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The Mother/Daughter Couple and its Destiny

«We are not among those distressed by an alleged slackening in the familial bond...But a great number of psychological effects seem to us to come from a social decline in the paternal imago,» Lacan wrote in 1938 in *les Complexes familiaux* [Familial Complexes].¹

Thus, psychoanalysis has not only recognized that the family, or better yet the familial institution, «presides over the fundamental processes of psychic development,»² but from the start, since Freud, has demonstrated it through the analytic experience. Furthermore, psychoanalysis gives to the paternal function an essential place in the process of humanizing our offspring. However, the fact that Lacan is not distressed by the relaxing of familial bonds does not mean that he encourages it, but rather that he sees a logic at work in it, a correlation between the reduction of the modern family to its biological grouping and the growing integration of the highest cultural progress. In other words, the more that marriage prevails in it, the more the family is holophrastic, reduced to a single element condensing the most complex functions.³ Lacan attributes the decline of the paternal imago to the same causes, the most extreme effects of social progress, while observing that this decline in the paternal imago gives way to a return to matrimonial exigencies.

Thus, if Freud, in his work *Civilization and Its Discontents*, attributes to culture a program which goes against the most intimate aspiration of each of us, Lacan sees in the complex of the conjugal family «the cleanest battlefield in which [man] can measure himself against the most profound figures of his destiny.»⁴ In other words, where civilization has a program for the subject, where it has written in advance his destiny, the family, while participating in the progress of civilization by inscribing those under its jurisdiction in the cultural program, offers the possibility of a

clear-cut combat in a closed battlefield, which is to say, in a ballasted reality.

We know about this paradoxical battle; the subject cannot leave the field in triumph without having first accepted to be vanquished, which is to say, lacking something that introduces him to the promising ideal. In this case, the subject returns the charge of his destiny to the Other so that not all the possible destinies open for him, but a few of them, those marked with the seal of his castration. I say «his» castration to emphasize the particular modalities under which each subject assumes castration.

The necessity to enter by the familial Other -- it's a question of survival for human beings who are born in a state of prematuration -- this necessity, then, can become an obstacle, the obstacle of no longer being able to quit the battlefield. This obstacle is conditioned by the refusal to sever which follows nursing, itself reproducing the severing which, at birth, separated the child from the matrix, «premature separation from which comes a malaise that no maternal care can recompense.»⁵

The subject caught up in the harmony of the imago of the maternal breast can thus find him/herself condemned to a perpetual joust in this battlefield where his/her destiny might have played in the sense of having a destination, «destination castration» one might say. But in this case there is no destination. No destination is thus impossible. It is this formula of the destiny of psychosis that I propose to study in more detail, setting out from a clinical construction and the support of a text that pre-dates Lacan's teachings, *les Complexes familiaux*.

So I propose the following formula: to the consent of neurosis is opposed the rejection of the psychotic subject, a subject who, without a definite destiny according to the coordinates of the Other, finds him/herself constrained to invent one for him/herself. Without doubt, it is in this respect that Lacan could say of the psychotic that he was the free man.

This liberty is seductive because it belongs to the figure of the ideal mother, or the recovered harmony of affective fusion, or as Lacan said, «a perfect assimilation of the totality of the being.»⁶ But this seductive liberty has its underside. It can kill. It is only in death that the subject can recover the harmony of paradise lost.

Harmony is the name that Mr. and Mrs. X could have given their first daughter. When I first met them, the father confided to me; «She's begun raising her hand against her mother, and we're afraid that one day she'll bring it down.» It was a familial drama in which a young girl, until then supported in the love that her mother believed to be without limit, comes

to terrorize the whole family. The parents attest to the hell they always had had to bear: from strident screaming at the least solicitation of an educative nature to thunderous music that the father could only stop by taking out the fuses, and in between perpetual, little aggressions on her younger sister. All of this would be nothing (understood to mean it wouldn't get any farther than the family circle) if, a little while ago, the threat Harmony held over her mother hadn't returned on herself. She had attempted to hang herself, around the age of nine, which is to say, shortly before her admission in the specialized establishment where she currently stayed. It had taken this to tone down the familial hell and get the parents to accept an in-patient status during the week for their daughter, who now is twelve.

Behind the parents' complaint about the tyranny that Harmony exercised on her family, an unconscious complaisance on their part would appear, threading through the interviews.

It can be heard in one of the first things the mother said to express how she understood her daughter's problem: «On the one hand she's too big, and on the other, she's too small.»

Too small means none other than, for her mother, she is only a baby. Thus, the father explained to us that to have his breakfast in peace, he had to get up very early, which allowed Harmony to crawl into their bed and spend the last moments of the night beside her mother. This latter testified, after a while, to the intimate bond she had with her daughter, as if she were still a baby. She would explain to us the great difficulty Harmony had had in separating from her. Thus, for a long period, Madame went about her housework while carrying the child next to her stomach almost without respite thanks to a baby-carrier. The moment she detached the apparatus, the baby set to screaming until returned to the maternal belly. According to the mother, Harmony had passed her first two years crying. Today, the moment one of her requests is not immediately satisfied, Harmony begins crying until satisfaction is brought about. This is what the mother calls her «too little» side. It must be noted that this is a «comprehensive» version given by the mother in an attempt to explain to us what she meant by «too small.» On another level, we will see that the daughter will superpose her mother's dichotomy big-small in her delusional constructions.

«Too big» is, for example, as the mother said, «her infantile masturbation didn't stop at the normal age.» A curious discourse which assumes that this arrestation is natural and not, as Freud has shown it, dependant on cultural factors. Harmony was asked to go do that in her room. «I never forbid it,» her mother said. «This is one of those things between women. It wasn't my place to interfere in it,» the father defended himself.

«Too big» thus refers to the unrepressed, which is to say the too great ease with which Harmony speaks, acts and represents sex. Eric Laurent states that there is, in the framework of extremely varied psychoses, a clear contrast between the ease with which the subject can put to work phantasms and perverse experiments and the rigor with which the psychotic constructs the delusion.⁷

To support one's theory on the family complex, such as it is presented here with a false father and a real mother, one can deduce the daughter's psychosis in a simple movement of cause and effect. This would be giving credit to the elaboration of family therapy so that the family is a pure and simple reality articulated in a system, when, to the psychoanalyst, the family is only one name for the Other. Why tire oneself out by speaking of the «Maternal Other» if it is only about the mother as a person? The maternal Other is the mother that the subject installs, which is, in his/her world made up of the presence of the maternal for him/her. This means that, in listening to the mother, we only get a glimpse of what the maternal Other might represent for the subject. Note, however, that this is more true than that the subject has introjected the mother as Other, which needs to be investigated here.

The maternal imago, in other words the unconscious representation of the mother, will take its fundamental form from the complex of severing. Recalling the theory, the newborn finds itself in a state of physical malaise linked to its prematuration, a state that dominates the first six months of its life, and which endures beyond the second year of life. Maternal care responds, while indeed insufficiently, to this malaise.⁸ From this insufficiency, this incomplete nature of maternal care, the child will be able to exit the complex of severing by sublimating it, which is to say, in displacing it in the form of a game in which he/she will assume the reproduction of the malaise induced by the comings and goings of the mother. And, in so doing, he/she will surmount the malaise. Freud located this foundational moment in what he called the *fort-da*, taken from the phonemes pronounced by his grandson to express the presence and absence of a spool representing the maternal Other. The imago of the maternal breast, on which the complex is based, will dominate the whole life of the person. The liquidation of the complex of severing «leaves, in the psyche, a permanent trace of the biological relation that it interrupts.»⁹ This trace testifies to a first orientation of the subject-to-come, an orientation that supports itself on what Lacan later would call a first signifying rhythm. In 1938, Lacan spoke of a vital tension, given in the form of a primordial ambivalence, an ambivalence which will have to resolve itself in mental intention. The mental intention that Lacan speaks of is that the subject can bear, and I would say «physically,» and later sustain mentally that there were pluses and minuses. The way that this mental resolution operates will condition, in a growing

movement of irreversibility, Lacan says, the crises assured by the continuation of development. One might see in this «growing irreversibility» the march of destiny.

Returning to our case, we could transcribe the words of the mother about this period of the «baby carrier» in writing lots of pluses and not many minuses. But this writing doesn't get to the question of who, the mother or the daughter, installed the pluses and refused the minuses. Independent of the cultural factors conditioning the future of the newborn, there is indeed a mental intention which is extracted from the living being. Lacan doesn't speak of choice, impossible to conceive of without a constituted ego, but of refusal or acceptance. This is what gives the subject-to-come his say in the decision about his destiny. «His say» simply because it is from his capture in what Lacan called an «ineffable, fusional cannibalism» that the subject must orient himself. The expression «fusional cannibalism» anticipates the image Lacan will propose in Seminar XVII when he speaks of the mother as «the big crocodile in the mouth of which you are.»¹⁰

Taking one step further in the mother-daughter relation, one must recall the observation which much interested Lacan,¹¹ according to whom this couple is particularly propitious to the delusion for two. In *les Complexes familiaux*, Lacan even proposes this couple as a model for psychosis. At this time, he linked it to the notion of «group made incomplete,» reduced to the mother and the siblings, a notion which announces the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-father. How, in 1938, did he articulate this?

He noted that, in the Oedipal drama, the primordial identifications to the maternal imago interfered in the formation of the ego ideals and the Superego.¹² For the daughter, this dimension is accentuated, which tends to turn the sublimation of the maternal imago into a feeling of repulsion toward its failure and a systematic worry about the specular image.

This feeling of repulsion toward the failure of the maternal imago can be seen in the case of Harmony, turned toward her mother, idealized from the start. Her mother, she says, is a philosopher. She knows the dictionary by heart. She knows everything.

As to the systematic worry about the specular imago, it seems to me that it is to be found, curiously, in the words of the mother which show her to be extremely preoccupied by her daughter's body. Harmony, since her arrival in the establishment, has gained much weight. She absolutely doesn't complain about it; on the contrary, she eats everything that presents itself by way of nourishment. Her mother, on the other hand, complains a

great deal about this transformation, fearing, as she says, that her daughter will become as fat as she herself is. This is astonishing if one knows that this woman has a very average body weight. It is as if Madame sees her double in her daughter.

If we haven't been able to precisely locate a delusion for two, there is at least a couple responding to itself in mirror. To conclude, we return to the parallel between the mother's sentence: «On the one hand, she's too big and on the other, she's too small» and the delusional constructions of the daughter, who comes to superpose herself there. First of all, it must be observed that the admission of Harmony as in-patient, if it had an appeasing effect on the familial climate, had a triggering effect for the daughter. The real separation of Harmony from her mother, while indeed Harmony didn't manifest any opposition to her stay in the institution, had an effect of subjective sinking for her. She would find her paroxysm in the phrase: «You've confused everything, my problems with my mother and my problems at school,» proposing then to return home where her mother would tutor her. She however had attempted, starting at her admission, a partitioning between her psychological problems (it's my imagination speaking, she would say) and her «ecological» problems (referring to *ecole* -- meaning school -- rather than the Greek prefix 'eco'). One might situate here what the necessity to invent destiny, outside the field of castration signifies for a subject. Petrified in the harmony of the maternal imago, this girl is condemned to write her destiny. What is surprising is that this writing echoes the words of her mother concerning the partition big/small.

In Harmony's discourse, one can locate this dichotomy: on the one hand, she might say that she is going to «grow big,» and make her mother happy, so she can return home. One sees here that the ideal of the promise, as it is structured in the resolution of the Oedipus in the form of a preparatory opening to some possible destinies, is here given in the form of a prospective closing. To be big, make mother happy and return to her bosom -- where one might see «the abandon of the securities that the family economy comports has the range of a repetition of severing...»¹³, here one sees the repetition of a refusal of severing.

If one thus has the version, «grow big» one also has the version, «grow small» produced in the form of a neologism: «to small». «In life,» she says, «there is the man and the woman and what would there be if there were no man and no woman? There would be insects.» A little while before pronouncing this assertion, she had explained that she was «smalling,» that she was already the youngest in the group and that she would become a flea that could be crushed. Then she extended this inverted genesis to everyone. Becoming an insect doesn't go without invoking the «desire of the larva» that Lacan uses to designate the relation to reality on which the

maternal imago reposes.¹⁴ It is indeed in order to get around such a destiny that she is constrained to invent another for herself alone, if she ever is alone.

¹ Jacques Lacan. *les Complexes familiaux dans la formation de l'individu*. Bibliotheques des Analytica, Navarin: Paris, 1938; p. 72.

² *Ibid.*; p. 131.

³ Eric Laurent. «Institution du fantasm, fantasmes de l'institution». *Les feuillets du Courtil* #4: avril, 1992; pp. 7 - 20.

⁴ Jacques Lacan. *Op.cit.*; p. 71.

⁵ *Ibid.*; p. 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*; p. 35.

⁷ Eric Laurent. «Trois enigmas: le sens, la signification, la jouissance.» *la Cause freudienne* #23, Navarin/Seuil: Paris, 1993; p. 49.

⁸ Jacques Lacan. *les Complexes familiaux*. Navarin: Paris, 1981; p. 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*; p. 27 and 35.

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan. *le Seminaire, Livre XVII: l'Envers de la psychanalyse*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Seuil: Paris, 1991; p. 129.

¹¹ Jean Jacques Gorog remarks in an article («La psychose dans les Complexes familiaux.» *Ornicar?* #44: March, 1988; p. 44) that the mother/daughter couple occupies a very particular place in Lacan's clinic. Its presence is constant, from his work on Aimee and the Papin sisters, through the example of the sow in «On a question preliminary to any possible treatment of psychosis» to Joyce and his daughter in the seminar consecrated to this writer.

¹² Jacques Lacan, *Op. Cit.*; pp. 64 - 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*; p. 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; p. 30.