonless womoonless marsh" is not a sentence Bloom could write, while in "Proteus," the superiority of the prose which conveys the workings of Stephen's mind to the poem which he writes on Deasy's envelope is evidence that he could not write the prose. ALP too, for Brivic sees the characters in *Finnegans Wake* as quasi-persons, "could never intentionally wield the exalted dignity of her final passage" (p. 191).

There were moments when I felt that Brivic had underestimated Joyce's democracy of spirit, since I believe that part of the point, particularly with Bloom, is that the mind is a hive of subtleties even in the case of the advertising canvasser who doesn't really understand refraction. I don't imagine, however, that Brivic would really quarrel with this; his point is that only a writer of the stature of Joyce is capable of effectively expressing these subtleties. What Brivic does quarrel with is any structuralist or poststructuralist tendency which does not return to a healthy respect for authorial authority. Thus one agenda of the book is to arrange an accommodation or even a reconciliation between these new approaches and some of the most traditional verities in the interpretation of Joyce; what my criticism amounts to is that the new approaches are asked to surrender too much of their forensic radicalism, that they are subordinated and tolerated, picked over for what can be made to fit with what Brivic already thinks. There is no malice in this; though there are moments in the footnotes when Brivic seems to bear his chalice through a throng of such foes as Patrick McGee, Joseph Buttigieg, and Derek Attridge, he also finds something of value in the work of most of these. In other words, his tone is good-natured, and so I'll try to conclude in the same spirit.

As I have already suggested, one problem with Brivic on Lacan and Derrida is that they don't always say what he says they do, that he tends to debate what he fears they might be saying. Thus he discusses whether "the author Derrida eliminates" (p. 122) is "the author as a clear statement" (p. 122) or "the author as unified consciousness in rational control" (p. 127), though it doesn't seem clear to me that Derrida "eliminates" the author at all; at the least, I'd like to know in which text he is supposed to do this. Brivic, however, takes Derrida's hostility to the author sufficiently for granted that he is surprised at his respect for Joyce, a respect which he renders in characteristically religious terms with this formulation that Derrida "virtually deifies" (p. 22) Joyce. The starkness of this contrast between an author who is divinely powerful and an author who is simply absent is, I think, revealing of the extent to which Brivic implicitly polarizes our options. In sum, Brivic seems to want to protect the status of Joyce as an ideal-ego. He is not so much suspicious of the idea that Joyce was a historical subject and a subject of the unconscious as he is resistant to the notion that this should make a difference in the way we read his work, which "could not have been written by a combination of linguistic codes and reader responses" (p. 123). What would he make, I wonder, of Joyce's remark, à propos of *Finnegans Wake*, that "Really it is not I who am writing this crazy book. It is you, and you, and you, and that man over there, and that woman at the next table"?

Lacan called Joyce "le sinthome," condensing meanings suggesting "the symptom" and "the holy man," the symptom and the saint. Brivic is right, I think, in understanding this to imply that Joyce is the subject of the unconscious who has in his writing most nearly approached mastery of this common human condition. However, there is another Lacanian sense in which the unconscious defies mastery in principle; Brivic gives us too much saint and not enough symptom.