

LACAN FOR BEGINNERS

Written by Philip Hill and illustrated by David Leach.

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Is it misguided to write a 'beginners book' on a thinker as complex, obscure, fluid and rich as Lacan? It depends perhaps, on to whom the book is addressed.

In the opening to the French edition of the *Ecrits*, Lacan states that 'the style is the man'. He then wonders is it 'the man to whom he addresses himself?' He further states that 'in language our message returns from the Other in inverted form' and again he wonders about something. This time he wonders 'if man was to be reduced to the place where all our discourse goes back to, wouldn't the question itself then be whether there is a point in asking him at all?' Indeed, what is the point? What is the point of interrogating and working through all these difficult and obscure Lacanian texts? What is the point of asking him?

If it is the case, as Boileau said, that what is understood well can be clearly formulated, then we could argue that Lacan, in all likelihood, did not understand very well because his work is obscure and sometimes impenetrable. But do we demand greater clarity from writers and poets like Joyce, Mallarmé, Beckett and Plath so that at least we can be assure ourselves they understand? This is not to imply that Lacan is a writer or a poet. Lacan is a psychoanalyst. The implication is rather that psychoanalysis has a lot in common with literature and poetry. What they have in common is an attempt to make sense of human experience via a medium which in itself is incomplete, namely language. This attempt to make sense of life is therefore doomed to failure. It is an impossibility. Literature, poetry and

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psychoanalysis are concerned with the impossibilities of language and life. Hill writes:

We all have to live with the real, with 'the impossible to say'. If we manage to find the words to say something that we could not say before, we can only do so at the cost of introducing new items in the real which we then cannot talk about. Language always introduces new indeterminacies, uncertainties and the renewed division of the subject. This is why Lacan argues that language is an universal trauma or wound, taking an unique form for every subject.

It might be interesting to mention that Sylvia Plath's poetry is a perfect illustration of language as a trauma or wound and it is a language which at times is pushed to its very limits. That is the beauty of her poetry. But it is not only in psychoanalysis, literature and poetry that we encounter the limits, impossibilities and indeterminacies of language and life. Hill writes that the physicist Heisenberg discovered that it was impossible to measure simultaneously the position and the speed of an electron as it orbited around the nucleus of an atom. 'His discovery produced a new attitude to science, with expectations completely different from those of Newton's time. Science could no longer be relied on to solve all the problems of life. Since Heisenberg, science, however useful and informative, has become yet another set of impossibilities'. Not everything in life can be measured, clearly formulated and immediately understood.

Philip Hill, in his excellent book *Lacan for Beginners*, writes, amongst other things about language, the real as impossible, *jouissance*, the subject and the object, psychosis, feminine sexuality and topology. These topics have in common that they centre around the limitations, impossibilities and traumas of life. From Hill's writing it is obvious that he has closely interrogated Lacan and worked through the obscurities and complexities of his work. But more importantly Hill has returned from this task and been able to write about it clearly. As the saying goes: 'There is absolutely no simplicity, there are only simplifications'. The book is an excellent introduction to Lacan in the sense

that it inspires people to read him. It is a beginning. But do not expect to be inspired by this book if you read it only as a short-cut to Lacan's theories.

The style is the man: The man to whom he addresses himself? Lacan addressed himself to analysts. Hill addresses beginners. There is only a point in reading Lacan if you have a curiosity about the complexities of the human mind and culture. This precisely what Hill's book gives us a glimpse of and invites us to explore. This book is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the 'Sunday paper type criticisms' of Lacan's work which are based solely on opinions, rumours and allegations about his life-style. Now that is misguided!

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