

The Freudian Family and Ours

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I

The title I have chosen evokes some questions I tried to follow when thinking about the topic of the modern family. Firstly, because it seems we are getting used to speak about hypermodernity rather than modernity, when trying to account for the clinic with which we are confronted, but also with the diversity of theorisations produced around the never before so rapid changes that have affected Western culture in the last century. Secondly, because in the second session of Lacan's Seminar XI whose title I paraphrase, there is an indication of that which constitutes, in his teaching, a radical separation from the rest of the psychoanalytical movement. And finally, because it is this separation that allows us to conceive a version of the family that is, I would suggest, specifically Lacanian.

II

Freud introduced the notion of '*family romance*' for the first time in a letter to Fliess in June of 1898, during the period of what he called his self-analysis. He states there that "all neurotics create the so-called family romance (which becomes conscious in paranoia), it serves on the one hand the need for self-aggrandizement and on the other as a defense against incest"¹ He also mentions the concept in his letter 57 and in his Draft M (where he presents the incipient prevalence of the role of phantasies in symptom formation). But another ten years will pass before Freud produces a text specifically dedicated to the topic, first published as a chapter in Otto Rank's "*Myth of the Birth of the Hero*", and later modified and published under the title "*The Neurotic's Family Romance*". (It is worth noting that the English SE published it

¹ Masson, J. (Trans.), *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess*, Belknap Press, Harvard Univ. Press, London, 1985, p 317.

as "Family Romances", leaving out the "neurotic's" complement, whereas the Spanish translation turned this into a plural). The text begins as follows: "The liberation of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development (...) Indeed, the whole progress of society rests upon the opposition between successive generations (...) For a small child his parents are at first the only authority and the source of all belief. The child's most intense and most momentous wish during these early years is to be like his parents (that is, the parent of his own sex)"².

The 'neurotic's family romance' defines the fantasies, day-dreams and imaginations through which the subject replaces his parents in reality for others where, on the one hand, the father is exalted (he is richer, more powerful, of a better class, says Freud) and, on the other, the mother is brought into situations of secret infidelity and love-affairs. Freud affirms: "It is, as a rule, precisely these neurotic children who were punished by their parents for sexual naughtiness and who now revenge themselves on their parents by means of phantasies of this kind"³.

So the notion of family romance is quite clearly defined as a neurotic's response both to the awakening of sexuality and its prohibition, and to the confrontation with the dimension of the desire of the Other (for instance, in Freud's terms in this paper, through the birth of a sibling). The neurotic subject is therefore that who constructs a family romance, and whose liberation from the parental authority and access to an exogamic position finds an obstacle in the difficulty to renounce to this version of the parents as being "the source of all belief".

We could say that, in Freud, the family *is* essentially a romance (at the same time "a love affair" and "a story dealing with love in an idealized way"), and also that his theorization of the Oedipus complex derives from this.

III

As for Lacan's conceptions there are, as we know, several points of

2 Freud, S., "Family Romances", SE, Vol IX, p 237.

3 Freud, S., op cit., p 238.

reference according to the movement of his teaching, movement that was always marked by his attempts to “measure up with the subjectivity of his times”; attempts firmly based on his notion of psychoanalysis as being the “theorization of a praxis” which cannot ignore the historical changes in the structure of discourse, namely, of the ways in which human beings inhabit the social bond.

In his work on “*The Family Complexes*”, in 1938, he pointed out that “it was the forms of neurosis dominant at the end of the last century which revealed that they were intimately dependant on the conditions of the family.”⁴ At that time, he also highlighted that Freud “elaborated his theory at a moment when the family was in crisis” and that “the concept of the Oedipus came to him as a response to an institutional recasting of the family.”⁵

I think it is interesting to put Freud's notion of '*the neurotic's family romance*' in tension with Lacan's concept of the '*neurotic's individual myth*' (especially considering that, as far as I know, Lacan never made use of Freud's notion). This writing, where Lacan presents a structural reading of the Rat Man, is the transcription of a conference delivered in 1953, the year he dates as the beginning of his teaching. As it is the case in “*The Family Complexes*”, here too Lacan's criticism of Freud's Oedipal theory is quite explicit. The structural version of the 'romance' is presented through the following definition of the myth: “a certain objectified representation of an epos or a gest which expresses in an imaginary way the fundamental relationships that characterise a certain mode of being human in a given period of time”⁶. What interests Lacan here is “the extreme particularity of the case” and the idea that the entire case history of the Rat Man can be formalised through what he calls “a formula of transformation” of the “original constellation that preceded the subject's birth (...) that is, the fundamental family relations which structured his parents union”. The '*individual myth*' is this “small drama”, this “fantasmatic plot” by means of which the elements of the structure in which the subject finds his place are articulated and, at the same time, modified. The *impasse* at which the subject arrives in relation to his desire and his *jouissance* cannot,

4 Lacan, J., *The Family Complexes*,

5 Laurent, E., “Institution of the Phantasm, Phantasms of the Institution”, in *Courtil Papers*, 2002.

6 Lacan, J., “El mito individual del neurotico”, in *Intervenciones y Textos*, Manantial, Buenos Aires, 1999, p 40. (My translation)

says Lacan, be explained with the “traditional schemes (...) of the triangular thematisation of the Oedipus complex”⁷. He introduces then the notion of a fourth element and, interestingly as well, when mentioning (for the first time?) the name-of-the-father, he categorically affirms that [for this *impass* not to arise] “it would be necessary that the father was not just the name-of-the-father, but that he represented in all its plenitude the symbolic value crystallised in its function. But it is clear that this overlapping of the symbolic and the real is absolutely inapprehensible. At least in a social structure like ours, the father is always, in some aspect, discordant with regards to his function, he is always a lacking father”⁸. Lacan returns to Freud, but he does not stay there: he “reinterprets the prohibition of desire as the impossible of *jouissance*”⁹ In other words, it is only in the neurotic's phantasies that the real father exists “he is a strategy which invents an Oedipal agent for the impossibility of the sexual relationship (...) what is real in a particular father is the singular way in which he misses or fails in fulfilling the function of Name-of-the-Father”¹⁰

IV

According to Laurent “Lacan presents a form of evolution of the family towards a form of reduction to the nuclear family, conceived of as a minimal, irreducible core of the alliance between man and woman (...) The truth of the family -he says- has become the truth of the forms of marriage (...) the story of the man-woman alliance of which psychoanalysis explores the impasses.”¹¹ Through a detailed analysis of the bibliography produced in the fields of medicine, sociology and cultural anthropology, he affirms that “we are witnessing a double movement in our civilization. On the one side, an ensemble of technico-legal practices increasingly reveals the arbitrariness of

7 Lacan, J., “El mito individual del neurotico”, in *Intervenciones y Textos*, Manantial, Buenos Aires, 1999, p 51. (My translation)

8 Lacan, J., “El mito individual del neurotico”, in *Intervenciones y Textos*, Manantial, Buenos Aires, 1999, p 56. (My translation)

9 Miller, J-A., “Religion, Psychoanalysis”, in *Almanac of Psychoanalysis* 5, July 2006, p 38

10 Piechotka, E., “The Mis(s)-sin-g of the Real Father”, in *Almanac of Psychoanalysis* 5, July 2006, p 89.

11 Laurent, E., “The Name of the Father between Realism and Nominalism”, in *Almanac of Psychoanalysis* 5, July 2006, p 52-53.

the discourse of the master who assigns us a name. On the other, there is a frenzied pursuit of a foundation for the familial relationship in "Mother Nature"..."¹² In this sense, the progress Lacan's teaching follows but also anticipates the logic of the displacement towards a social organisation in whose zenith is placed, not the Name-of-the-Father but the object (within the pseudo-discourse that capitalism constitutes). As highlighted by Marie-Helene Brousse in her thesis about '*parentality*' being a neologism of our times, "when the signifiers 'mother' and 'father' are prevalent, the absence of the sexual relationship is veiled by the phallic effect of meaning subtended by metaphor[...] [but] the object child is what comes to the fore when these signifiers tend to be erased in favour of the single signifier 'parent'¹³.

One last reference, from a different moment of Lacan's work, will give us a direction in which to inscribe our position and our intervention with regards to this "opaque" matter of the family. It is in 1969, a very prolific year in Lacan's teaching, when he writes in his "*Note on the child*": "The function of residue that supports (and at the same time maintains) the conjugal family in the evolution of societies, brings out the irreducible of a transmission -which is of another order than that of life according to the satisfaction of needs- but which comes of a subjective constitution implying a relation to a desire that would not be anonymous."¹⁴

Lacan places the accent here much "less on marriage than on the establishment of a name for the child"¹⁵. How would one read the '*neurotic's individual myth*' following this indication? The parent's union becomes specified by the incarnation [embodying] of these functions: "the mother [...] insofar as she is an obstacle to the ideal mother" and the father, as a place to be "left empty". Thus, the father that corresponds to a beyond the Oedipus is "the one who sustains his position from one thing alone: does he know of his *jouissance* to be responsible in relation to his children. And it would be better if his *jouissance* took a turn towards a woman whom he makes the cause of his desire"¹⁶. By doing this, the father "is not only the one who transmits

12 Laurent, E., "The Name of the Father between Realism and Nominalism", in *Almanac of Psychoanalysis* 5, July 2006, p 48

13 Brousse, M-H., "Parentality: an up-to date neologism", in *Almanac of Psychoanalysis* 5, July 2006, p 165.

14 Lacan, J., "Note sur l'enfant", in *Autres Ecrits*, Ed. du Seuil, 2001, p 373.

15 Laurent, E., "Institution of the Phantasm, Phantasms of the Institution", in *Courtill Papers*, 2002.

16 Laurent, E., op.cit.

castration, but also the one who is defined in giving a version of the object cause”, and this only can ensure a transmission that lodges the subject's singularity, which cannot be reabsorbed into any universal.

At least two fundamental consequences can be extracted from this: firstly, that “the psychoanalytic position consists in keeping the subject at a distance from the ideal and in interrogating the real at stake in the birth of the child, that is to say, the desire or the *jouissance* of which he is the product.”¹⁷ And secondly, “that the family itself is only worthy and respectable insofar as it can be a place where each one finds space for what is his or her residual particularity”. Without any doubt the cases we will hear this afternoon will allow us to reflect on these very precise formulations and to interrogate our position in the practice.

V

To conclude, when Lacan speaks about “the Freudian unconscious and ours”, he introduces the dimension of the cause as the point that distinguishes psychoanalysis in its specific conceptualization of the human being. He demonstrates the radical separation between the unconscious understood as a substantialised agency whose causal efficacy would lie in a supposed repressed past, and the unconscious that includes a real, which he defines as “that which has not yet been born”¹⁸. The notion of the family that corresponds to the Lacanian orientation is, in my view, of this same order: a residue in the place of the cause of what has not yet been realised. What matters for us is, therefore, not so much the 'reality' of the family, or even its 'romance', but the enacting of the function of particularity -by means of the lodging of the object small *a*- which allows for the emergence of a subject within it. From the romance to the residue, is this not also the trajectory of the analysis when it is led to its end?

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17 Laurent, E., “L'enfant à l'envers des familles”, in *Revue de la Cause Freudienne*, N 65, March 2007, p 52. (My translation).

18 Lacan, J., *The Seminar, Book XI*, Routledge, London, p