

# THE WORK OF THE SYMPTOM

Patrick Monribot

The expression the 'work of the symptom' is suggestive of other Freudian phrases that are frequently used by us — the work of the dream, of mourning, or even the formula suggested by Roland Barthes of 'amorous work'. Each of these phrases have in common the elevation of a certain real to the rank of the cause, which for the three cases mentioned above, is a matter of the navel, of loss and of the other sex. What is the real of the symptom, and in what manner can we impute work to it?

## *The trap for libido*

The Latin etymology of 'work' — *tripaliare* — expresses torture. Let us remember that in the Middle Ages, 'to work' signified to 'cause suffering', the term was reserved either for those condemned to torture, or with the suffering associated with giving birth. There we have the idea of suffering and of production. It is a fact that the symptom joins both of them, but with a change: over the duration of the treatment it passes from 'suffering' towards 'production'. Torment cannot be said to be without some satisfaction. Freud demonstrated as much in number twenty three of his *Introductory Lectures*. This satisfaction does not so much concern the subject, as the libidinal demand of the drive, which obeys the avaricious super-ego to such a point that the symptomatic compromise — in trapping the libido of the repressed drives — comes 'to the place of the sexual activity of illnesses',<sup>1</sup> as Freud wrote in his *Three Essays*. But the gain of satisfaction is incomplete; the gain is truly meagre in respect of the *pretium doloris* to pay, so that the symptom's insistence justifies itself less by this effect of minimal gain than by what causes it: it is a defensive process in the face of sexual irreconcilability; this is the inescapable basis of its permanence.

The libido nevertheless knows all about the symptom, although this is certainly not what Freud assimilated to Eros. Rather, it is a matter of the libido before *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the conception of which created a scandal, and which Lacan rescued from a great number of attributes in order to remedy the then tarnished usage. On one occasion he qualifies it in the 'negative' at the service of 'Discord'<sup>2</sup>, on another occasion he gives it 'a deadly meaning'<sup>3</sup>, elsewhere he recognises it as 'the colour of emptiness'<sup>4</sup>.

This draining of the libido into the snare of the symptom suffices to justify a working dimension in terms of costs and torment. But the very vocabulary — 'work of the symptom' — exceeds this single signification since it implies an equivocation. On the one hand the symptom is work, it is the time of a treatment, on the other hand it produces a work well beyond the treatment. It works us. Let us examine the two facets of this polysemy: the worked and the worker.

### *The worked symptom*

To work the symptom is, in an architectural sense, to deform it. This work which affects the form — that is to say the formal envelope — is the responsibility of the analysand; it leads to two results that the *passant* must account for.

### *To fix jouissance*

I for one, have given an account of a 'ballistics of the symptom'<sup>5</sup> beginning with an analytical trajectory which passes 'from denial to the symptom'. It empirically validates Lacan's opinion that the only weapon in the treatment capable of treating the symptom, of *deforming* it, is equivocation<sup>6</sup> — which is not without therapeutic effects and which I have testified to elsewhere. The hidden meaning of the symptom, fragmented by equivocation, releases its flood of *varité*, and gives up its signified value. Such relief softens or cures. But then at the same time it isolates the incurable, resistant to any surgical<sup>7</sup> signifier and from which the above mentioned symptom takes on the value of the letter. It is the distinguished function of the letter to fix *jouissance*. The symptom does not only trap libido, but since it has been 'worked'

it 'literally' fixes *jouissance*. This represents an initial meaning (*acception*) of this work.

### *To object to denial*

Such a therapeutic alleviation from the weight of *jouissance* must not make us confuse the treatment with the cure. The letter signifies that if there is treatment, then it is a treatment of the text. What is at stake in the pass is a '*savoir y faire*'<sup>7</sup> with the text. If the complete cure were to exist, then this therapeutic aim would be the ideal of a pass which had become perfect — but then without any transmission — so that undertaking a psychoanalysis would be doomed, according to Lacan in *La troisième* to die out 'from only being a forgotten symptom'<sup>8</sup>. Now such is not the case. Psychoanalysis, far from forgotten, is transmitted. Transmission is made possible precisely because 'psychoanalysis fails'. In fact the pass is the successful transmission of the failure of the transference to oppose the agency of the real, to oppose what 'puts itself crosswise (...) in order to stop things working'<sup>9</sup>. Also taking its bearing from this same movement is a failure to make good the definitive divergence between truth and knowledge. Since 1966 in *Écrits* — in *Du sujet enfin en question*<sup>10</sup> — "the symptom represents the return of truth (...) in the failure (*faillie*) of knowledge" in neurosis. But it is necessary for us today to disseminate this formula, as something which is valid beyond the end of an analysis. Thus note that the failure of Hegel's absolute knowledge is just as easily called castration, which allows Lacan to add, in the same text, "castration is the key (...) whereby it makes itself the accession of the symptom". He correlates castration and the symptom. To work the symptom in analysis thus makes it a mark of castration to the extent it is irreducible. More exactly, it objects to its denial. Such is the second meaning of the worked symptom. That is to say, the pass is a process of de-idealisation which promotes castration, raising this failure of knowledge to the order of the impossible; it is the requirement in order to anticipate a conclusion to the treatment. Thus psychoanalysis does not risk reaching the order of 'forgotten symptom', despite the unbelievable efforts of other discourses in this direction. Besides, is psychoanalysis simply a symptom? This question

which Lacan asked his Rome audience, leads us to the other aspect of equivocation: the worker symptom.

### *The worker symptom*

In the infinite space that opens up the end of the treatment, the following dialectical reversal takes place: the symptom, after having being worked on, puts itself to work. Let us decline the modality of this work. I will develop five aspects of it.

### *To invent knowledge*

The work of the symptom ceases to be a strictly clinical question and takes on a political function in the broader meaning of the term: that of forming analysts and that of analysing the experience of the School. These two tasks (*taches*), which are the basis of transmission, are a direct consequence of the symptom.

The term of office of the AE is the time required to knot the side of the clinic of testimony (how has the symptom been worked) to the political side (how does it work), to which a third side is added in order to make a knot: the epistemic elaboration which makes the AE sweat in the production of knowledge to perpetuate the order of the — *bien-dire* after an analysis. It is not so much a matter of producing a theory, but of shaking it up. Jacques-Alain Miller indicated in his course<sup>11</sup> that all theory is marked by repression, and that a certain '*je ne veux pas savoir*'<sup>12</sup> inevitably presides over transmission. Thus, what the AE can do better consists in producing some bits (*bouts*) of knowledge that are so many scraps extracted from what he does not want to know anything about. It must not be forgotten anymore that, if castration is the irreducible hiatus between knowledge and truth, then the constructions after the pass do not leave any expectation of forming a whole from an exhaustive analysis. The unknown knowledge is not totalised in the real, waiting to be revealed. This remains true after an analysis, and the fragmentary knowledge expected from an AE reveals more of invention than of a stroke of inspiration. It is because invention is a response bordering on the real that it takes on a symptomatic value. Moreover, it has a logical modality about it, that of necessity,

for, to de-totalise without ceasing to acquire these constructions, indeed, even to contest them, knowledge does not cease from writing itself. And in this vein Lacan did not hesitate to propose 'reducing all invention to the *sinthome*'<sup>13</sup>. It is practically an equation of equality. Thus the work of the *sinthome* in the first place, is that of invention.

### *To make a bond*

The epistemical, the clinical, and the political do not serve the analytical discourse other than to knot themselves together. To speak of one of them recalls the other two. But for the knot of three to hold — Lacan showed 'the failure' of it in February 1976 — it is necessary to introduce a fourth term, that of the symptom, in order to assure, according to Lacan<sup>14</sup>, the collection 'a nodal appearance'. It is another version of necessity. But Lacan is still more precise: 'this failure of the knot of three, he says, is equivalent to the failure between the two sexes'<sup>15</sup>. We can derive the following conclusion: if the symptom makes good the knot of three, it must, in the same way, stand in for the impossible rapport between the sexes. To answer the non-rapport through the symptom makes the symptomatic bond a binder between the *parlêtres*.

This binding function is nevertheless, not a couple. The symptom as letter of *jouissance*, is firstly and above all, a link with the real. This magic formula which opens the door (*sésame*) towards the Real is without any alternative. To refer to *La troisième*: it is only, says Lacan, starting from the letter of the *sinthome*, 'that we have access to the real'<sup>16</sup>. One might as well say that the symptom is the indispensable vector of the relation to the analytical cause, to the extent it has something of the real.

In short, the work of the symptom is to make a link where the sexual fails. For this reason, the *sinthome*, already necessary on the level of logic, becomes a forced choice on the political plane, unless one chooses failure (*démenti*). If the symptom brings out the irreducibility of castration, then on this account relief is estranged from failure. In one such option, the bond between analysts is thus infected by effects of the type of 'SAMCDA'<sup>17</sup>, similar to those of analytical societies which pretend precisely to get rid of the symptom. In refusing to

take note of the symptomatic bond, the knot comes undone, nothing holds together anymore, each person is out for himself, to the great displeasure of a collective logic. The three sides mentioned above come undone: the theoretician withdraws into his articles, the practitioner into his room, the politician into his party, and the concept of the School is impracticable.

If there is only a symptomatic bond, if one rejects the scenario of the group based on failure, then the School is a 'partner-symptom', according to the logic developed by Jacques-Alain Miller in his lecture series of 1998. This partnership is essential to anyone who would have to elucidate the destiny of the symptom at the end of analysis. In some ways the School becomes 'the School of the symptom'.

### *To define the analyst*

'The School of the symptom' should make us question what the 'symptom of the School' is. If the School is analysable as experience, the AE, as the name indicates, must make himself the analyst of it; in his turn he must become its 'partner-symptom'. We can then return to the question Lacan asks in *La troisième* — is psychoanalysis a symptom? The answer is given two years later in *Le sinthome*: no, "it is not psychoanalysis which is a symptom, it is the psychoanalyst". The latter, says Lacan, 'cannot be conceived as anything else than a symptom'<sup>18</sup>. It is perfectly clear, the analyst is in short identified starting from his symptomatic function — to be the symptom of the School. To be its symptom signifies to disturb it, to make it vacillate, to put it awry. It is another reading of the famous, 'identification with the symptom'. Thus the AE occupies a double position: to be and to have a symptom. More precisely this dualism can be posited as follows:

— To have the School as symptom. As with every member, he establishes a symptomatic bond with it. Pierre-Gilles Gueguen reminded us of this at the recent conference in Nantes, 'a School can and must take over from the analyst in a different way of treating the symptom'<sup>19</sup>. It succeeds on the condition of being the 'partner-symptom'.

— To be the symptom of the School. 'The AE partner-symptom' could in that case knot, as such, the triple dimension mentioned above (of the clinical, political and epistemological). Therefore, he is himself a knot; that is why Lacan could say in *La troisième*: 'it is necessary to be this knot'<sup>20</sup>.

And if the Lacan of *L'insu que sait...*, contrary to the Lacan of the *Écrits*, gives the symptom the value of the sign, it is because there is an 'equivalence of the sign to the Real'<sup>21</sup>, 'Thus the AE as symptom-of-the-School' would be a sign of the Real or become congruent with it, for the very good reason that he has encountered a bit of it in his experience. The real does not depend on the analyst, says Lacan, it is 'the analyst who depends on the real'<sup>22</sup>, it is a matter of the encounter, of contingency. With this development one can better understand, why the real that the analyst is concerned with is nothing other than the real which is the centre of the experience of the School.

### *To sound the awakening*

All this relates to the awakening of the real: the navel of the dream, the awakening of anxiety. As with the pass, but in a completely different way, through the incidence that can be made with the symptom. The identification with the symptom in effect puts the *parlêtre* in harmony with its real *jouissance*: 'I am as I enjoy'. But what exactly is it that the symptom wakes us from?

To identify with the symptom — let us take note — does not mean that it is the real at play, in order to explain the reciprocal incompatibility with meaning. It is impossible to be concerned by Lacan in *Séminaire XXIV: L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile à mourre*. There he states that 'debility', is fundamentally from 'mental'<sup>23</sup> which suffers from not being able to say the truth about the real. As Jacques-Alain Miller course emphasised last June in relation to '*L'une bévue...*' 'the Freudian unconscious is a mental illness'<sup>24</sup>. Knowledge extricated from an experience of the treatment is finally reduced (*ravalé*) — as he emphasises — to a flight of fancy (*élucubration*) qualified as 'retarded' (*débile*). The unconscious does not make good the discord between the

mental and the real. This poses problems for any construction in the pass: whether it insists on, yes or no, a gap linked to the fault<sup>25</sup> of sex (*défaut de sexe*)? Doesn't this renovation (*ravalement*) render null and void the acquired knowledge to which the *passant* testifies? In the last resort, although unconscious knowledge is extracted (*arraché*) from ignorance in analysis, it is nevertheless retarded because it is firstly, as Jacques-Alain Miller says a *ne pas savoir y faire avec*, especially with the fault of sex. On the contrary, what arises from a *savoir y faire*, is the work of the symptom. The symptom appears as an alternative to debility — the symptom versus debility. The awakening in question thus consists in treating the debility of thought with the symptom, whether it is unconscious or not. But be careful. Ensure that this awakening is not used to proclaim the idealisation of the pass. As Jacques-Alain Miller reminds us in his course referred to above<sup>26</sup>, the definitive awakening is only a dream. It could only be short lived (*fugitif*).

### *To grasp the real*

Mental deficiency is severely tested each time that psychoanalysis confronts us with an aporia. This is the case ever since Lacan affirmed that the symptom is "the only thing truly real which keeps a meaning in the real"<sup>27</sup>. The phrase *L'insu que sait...*<sup>28</sup> certainly brings us up short. If there is reciprocal exclusion of meaning and the real, how can one posit a 'meaning in the real'. The word 'meaning' (*sens*) could certainly be understood as 'orientation towards...', but that would not be enough to remove the aporia. The direction opened up by Lacan is not always resolved. Jacques-Alain Miller clearly stated the enigma in Barcelona in 1998 in these terms: "How to think the unthinkable idea of a meaning-in-the-real?"<sup>29</sup> In this way the symptom unveils its Janus aspect:

— It keeps a meaning in the real, and this conjunction means that psychoanalysis is not a swindle (*escroquerie*), as Lacan maintained in Brussels. But as meaning, it is nevertheless a lie as regards the real which, for him, is absolutely excluded from it.

— At the same time, as signification, it is reduced to a letter beyond meaning. It is thus a supplementary signifier, which is not from the Other, compatible with the inexistence of the Other. These two aspects, lie and letter, operate an unthinkable conjunction of meaning and beyond meaning.

Without doubt that is the most extreme part of the work of the symptom, beyond all mental processes: *to reconcile*<sup>30</sup> the irreconcilable (meaning and real) without for all that to *reconcile* them by definition. Lacan attributed this feat to the poets (cf. *L'insu que sait...*) as they are capable of producing a signification without the effects of meaning.

The AE would do well to be inspired by the poets — not by providing a bad parody of them — but in order to invent their own solution which would have this poetic function of allowing the grasping (*serrage*) of the real. This brings us back to the question of invention from the bits of knowledge (*bouts de savoirs*) after the pass: it is not a matter of giving meaning to what hasn't got it; that is impossible and would represent a return to the neurotic's battle with the lack. It is a matter of making a mark (*signe*) of a *savoir faire avec*, with what should be called a gap rather than a lack. This '*faire*' which is to '*faire passer au savoir*'<sup>31</sup> really makes the practice of the knot clearer. There's no need to fiddle around with bits of string, it is by the act that, according to Lacan's expression, 'the man of *savoir-faire*' comes to pass.<sup>32</sup>

This amounts to giving life to what is called 'the dynamic of knots'<sup>33</sup>, the consequences (*portée*) which he sums up in this way: "It doesn't serve anything, he says, but it serves". One could say that to grasp is the final version of the 'work of the symptom'.

### *Thus, in order not to conclude*

Isn't this the object of all work, such that it has one: to serve up a bit of the real on which to base a practice? It is very different from deducing from a theory always in deconstruction. If historically the 'dream work' allowed the discovery of the unconscious as knowledge, then doesn't the 'work of the symptom', as far as it is con-



cerned, justify a beyond of the unconscious, precisely where knowledge fails. It is thus that I have set out the characteristic of the symptom collectively at stake from the ends of analysis. Isn't the symptom, in treating the incurable real by an operation of grasping, at the horizon of a practice of psychoanalysis which is radically Other? Has this practice discovered its insignia (*marques*)? Does it truly work? Can the School testify to it? What do the Cartels of the pass say of it? How is the pass itself clinically reshaped by the idea of the work of the symptom? Is it not in the end the stake itself of the formation of the analyst today, if he can survive his century — which I believe, is far from certain?

#### Howard Britton

1. S. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 1905, SE Vol. 7.
2. J. Lacan, *De l'agressivité en psychanalyse* in *Écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 1996, p. 116.
3. J. Lacan, *Position de l'inconscient* in *Écrits*, *op. cit.*, p. 846.
4. J. Lacan, *Du Trieb de Freud* in *Écrits*, *op. cit.*, p. 851. Fink also translates this as 'devoid of colour'.
5. P. Monribot, *La balistique du symptôme*, *Journées des AE de l'E.C.F.* in Paris, 2 – 3 October 1999, *Mediodicho* No 20, Cordoba, 2000, pp. 92 – 97.
6. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXIII: Le sinthome*, session of 18 November 1975, *Ornicar?* No 10, Paris, 1976, pp. 3 – 11.
7. In French the word *chirurgie* has a rich etymology and the Greek *kheirourgia* has a meaning of work [TN].
8. For a discussion of this term see, *Quarto* No 77, pp. 6 – 33: *La théorie du partenaire*. From the lecture series given in collaboration with Eric Laurent under the title, *L'Autre qui n'existe pas et ses comités d'éthique*, 1996 – 1997 on the 12, 19 and 26 March, April 23, and 21, 28 May and 4, 11 June.
9. J. Lacan, *La troisième* in *Lettres de l'École freudienne de Paris* No 16, Paris, 1975, p. 186.
10. *Ibid.*
11. J. Lacan, *Du sujet enfin en question* in *Écrits*, *op. cit.* pp. 234 – 235.

12. J.-A. Miller, *L'orientation lacanienne: Le lieu et le lien*, 2000 – 2001, lesson of 13 June 2001, unpublished.
13. I don't want to know.
14. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXIII*, lesson of 13 April 1976, *op. cit.* pp. 5 – 12.
15. *Ibid.*, lesson of 9 March 1976, unpublished.
16. *Ibid.*, lesson of 17 February 1976, *Ornicar?*, No 8, Paris, pp. 14 – 20.
17. J. Lacan, *La troisième*, *op. cit.*, p. 201.
18. *Société d'Assurance Mutuelle Contre le Discours Analytique*, cf. J. Lacan, *Télévision*, Paris, Seuil, 1974, p. 27. Translated as PIPAAD (Professional Insurance Plan Against Analytical Discourse), Norton, 1990, p. 15.
19. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXIII*, *op. cit.*, lesson of 13 April 1976.
20. P. G. Gueguen, *Éléments pour l'analyse du symptôme* in *La Cause freudienne* No 49, Paris, Seuil, 2001.
21. J. Lacan, *La troisième*, *op. cit.*, p. 182.
22. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXIV: L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile à mourre*, lesson of 10 May 1977, *Ornicar?* No 17/18, Paris, 1979, pp. 16 – 19.
23. J. Lacan, *La troisième*, *op. cit.*, p. 187.
24. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXIV*, lesson of 19 April, 1977, *op. cit.*, pp. 11 – 16.
25. J.-A. Miller, *Le lieu et le lien*, lesson of 13 June 2001, *op. cit.* unpublished.
26. As in blame, but also geographical fault or gap, rupture [TN].
27. *Ibid.*
28. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXIV*, *op. cit.*, lesson of 15 March, 1977, pp. 7 – 11.
29. A possible translation might be 'The unknown which knows....' [TN].
30. J.-A. Miller, *Le symptôme: savoir, sens et réel* in *Le symptôme-charlatan*, Seuil, Paris, *Champ freudien*, 1998, p. 58.
31. Italics in the French (*concilier les inconciliables*) [TN].
32. Could be translated literally as, 'to make a pass to knowledge' [TN].
33. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXIII*, lesson of 10 February 1976, *Ornicar?*, No 8, Paris, 1976, pp. 6 – 13.

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