

schooling: between knowledge and truth

Nazir Hamad

The paper we publish here in this form appears as Chapter 12 of Nazir Hamad's book *Adoption et parenté: questions actuelles* (Adoption and parenthood: current questions).¹ It is translated and republished in *écritique* with the kind permission of Nazir Hamad and Éditions Érès. Whilst this paper speaks of the difficulties in the acquisition of the ability to read in an adopted child, in doing so it raises a question regarding the place of each subject in relation to the ability to read. Thus what is at stake is the relation of the subject to the letter, in reference to what Hamad refers to as "established language".

Nazir Hamad is a psychoanalyst and member of the *Association Lacanienne Internationale*. He has worked with Françoise Dolto and published a book of interviews with her (*Destins d'enfants*, Gallimard, 1995).

Michael Plastow

The case of Tania

Here is a clinical vignette which could well illustrate the nature of the difficulties that children encounter when they start learning how to read.

This was a 9-year-old girl who had very serious problems learning French.² Her mother attended the first appointment with her and seemed very disappointed in her daughter. She had started to speak about her in the third person without introducing her to me and without referring to her by name. She spoke about her daughter's bulimia and obesity and her lack of interest in school and sports. She gave me the impression of suffering from Tania more than for her. Whilst the mother was pouring out her anger against the child, the latter, who had not had the least opportunity to express herself, got up and went to the board that was in my office to draw and write something. The result was just a group of letters joined to each other: ELAFIN.³

I interrupted the interview with the mother and I spoke to Tania to ask her to read what she had just written. She replied that she did not know how to read. I asked her again, adding that if she did not know how to read it in its entirety she could try to cut what she had written however she liked. She separated the group of letters into the following two smaller groups: ELA FIN. She read ELA FIN, accentuating the letters.

I invited her to cut further if she wished and she proceeded in the same fashion. She started to examine the first group, and, while she was reading ELA, the break was evident and she read EL A FIN. She added, very excitedly: "So, I know how to read!"

I replied, "You see Tania, you have written the sentence your mother dictated to you. It's like at school, a lot of knowledge is dictated to you and you always reply that you don't know how to read. It is the ogre who doesn't know how to read. Your mother says that you eat like an

ogre and this ogre does not have a name, it is called ogre, that's all. Your mother forgot to tell me your name, so you have written what for you has become your name: ELAFIN."

Some common difficulties

The "I do not know how to read" implicates the letter in regard to its own identity as pure difference and its position in the writing of words, as well as in its effect on the subject of the unconscious of the reader. Let us try to analyse some of the difficulties that are frequently encountered by young school children.

One of the basic difficulties is the painful deciphering by which the child inspects one by one all the letters which compose a word. Deciphering is not reading. Reading requires the fall of the letter or its invisibility. This fall implies its fusion with the phoneme in order to be incorporated with it.

The fall of the letter or the fall of the angel

The reader is made by the fall of the letter, a fall which authorizes reading and structures the signifying order. Indeed, when I say "the fall of the letter", for me it is precisely this that represents the "fall of the angel" in so far as this fall is correlated with the fall of the maternal tongue, or of the language of paradise. Let us understand "maternal tongue" as this private language shared by mother and child and founded on a common *jouissance*. The maternal tongue becomes the language of common discourse only due to the stamp of repression. Staying with the metaphor of the fall of the angel, to own this language and to make it one's own represents the discovery by Man that language only finds its key in the truth that it generates itself within the enunciation of the subject.

Effectively, the letter is a story of a perpetual fall. The letter, in order to be identified as such and to be written, needed to go through a total disengagement from the imaginary linked to its creation. The letter B, Beta or Ba, no longer needs us to refer to the picture of a house to be written or to be read. It only lends itself to this role by virtue of the very fact of this erasure that renders it pure difference. From the prehistoric hunter who drew a line to mark each of his hunts, to the Mesopotamian stockbreeder who drew as many lines as animals he owned, the process was the same. It was a question of substituting a mark⁴ for the thing, a mark that signified it without representing it. Indeed, a mark is like another mark but considering the number of marks left on the bones, as we can see in the Museum in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, for example, we discover that a mark remains unique because it refers to an expedition that cannot be confused with any other.

The letter beside itself

Confronted with the letter, a child is like Robinson Crusoe. The traces left on the board or on his exercise books designate it as a whole entity with an autonomous existence. A refers to A and as such the letter A can only be A. But this letter, as autonomous as it is, is destined to fade and enter into the writing of groups of words. For the child it is a question of a knowledge that is only of value in so far as it disappears to allow another to emerge. As for Robinson, the erasure of the footprints separates knowledge from the material proof which supports it in order to integrate the erasure of the traces in a symbolic operation in which the presence of another becomes an inescapable truth. In other words, the unknown person is detached from his steps and is inscribed into the symbolic network that gives him a presence despite his absence.

Is this an absurd parallel? I do not think so as it is precisely what happens to the very young child confronted with the enigma of the presence and absence of his mother.

The child, in the face of her absence can only overcome his anguish by resorting to the play of the symbolic. A transitional object, as it is called by Winnicott, comes to occupy the place of the love object thanks to an operation of permutation that the symbolic register offers to the child. This operation allows the child to go beyond the feeling of loss by introducing a possibility of substitution. In fact, it is for this same reason that adoption is possible. A woman can be substituted for another, the birth mother in this case, by virtue of the fact that the signifiers “mummy” and “daddy” are not locked into a meaning referring only to the genitors. Mummy and daddy are open signifiers that designate the men and women who fulfill the maternal and paternal functions at a time when the very young child needs a maternal Other to support the hypothesis of a desiring subject.

Reading is a responsibility of the subject

Clinical practice teaches us that it is this anguish in the face of an absence that sometimes renders the play of the letters a perilous operation. What happens to the young student who is taught the alphabet with the support of images or of his own body? For example, he is shown the letter A, and he is told “A as in Anatole” or “A is like this: you open your mouth and you spread your fingers in front of your face”. For him the letter is thus linked to a presence, an image, or a part of his body which makes up for an absence. If for one reason or another the child still suffers from the anguish of separation, as often happens in young school children, the letter A runs the risk of staying attached to the thing or the image, thus resisting its articulation to other letters and therefore to be read. In fact, in order to be written and to be read the letter needs to fade into a phoneme or a syllable and sometimes to disappear in the whole.

Here is the problem! To acquire the notion of the letter, the child faces the obligation to free himself from it and from the image to which it refers. This is exactly the same as the manner in which, in order to adopt his mother, the very young child has to free himself from his attachment to his first love object through the play of symbolic permutation that the object offers to him as metaphor of lack. In other words, for the child, reading and writing is constituted by the assimilation of the changing status of the letter, or even its pure and simple disappearance. In order to do this the child has no other choice but to take the risk of cutting off some letters, of adding others on, of pronouncing some, of accepting the silence of others, and God knows what else. This means that in the end, to be able to read, the child has to accept the risk of the letter. The young student discovers to his detriment that the letter is not at one’s disposition because, like a ferret⁵, it runs and, according to its place, determines the position of the subject.

The child calligrapher

The second classic difficulty is represented by the child calligrapher. The child calligrapher applies himself. He takes his time and lags behind because of this very same application. The parents present proudly their child’s exercise books to you, emphasizing the quality of his writing. The child is the perfect artist and this saddens the parents all the more to see such talent wasted without the child achieving the expected academic results. This strangely resembles the story of the Chinese calligraphy hanging on the wall of Lacan’s country house. He told his audience:

If it was not Chinese, I would not have hung it on my wall, for the simple reason that it is only in China that calligraphy took on the status of “objet d’art.”⁶

In fact the parents of a child calligrapher may also think: “If it were not my child’s production, I would not have valued it in the least”. But does this mean that it can be called Art? The child may apply himself as much as a Chinese calligrapher but in this case his zeal appears to be the sign of the inaccessibility of the child to the letter. Art is the play of the letter, it is so much this play that even if the artist manipulates it in a thousand different ways it is always to emphasize its reading. For Islamic calligraphy, the non-representation of the image becomes the sign of the presence of God. God is in the letter.

The letter is not like other forms of learning

The child calligrapher who applies himself in order to reproduce demonstrates that he has not integrated the writing of the letter. When the teacher tries again and again to teach it to him and discovers that he has reproduced it by inverting b and p or b and d, the question of dyslexia is raised straight away. This is not always justified. Knowing how to write is not knowledge like other forms of knowledge. The child can only integrate the letter through a conjunction between letter and image of the body. The letter A is written when Anatole is no longer caught in the confusion with the image of his peers and knows how to deal with the rivalry that results from it. It is a knowledge acquired not thanks to the pedagogic skills of the teacher but thanks to this conjunction. The child tries, fails, gets reprimanded or is told he is clumsy. There is a moment in which the child manages to deal with the things presented to him. It is the time for knowledge, Lacan says, and he adds:

There is a moment [...] in which the child handles his first alphabet and it is not a learning as such but something which collapses a large capital letter together with the animal whose initial is supposed to correspond to the capital letter in question. The child makes the connection or does not make it. In the majority of cases, namely in those where he is not surrounded by too much pedagogical attention, he makes it.⁷

What interests us in these examples? Let us go back to Tania’s history in order to find the beginnings of an answer.

The knowledge of the mother as obstacle

When Tania took responsibility to read she had to carve into a text dictated by her mother that reduced Tania to her symptom. It was a text that implied a knowledge regarding the subject but which remained outside the subject, so to speak. Tania presented in a way as a good student. She was receiving what her mother instilled into her body but was totally unable to understand its terms. This is of the same order as when a student learns a text by heart and reproduces it entirely for an adult’s benefit without being able to read it properly. It is often the case in school that a student learns a text by rote without appropriating its meaning. It is an ingenious way to satisfy the adults whilst protecting oneself from the knowledge that is being imparted.

All knowledge refers to a text, written or inscribed in the mores of the time. But knowledge, to become accessible, let us say personal, has to be separated from the text in a way that allows a different re-writing of the text. In my opinion this represents a first paradox. The separation, the cut that one operates in the text, reorganizes it. This reorganizing is the sign of the subject. But for there to be the possibility of a cut, the subject has to take the risk of engaging his responsibility as a reader. If we admit this first paradox, a second one is

necessarily introduced. If, for Tania, knowledge has made its way thanks to a text written in an established language, let's say that of the mother, her truth as subject cannot emerge unless it is against that text. To say "against that text" does not necessarily imply simply rejecting it but rather that it is possible for her to appropriate it in a way that might allow her desire to unfurl.

What about changing the system of marking in schools?

How many times do parents and teachers continue to try and explain to a student the rules that determine the grammatical agreements in the plural or with feminine nouns for instance, only to realize that the student keeps making the same mistake? At school in France a spelling mistake is called "a fault".⁸ How many mistakes does a student have to make to earn a naught which many teachers exhibit in the classroom in front of sniggering peers? One student may indeed make a mistake but he is not wrong in regard to the truth that underwrites the mistake. Moreover, I am taking the risk of asserting that many of us do not do any better than the young student when we make the same mistake again and again in the writing of a recalcitrant word or group of words. We are not making mistakes; we are rather in the truth of a knowledge that cannot be shared, knowledge about our intimate truth.

Each time I am questioned on this subject by the teacher of a child I am treating, I advise them not to give negative marks for the mistakes a student makes but to give a positive mark for the number of mistakes the student has found and corrected. The teachers are taken aback when they realize that the supposedly bad student can find many of his errors himself and manages to correct quite a few of them. I believe that it is possible to tackle teaching in this way, at any rate the teaching of spelling, but it would be pretentious of me to demand it. The sin [*faute*] is committed in regard to an established order, to a foundational prohibition or to an established discourse. Finding and correcting the mistakes by oneself is the responsibility of the subject; it is a way for him to re-appropriate a text from which the only authorized deviation is the mistake, recognized as such. Such a mistake is thus subversive. *With the expression "subversive" I intend to designate the place that the subject of the unconscious continues to occupy albeit in this clumsy way. The unconscious refusal to learn should be understood as a position of the subject against the established language.*

I stress this in order to propose my working hypothesis. Could one say that, for some children, refusing to learn represents a refusal to open, a refusal to question or to repress what they retain of the knowledge of the jouissance of their maternal Other, in this instance their birth mother? Their lack of interest in school work arises from the fact that this knowledge does not answer their question concerning the enigma of origins.

Translated from French by Nicole Chavannes and Françoise Muller Robbie

References

¹ Hamad, Nazir. *Adoption et parenté: questions actuelles*. Ramonville Saint-Agne: Érès, 2007. (<http://www.editions-eres.com/resultat.php?Id=2124&Critere=nazir>) The original is copyright to Éditions Érès.

² Translators' Note: As her first language.

³ T.N.: Read aloud it sounds the same as *elle a faim* 'she is hungry'.

-
- ⁴ T.N.: We translated *trait* as ‘mark’. *Trait* is the word Lacan used for the concept of *trait unaire* in the *Identification Seminar*. It is in this Seminar that he speaks of the bone he saw exhibited at the Museum of Prehistory in St Germain-en-Laye, an old town to the west of Paris.
- ⁵ T.N.: *comme un furet*. This refers to the French game *le jeu du furet* and its song: *il court, il court, le furet, le furet du bois joli, il court, il court le furet du bois Mesdames, il est passé par ici, il repassera par là. Qui l'a?* (The ferret runs, it runs, the ferret of the pretty woods, the ferret of the woods runs, it runs my ladies, it passed this way, it will pass again that way. Who has it?). In this game, the children stand in a circle with one in the middle. They pass a ball or small object from one to the other behind their backs as discreetly as possible whilst singing the above song. When the song ends, the one who is left holding the object holds on to it and the one in the middle has to guess who it is. If he or she guesses right, they have to swap positions and the game starts over again. If the one in the middle guesses incorrectly, he or she remains there for the next round. In the game of ‘pass the parcel’, the person who ends up with the parcel opens it and keeps the object found by unwrapping the parcel. In *le jeu du furet*, there is nothing material to win, this is the interesting difference. When Lacan refers to *le furet* ‘the ferret’, he also implicitly refers to this game and its song.
- ⁶ Lacan, Jacques. *Seminar 1961-1962: Identification*. Lesson of 6th December 1961. Paris: Association Freudienne Internationale, 1996. 53.
- ⁷ Lacan, Jacques. *Seminar 1968-1969: D’un Autre à l’autre*. Lesson of 26th February 1969. Paris: Association Freudienne Internationale, 2002. 191.
- ⁸ T.N.: *faute* in French is ‘mistake’, ‘fault’ and ‘sin’.