



Read

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review of:

Jacques Lacan (2006) *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg. New York: W. W. Norton (HB: pp. 879, £30.00, ISBN: 978 0 393 06115 4; PB: pp. 896, £15.99, ISBN: 978 0 393 32925 4)

The year 1977 saw the publication in English of three translations from the French by Alan Sheridan Smith. The first was Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, published by the gargantuan publishing house Penguin. The second was Jacques Lacan's *Écrits: A Selection*, published by Tavistock Publications. The third was *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, the first of Lacan's famous seminars to appear in English translation, published by the renowned Hogarth Press in association with the Institute of Psychoanalysis. Three works of two French writers who at that time were already very well established in France – one translator. The itinerary of the reception of these three books could not have been more different. Given that our interest here is in theory and politics in organization, we might try to restrict ourselves to the consequences of the reception of these books for the study of organization.

Recall the situation in organization studies at that time. The *Academy of Management Review* was in its second year; Clegg and Dunkerley had just published *Critical Issues in Organizations*; and the consequences of Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* were still being calculated. We would have to wait another two years for Burrell and Morgan's *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis*. How might we gauge the distance represented by the 30 years that stand between 1977 and today? One possible framing comes from an important commentary published exactly half way between these dates. In 1992, Mike Reed wrote of the way that, between the late 1970s and the late 1980s, an "ever-widening range of theoretical perspectives were offered as alternatives to the unacceptable constrictions of orthodoxy and the potential palliatives for the conceptual profusion into which organization theory was being seduced" (Reed, 1992: 4). Commenting on these theoretical incursions into organization studies, he continues:

At one level, these developments seemed to signify the dissolution of organizational analysis as an identifiable field of study and body of knowledge. At another level, they seemed to open up attractive possibilities for research and explanation that forged connections between philosophical debate, theoretical developments and institutional change – connections that had either been ignored or inadequately treated in previous work. Organization theory seemed to have finally left its period of “intellectual innocence” far behind. (Reed, 1992: 4)

By the end of the 1980s and into the early 1990s, the cure for intellectual innocence was, for many, a turn to the works of Foucault. In critical circles, Foucault became one of the central reference points for a thinking of power, discourse, discipline, surveillance and subjectivity. This history is well known to readers of this journal, and the consequences of this turn to Foucault are still being felt today (Butler, 2006; Jones, 2002).

Why Foucault was given such pride of place in these developments is one of the recurring mysteries of that period, and one that cannot be resolved through recourse to either the structure of the field at that time or to the works of Foucault. Of course, Foucault was not the only French theorist who came to prominence at that time. Also apparently did Lyotard and perhaps even more so Derrida – or at least the name ‘Derrida’. The complexity of Lacan’s relations with these other French thinkers prevents any easy position regarding their mutual compatibility or incompatibility. But at the time in the 1980s and 1990s when Lacan swept the humanities, cultural studies and the fringes of the social sciences, he remained almost completely unknown in organization theory.

The 1977 edition of *Écrits: A Selection* contained translations of 9 of the 35 texts from the 1966 French edition of the *Écrits*. These include important texts such as ‘The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis’ and ‘The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious’ although central texts such as the ‘Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”’ and ‘Kant with Sade’ were omitted and appeared in various scattered locations. The selection of these essays was Lacan’s, and it certainly did create a shorter and more manageable volume than the rather grand 1966 volume, which appeared in two paperback tomes in French. This 1977 translation was then reprinted in 1982 by W. W. Norton, then again in 1990 by Routledge, who then reprinted this volume in 2001 as part of the ‘Routledge Classics’ series. For English readers this was, for many years, the only volume of Lacan’s writings that was known. Then, in 2002, Norton released a new edition of *Écrits: A Selection*, completely retranslated by Bruce Fink.

Fink, the author of *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (1995) and *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (1997), has been prolific in recent years. Having translated Lacan’s *Seminar XX: Encore* (2000), the retranslation of *Écrits: A Selection* (2002) and written his *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely* (2004), he has now released a new translation of what is marketed as ‘The first complete edition in English’ of Lacan’s *Écrits*.

On the surface, this might appear as little more than a book for purists, something to be fondled and adored until the next new ‘little object’ comes along. But at the same time this publication promises something much more – at the extreme, the possibility of

something quite revolutionary in organization studies for the reception of Lacan and, by extension, French theory. This is particularly the case given that the first encounter with Lacan for many was Sheridan Smith's *Écrits: A Selection*, and for many that experience was of an obscure and impenetrable text, which might at least in part explain the lack of attention that Lacan has received to date in organization studies. As he was preparing the translation of the complete edition, Fink wrote: "I can only hope that readers will glean from my new translation of *Écrits: A Selection* (2002) and my translation of the complete *Écrits* (forthcoming) that his earlier translators may well have been more obscure and impenetrable than the man himself" (Fink, 2004: vii).

So this is not simply a new translation. In a way it is a completely new book. Insofar as this is Lacan's only collection of writings now available in English, this brings with it something of a new Lacan. It brings a clarity of prose that is almost totally missing in Sheridan Smith's rendering, and with this a set of insights into the play of language and a clear sense of the way that Lacan – whether he succeeded or not – certainly made a not insignificant effort to establish himself as a 'great writer'. But beyond preparing a completely new translation, Fink has been meticulous in supplying a completely new editorial apparatus. Throughout we find the page numbers of the French for ease of cross-reference, but perhaps most significantly this new edition includes an exhaustive set of 'Translator's Endnotes' which supply, without excessive intrusion or presumption, a set of clarifications regarding translations, implicit citations, cross-references and allusions. We have, then, a delightfully presented retranslation of the text with an incredibly helpful new editorial apparatus. One might think that this translation could solve the problems that previously interfered with the reading of Lacan and now bring him to the light of day. Don't.

There is at least one peculiar irony regarding this translation, and it is perhaps indicative of the cult that is still actively maintained around Lacan. This irony can perhaps be best understood in Lacanian terms, in a way that is analogous to the missing letter in Edgar Allan Poe's story that Lacan analyses in the 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"' and which is now reinstated as the first major essay in *Écrits*. The mystery is that Fink has here presented a truly magnificent translation of Lacan's book, in what is a seriously weighty tome. He has translated every word, with the exception of that thing that is perhaps most obvious, the thing that stares one in the face: the title!

One might rightly ask what would be lost in calling this new collection *Writings* by Jacques Lacan. This would have clearly distinguished the new translation from the earlier translation of *Écrits: A Selection*, and then would have also been a *complete* translation of this book. Why, given his great work, would Fink want to retain the French title, the title of a previous and, by his own hand, discredited edition of Lacan's writings?

Beyond the inexplicably untranslated title, we are also still faced with the fact of the text itself, and the fabulations that surround it. First, of course, Lacan's writing, what is known as his 'style'. This has been defended in a variety of ways, perhaps the most outlandish being that Lacan somehow produced a discourse of the unconscious, with the corollary being that the Master would therefore be unfaithful to the unconscious if he was to produce a coherent discourse. There is something more going on here in the

question of Lacan's style, which is at times brilliant but at times overcooked. More than once, I was tempted to concede to Derrida, who writes of Lacan: "I read this style, above all, as an art of evasion" (Derrida, 1981: 110). But this 'above all' perhaps misses something of the complications of the book, and the unevenness and differences between the essays that appear in this volume.

Shortly after the publication of the book, in a lecture given in Bordeaux on 20 April 1968, Lacan described his book as 'unreadable' and as "very thick, difficult to read and obscure" (2005: 80-81). But we should recall that, although students of management might think otherwise, the size of a book is a poor measure of quality, and to call a book 'unreadable' is in some circles a compliment. Indeed, in *Seminar XX* he offers unreadability as a compliment to Phillippe Sollers, and further remarks that "you are not obliged to understand my writings. If you don't understand them, so much the better – that will give you the opportunity to explain them" (Lacan, 2000: 34). In the same seminar Lacan (2000: 26) also famously described *Écrits* as a 'poubelliciation', a neologism that plays on the French *publication* (publication) and *poubelle* (rubbish bin). Perhaps this is another instance in which Lacan hits the SELF-DESTRUCT button, and joins the harshest critics of his style, and this is perhaps unfair, given that there are some beautifully crafted essays here, although it could perhaps be read as indicative of the great variations in style, exposition and the level of argumentation between the essays in this collection.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the original French version of this book met such a mixed reaction. When the book was published, Lacan sent a signed copy of the book to Martin Heidegger. It would seem that Heidegger was not impressed, given that he wrote in a letter to Medard Boss: "You too have no doubt received Lacan's large tome. Personally, I haven't so far been able to get anything at all out of this obviously outlandish text." Heidegger wrote again a few months later: "It seems to me that the psychiatrist needs a psychiatrist" (Heidegger, in Roudinesco, 1997: 231).

This is, of course, a rather weak joke, and Žižek's remark that this is "the only joke – or, if not joke, then at least moment of irony – in Heidegger" (2006: 401) is inadvisable, to say the least. But Lacan was a controversial figure, and *Écrits* is a controversial book, a book that is at one and the same time rigorous, brilliant, insightful and outrageous, lazy and superficial. But for Lacan, psychoanalysis was something that should be controversial, and in Freud's time it was controversial and radical. Lacan bemoaned the fact that even by the 1930s psychoanalysis was something that "no longer involves a conversion that constitutes a break in one's intellectual development, a conversion that thus attests less to a carefully thought out choice of an avenue of research than to the outburst of secret affective strife" (2006: 58). We must not forget that for Lacan psychoanalysis was controversial, and part of his effort was to make it so again. This controversy continues today with the publication in 2006 of the *Black Book of Psychoanalysis* (Meyer, et al., 2005) and the responses coordinated by Elisabeth Roudinesco (2005) and Jacques-Alain Miller (2006).

Of course, if Lacan is a psychoanalyst, then we have here no ordinary psychoanalysis. The effort, as always, was to reinvent and to renew psychoanalysis, and that is the meaning of the proposed *return* to Freud. The reading of Freud that we have here is

then the radical Freud, the Freud of the Copernican revolution in thinking, the Freud of uncompromising speculation and the Freud of the cutting joke. It is Freud who is a reader of philosophy, Freud who is suspicious of Americanisation and Freud for whom the discovery of the unconscious involves a certain discovery from which it is impossible to return or to go back to the subject of the ego and its intentions. In this return to Freud Lacan introduces a lot into Freud that is perhaps not there, or that was underestimated by Freud. It is a reading of Freud in the light of early twentieth century European philosophy and in the light of linguistics, from Saussure and beyond.

This is a book that is literally brimming over with ideas, sometimes restricting itself to psychoanalytic practice but almost always expanding that well beyond its normal confines. Some of the ideas that we find here are incisive and some are drastically poorly formulated, and as a result the demand that faces any reader of the *Écrits* is to work critically against the seductions of style and profundity, and the seductions of both the figure and the person of Lacan, in order to *read* this book. Which means to struggle with it, to test it and contest it, to put it to use and at the same time to be aware of its limits.

To my mind it is a great shame that the current reception of Lacan's work is being so divided between those who seem willing to ignore or to dismiss as of little relevance the work of Lacan and psychoanalysis, and on the other hand a cadre of sycophantic ostensibly radical scholars who find in Lacan an unquestionable master thinker. For those who might become disciples of Lacan there is much to learn from, for example, Lacan's sharp remarks about 'disintellectualization' and the obedience of the 'Little Shoes' that we find in 'The Situation of Psychoanalysis and the Training of Psychoanalysts in 1956'. And those who would ignore Lacan or would keep blocking their ears while denouncing 'structuralism' or announcing that 'Desire is not Lack!' – they now not only can but *must* read Lacan, which means also some others.

We live in an age in which questions of language, meaning and interpretation are often pulverised beyond all recognition. In this sense *Écrits* is a very classical book, a book that, for the technocrats of 'communication', will indeed be unreadable. But it is perhaps only in the face of such a text that it is possible to give meaning to the word 'reading'. This is perhaps the condition of 'reason after Freud', as Lacan so forcefully puts his case in 'The Instance of the Letter'. The defile of the letter in the interests of meaning is presumption and arrogance. To interpret, to search for the meaning of the symptom, will not be easy nor satisfying, and those who want satisfaction should apply elsewhere.

This is, then, a challenging book, and perhaps most important for exactly the demand that it places on *reading*. For this reason, I will conclude here not simply with an invitation to read but with some indications as to how one might read such a book. Lacan put great emphasis on his teaching, and readers new to Lacan are almost certainly best advised to begin with the Seminars compiled by Jacques-Alain Miller, many of which are now in English translation. So if the large volume of *Écrits* is off-putting, these writings can be accompanied by a reading of the several volumes of his seminars which coincide with the *Écrits*. One should also be aware that *Écrits* contains only about half of Lacan's written output, the other half of which appears in *Autres écrits*

(2001) which is yet to appear in English. That volume contains most of the material written between 1967 and Lacan's death in 1981, and some other pieces, although some material has been held back and is now appearing in the 'Paradoxes de Lacan' series edited by Jacques-Alain Miller for Seuil.

But perhaps most importantly, the *Écrits* are, to my mind, best read in a group. Over the past year I have had the good fortune to meet with a committed group of scholars who have read aloud from the seminars and have met for full day meetings to discuss individual texts from the *Écrits*. This exercise was a lesson in the richness of Lacan's text, the use of techniques of prolepsis, anticipations, allusions, wordplay and, not the least, the jokes. But this is also crucial if one is to avoid the uncritical reception of Lacan's text. Many interested in radical theory and politics today come to Lacan through the detour of Žižek, and I have no absolute protest about this path. But the Lacan that we find in Žižek is a very particular one, and typically one that, to recall Heidegger's joke from earlier, has already been to the psychiatrist. But still needs to go back.

Écrits is a beautiful and a frustrating book. In many parts it is unreadable, overstated, repeats psychoanalytic prejudice or is based in unusual, unexplained or weak readings. But at the same time this is a crucially important text, and anyone who studies organization and has more than a passing interest in subjectivity and discourse must struggle with this book. Perhaps one way to put it would be to say that this is a great book, but it is not a good book. And as such it requires reading. Which, I can assure you, will cause you much pain. These are *Writings* that one must read. Which means to *Read*, in the strongest possible sense of that word.

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