

# Reflections on the Formal Envelope of the Symptom\*

JACQUES-ALAIN MILLER

Translated by JORGE JAUREGUI

Does there exist a psychoanalyst who does without the concept symptom, or who does not at least possess a practical notion of it? I don't think so. Although we may believe we can easily do without the concept of structure, and even though we may suspect clinical structures as impenetrable compartments - as a matter of fact, prevalent in one whole area of psychoanalytic practice is the belief in a sort of clinical continuum wherein borderline cases proliferate, and one hears more of states rather than structures- still the notion of symptom seems basic, truly elementary. It belongs, in some way, to natural consciousness, to the spontaneous philosophy of the therapist, of the physician, inasmuch as it constitutes the medical stance to refer to the notion of harmony, of what fits right together, of what is consonant, where the symptom appears as what troubles the said harmony, disturbs it, destroys it. There can be no symptom without reference to some symphony itself disturbed by a dissonance, by an unexpected accident. Such is the meaning of the Greek word *sumptōma* - which curiously, keeps the sun of synthesis, of reunion, of ensemble - that which happens simultaneously and is coincidental. The symptom carries with it this medical connotation,

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this connection with harmony, and its value, can only change when it is no longer approached from the medical viewpoint but from within the analytical discourse.

We acknowledge it as no longer articulated with a supposed harmony but with a reference of another order, its opposite, one might even say. The meaning of the symptom changes radically when not related to a harmony but to a disharmony, that is, to what, in short, we speak of as castration. It could be said that in psychoanalysis the symptom harmonizes with castration. And certainly this is what gets in the way in our attempt to isolate the being of the symptom in psychoanalysis. Briefly now, to conclude this introduction: we cannot isolate it except as a speaking being, the speaking being of the symptom. Let's abbreviate this as: the *parlêtre* of the symptom.

I already had the occasion to speak of how, taking my lead from Lacan, one catches in practice the *parlêtre* of the symptom. I called this intervention "*Symptôme et Fantôme*," and I would have left it there had Jacques Adam not asked me to lecture about it. I am pleased to do this because it allows me to clarify an expression of Lacan which has always particularly seduced me, which poses a kind of special harmony for me, namely, "the formal envelope of the symptom."

Although I've cited the exact reference to this expression in *Écrits*,<sup>1</sup> it seems to me that we might re-situate it in its proper context. It recurs in Lacan's recollections of his psychiatric antecedents, specifically the lineage from Clérambault and Kraepelin to Freud, and how by necessity - this is the very term he uses - he was led to psychoanalysis. The motive he gives is precisely that of "faithfulness to the formal envelope of the symptom." He therefore makes his particular first, in some way original access to analytical discourse, for the reason that this "faithfulness to the formal envelope of the symptom, which is the truly clinical trait [...] [led him] to that limit where it backtracks itself in effects of creation." There follows a reference to Aimée's literary writings, the subject of Lacan's thesis.

There is something quite surprising in this articulation

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postulated between the symptom and creation, almost without mediation - and well before *Joyce le symptôme*. For it would seem that nothing could be further from the symptom than creation, that the subject endures the symptom, that he is passive rather than creative. In the symptom he is pathological, while in creation he is, I dare say, demiurgical. A point where one retraces steps already taken - for this is what Lacan evokes in the aforementioned sentence - is a point at which one turns back, reverses his course, along the same path.

How are we to articulate the backtracking of the symptom the effects of creation, the symptom, which seems to be a debased state of the subject, and creation, which seems to be a sublime state? I say sublime, considering the category of sublimation. This is precisely what comes into question: the articulation of the backtracked symptom in sublimation.

I won't answer this question now, for beforehand I would need to fix some markers, to posit Cartesian coordinates of the symptom, its two axes. We could say that Lacan, during his teaching, displaced the stress from one to the other: the axis of the message, and the axis of *jouissance*.

Is the analytical symptom a message or *jouissance*, a way of *jouir*? I think I have already explained thoroughly that Lacan's approach becomes displaced from one definition to the other, that the symptom in "Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis"<sup>2</sup> is approached as a message, and in his Seminar *R.S.I.*<sup>3</sup> for example, he situates it as a way of *jouir*. Curiously he retraces Freud's journey, who, departing from the hysteric symptom as interpretable, reaches the negative therapeutic reaction, the primordial masochism and the death drive, that is to say the question of what, in a closed way, is satisfied in the symptom. I won't reiterate this already known demonstration, although I shall illustrate my point with an anecdote - exalted, if I may, to an apologue - of how one can *jouir* with a message.

This anecdote illustrates an event which just occurred yesterday

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afternoon, in my lawyer's office. My visit was due to matters very much related to Lacan's teachings - I could even say to his formal envelope. During the meeting my attention was constantly set on my lecture the next day, and this is what came to my mind.

Why was I with this lawyer instead of being here? I was at his office because I'm lodging a complaint. What brings me to lodge a complaint? Let's notice that to lodge a complaint is already a step further than to complain. In fact, certain people do things that displease me, things that cause me, if I may say, displeasure. My complaint is regulated by the pleasure principle. What do I do then? Because I'm a civilized person I meet with a lawyer, that is to say with someone who will talk for me, who will lodge this complaint due to the displeasure I'm suffering to the point of lodging a complaint. And what does it mean to lodge a complaint? Precisely that the lawyer will shape up my complaint.

The complaint's forms are prescribed forms, anticipated by The law. Thus he will formulate my complaint according to terms that judges may hear. He is the operator who will make my complaint speak in the language field of the Other. He converts this complaint, emerging from the depths of my displeasure, into a message about which we could simply say - and everybody understands it- that it will be uttered from the Other's place and in its own language. From my complaint, bearing the appropriate forms, I will exist in a new way, in the field of the Other and under an appointed form - which furthermore is called in this field "to appoint oneself as a civil party." Notice that this appointed form in the field of the Other of law is a completed form, for I can exist there only when represented by a lawyer, by someone who talks for me in the forms of the Other. In this register I only become a subject when coupled with my lawyer. Moreover this allows the distinction between subject and individual: if many individuals constitute themselves as a civil party, they only make one juridical subject.

So much for the form of the message, for the transformation of the complaint as appointed form in the field of the Other. At the

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same time of course, this shaping distorts my complaint, for there is what can be said and what cannot be said. There is a logic proper to the Other which thrusts itself upon you, and which congeals, fixes your complaint. And then the complaint runs its own course.

But there is something more in this shaping of the complaint. While your lawyer filters, posits and formalizes your complaint, you realize that somewhere you are satisfied. In the process of formalization itself, even though nothing has been done to mend your displeasure, which is always there, and causes the whole affair, in some place you are already happy, happy because your displeasure has been formalized. You are happy I may say, despite having infringed the pleasure principle. Therefore you grasp maybe how the shaping of the message, even its legalese ciphering, produces a *jouissance*, or more accurately an extracted *plus-de-jouir*, drawn out from displeasure itself through this formalization. It's but an anecdote, given to illustrate the conversion of the message and its shaping into *jouissance*. I will add: the truth of the complaint summons up legal knowledge, and this knowledge works for a *jouissance*.

Here's another example along the same line that I witnessed some years ago in Senegal, in a faith healers village. How do they heal in their traditional way? They inscribe formulas in small strips of paper - from the Koran for example - which they dissolve in a glass of water. You drink this potion which cures you. This belongs to the same order as that of the one lodging a complaint, even if the results are more immediate - perhaps this belongs to a loftier order.

Also you will find this conversion in the “Book of Revelations,” superbly illustrated by Dürer, whose work is reproduced on the cover of *Ornicar?* #16: “And the voice which I heard from heaven spake unto me again, and said, 'Go and take the little book which is open in the hand of the angel which standeth upon the sea and upon the earth.' And I went unto the angel, and said unto him, 'Give me the little book.' And he said unto me, 'Take it, and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey.' And I took the little book out of the angel's hand, and ate

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it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter.” This is also a reference of Lacan, about which I will say something at the end of my intervention.

From these apologues, whose purpose is to fix the marks of the question, I refer to our experience of the symptom, and I'm taking it in the simplest way, on a level of everyday phenomenon. As an analyst, where do you place the observation you make of your patient? Of course one day, you could notice his paleness, his drawn features, or even his feverishness, and say to yourself: “Something's wrong with him.” You could have very good reasons to think so, yet you know that for you, as an analyst, this does not amount to the symptom, for still the analysand has to speak it. When you meet someone for the first time, this is what you expect - the narrative of what doesn't work. If he only refers to what goes wonderfully, you say to yourself that something really doesn't work. We must look carefully at the rim of the narrative of what doesn't work, for is the *parlêtre* of the symptom itself. The problem is that in a sense there is a psychoanalytic harmony, and you can only think that in the narrative of the misfortune itself, there is in fact an arrangement, and that the symptom satisfies precisely where it appears as painful. This is the paradox located by Lacan in *Television*, when he defines the demand as that “of one who suffers.” He then goes: “The subject is happy-go-lucky. It is his very definition since he can owe nothing if not to luck, to fortune in other words, and any piece of luck is good as something to maintain him, insofar as it repeats itself.”<sup>5</sup> At the level where Lacan aims and where the subject is happy, the symptom is not a discordance, but dissolves itself for it satisfies, it especially satisfies repetition. And what characterizes This level, this somewhere where the symptom satisfies? At least the fact of being a level distinct from the one of the *parlêtre* of the symptom, distinct from the one where the symptom is spoken.

In this sense the symptom, as it is articulated and conveyed in the speech addressed to the analyst, formalized in the field of the Other, is a lie. It is, if I may say, an allegory of the symptom - the

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term allegory is for me irresistible since long ago, at the *Section Clinique*, I heard it used at its worst apropos of anxiety. The symptom is a lie - what does it mean? It doesn't mean that as soon as one enters analysis one becomes an imaginary sick person - even if the analysand tends to believe so, for he could willingly believe that nothing could happen to him as long as he is in analysis. To state that the symptom is a lie is not an insult to pain; on the contrary, it is to state that the *parlêtre* of the symptom belongs to the dimension of truth, for it is only there that truth and falseness are posited. And it is in this sense that Lacan formulates that the symptom is truth, “made both of the same wood, if we posit materialistically that truth is

what gets established from the signifying chain.” We must understand what this assertion implies against the background of “truth having the structure of fiction”. One has only to superimpose these two assertions to infer that for one's guidance, the symptom has the structure of fiction.

We shouldn't hurry. This is neither an insult to pain, nor even to complaint; it only posits that not pain, not a complaint, but the symptom, as analytical, as formalized in the field of the Other, setup as what gets established from the signifying chain, has the structure of fiction. This is what makes of hysteria the symptom's proper condition as analytical - to the extent that usually, after Lacan, the hysterization of the subject constitutes a prerequisite to the subject's installation in the analytic discourse. But this is also what makes of hysteria the incurable symptom as such, for it is fiction itself as symptom - we could say the sickness of the semblance - abusively debased as mythomania, or perversely disqualified as long as its symptoms would be fictions. On the contrary, it is by means of hysteria that the symptom reveals its essential fictional structure, as the latter gets established from the signifying chain in regard to what? From that level where the subject is happy, the level that could be said of drive, the level let's say, of *objet a*. Hysteria displaces the symptom as the subject's being of truth, it displaces it from the depths and makes it evident, whereas it brings forth to the place of

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truth the *objet a* as real - this doesn't happen without an emptying, and compels especially to add nothingness to the nomenclature of the objets a. From there the question is whether the subject as such wouldn't be a fiction. Thus, positing it as the answer of the Real asserts all its decisiveness.

Notice that if the symptom has a fictional structure, Lacan's starting point that there is “a limit where the formal envelope of the symptom backtracks itself in effects of creation”, appears to us less opaque. But the question is how fiction and creation are articulated and distinguish themselves, for after all they are two modes of fabrication. Briefly I will say that to be a poet or a poem is not the same thing. At the level of the symptom the subject is a poem, even if he gladly believes, if he is hysteric, that he is a poet. Yet to be a poet is something else, it is, trite to remark, to produce poems. To be a creator means to produce forms, forms that are not already in the Other.

There is in French a fertile ambiguity regarding the word *for-me*, a word Lacan willingly matches with the word *symptôme* - this might seem unusual only if we confound form and figure, for the symptom would disturb the correct form singled out by the German tongue as *Gestalt*. Now, we must understand here form as this other translation offered by the German tongue: *Form*, as found in formal logic. For, if the symptom has forms, the term formal envelope poses the question of the enveloped - the symptom is not all signifier, and what formal envelope of the symptom evokes as negative is what it envelopes of *jouissance*, of *jouissant* matter. Thus, what is carried out in analysis, in some way naturally, that is to say logically, is a labour on the formal envelope, a labour consisting in taking the symptom to the limit where it backtracks itself in witticism which is calculation

I can only be allusive here, for this point of backtracking is none other than the key point of the logic of the *fantasm*, the point where the transference operation backtracks itself in

sublimation by eliminating the subject supposed to know. That is, that there is only creation, backtracking of the symptom in sublimation, to the extent

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of a crossing of the *fantasm*, or what stands for it, a passage à l'acte, to the extent that it paves the way to the formal to become disjointed from the material of *jouissance* it envelopes, so that this formal could play its own game and give rise to *jouissance*. This supposes that the subject be deprived of the belief the Other *is enjoying* his symptom.

Does it suffice to say that the subject is the vector of the new, [of the unspoken, of what in the Other is not, that the subject is confronted with the lack in the Other? Castration therefore, would be the condition of creation, yet to confront the lack in the Other wouldn't be any less true of the symptom. The condition of creation is that somewhere the subject knows that the Other does not exist. But why not admit that the symptom is also an act of creation, of creation of meaning? And this is what allows for its homology to the metaphor. The symptom operates in creation - hence analysts have always been tempted to psychoanalyse creators. Yet we should notice that what does operate in creation, is the symptom separated from the *jouissance* which it formally enveloped. Is the work of art a symptom? Why not? It is often called omen, premonitory sign. But if it is a symptom, it is a ready-made symptom, ready to capture our *jouissance* throughout the centuries. The symptom is *jouissance* as a sense *enjoyed* by the subject, while the work of art gives a sense to be *enjoyed* by everyone, according to the encounter.

Therefore, the emptying of the formal envelope of the symptom is the condition of creation, insofar as it proceeds from *ex nihilo*, as Lacan used to say, from nothingness.

And this means: in order to write your book, learn how to eat your *Dasein*!

1. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, Paris: Seuil, 1966. 2. Lacan, "Function and Field of Speech and Language". *Écrits, A Selection* New York and London: Norton & Co., 1977. 3. Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XXII*: unpublished. 4. The Holy Bible, *King James Version*, Royal Press, Inc., Montreal, North Carolina, 1976. 5. Lacan, *Television*, New York and London: Norton & Co., 1990, p. 22.