

Joyce the Symptom I

Jacques Lacan¹

(21) I'm not in the best shape today, for a lot of reasons.

With the agreement of Jacques Aubert, at whose insistence you all have to look at me today—Jacques Aubert, an eminent Joycean whose thesis on the aesthetics of Joyce is an eminently recommendable work—I have taken as my title *Joyce the Symptom*.

With that, you'll have to forgive me if I take a moment—it won't take long—to par-rot² Joyce, the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*, which is the dream that he bequeaths, the dream that put an end to—an end to what? That's what I'd like to try to say. This dream puts an end, a *Finneg-end*,³ to his work's being able to do any better.

I'll start again—why expect that the rot on which man *pourspère*—which sounds like “rot in hope”—why expect the meatia⁴ that fill us up with news to transmit my title correctly? Jacques Lacan, they don't even know what that is, it might as well be Jules Lacue—which is the English pronunciation of what we call in our language, tail (*la queue*). Why would they print *Joyce the Symptom*? Jacques Aubert communicates it to them, and then they put out *Jacques the Symbol*. For them, of course, it's all the same.

¹ Address delivered at the invitation of Jacques Aubert at the opening of the fifth international Joyce Symposium, 16 June 1975. The parenthetical page numbers in the text refer to the original French version of the talk as published in the volume *Joyce avec Lacan* (Paris: Navarin, 1987): 21-29. Lacan's written version of this talk was published in the same collection as “*Joyce le symptôme II*.” To confuse matters, “*Joyce le symptôme IP*” was republished in *Autres Écrits* as simply “*Joyce le symptôme*.”

² Lacan's pun is *poursticher* for *pasticher*, ‘to parody’, ‘to mimic’, ‘to pastiche’. I'm assuming the syllable “*pour*” at the beginning anticipates the puns on *pourrir*, ‘to rot’, that follow. Thus Lacan is parroting Joyce's wordplay, with the emphasis on “rot.”

³ In French the pun plays on *fin*, ‘end’, and *Finnegan*.

⁴ Lacan's word is *journiture*, a pun on *journalisme* and *nourriture*, ‘food’. Hence, “fill us up,” immediately following. The word also ends up sounding like *pourriture*, ‘rottenness’, ‘corruption’.

From the sym that *ptom*s to the sym that *bols*, what difference could it really make (22) in the bosom of Abraham, where the all-rotten will remain fat and happy⁵ for all eternity?⁶

Still, I'll correct it—ptom, petty-tom, good little man,⁷ still lives in [our] language, because, along with other languages, it believed itself obliged to ptom the thing that coincided, for that's what it means.⁸

Refer to *Bloch et von Wartburg*, the etymological dictionary, which is a solid enough source, and you'll see that symptom was originally written *sinthome*.

Joyce the *sinthome* is homophonic with saintliness—some people here might remember that I televised about it.⁹

⁵ This passage, “*où le tout-pourri se retrouvera en sa nature de bonneriche*,” is difficult, and my translation of it is speculative. To take the clearest points first—Lacan is undoubtedly referring to the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man from Luke 16:19-31. “*Tout-pourri*” continues to pun on the “rotteness” that is a theme here. Though not exactly common, the expression “*en sa nature de*” is one that Lacan used. It appears in “Kant avec Sade,” for example (*Écrits* 786). It means something like “in the form of,” “in its manifestation as,” or simply “as.” More difficult is the word “*bonneriche*.” It is given in this form in all the different versions of this text, and so it is probably not a misprint, but it doesn't appear in any dictionary. A clue to Lacan's intention is provided by the fact that the rich man in the parable, traditionally named Dives, is known in French as *le mauvais riche*. In contrast to the parable, Lacan places the *tout-pourri*, who seems to correspond to *le mauvais riche*, rather than Lazarus, who is the good poor man, in the bosom of Abraham. In spite of the syntax of the sentence, Lacan seems to be asking, “What could it possibly matter if they get my title wrong, if these rotten people wind up in the bosom of Abraham like good rich men for all eternity?” To capture the degree of blithe indifference Lacan accuses these careless journalists of displaying, I've used the English expression “fat and happy” as a translation for *bonneriche*. Finally, it should be noted that Lacan, who knew the King James Bible, uses the word “bosom” in English in the original.

⁶ Lacan says, “*étournité*,” punning on *éternité* and *tour*, ‘turn’. There's also a likely pun on *étourdi* (‘crazed’, giddy), which doesn't translate very well. Lacan had, of course, had already punned on this latter term in the title of his essay, “*L'Étourdit*” in *Scilicet* 4 (1973).

⁷ The wordplay in French is more striking—“*ptom, p'titom, p'titbonhomme*.”

⁸ Lacan is playing upon the etymology of *symptom*, which in Greek meant “to fall together,” “to coincide.”

⁹ *Sinthome* sounds like *saint homme*, ‘saintly man’. Lacan is referring to his elaborations on sainthood in a television interview recorded at the end of 1973. The text was later published and translated into English as part of the collection *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment* (New York: Norton, 1990).

If you pursue a little of the reading that the references in *Bloch and von Wartburg* direct you to, you'll see that it's Rabelais who turned *sinthome* into *symptomate*.¹⁰ That's not surprising, since he's a doctor and *symptom* must already have had a place in medical language, but that's not certain. Continuing in this same vein, I would say that he *sympraumatizes* something.

The important thing isn't for me to parody *Finnegans Wake*—we'll never live up to that task—it's to say how, by forming the title *Joyce the Symptom*, I give Joyce nothing less than his own name, the one by which I believe he would recognize himself in the dimension of naming.

That's a supposition—he would recognize himself if I could still speak to him today. He would be a centenarian, and that's not common—it's not common to pursue life for so long, that would be a hell of a number to get up to.

Meeting

Coming from a rather sordid environment, namely Stanislas—raised by priests, like Joyce, but by priests less serious than his, who were Jesuits, and God knows he knew what to make of them—anyway, emerging from this sordid environment, it happens that at seventeen, thanks to the fact that I frequented Adrienne Monnier's place, I met Joyce. Likewise, I attended, when I was twenty, the first reading of the translation of *Ulysses* into French.

It is from such coincidences, that lead us here or there, that we make our destiny—for we're the ones who weave it that way. We make a destiny out of them because we speak. We (23) believe that we say what we want, but it's what the others wanted, more specifically, our family, that speaks us. And you should understand that "us" as a direct object. We are spoken, and because of that, we make of the coincidence that directs us something like a plot (*de*

¹⁰ Cf. *Scilicet*, 6/7, p. 33. Lacan refers to Rabelais's introduction of this spelling.

tramé)—and we call it our destiny. So that it isn't necessarily by chance, however difficult it may be to find the thread of it,¹¹ that I met James Joyce in Paris, even though he was here for quite a while more.

Excuse me for telling my own story here, but I think that I do it only as a tribute to James Joyce.

University and analysis

Throughout my life, a wandering life like everyone's, I have always lugged around an enormous quantity—about this high—of books, among which Joyce's don't go any higher than this—the others are on Joyce. I used to read some of those from time to time, but Jacques Aubert will testify that I've taken myself to task for it recently. I've been able to see in them more than just differences—a peculiar back and forth in the way Joyce is received based on the way he is read.

In accordance with what Joyce himself knew would happen to him posthumously, the university is in charge. It's almost exclusively academics who busy themselves with Joyce.

It's quite striking. Joyce said it: "What I write will never cease to give work to academics." And he hoped for nothing less than to keep them busy until the extinction of the university. We're headed in that direction. And it's obvious that this could only happen because the text of Joyce teems with completely captivating, fascinating problems for academics to sink their teeth into.

I'm not an academic, in spite of the Professor, Master, or other taunts that they hurl at me. I'm an analyst. Right away, that makes a homophone, doesn't it, with the four master

¹¹ While in English we tend to think of a plot *line* or of the *thread* of a plot, the French word for "plot" is the same as "weave." Lacan's metaphor, then, is of finding the particular strand, within a woven plot, that would have led him to Joyce.

annalists that Joyce made a big deal about in *The Wake*,¹² and which are founded on the basis of the annals of Ireland. I'm another kind of analyst.

One couldn't say that Joyce (24) was a fan of the analysis that has emerged since then. Credible authors who knew Joyce—I only glimpsed him—who were his friends, gladly report that if he “Freudened,” if he hummed this Freudian tune, it was with aversion. I believe that's true.¹³

I find proof of this in the fact that in the constellation of the dream from which there is no awakening—in spite of the last word, *Wake*—in the series of personages in *The Wake*, there are two twins—Shem, whom you'll permit me to call Shemptom, and Shaun. I hope they're pronounced that way because on this point I didn't consult Jacques Aubert, who, for pronunciation, helped me out an awful lot during this multi-cultural exchange.¹⁴ So we have Shemptom and Shaun. They are linked (*noués*)—nothing is more closely linked than twins. It's to the other—not Shem, whom he calls, by adding on another epithet (*épinglage*), *the penman*—it's to Shaun that Joyce pins Dr. Jones. This is the analyst to whom Freud, who knew what he was up to, gave the task of writing his biography. He knew him well. That is to say that he was sure that Jones wouldn't add the least bit of fantasy to it, that he wouldn't, among other things, permit himself to add any touch, any bite, any *agenbite of inwit*. Somewhere in *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus speaks of the *agenbite of inwit*, of the bite, the “*morsure*”—we translate it in French, I don't know why—“*d'ensoi*,” of inself, even though it really means *wit*, interior *wit*, the bite of

¹² Wherever Lacan uses *Finnegans* as a shortened version of the title, I've used the—slightly pretentious—English nickname for the book, *The Wake*.

¹³ “*s'il a 'freudened', s'il a freudenedé ce fredonnement. . . .*” Lacan makes an English past participle out of Freud's name. That sounds like “frightened” in English and “*fredonnement*,” ‘humming’, in French.

¹⁴ The simpler French word here, *brassage*, can mean mixing of cultures. The expression is similar to the American term, “melting pot.”

the joke, the bite of the unconscious. With Jones, Freud was tranquil. He knew that his biography would be a hagiography.

Obviously, the fact that Joyce Shaunizes, if I may put it that way, the Jones in question gives us an idea of the importance, as someone else would say, of being Ernest. A lot more than Joyce, Jones—I tell you this because I met him—turned up his nose at being called Ernest. But that’s probably because of Wilde’s amazing play by that title, about which Joyce made a great deal. More than once in *The Wake* this reference to the importance of being called Ernest appears.

Not hooked up to the unconscious . . .

All this only goes to show that it’s not the same thing to say Joyce the sinthome as it is to say Joyce the symbol. I say Joyce the symptom—because the symptom abolishes the symbol, if I may go on in the same vein. It’s not just Joyce the symptom, but Joyce as—if I may—not hooked up to the unconscious.¹⁵

(25) Read *Finnegans Wake*. You see that there’s something that plays, not in each line, but in each word, on the pun, a very, very peculiar kind of pun. Read it, there isn’t a single word that isn’t made like the first one that I used to try to set the tone for you, “*pourspère*,” made of three or four words that are used to make flashes and sparkles. It’s really fascinating, even though, to tell the truth, meaning, in the sense that we usually understand it, gets lost in all this.

In *Structure and Motif in Finnegans Wake*, Clive Hart speaks of something disappointing in Joyce’s use of this kind of pun. Atherton, in his *The Books at the Wake*, attributes this to the

¹⁵ This phrase would more usually be translated as “unsubscribed to the unconscious.” Unfortunately, “unsubscribed” doesn’t sound very colloquial in English. Hence the phrase “hooked up,” in the sense that one is “hooked up” to cable, the telephone, or the Internet when one subscribes to them.

unforeseen. This pun is rather a portmanteau word, in the sense of Lewis Carroll, who is thus a precursor—and having discovered this rather late, Joyce must have felt, Atherton concludes, a bit annoyed by it.

Read some pages from *Finnegans Wake* without trying to understand anything. It reads, but as someone of my circle remarked to me, that's because we can feel present in it the *jouissance* of the one who wrote it. One wonders—at least the person in question asked—if this is why Joyce published it. Why did this *Work*, which was *in progress* for seventeen years, finally come out in black and white?

It's lucky that there's only one edition, which allows one to cite it by designating the line number on the right page, that is, the page that will always bear the same number. If it had to be published with different page numbers, like other books, how would we ever find anything in it? But he had it published, and that's how I would hope to convince him, if he were here, that he wanted to be Joyce the symptom, insofar as he displays the apparatus, the essence, and the abstraction of the symptom. For if anything accounts for the fact, noted by Clive Hart—that in following Joyce, we are in the end exhausted—it's only the proof of the fact that our own symptoms are the only thing that hold any interest for each of us. *The symptom*¹⁶ in Joyce is a symptom that doesn't concern you at all. It's the symptom insofar as there is no chance that it hooks you up to something of your unconscious. I believe that this was the meaning of what was told to me by the person who asked me why he had it published.

¹⁶ Lacan has “*Le symptôme chez Joyce*,” with the emphasis on the *le*. Lacan seems to be getting at a distinction between the many individual symptoms we're each concerned with and Joyce's singular symptom. This seems to be one case where the French definite article, used for emphasis, can be translated directly into English.

(26). . . *even though playing only upon language*

It's necessary to go on questioning this major and final work, to which, in fact, Joyce assigned the function of being his ladder.¹⁷ From the start he wanted to be someone whose name, very specifically his name, would survive forever. Forever means that it serves as a landmark (*marquer une date*). No one had ever made literature like that. And to emphasize the weight of this word *literature*, I'll give it the equivocation that Joyce often played upon—*letter, litter*. The letter is trash. And if there weren't this kind of spelling, so peculiar to the English language, three quarters of the effects of *The Wake* would be lost.

The most extreme example—which I owe, by the way, to Jacques Aubert—is *Who ails*, and after that, *tongue*, written like *langue* in English, *tongue* and then another enigmatic word, *coddeau*—“Who ails tongue coddeau aspace of dumbillsilly?” If I had encountered this passage, would I or wouldn't I have perceived—“*Où est ton cadeau, espèce d'imbécile?*”¹⁸

The unbelievable thing is that this occasionally translinguistic homophony is only supported by a letter that conforms to the orthography of the English language. You wouldn't know that *Who* could be transformed into *où* if you didn't know that *Who*, in the interrogative sense, is pronounced that way. There's a kind of ambiguity in this phonetic usage that I might just as well write as *f.a.u.n.a*. The fauna-tics of the thing is based entirely on the letter, that is, on something that isn't essential to language, something woven by the accidents of history. That someone should make prodigious use of this is an inquiry into what language is in itself.

I have said that the unconscious is structured like a language. It is strange that I should also describe someone who, strictly speaking, only plays upon language as not hooked up to the

¹⁷ What's translated here as “ladder” is *escabeau*, ‘step ladder’, ‘steepstool’. This will become an important word in “Joyce the Symptom II” where it is transformed into “S.K.beau,” one possible reading of which is “*est-ce qu'est beau.*”

¹⁸ “Where is your gift, you idiot?”

unconscious—even though he uses the one language that isn't his own—for his own was wiped off the map, that is, Gaelic, of which he knew a little, enough to orient himself, but not a lot—not his own, therefore, but that of the invaders, the oppressors. Joyce said that in Ireland one has a master and a mistress, the master being the British Empire and the mistress being the holy, Roman, and apostolic church, both being the same kind of scourge. This is exactly what is to be noted in what turns Joyce into the symptom, a pure (27) symptom of what the relation to language is like insofar as it's reduced to a symptom—namely, to its effect, when that effect isn't analyzed. I would even say when one is forbidden to play on any of the equivocations that would stir anyone's unconscious.

Jouissance, not the unconscious

If the reader is fascinated, it's because in conformity with this name that echoes Freud's—after all, Joyce is related to *joy*, to *jouissance*, as it is written in the English language—this joy, this *jouissance* is the only thing that we're able to get a hold of in his text. That's the symptom. The symptom insofar as nothing connects it to the very *lalangue*¹⁹ that supports this

¹⁹ “Lalangue” is a coinage of Lacan's that joins the definite article *la* to *langue*, ‘language’, ‘tongue’. He introduced the term in *The Knowledge of the Psychoanalyst* (session of 4 November 1971). There is no space here for an exploration of the concept. Simply, *lalangue* is language not as structure, but as nonsense. *Lalangue* provides all the homophonic and equivocal effects of language. While it is tempting to think of *lalangue* as language in a “primordial state”—the world of language, say, as the infant experiences it—this conception should be avoided because it introduces the developmental notion that language *supercedes* *lalangue* by imposing a structure on it. Clearly, slips, mishearings, and mispronunciations—along with the fact that *lalangue* produces surprising polysemic effects—show that *lalangue* and language are always intertwined. Lacan introduces *lalangue* to address an impasse in his work. He says as much in *The Knowledge of the Psychoanalyst*—“I didn't say that the unconscious is structured like *lalangue*, but like language.” After years of describing the unconscious as linguistically structured, he now wants to account for both the meaning effects and the *jouissance* effects of the unconscious. Much of “Joyce the Symptom I” is devoted to this very impasse.

Note that Russell Grigg has proposed “llanguage” as an English translation of *lalangue*. Others adopt it untranslated as a Lacanian term.

weaving (*trame*), these grooves, this braiding of earth and air with which he opens *Chamber Music*, his first published book, a book of poems. The symptom is purely what conditions language, but in a certain way, Joyce gives it all the power of language without, for all that, any of it being analyzable, which is what strikes the reader and leaves one literally dumbfounded (*interdit*)—in the sense that one is struck dumb. I remain dumbfounded.

That we use “to prohibit” (*interdire*) to say “to dumbfound” (*stupéfaire*) in French is significant.²⁰ This is what gives substance to Joyce’s contribution, and this is why literature after him can never be what it was before.

It’s not for nothing that *Ulysses* aspires to the Homeric, although it doesn’t have the slightest relation to it, even though Joyce sent his commentators off looking for resemblances between what happens in *Ulysses* and *The Odyssey*. To associate Stephen Dedalus with Telemachus! Trying to shed some light on that one with commentary on *The Odyssey* just gives you a headache. And how could anyone say that Bloom could in any way be a father for Stephen—who has nothing to do with him except for crossing his path occasionally in Dublin? How indeed, if it weren’t for the fact that Joyce indicates and is able to denote that all psychic reality, that is, the symptom, depends, in the final analysis, on a structure in which the Name-of-the-Father is the unconditional element.

(28) *The Borromean father*

The father as name and as the one who names are not the same. The father is the fourth element—here I’m referring to something that only a portion of my audience is able to

²⁰ This is Lacan’s own gloss on the end of the last paragraph, the wording of which is more impersonal in French—“*c’est ce qui frappe, et littéralement interdit—au sens où l’on dit—je reste interdit.*” “Dumbfounded” is perhaps the best way in English to capture the negative relation to speech expressed by *interdire*. Another possible translation of this passage is “one is literally left speechless—with the emphasis on speech. I remain speechless.”

consider—the fourth element without which nothing is possible in the knot of the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real.

But there's another way to name it, and that's why today I'm covering what there is of the Name-of-the-Father at the level at which Joyce testifies to it—which deserves to be called the sinthome. It's insofar as the unconscious is knotted to the sinthome, which is what there is of the singular in each individual, that one can say that Joyce, as someone wrote somewhere, identifies himself with *the individual*. He is the one who has gone to the extreme of incarnating the symptom in himself, thus escaping any possible death and being reduced to the very structure of Man, if you'll permit me to write it very simply as *l.o.m.*²¹

And that's just how he conveys himself, as something that brings a number of practices to an end. He puts an end to them. But how are we to understand the meaning of this “end”?

It's striking that Clive Hart emphasizes the cyclical and the cross as being that to which Joyce is essentially linked. Some of you know that with this circle and cross, I draw the Borromean knot. To investigate in Joyce what this knot produces, namely an ambiguity between 3 and 4, which is what he remained stuck to, attached to, in his inquiry into Vico, and what's worse, in conversations with spirits, which Atherton, by the way, classifies under the general title of *spiritualism*, which surprises me, because I would have thought it would be called spiritism. I think it's surprising to see that on occasion, this contributes to what appears as the symptom in *The Wake*.

That's not all, for it's difficult not to take account of the fiction that could be placed under the rubric of initiation. What does whatever is conveyed under this register and this term consist of? How many associations come into being under banners that they don't understand the meaning of? That Joyce delighted in Madame Blavatski's *Isis Unveiled* is one of the things I

²¹ *Lom*, is a condensation of *l'homme*, ‘man’.

learned from Atherton—and it floored me. The kind of mental retardation involved in any initiation is what gets me, and probably makes me underestimate it. I must say that a little after I had, thank heaven, made Joyce’s acquaintance, (29) I was to meet someone named René Guénon,²² who didn’t rate any higher than the worst in terms of initiation. *Hee hawsn’t!*²³ That’s one way to write what comes from the donkey that Joyce alludes to as the central point of the four terms, North, South, East, and West, as the intersection, therefore, of the cross—an ass supports it. God knows that Joyce makes something of this in *The Wake*.

But still, how can we call the dream that is *The Wake* finished, since the word it ends on joins up with the one at the beginning, the “the” that it ends with hooking up with the “riverrun” that it starts with—which indicates something circular? To spell it out, how could Joyce have missed what I’m currently introducing in the form of the knot?

In so doing, I’m introducing something new that not only accounts for the limitation of the symptom, but also for what allows what’s knotted to the body, that is, the imaginary, to be also knotted to the real, and thirdly, to the unconscious, in such a way that the symptom finds its limits. It’s because it reaches its limits that we can speak of the knot, which is surely something wadded up like a ball of yarn, but which, once unfolded, keeps its form—the form of a knot—and at the same time, its ex-istence.

This is what I will be introducing in my course next year, taking Joyce, among others, as my support.

—translated by Dan Collins

²² René Guénon (1886-1950) was a French critic of “decadent” Western culture and proponent of esotericism who ultimately relocated to Egypt and lived as a Sufi. Lacan seems to be invoking him as an advocate of initiation for its own sake.

²³ *Hi han* is the sound a French donkey makes. I’m assuming that Lacan’s “*Hi han a pas*” is meant to approximate “*il n’a pas*,” ‘he doesn’t have’. Thus “*Hee hawsn’t*.” Other readings are possible.

From Joyce-the-Symptom. = Slavoj Žižek. What does Lacan's thesis on "Joyce-the-symptom" aim at? One could also say that this scene renders the symptom of Power: the grotesque excess by means of which, in a unique short-circuit, attitudes which are officially opposed and mutually exclusive reveal their uncanny complicity, where the solemn agent of Power suddenly starts to wink at us across the table in a gesture of obscene solidarity, letting us know that the thing. Joyce the Symptom : Conference given by J. Lacan in the large auditorium of the Sorbonne on the 16th of June, 1975, Text from : <http://topoi.net>. The text was established by Jacques-Alain Miller, partially from the notes of Eric Laurent. Published in *L'Œuvre*, 1982, no. 6. Translated by Aaron Benav. "I am not in top form today, for all sorts of reasons. 3. From Joyce-the-Symptom to the Sinthome 4. Joyce's Knots: Death and Sex Before the Wake 5. Waking the Read: The Indelible Sigla of Finnegans more. Contents: 1. James Joyce, In and Out of Analysis 2. Was Joyce Mad? Not by a Transparent Sheet 3. From Joyce-the-Symptom to the Sinthome 4. Joyce's Knots: Death and Sex Before the Wake 5. Waking the Read: The Indelible Sigla of Finnegans Wake 6. The Object Meaning Raised to the Dignity of the Thing. The symptom is purely what language conditions, but, in a certain fashion, Joyce carries it to the power of language, without forasmuch any of it being analyzable; it is what strikes, and literally dumbfounds (interdit) . . . Joyce the Sinthome II. Notes given by Jacques Lacan to Jacques Aubert after the conference for publication of its papers. The two papers are very different.