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What, for Lacan, makes the function of the Father work? Of Abraham and the goat, or, of Elliott and ET

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[B O O K R E V I E W]

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What Lacan calls the Name-of-the-Father refers to the influence of cultural and social law within the family, something which has traditionally – especially within patriarchal societies – been associated with the actual figure of the father. Given that Lacan thinks of the Name-of-the-Father as a *signifier* – and a crucial signifier at that, one that anchors the symbolic order and enables it to function – it need not refer to a literal father. This much is made clear by the reference in Catholicism to, precisely, the Name of the Father, a signifier (or term of reference), which clearly points beyond the level of mere mortal fathers. Stijn Vanheule (2011) provides a brief yet illuminating description of the Lacanian concept of the father. The father for Lacan is "a symbolic function to which all group members … are subjected" (61); "It provides human beings with an internalized compass of culturally and socially viable principles" (Stijn Vanheule, 2011: 61).

By the early 1960s it was becoming clear that there was a prospective shortcoming – an internal contradiction – to this crucial Lacanian concept. The Name-of-the-Father is both *a signifier* (as is oft repeated by Lacanians), and yet it

is also a *privileged signifier* that grounds the symbolic order, that makes it work as an order of laws and prohibitions. As such, we have the same problem that is sometimes encountered in versions of social constructionism: once we have been informed of the power of various constructions of knowledge (or, switching to Lacanian theory, signifiers), then the question is posed: what makes some constructions – some signifiers – more powerful, more law-inducing than others? What do they draw upon, what modality of force lends them, their apparent power? Given that the Name-of-the-Father is such a crucial factor of power, a "compass of culturally and socially viable principles" (Vanheule, 2011: 61), then this is a crucial question for Lacan to address.

It helps, if we are to make any headway on this question, to introduce an example from outside the ambit of Lacan's own (often obscure) cultural frame of reference: Steven Spielberg's **ET**. It is often wrongly assumed that **ET** is a film about an extra-terrestrial. In fact, the film is really about how the film's young protagonist, Elliott, comes to assume a symbolic identity in a puzzling world that has provided him no clear role model or father figure. The film is shot largely from the perspective of a child (we rarely see the faces of adults; we side with Elliott and his friends in their attempts to hide ET, etc.). From this perspective it becomes clear that Elliott is all but invisible, certainly in comparison to his noisy older brother, his cute little sister Gertie and given his mother's heartbreak after recently being dumped by Elliott's absent father. This all changes when Elliott discovers ET and becomes his protector. It is only after meeting ET, and a series of subsequent quasi-Oedipal exploits – kissing a girl, causing chaos at school by liberating frogs destined for a science experiment – that the adolescent Elliott is given a purpose and a role relative to the other characters in the film. Although ET may fascinate us, his role is fleeting – the whole film in a sense is about ET going home, leaving Elliott. Then again, it is as a result of all this upheaval that Elliott is finally able to locate himself in relation to both a surrogate father figure – a benevolent scientist, who confides in Elliott that he too had loved ET – and the rudimentary social matrix that he finds himself within.

A similar familial matrix provides the subtext for Spielberg's **Jurassic Park**, in which a palaeontologist who hates kids comes to assume a paternal role via the crisis precipitated by a rogue Tyrannosaurus Rex. Once again, we are dealing less with a film about an alien life form than with a narrative about how a broken family bond is made right, how a crisis of paternal identity is corrected. The salvation is made possible – and here I cite Leader (2011: 56) – "not by the real father but by a non-human protagonist, as if to emphasize the disparity between the biological progenitor and the symbolic function of paternity". Differently put: there needs to be something outside the obvious remit of the father to make the function of the father work. Leader

continues: "It was this symbolic texture of the father that made Lacan use the expression 'Name-of-the-Father', as if the outside force necessary to introduce order into human relations was beyond flesh and blood and situated rather in the register of symbols" (2011: 56). The important point of emphasis here is the "outside force" able to "introduce order into human relations". There is a sense then in which that which makes the father work is in some sense external, or, perhaps better yet, fictitious, mythical.

This lengthy preamble helps to contextualize what initially seems an odd point of emphasis in the first session of Lacan's aborted (1963) seminar "On The-Names-of-the-Father". The seminar was famously cut short after the first lesson (20 November), due to Lacan being "excommunicated" as a training analyst by the IPA. The odd point of emphasis is this: after extended reflection on the name of God as conveyed to Moses via the burning bush (the famous biblical words: "I am what I am"), Lacan directs his audience's attention to the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac. After all of Lacan's (2013: 80) various readings of God's pronouncement, "I am who I am", understood as a type of pure naming function conferring symbolic existence ("I am He who is") this redirection of attention comes as a surprise. As if addressing the argument above (What is it that imbues certain privileged signifiers with power?) Lacan seemed to have been offering up an argument about the role of performative enunciation. This would not have been unusual for the Lacan of the 1950s who was so focused on the 'full speech', that is, on the therapeutic efficacy of the *spoken* word.

Referring to Caravaggio's depictions of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his son, Lacan draws our attention to the figure of the ram. It was of course the ram, whose horns had become entangled in a thicket, that stopped Abraham dead in his tracks and that became a suitable substitute sacrifice for Isaac. The point here seems to be that performative utterance ("I am who I am") is not enough to mark the authority of God. Even God – surely the "Father of all Fathers" – requires a naming beyond himself, a reference to something else beyond His own Name. (And let us not forget, in the Old Testament, the Name of God cannot be spoken, a tautological formula needs to suffice). The office of paternity needs something outside itself, something *symbolic* – something mythical or fictitious, indeed, something *outside a given set of experience* – to reconfigure reality. This point is underscored when Lacan insists (in an earlier, 1953 lecture, included in this same collection):

> "symbols are not elaborations of sensations or of reality. What is properly symbolic – and the most primitive of symbols – introduces something else, something entirely different into human reality … The creation of symbols accomplishes the introduction of a new reality into animal reality." (2013: 44-45)

And so we are making some headway: the Name-of-the-Father is at once symbolic (it is not "of reality"), and yet it is also from outside of human reality (mythical). It is in this sense that the Name-of-the-Father as a signifier is both *of* the symbolic and yet able to *reconstitute* that symbolic. It is like an element from within a set that becomes a re-articulation point for a reordering of its elements.

This does not at first sound like a particularly Freudian type of argument. Lacan is, however, quick to enlighten us. The missing Freudian component – which helps flesh out how we think of the mythical dimension of the symbolic – is the role of the totemic.

The totem, of course, arises after the murder of Freud's primal father, and it provides a structure of law and prohibition by virtue of the imposition of an artificial or external (indeed, a *mythical*) symbolic element. This then is why for Lacan the problem of naming God as dramatized in the proverb of Moses and the burning bush must be supplemented with reference to Abraham's prevented sacrifice of Isaac. The function of the Name as both Law and pure symbolic function requires an alien element – a ram, or in Spielberg's universe, an extra-terrestrial or dinosaur – to reorder the world of social relations. And yet it does more than this. Here follows what is perhaps the point of greatest interest to those concerned with the broader sociological and group psychological dynamics of Lacan's aborted seminar on "The Names-of-the-Father". We will always need these alien figures, these mythical components that support the function of the Father and ground symbolic law. Why so? Well because they separate us from God's (the Father's) terrible jouissance. More clearly put: without these mythical elements, we would experience the terrifying authority of the Primal Father, of God, directly. It is because the Name-of-the-Father functions in society today as it does – via the imposition of a mythical, symbolic element – that we no longer need to participate in rites of sacrifice, rites which for thousands of years "united the community with God's jouissance" (Lacan, 2013: 88).

References

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