

On the Names-of-the-Father
Jacques Lacan (translated by Bruce Fink)
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On the Names-of-the-Father is the second of two recently published English translations of Jacques Lacan's work from Polity Press.¹ It consists of two parts, which are titled "The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real" (a talk given on July 8th, 1953) and "Introduction to the Names-of-the-Father" (a talk given on November 20th, 1963). Those familiar with Bruce Fink's legacy in the American context—notably, his translation of the "Complete" *Écrits*²—will be delighted to know that the quality of this translation is once again unrivalled. There is no discernible intervention on the part of the editor apart from a rather short forward from Jacques-Alain Miller,³ and Fink relieved himself of his traditional practice of incorporating excessive annotations and footnotes into the text.⁴ While this provides for a smooth reading experience—many of the original French words are not provided in parentheses—it nonetheless encourages an active faith on the part of the reader. The book also includes two rather unnecessary colour plates, which are printed in opposite order in relation to the text: two versions of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1596 & 1601-2) by Caravaggio.

Those who expect a thorough examination of the Lacanian trinity (Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real) or an intimation about the relevance of the Borromean formation will be disappointed by this publication. Lacan admitted this much when he opened his talk: "I have selected a title that is quite ambitious."⁵ Ambitious indeed. These books are meant to be read in one of three ways, and none of these ways bring clarity. First, it could be read as an introductory text. However, those who turn to the book for an accessible introduction to Lacan's work will be bitterly disappointed. And yet, not unlike many of Lacan's other short works, the book truly does serve as an introduction. It is only an introduction for those who are willing to continue studying other works. More precisely, this text was Lacan's own introduction to the study of the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real. In other words, Lacan did not yet have the trinity sorted out during 1953. Second, it could be read as a supplementary text. In this case, one reads the text to further explore the

1 I have reviewed the other book in *Interstitial Journal* (2013). Cf., <http://interstitialjournal.com/reviews>. Retrieved on December 18th, 2013.

2 Cf., Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (Bruce Fink, Trans.), New York: W. W. Norton & Company (2007).

3 The forward provides a few notes regarding the context of the work.

4 Upon further inspection, one will nonetheless locate a fairly extensive list of editorial and translator comments as an appendix. However, this list is non-obtrusive.

5 Jacques Lacan, "The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real," in *On the Names-of-the-Father* (Bruce Fink, Trans.), Cambridge, UK: Polity Press (2013), p. 3.

contours of some of Lacan's central concepts and gain an appreciation of the context in which various themes were developed. For example, we are alerted to the fact that the two sections of this text occurred during pivotal moments in Lacan's biography: the first text was the result of a split within the French psychoanalytic movement that provided the impetus for the development of the French Psychoanalytic Society, while the second was the result of an "excommunication" by the education committee of the French Psychoanalytic Society. Third, the book could serve as ammunition for those who have already made up their minds about all this stuff—and they will happily dismiss the whole of it. And we are the better for it!

In "The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real," Lacan introduced his teaching as if from the very beginning: what is the reality of the clinic? What is reality for the patient? What is speech and why is it central to psychoanalysis? What is language and how is it different from speech? We shall find the answer to this group of questions in a latent schema which differentiates the symbolic ("gagged speech") from the imaginary (resistance):⁶

What the subject expresses first when he speaks is the register of what we call resistances, which can only be interpreted as the fact of realizing an image or images of early experience *hic et nunc*, here and now, in the analytic situation with the analyst. The entire theory of resistance was built upon this, but only after the major recognition of the symbolic value of symptoms and of everything that can be analyzed.⁷

Resistance, then, occurs within the imaginary and not within the unconscious. The unconscious is the place of the symbolic, of that which is repeated: the symptom. We should note that even during the early development of the trinity Lacan maintained a relational/structural articulation of the Symbolic and the Imaginary. Readers will also be introduced to a very interesting formulation of the logical time of analytical work: "rS-rI-iI-iS-sS-SI-SR-rR-rS." One immediately wonders what this strange inscription could mean. To decipher it, we need the basic coordinates: there are lower-case letters (which, to some extent, symbolize subordination) and there are upper-case letters (which, to some extent, symbolize dominance), and then there are three letters consisting of R (for "Real"), S (for "Symbolic"), and I (for "Imaginary"). I will invite the reader to turn to the text to get a more precise understanding of the formulation. For now, it should suffice to provide but one example: "rI" refers to the "realization of images," which makes possible the narcissism of resistance; "iI" refers to a stage in the direction of the session whereby the analysand becomes captivated by these images. We know that the analysand's captivation with images can not be logically prior to the analysand's realization of images. The point of all of this is to demonstrate that the Imaginary is not clear-cut: it always passes through different relations or times *vis-a-vis* the other orders; it is not *just*

⁶ Elsewhere, during the 1950s, Lacan referred to this as "schema L."

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

the narcissism of images.

The second part of the book is much more obscure. Lacan remarked that his presentation was prepared as an introduction to his regular yearly seminar. Yet, due to the removal of Lacan's name from the list of training analysts of the French Psychoanalytic Society, the introduction was also to be the conclusion. For this reason, the curious invocation within the title—the “names” of the father—remains to be completely understood. Most of us are familiar with the *name* of the father, the *Nom du père*, which is the signifier of signifiers, the master signifier, but then, with the subsequent pluralization, we must wonder what company the master keeps! It seems to me that Lacan's point was not that there are many master signifiers within a single discursive chain, but that there are many different master signifiers within the world of discursive chains. For example, we know that there are many names for God and that there are many substitutes for the Father within the Oedipus Complex. Lacan put this rather well when he said:

The name of God [...] is but *The Name*, which is [Ha] Shem in Hebrew. As for the name designated by the *Shem*, I would have never pronounced it in my Seminar this year for reasons that I would have explained, even though certain people know how to pronounce it. Moreover, there is no one single pronunciation, there are many [...] and they have varied over the centuries.⁸

What is important is the *function* that the name plays and not the true name. So, there are many *names* of the father and all of these names perform the same function of the *Nom du père*. The name is much more purely transmitted via the letter and this is why it is grounded within the Symbolic Order. More precisely, there is no way of naming the name of the father—this is precisely the question which eludes us. Lacan claimed “[t]he question of the father can not be raised because it is beyond what can be formulated as a question.”⁹

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8 Jacques Lacan, “Introduction to the Names-of-the-Father,” in *On the Names-of-the-Father* (Bruce Fink, Trans.), Cambridge, UK: Polity Press (2013), pp. 78-79.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 72-3.