

A father: puzzle, by Sibylle Lacan, Trans. Adrian Nathan West, Cambridge MA-London, The MIT Press, 2019, 92 pp., £14.99, ISBN-13: 978-0-262-03931-4

It is not uncommon in the French publishing tradition for works of fiction to be presented with a mark of the literary genre to which they belong: *roman* (novel), *théâtre* (drama), *contes* (short stories), *poésie* (poetry), etc. So when I first picked up a copy of the original French version of Sibylle Lacan's delicate little volume, back in September 1994, its presentation as a 'puzzle'—the word is identical in French and English—immediately caught my attention, sparking my curiosity and indeed inducing a certain degree of puzzlement. Since the word also carries the same connotations in both languages, it could refer to a mystery story, or even a work of hardboiled detective fiction, and to some extent it would not be entirely inappropriate to apply these designations to the quiddity of this text, if only because the entire narrative is driven by the unresolved question marks that loom large over the figures who provide the book's subject matter—the father of the main title, and his daughter, the author. Yet in an introductory note to the central part of her work, which is also entitled 'A father', Sibylle Lacan explains that the word 'puzzle' refers more to her creative *modus operandi* than to the 'genre' in which her work ought to be situated: "The subtitle *puzzle* derives from the fact that I did not write this text in a consistent manner. In the midst of disorder, I have written what I would call 'bursts' [*bouts*] . . . I have written, so to speak, blindly, without any precise design, whether in the formal sense, or as forethought; without knowing which scene, which image, I would wind up with once the bursts, the morsels, the pieces were assembled." (p. 2) Taking into account that she opens this note with the affirmation that her book "contains not an ounce of fiction", one thus needs to conclude that

the puzzle is first and foremost a tentative assemblage of scattered crumbs of truth—singularly subjective truth, yet truth all the same—which emerged intermittently in the author’s mind over a prolonged period of time (the words of the book were written, and probably re-written, between August 1991 and June 1994) like precious *objets trouvés*, redolent of a life lived with and without a father, and screaming out to be captured in writing as material proof of a painfully uncertain existence. Much like the font type adopted for the book’s main title on the front cover, the resulting image remains essentially cracked without therefore ever falling apart, and so the picture of ‘a father’ the reader is left with is both fragile and inchoate, coherent yet always quivering by the vulnerability of the sutures holding the fragments together.

Sibylle Lacan was the second daughter, and the youngest child, from Jacques Lacan’s first marriage. When Marie-Louise Blondin, who is affectionately called *Maman* throughout the book, was pregnant with her third child, her husband was already living with his mistress and future wife Sylvia Maklès. When Sibylle was born, on 26 November 1940, Sylvia was six weeks pregnant with her own child by Lacan, a daughter who would be born on 3 July 1941 by the name of Judith Bataille, because Lacan was still legally married to Marie-Louise Blondin and Sylvia herself had not officially divorced from Georges Bataille. In the opening piece of Sibylle’s puzzle, she describes her own birth as the “fruit of despair” (*le fruit du désespoir*) (p. 7), refusing to believe that she had been conceived in a fertile moment of reawakened desire between *Maman* and her partially estranged husband. One might easily interpret this phrase as a lyrical description of an unhappy, yet progenitive accident, were it not for the fact that despair constitutes the heart note of Sibylle’s entire composition. Whichever way one constructs and reconstructs the pieces of the puzzle, the developing image, which always shows more about Sibylle Lacan than it does about her father, because it is always an image

of Jacques Lacan as seen through the eyes of his daughter, is invariably bleak, gloomy and sorrowful. The one or two pieces displaying intensely longed-for flashes of uncontaminated joy are by far the smallest ones in the entire collection and they are always surrounded by more substantive pieces of despondency, anguish and dejection. In French, the word *désespoir* literally refers to ‘un-hope’ or ‘dis-hope’, and it could therefore also be translated as hopelessness. And if there is a more or less transparent picture emanating from these cautiously assembled pieces, it is a heart-rending image of Sibylle’s unrequited hope, an endlessly deferred longing that never fully succeeds in finding some form of meaning in the longing itself, and that is only brought to a temporary closure long after her father’s death, when she stands alone at his grave, in the small village cemetery of Guitrancourt, and places a red rose on his headstone. Ever since she had been struck down at the age of twenty-one by a mysterious, chronic sense of extreme fatigue, which had prevented her for many years from working, Sibylle had found it almost impossible to concentrate on anything at all, yet now, standing solitarily in front of her dead father, she somehow managed to find the strength: “As a last resort, I laid my hand on the icy stone until it burned . . . Reconciliation of bodies, reconciliation of souls. The magic worked. At last, I was with him. *Dear Papa, I love you. You are my father, you know.* He must have heard me.” (p. 84)

Despite their dominant hue of aching asperity, all the pieces in this agonising conglomeration of intimate memories show that Sibylle loves her father dearly, that she adores his ‘eccentricity’ warts and all, and that she never relinquishes the thought that her father will always be her father. Sometimes she loves him by expressing her profound hatred for the man who only seems to care about himself; sometimes she loves him by lying to others and to herself about what she likes and dislikes; sometimes she loves him by protecting him against the betrayal she feels he is being subjected to by the purportedly loyal members of

his family. But it is precisely because her love for him runs so deeply that she feels forced to live her life under erasure, in a never-ending state of mental fogginess, desperate yet persistently unable to make a living and to make life worth living. Lacan, as *Maman* would call him, is a father who comes to visit for lunch once a week, who buys his daughter expensive presents that he has asked his former wife to choose for her, who is running insouciantly late for a pre-arranged daytime visit to his seriously ill daughter because he is making love to one of his mistresses in a house on the same road where she lives, who only includes the daughter from his second marriage in his entry for *Who's Who*, who insists that his daughter call him as soon as she returns home after she has dropped him off in her car at his house only to then wonder why she is calling him when she effectively does so, who only keeps a picture of Judith in his office, who treats his daughter to exquisite meals at fancy restaurants, who gives her an orchid when she is about to leave on a long train journey to Russia, who sends his daughter for psychoanalytic treatment with one of his mistresses (she finds out and eventually chooses her own analyst), who is crying inconsolably alongside his first wife at the funeral of his youngest daughter Caroline (she died in a car accident on 30 May 1973, at the age of thirty-six), who refuses to lend his daughter money when she is urgently in need of surgery that she herself cannot afford, and who refuses to see his daughter on his deathbed. Lacan is a father who is rarely there when his daughter wants him to be there, and who often arrives intrusively when she is the least expecting him. Lacan is a father who does not keep his promises, but who always makes it up to those people he has let down "a hundred times over" (p. 25). "Was a father not a father?", Sibylle keeps asking herself (p. 29). Indeed, Lacan, the great psychoanalytic theoretician of the Name-of-the-Father as the key signifier for the child's mental development, was also nothing more, nothing less than a father. But as a father he could not prevent his daughter Sibylle from being ruthlessly devoured by the all-consuming

question as to what she means for this particular father, what valence she carries in his world, what place she occupies in his desire.

There is a tenacious, highly discomfiting tension permeating this text. It is highly unlikely that Sibylle's words would ever have been published, neither in the original French nor in any of the other fifteen languages in which they have been translated since, had she not been the daughter of Jacques Lacan. It is highly unlikely that the words would have existed to the general public had it not been for the evocative resonances of the author's surname. And yet, this is a memoir in which the words themselves struggle to exist, in which the author feels both liberated and reduced to nothingness when she is not just her father's daughter, and in which words are written on sheets of paper as material proof of the author's ongoing existence—harrowing as it may be. Someone out there might one day use these words as further evidence, if any were needed, that Jacques Lacan was a totally heartless, coldly calculating and utterly selfish philanderer, who was at least partially responsible for the fact that, during young adulthood, his daughter entered a debilitating state of melancholia from which she never fully recovered, despite years of psychoanalytic treatment. This, however, would completely miss the point of the puzzle, which is all about a daughter desperately trying to find the words to encapsulate and bring to life her own existence in relation to the absent presence of her beloved father. For the superb English translation of Sibylle's puzzle, it was decided to replace the original *quatrième de couverture* with a different text, which is both informative and captivating, but which does not carry the weight of the original, which may have been written also by Sibylle herself: "A *father*. The indefinite article might seem paradoxical if one knows that the author is the daughter of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. With this title, Sibylle Lacan displays precisely her own bias: "to speak of the father Jacques Lacan was to me, not of the man in general, and even less of the psychoanalyst". Each and

every girl's relationship with her father always contains somewhere within itself a small corner of hell. Yet what attests to this plight, as time goes by, is the love that is wounded within ourselves in the very place of our language. This is why this book cannot be defined as a novel or an autobiography, but as the frenzied quest for expression and authenticity with which a woman conquers her own language."

When her puzzle was reprinted in paperback in February 1997, Sibylle Lacan chose for the cover the only picture of herself that she really loved, and this is the image that also adorns the cover of the English edition. It is a slightly grainy, black-and-white photograph of a barely ten-year-old child, looking away from the camera, pensive and somewhat distracted, her purposeful gaze fixed not on anything particular in her immediate environment, but turned inwards, searching for answers to questions that have not yet come to pass. Those who were fortunate enough to have spent time with Sibylle in her later years, at *Le Select* or at *La Closerie des Lilas* in her Montparnasse neighbourhood in Paris, will know that in many ways she always remained that childhood image of herself—shunning the spotlight, inward-looking and perennially questioning others and herself. Six years after *A father* was first published, she released a second, equally exquisite collection of dispersed reminiscences entitled *Points de suspension* (Ellipses), which was dedicated to *Maman*, who had died in 1983, and which was more broadly expressive of the people, places and events that had marked her life. The book did not receive the same attention as *A father*, probably because it does not directly invoke a famous person, but it is at least as poignant as her first attempt at conquering her own language.

In one of the later pieces of *A father*, although this one may very well have been written much earlier than its location in the book suggests, Sibylle concedes, without providing the reader any specific details of place and time: "The idea of suicide began to haunt

me as the only solution to my suffering. Nearly nothing changed, despite my analysis.” (p. 73)

On 7 January 2013, she wrote a letter to her long-time partner Christian Valas, in which she stated: “If I kill myself, I do not want the circumstances of my death to be hidden at all (from the press, friends, etc.). This request must be considered as part of my last wishes.” Some time during the early hours of 8 November 2013, Sibylle Lacan took her own life by an overdose of prescription medication. The next day, the French broadsheet *Le Monde* published a moving obituary by Élisabeth Roudinesco, entitled ‘Death of Sibylle Lacan, *writer*’. Faithful to her last wishes, she is buried in the cemetery of her cherished Montparnasse, where she can be reached and touched by everyone wishing to pay their respects. *Adieu* Sibylle. May your words bear witness. They shall be alive forever.

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