Puzzling out the fathers: Sibylle Lacan’s
Un père: puzzle

Sibylle Lacan’s text *Un père*, published in 1994, bears the subtitle ‘puzzle’, a term which the author describes as referring primarily to the fragmented nature of her writing. However, it applies equally well to the subject of her text: the question of what kind of father Jacques Lacan represented for her is a puzzle wrestled with throughout the text. Behind this puzzle lies another. Is her text also primarily a testimony to her father’s intellectual legacy? In taking up her pen, is the daughter merely confirming the law of the father? This intriguing text tables issues relating to autobiographical writing, to discourses of fatherhood and daughterhood and to the ways in which women’s writing can be appropriated – or legitimised – by the dominant theoretical discourses of its day. I intend to consider these issues in three different stages of this chapter: first, what kind of writing project is entailed? Second, how does it explore and engage with discourses of the daughter–father relation? And third, can the text be reduced simply to a reading in terms of Lacanian theory, or are there alternative frameworks which can be productively brought to bear on the text?

However, it is first necessary to introduce the complex biographical nexus of relations with which the text sets out to deal. Jacques Lacan married Marie-Louise Blondin (‘Malou’) on 29 January 1934. During their honeymoon in Italy he sent a telegram to his mistress of the day; as Elisabeth Roudinesco remarks in her biography *Jacques Lacan*, husband and wife had entirely opposing notions of marital fidelity and, in her words, ‘ce couple . . . s’engageait ainsi sur la voie du désastre’ (the couple thus set out on the road to disaster). Their first child, Caroline, was born in January 1937; her father gave her the nickname of ‘Image’, a reference to the theory of the mirror stage which he was elaborating at the time of her birth.
According to Roudinesco, Lacan was an adoring father made happy by the experience of paternity. However, twenty-one months after Caroline’s birth, Lacan ran across Sylvia Bataille by chance in the café de Flore: she had refused to have a relationship with him some years earlier when she was still living with her husband, Georges Bataille. Now she was separated, and she and Lacan embarked on a relationship which would last the rest of Lacan’s life.

Malou, meanwhile, had a second child, Thibault, born in August 1939, and in the autumn of 1940 was eight months pregnant with her third child when Lacan broke the news to her that Sylvia was also expecting his child. Malou’s child Sibylle was born on 26 November 1940 in Royan; Malou became depressed and filed for divorce. Lacan and Sylvia moved into the rue de Lille in Paris, and on 3 July 1941 Sylvia gave birth to Judith, declared on her birth certificate as Judith Bataille, since she was still married to Bataille and Lacan had not yet been divorced from Malou. French law did not permit a married man legally to recognise a child born to anyone but his wife. A farcical situation had thus been created: Lacan was the biological and social father of Judith, but could not give her his name. Sibylle was his biological daughter and bore his name, but he had almost no contact with her in the early years of her life. Malou insisted that the truth be kept from the children, and when she moved back with them to Paris from Royan, Lacan would come to dine at the house every Thursday. The children were told he was busy with his work. They had no idea he had remarried (which he did in 1953) and they did not know of the existence of their half-sister Judith, or of that of Laurence, Sylvia’s child by Bataille, to whom Lacan acted as a substitute father.

Thibault was let in on the secret and met his half-sister in 1956, but Sibylle, the youngest child, was only told in 1958, when her older sister Caroline was to be married and Lacan wanted the two families present at the wedding. Sibylle subsequently holidayed with her father and Judith in St Tropéz and in Italy, and became painfully aware of what Roudinesco calls Lacan’s ‘véritable adoration pour Judith. Il souffrait amèrement de n’avoir pu lui donner son nom et lui voua un amour exclusif et passionné’ (Roudinesco, p. 250) (veritable adoration for Judith. He suffered bitterly from the knowledge that he could not give her his name and loved her with an exclusive passion). Judith later married one of Lacan’s most devoted disciples, Jacques-Alain Miller, and became Judith Miller. After the death of Georges Bataille, Lacan had taken the formal legal steps necessary to have her legitimised as Lacan, but, in the event, she bore the name Lacan.
for only two years, before becoming Miller. On Lacan’s death in 1981, Malou and her family were upset by the will, which left most of Lacan’s fortune to Sylvia and her family, and gave them the rights over his published and unpublished work. Legal battles between the two families went on for ten years after Lacan’s death.

Sibylle Lacan’s *Un père* was published in the period when the legal battles were coming to a close; the writing process is dated as having taken place over the period August 1991 to June 1994 and Sibylle was thus 51 when she began this written quest for the father. The text is brief, often brutally lapidary in style, and consists of thirty six unnumbered fragments preceded by a preface and followed by an epilogue, itself made up of three fragments. The preface makes a series of strong claims for the text’s status as authentic. It opens, in high Balzacian style, with the following sentences: ‘Ce livre n’est pas un roman ou une (auto)biographie romancée. Il ne contient pas une once de fiction’ (p. 9) (This book is not a novel nor a fictionalised (auto)biography. It does not contain an ounce of fiction). She goes on: ‘On n’y trouvera aucun détail inventé dans le but d’enjoliver le récit ou d’étoffer le texte’ (p. 9) (The reader will find in it no detail invented to embellish or fill out the text). The text thus opens with three denials, before it comes on to a series of attempts to formulate the nature of her project as being to speak of Lacan in his relation to her as a father, and not as a famous psychoanalyst. Her method and materials are described as strongly privileging the process of memory, especially spontaneous and associative memory. She insists on the fact that the order of the text is the order in which the memories made their ‘imperious’ apparition in her mind; both the use of the word ‘imperious’ and the statement that she wrote ‘à l’aveugle’ (blindly), with no precise purpose, strongly suggest the comparison with the therapy session.

However, if the text is a kind of therapy, Sibylle plays the part of both patient and analyst, since the text we have in front of us is not a series of unadulterated memories presented in the order in which they came to her but, as she almost immediately concedes, a reordered and a ‘corrected’ set. Sibylle has assembled her puzzle pieces to make a whole – the link between them is not necessarily that of the associative process but of a set of later choices. From the outset, therefore, the project has a double face: on the one hand it is presented in a rather fiercely puritanical tone as a model of subjective authenticity, untouched by the desire to invent, to romanticise or to prettify. The ‘perfect’ writing, she asserts, is one which is ‘spontanée, impulsive, sans corrections ultérieures. C’était pour moi une
question de principe’ (p. 10) (spontaneous, impulsive, with no later corrections. That was a point of principle for me). However, this fierce defence of rectitude, based on the notion of subjective memory as authenticity, is contradicted by the fact that what we actually have is a text grouped and ordered according to a conscious logic which is not stated, but about which the narrator appears to announce in advance her guilt, since it breaks a lifelong principle.

The workings of this logic will be of particular interest as we turn to the broad question of how the text explores the daughter–father relation, and of what discourses of fathering it draws on. The title, Un père, with its indefinite article, poses a blank space and, indeed, one of the first figures of fatherhood the text stages is that of absence. The first fragment begins: ‘Quand je suis née, mon père n’était déjà plus là’ (p. 15) (When I was born, my father was already no longer there). His absence was indeed so much part of the structure of the family’s existence that he could not be ‘missed’. In the second fragment she writes: ‘Aucun manque [. . .] Nous savions que nous avions un père, mais apparemment les pères n’étaient pas là’ (p. 17) (He wasn’t missed [. . .] We knew we had a father but apparently fathers were not present). Alongside the evocation of absence is immediately raised the issue of the family name. In the last lines of the first fragment she writes: ‘nous étions, ma sœur aujourd’hui disparue, mon frère aîné et moi, les seuls à porter le nom de Lacan. Et c’est bien de cela qu’il s’agit’ (p. 15) (my sister, no longer on this earth, my elder brother and I, we were the only ones to bear the name Lacan. And that’s what it’s about).

The sense of portent emerging from the last sentence indicates the extent to which holding onto the name becomes a talismanic symbol, standing in compensatory relation to the absence of the father, and constituting the only form of superiority she has over her half-sister Judith – once she has discovered the latter’s existence. The arrangement of the fragments indeed precisely ties the theme of the patronymic to the crisis of Sibylle’s discovery of Judith’s existence: this discovery, and the realisation that Judith and their father behave like ‘lovers’, are recounted in the tenth and eleventh fragments. Fragment twelve draws particular attention to itself by its extreme brevity. It consists of only two sentences in which Sibylle recalls that when her mother, who had reverted to her maiden name of Blondin, asked her children if they wanted to change their name to Blondin, they had refused. However, this event actually took place earlier than the discovery of Judith; its positioning in the narrative here immediately following the account of her discovery of Judith’s existence indicates the significance she
attaches to it at the time of writing – or arranging – her text. The significance attached to the name of the father is thus beyond dispute.

The early fragments follow the images of absence with a number of images of the magical fantasy figure. The most striking is the recounting of an episode in which, during a visit to a fort in Brittany, her brother narrowly escapes falling to his death as the father catches hold of his clothing at the last moment. No other family member found the episode particularly memorable, but Sibylle is so transfixed by this heroic role for her father, that she reads her own attachment to the island of Formentera (‘Fort-m’enterra’ (fort buried me)) as a re-enactment of the incident. The following fragment again evokes her father in a saviour role – this time when he intervenes on her behalf against her siblings. The fragment ends on the following remark: ‘Et si un père servait d’abord à cela: à rendre la justice...’ (p. 27) (And perhaps that is a father’s primary role: to dispense justice...). Also supporting these idealised versions of the father is the evocation of their visits to expensive restaurants: the mingled pleasures of meringue glacée and a sense of intimacy with her father produce ‘le comble de la volupté’ (p. 29) (the height of voluptuousness); she has her father’s total attention and feels herself to be ‘une personne à part entière’ (p. 29) (a full and proper person).

These images are concentrated in the early part of the text, and form the main elements of what one might call the discourse of the ‘magical’ father. However, they connect to other discourses, of the father as provider and the father as guarantor of sexual identity, both of which are more problematic. The father is a positive provider when he opens the door to expensive restaurants, but he is a failing provider when, in Sibylle’s account, he gives her mother only a small allowance which obliges her mother to make fitful and generally doomed efforts to seek work. Sibylle also expects her father to provide for her, and is deeply disappointed by her father’s apparent lack of anxiety about who will provide for her after his death. His refusal to pay for an operation for her, when she is 40, leads her to break off relations altogether with him; Lacan died two years later without her ever seeing him again.

The sexuality issue is equally dichotomous. The ‘height of voluptuousness’ attained in the restaurant scene has obvious links with the sense of idyllic physical pleasure which emerges from one of the most evocative fragments of the text, in which her father sees her naked. The scene takes place in her father’s country house, and she is describing the pleasures of washing in the bathroom connected to her bedroom, overlooking the garden:
J’y faisais ma toilette avec délices car elle était spacieuse, claire et avait un
charme légèrement désuet propre aux demeures provinciales qui corres-
pondait à mon sens de l’esthétique.

En fin de matinée, j’étais debout dans la baignoire, me passant le gant
sur le corps. Soudain (il n’y avait pas de verrou), j’entends la porte s’ou-
vrir. Je me retourne en tressaillant, mon père était dans l’embrasure de la
porte. Il marque un temps d’arrêt, me dit posément ‘excuse-moi, ma
chérie’, et se retire tout aussi tranquillement en refermant la porte derrière
lui.

Un coup d’œil, c’est toujours ça de pris. . .
(I’étais FURIEUSE.) (p. 61)

(I delighted in washing there, for the room was spacious, light and had the
slightly old-fashioned charm of provincial houses which corresponded to
my idea of the aesthetically pleasing.

In the late morning I was standing in the bath, passing the flannel over
my body. Suddenly (there was no lock), I heard the door open. I turned
round with a shiver, my father was in the doorway. He waited a moment,
said calmly ‘sorry, darling’, and went away just as unhurriedly, closing the
door behind him.

A glance, that’s better than nothing. . .
(I was FURIOUS.))

The anger referred to in the last line is seriously undermined by the capital-
isation and the use of parenthesis. The combination of aesthetic charm with
the sensuality of the flannel passing over the body, the vocabulary of ‘délices’
and ‘tressaillant’ carry an evident sexual charge. The sense of having been
looked at, conveyed in the penultimate line, is expressed with a more discor-
dant brutality: ‘un coup d’œil, c’est toujours ça de pris’ clearly implies a rela-
tion of power between looker and looked at. This worm in the apple
becomes dominant in most of the other representations of femininity and
sexuality in the text. Sibylle stresses the way in which her father’s sexual
interest in his mistresses intervenes in her own relationship with him on a
number of occasions: on one, he has been urgently summoned to discuss
Sibylle’s illness and, as she waits for him on the balcony, she sees him emerge
from a local house of ill repute preceded by a woman. She is suffocated by
indignation that he should satisfy his own sexual desires when she is waiting
for him, and in her own street. Later, Lacan agrees to find her an analyst, but
she discovers after a number of years that the analyst in question is his mis-
tress. Once again she tries to draw closer to her father through illness but
finds herself obliged to pass through her father’s sexual relations to others.
However, the main thread of both sexual and sibling rivalry is centred around the existence of her half-sister Judith. In the ninth fragment Sibylle recounts the events of 1940: ‘Alors que je venais de naître (ou bien maman était-elle encore enceinte de moi?), mon père annonça joyeusement à ma mère, avec la cruauté des enfants heureux, qu’il allait avoir un enfant’ (p. 33) (When I had just been born (or was my mother still pregnant with me?), my father announced to my mother with the cruelty of a happy child, that he was going to have a baby). Sibylle then evokes her mother’s ‘effondrement intérieur, l’impression d’avoir reçu le coup de grâce, la mort qui envahit l’âme’ (p. 33) (interior collapse, the feeling of having received a mortal blow, death in the soul) and her father’s extraordinary remark to her mother: ‘Je vous le rendrai au centuple’ (p. 33) (I’ll make it up to you a hundred times over). The narration of this event is a clear violation of the promise made in the preface that her own memories will form the materials of her narrative. But it allows her to stress the horror of this betrayal, and, furthermore, it is used as an introduction to the account of her meeting with Judith, a meeting portrayed as a crushing blow to her sense of feminine identity:

Ma première vraie rencontre avec Judith m’écrasa. Elle était si aimable, si parfaite et moi, si maladroite, si gauche. Elle était la socialité, l’aisance, j’étais la paysanne du Danube. Elle avait l’air d’une femme, j’avais encore une allure enfantine. Ce sentiment dura longtemps. Depuis, j’ai rencontré ce spécimen féminin et je sais à quoi m’en tenir. Mais à l’époque j’étais accablée, coupable [. . .]

A haunting memory is the vision of my father and Judith dancing like lovers at a local dance in Ramatuelle. What on earth was this? Was a father not a father?)

The rivalry with Judith and the sense of struggle for a daughterly identity cumulates in two particularly painful fragments, situated in the heart of the text, in fragments eighteen and twenty-three. The eighteenth fragment is
perhaps the most significant and stands exactly halfway through. It recounts her discovery, via a friend, that her father is listed in *Who's Who* as having only one daughter – Judith. Stupefaction is followed by hatred: the next fragment is a pure indictment of Lacan as father, beginning with the statement: ‘J’ai haï mon père pendant plusieurs années’ (p. 57) (I hated my father for several years) and declaring him responsible not only for the collapse of her family but for her own psychological crisis which began at the end of adolescence. Four fragments later, we come to the episode of the photograph:

Aussi loin que je remonte dans mes souvenirs, j’ai toujours vu dans le cabinet de mon père, trônant sur la cheminée, une grande photographie de Judith jeune fille, en position assise, vêtue sagement – pull-over et jupe droite –, ses longs cheveux noirs lisses peignées en arrière de manière à dégager le front.

Ce qui me frappa d’emblée quand j’entrai pour la première fois dans ce cabinet fut sa ressemblance avec papa. Comme lui, elle avait le visage ovale, les cheveux noirs et le nez allongé (mes cheveux sont châtain clair, j’ai le nez retroussé, le visage triangulaire et les pommettes saillantes). Ce qui me frappa ensuite, c’était sa beauté, l’intelligence de l’expression, l’élégance de la pose.

Dans la pièce aucune autre photo.

A ses patients, à nous, à moi, pendant plus de vingt ans, mon père a semblé dire: Voici ma fille, voici ma fille unique, voici ma fille chérie. (p. 65)

(As far back as I can remember, I have always seen in my father’s consulting-room, in pride of place on the mantlepiece, a large photograph of Judith as a girl, seated, neatly dressed in a pullover and straight skirt, her long black hair combed back revealing her forehead.

What struck me straight away when I went to the consulting-room for the first time, was her resemblance to my father. Like him, she had an oval face, black hair and a long nose (my hair is light brown, my nose is turned up, my face triangular shape and my cheekbones prominent). What struck me afterwards was her beauty, the intelligence of her expression, the elegance of her pose.

There was no other photo in the room.

To his patients, to us, to me, for over twenty years, my father seemed to be saying: Here is my daughter, here is my only daughter, here is my beloved daughter.)

The photograph is indeed a very daughterly portrait, with Judith dressed ‘sagement’, hair brushed back, and bearing a strong resemblance to the
father. It appears to exclude Sibylle as daughter through the comparative list of features – even physically, it appears, Sibylle has difficulty in asserting her status as daughter. The message of the last line is a reinforcement of the *Who’s Who*. Judith is not just one of Lacan’s daughters, she occupies the whole place of daughterhood in relation to him.

These two episodes, of the photograph and the missing recognition in *Who’s Who*, appear to be springboards for the text of *Un père*. In writing and publishing her text, Sibylle Lacan publicly asserts her name and her relation to her father, filling the gap, the missing piece in *Who’s Who*. On the front of the volume is a photograph of Sibylle, labelled as having been taken at 16 in Brittany, which stands in complete opposition to the photograph of Judith. It dates from the period of Sybille’s life in which she knew nothing of her rival for daughter status and it recalls the magical father who saved her brother’s life in Brittany. It also displays a very boyish mode of femininity: short, unevenly cut hair, an immature yet determined-looking face, gaze directed pensively into the distance. It bears a strong resemblance to the determination expressed in the preface that nothing should be prettified or be inauthentic. It represents her portrait of a daughter, addressed to a public who have heretofore been presented with the portrait of Judith. She no longer appears to be crushed by Judith but to be asserting her own claim to daughterhood.

Thirteen fragments of the text remain, after the evocation of the *Who’s Who* episode and Judith’s portrait. The two dominant discourses are that of the mildly ridiculous ‘drôle de père, un peu “zinzin”’ (p. 70) (a weird father, a bit ‘barmy’), with a host of stories of his social *hauteur*, and his inadequacies on the sporting and mechanical front, and that of the criminal father, source of her psychological breakdown. Eventually Sibylle forces her entry into her father’s world, through her need for therapy. Contrary to her own claims, little seems to be resolved: she fails to visit him in his final illness and the account of the funeral is marked by recriminations and bitterness.

However, there is a final fragment of the main text in which Sibylle visits her father’s grave and undergoes an experience of magical reconciliation, strongly recalling the description of the restaurant visits in an early fragment. She seeks a private, intimate rendez-vous with her father, and is rewarded by a physical sense of rapprochement so strong, that she is finally able to declare ‘tu es mon père’ (you are my father) a recognition which at last goes beyond the generic title *Un père*. It is supported by three very brief fragments of epilogue, focusing on dreams and memories in which she
evokes images of closeness to him, even a sense of an ‘histoire d’amour, de passion’ (p. 101) (a story of love, of passion) between them. The final shape of the text therefore, which seems to be on a downward spiral from the Who’s Who episode onwards, moves back up in the very last pages to a recapturing of her early sense of a passionate tête-à-tête with the father.

What then, in the end, is this text all about? A public recognition of her father as father, is clearly central: a public staging of her own name as Lacan is an assertion of daughterhood, made necessary because among his failures as father has been his failure publicly to recognise her as his daughter. The shape of the reordered narrative which drives downward into the heart of her sense of betrayal and disappointment but which moves upwards at the end towards reconciliation and reintegration suggests that the writing process may have succeeded where her therapy has failed. This is less true of the problematic feminine identity staged in the text, graphically illustrated by the photograph, mirrored in the insistence on an unvarnished writing style, and focused through the narrative of the rivalry with her half-sister Judith. In many ways, this set of issues about names, about a passionate but largely disappointed yearning for the absent father, and about gender identity look ripe for a Lacanian theoretical resolution. This is indeed a line explored very successfully by Martine Delvaux, who sees Sibylle Lacan as experiencing a ‘forclusion du nom du père’ (a forclusion of the name-of-the-father), the famous concept which Lacan began to elaborate in Sibylle’s early childhood.3 In this reading Sibylle’s illness is caused by a rejection of the name of the father; writing and publishing the text allows her to accept her name and move towards an acceptance of herself. This is indeed a highly plausible reading, but I would like to raise the issue of what is at stake when we read the text in this way. In Simone de Beauvoir’s Les Belles Images, Laurence falls ill when the emotional and intellectual lure of the father becomes evident to her, and she both recognises this and simultaneously rejects a Freudian explanation as a neat formula which can certainly be applied to her case, but which resolves nothing. Keeping her daughter out of therapy, and encouraging her friendship with another girl, are the most positive steps Laurence takes.4 In the case of Sibylle Lacan, reading her text through a Lacanian framework risks reducing her account of an emotional and fragile journey towards a belief in the self, via her father’s apparent rejection of her, to an illustration of the intellectual authority of the father, whose fame and eminence she stresses in her text. The effect is circular: she escapes the emotional bind in which she has been placed only to fall into the intellectual bind. Is there, then, any
other way of reading the text which takes us outside the authority of the fathers?

Two other paths through the text seem to me to be worth pursuing. The first centres on the figure of the mother, whose presence in the text is often inextricable from that of the father. Jessica Benjamin argues that instead of seeing the daughter’s turn to the father as the desire for the phallus, the rejection of the mother’s lack (as Freud and Lacan do), we can instead understand the girl’s desire for the father to be driven by a desire for freedom from dependency on the powerful mother of early infancy. When we turn back to Sibylle Lacan’s text we find that the mother, depicted as a poor abandoned wife in relation to the father, is nevertheless seen as an extremely powerful figure in relation to the children. Stressing her father’s complete absence during the earliest years of her life, Sibylle writes: ‘ma réalité à moi, c’est qu’il y avait maman, un point c’est tout [. . .] Maman était tout pour nous: l’amour, la sécurité, l’autorité’ (p. 17) (my own reality was that mother was there, and that was that [. . .] Mother was everything to us: love, security, authority). The last term is especially significant. Her mother ran the household on a system of rights which accompanied age and it is this hierarchy which allows Sibylle’s elder siblings to bully her – earlier I drew attention to the way in which the father comes into this scenario as saviour and justice figure. When Sibylle first becomes ill her entire family pushes her to spend a year in Russia: her father advises her that she needs to get away from her mother. In the fragment in which Sibylle considers this possibility she again draws attention to the primordial role played by her mother in her life, and evokes her mother’s beauty. ‘Grande, svelte et blonde’ (p. 46) (tall, svelte and blond) – nothing could be more different from the photograph on the front cover of the text. It raises the possibility that Sibylle’s sense of being crushed by Judith in the femininity stakes simply reflects her sense that she will never look like her mother. In a more identifying move, Sibylle spends most of her adult life apparently incapable of working, echoing her mother’s desultory attempts to take up a variety of professions which all fizzle out. Also like her mother, who never remarried despite a number of opportunities, Sibylle remains unmarried. Reconsidering the role of the mother in the text places the daughter’s pleasure in a rare escapade to a restaurant with her father in a different light, and may also explain why ‘instinctively’, she and her siblings refuse when asked if they wish to take their mother’s name of Blondin. If it is indeed the discourse of the mother which in reality remains unresolved, the failure to resolve the feminine identity issue also becomes more explicable.
A second path involves another woman who can perhaps also be regarded as a quasi-maternal figure – Elisabeth Roudinesco. Roudinesco has a textual existence in the final fragment of the text, where Sibylle Lacan cites from Roudinesco’s biography of Lacan the paragraph which describes Lacan’s final moments. As he was in excruciating pain, it was decided that he should be given enough morphine to allow him to die. According to Roudinesco, Lacan was fully conscious of what was happening at the moment of death and stared into the eyes of the doctor who gave him the final injection. Sibylle Lacan describes the emotional storm which reading this paragraph unleashed in her, and its role in allowing her to come to terms with her father’s death. The text ends: ‘C’est ce jour-là [i.e. the day she read Roudinesco’s paragraph] que je me suis sentie le plus proche de mon père. Depuis je n’ai plus pleuré en pensant à lui’ (p. 106) (It was that day that I felt the closest to my father. Since then, I no longer cry when I think of him). Roudinesco’s text is thus given a central role in Sibylle’s final sense of identification with her father, and her acceptance of his death.

This appears all the more significant when we look further into the links between Roudinesco’s biography and Sibylle Lacan’s text. Roudinesco’s biography was published in September 1993; Sibylle’s text, written between August 1991 and June 1994, was therefore begun before the appearance of the biography. However, Roudinesco interviewed members of the Lacan family extensively in preparing her book, and the dates cited of interviews with Sibylle show that the interviews began as early as November 1989, and continued throughout 1990 and 1991. The beginning of Sibylle’s writing process thus follows on from the interviews and Roudinesco has confirmed to me in conversation that she encouraged Sibylle to write. Sibylle’s text can be considered, in this light, as having strong intertextual links with Roudinesco’s biography, which itself draws on Sibylle’s memories. In a further twist, Roudinesco’s account of Lacan’s development of the concept of the nom-du-père is a firmly biographical one. In her account, Jacques Lacan detested his paternal grandfather Emile, a family dictator of such ferocity that Jacques’s own father Alfred was unable to exercise his paternal authority. Roudinesco goes on:

Partant de l’abaissement de la condition paternelle dont il avait souffert dans son enfance, il [[Jacques Lacan] faisait surgir le concept de nom-du-père de l’horreur que lui inspirait encore la figure d’Emile: le père du père. Et au souvenir de cette humiliation d’Alfred s’ajoutait le poids de sa
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propre expérience de la paternité. Se sentant coupable de n’avoir pu donner son nom à sa fille, Lacan théorisait l’idée que seul un acte de parole – une nomination – pouvait permettre à un père d’authentifier sa descendance. (Roudinesco, pp. 373–4)

(Starting out from the abasement of the condition of fatherhood from which Lacan had suffered in his youth, he conjured up the concept of the name-of-the-father from the horror which the figure of Emile – the father’s father – still inspired in him. And his memory of the humiliation of Alfred was further exacerbated by the weight of his own experience of paternity. Experiencing guilt at not having been able to give his name to his daughter, Lacan theorised that only a speech act – a nomination – could allow a father to authenticate his descendants.)

In sum, for Roudinesco, Lacan’s theory recounts in her words ‘ses affaires de famille’ (Roudinesco, p. 373) (his family affairs). Theory and biography are turned on their heads. Instead of Lacanian theory being used as a reductive tool on Sibylle’s life writing, Lacan’s family life becomes an explanation of his theory. Sibylle is not so much the prisoner of Lacanian discourse as part of one of its sources. In both cases we have discourses of paternity which mask other discourses that lie beneath them or are entangled with them.

In the end, Sibylle Lacan’s Un père, Roudinesco’s Jacques Lacan and Jacques Lacan’s nom-du-père become embroiled in an intertextual whirl in which notions of paternity, origins and authority lose their footing. Seen in this light, however, Sibylle’s puzzle of a text escapes the reduction to simple confirmation of her father’s intellectual legacy. The discourse of the daughter remains tightly enmeshed with a discourse of the father but is more than the subject of patriarchal law. Indeed, the most enabling figure of the text may be that of Roudinesco, who acts as godmother to the writing of the text, and hence to the partial resolution of the traumatic relation with the absent father. What is left far more unresolved is the challenge of the idealised and powerful femininity of the mother and half-sister, to which the portrait of the adolescent on the front cover of the book offers a painful response and a clue to the puzzle of this fragmented text.

Notes


