Fathers and Sons in “The Night in Question”

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Abstract: Mike, the switchman, lost his son at the drawbridge station, and in his allegorical repetition of the event, the priest underscores the Biblical Father/Son relationship. In retelling the same story, Frank is interrogated by Frances: would you save me or the strangers if I were caught there? For Frank, it is not simply a matter of reversing their imaginary positions, and rather, it depicts the Father/Son relationship in the Symbolic. In repeating the tale, Frank, in contrast with his own father, comes to master the meaning of event: the nature of Father/Time and paternal discourse, and the insatiable appetite of maelstrom-like maternal world. “I or the strangers, to be saved?” ----this unanswered ethical question “gives the story wings.”

Key Words: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, Father Time, Repetition

France is retelling his sister Frances a touching sermon he just heard from the local priest: Mike, a switchman, lowered the bridge and saved a train of passengers but killed his son who was playing in the engine room at the moment. After the story, Frank is questioned by Frances: if she were in the Mill, would he do the same? Most criticisms focus on his moral dilemma. But, this article, from the perspective of the Lacanian subject, argues for Frank’s newly formed identity. Jacques Lacan maintains that an infant has no self until the Mirror Stage, when it develops a blurring concept of self—(M)other (6). Only after the child’s acceptance of the social laws symbolized by Father will he enter the Symbolic Order (72-4).

Frank’s progression from the Imaginary to the Symbolic initiates from his reflections upon Mike’s tragedy whose failure to perform a father’s duty accounts for the loss of his son. Lacan informs us, “it is in the name of the father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, […] has identified his person with the figure of the law”(74). A father must embody the insurmountable rigidity of the forbidding law, which is suggested in the harsh and gloomy delineation of the engine room. “Gigantic screws turning every where, gears with teeth like file cabinets.” Before it, the mechanics become very submissive, “they’ve got catwalks and little crawlways” (Wolff 179). This is the essence of the uncompromising father-son confrontation in our civilized (post-Oedipal) society—father is the incarnation of the inexorable rule, the negative principle of “No” to the son’s transgressive desire, otherwise the rebellious son will be castrated mercilessly, “you never go down here when the bridge is being moved. Never. There’s just too much going on, too many ways of getting snagged and pulled in the works”(179). Mike’s tragedy lies in his negligence of the severe fatherly law. Mike “had no choice but to bring Benny along with him” and “it was a good chance for him and Mike to buddy up, batch it a little” (178). This buddy intimacy confounds the stern father-son hierarchy. “It was against the rules, […] but he’d done it before, more than
once” (178). His occupation as a switchman further reinforces this point. A switchman’s flexible shifting back and forth blurs the uncompromising opposites: raising the bridge cuts off the connection between the two banks, suggestive of the castrating “No”, while lowering the bridge links the two sides, symbolic of the submissive “yes.”

The essential incompatibility between the flexible switchman guideline and absolute severity of Father the law compels Frank to reexamine his own relationship with Frank Senior. Totally different from the benevolent image of Mike who enjoys “just being together” with his son, Frank’s father seems to be an incomprehensible brute. “At dinner he’d dangle his wristwatch before Frank’s eyes, then say no! and jerk it back just as Frank grabbed for it. When Frank persisted, Frank Senior would slap his hand until he was howling with fury and desire” (176). Only after Mike’s misfortune did Frank understand his father’s real intention behind the façade of cruelty: to instruct the son of the supreme authority of the relentless law. “Frank Senior, their father, had set out to teach his son the meaning of the word no.” It is a long ordeal for an infant to regulate his wild desire into the procrustean bed of social laws, which is a must for a father. “This happened night after night. Frank would not take the lesson to heart; as soon as the watch was offered he snatched at it” (176).

The sharp contrast between two fathers—benevolent Mike and grim Frank Senior—enables Frank not only to understand the necessity of father’s threatening negation, but also to accept his position as a submissive son. Davis writes, castration, as the core of Oedipal Complex, must be resolved in this way: “the son must accept his passivity, and acknowledge his father’s authority” (8). This is exemplified by Jesus, the son of God, who complies with Father’s order to sacrifice himself for human salvation. “It has been done before, even by Him who speaks, the Father of All, who gave His own son, his beloved, that others might be saved” (Wolff 181).

The Symbolic is based on the separation of (M)other. “The two of them waiting in her room upstairs […] Frank panting beside her, moving closer, his voice whispering her name and her own voice answering as fear gave way to ferocity and unaccountable joy” (184). After the death of mother, Frances becomes a mother figure for Frank. “The two of them” are embracing tightly into a primordial oneness, a vivid illustration of (M)other—the blurring concept of self/other at the Mirror stage. The excessive emotional intensity between them also echoes the ineffable Jouissance, the impulsive and forbidden desire. Father, the Symbolic law, is to negate the melting and presuppose “a rupture of the inaugural [imaginary] contiguity” (Lemaire 61), as is narrated in the story, “she could still taste that smoke and hear her father’s steps on the stairs.”

Mike’s tragedy has ushered Frank into the Symbolic order and he understands the necessity of the rupture of the Imaginary and the harsh paternal law. Then the climax occurs: “would you grind me up if I was the one down in the mill, would you push the Francesburger button?” Frank offers a riddle-like answer: “Don’t put me to the test, Frances. It’s not your place” (183). We may regard it as a moral decision about the choice between the beloved one and the strangers. However, there is another possibility. Frank, who progresses from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, reads from the
sermon the Oedipal Father-son structure rather than a didactic biblical lecture, so he
insists, “you’re missing the point.” But Frances, still sunk in the Imaginary, just
projects her assumption unto Frank: she would never sacrifice Frank to save strangers,
so her mirror image (brother) would do the same. “She knew what his answer would
be—in the end there could be no other answer” (183). For her, it is just a question of
reversing the positions, as is in the Lacanian transitivism: the “structural ambivalence
is clearly revealed in his behaviour, the slave being identified with the despot, the
actor with the spectator, the seduced with the seducer” (21). But for Frank who has
transcended the imaginary duality, it is not a simple matter of exchanging roles, but
more about the relationship between an authoritative father and a submissive son.
Frances occupies the position of mother, therefore Frank informs her “it’s not your
place.” In addition, the parallels between Mike/son and Frank/Frances also put Frank
in the position of a father, which heightens his comprehension of father’s symbolic
role in social laws. It is the progression from “the specular I” to “the social I” (Lacan
6) that accounts for Frank’s transformation: “I had to change. I had to change the way
I thought about things”(182).

Works Cited
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