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The Most Divine Hysteric

Laura's Story

Laura is twelve. Blond, blue-eyed, tall and thin, she's like a bounding, untamed gazelle, the paradox of her «being-woman» in a child's body which adorns itself with a thousand feminine charms. We will sum up Laura's story in referring to the familial discourse to situate how she responds to it.

When Laura's mother was pregnant, she was terribly weakened and had to rest in bed. She was on a diet, went to a bonesetter for «golden shots» [piqures d'or], and took strong doses of all kinds of pills. The father was absent, doing his obligatory military service. At her birth, Laura was transferred from maternity to pediatry; her mother having encountered serious health problems, having suffered several crises and acute hallucinatory episodes in which she saw sheep after the birth. She died two months later. The father was still in the army. Laura was raised by her paternal grandparents for the first three years. The father returned at this point, already remarried, and took Laura with him.

Less than a year later, Laura's father and step-mother brought her to a CMP [Medico-Pedagogical Center] in consultation for her behavior problems. She was described as a dirty child, encopretic, enuretic, mute, refusing all but liquid nourishment. She mutilated herself, gave herself bruises, tore out her hair, tore up her clothes and screamed. She was diagnosed as autistic with precocious affective failure.

When Laura had been with her grandparents, she did not present these troubles. The doctors said: «The father has a skeleton in the closet.» The CMP report concludes, «It is important that she find a balance at the heart of her family.» Nevertheless, during the next four years, Laura would become the object of exchange between her father and his parents before a request for admission would be addressed to the IMP [Medico-Pedagogical Institute]. Laura was eight.

Thus, Laura found herself the object of exchange between her father and step-mother on the one hand and her grandparents on the other, but also the object of the discourse of the Other. The maternal grandparents held the father responsible for the death of her mother and broke all communication with him. The step-mother imputed the responsibility for Laura's difficulties to her husband's parents. And they, who describe Laura as a normal child, attribute the troubles to reactions of opposition to her parents.

Lies and truth

What does the father say during our interviews? Concerning the death of his wife, he says he never brought the subject up with Laura; to speak of it when she was little would have only complicated her problems, later he said he had explained to her all that she needed to know, hiding nothing. In the interviews everything turns around lies and truth. For this man, the truth exists, universal and objective. One complaint appeared from the very outset: «Laura lies all the time.» She lies concerning her new clothes, which he regularly buys her and that she doesn't take home with her for weekends. She says she left them at Courtil (where she tears them to shreds). She lies also when she says her parents beat her. Thus the father wants to come to Courtil to verify that her clothes are indeed there. He wants to know if Laura is telling the truth. He also wants her to be present during the interviews, so she knows everything that happens, so she knows all the truth. Rules had been established for the consultant who conducted these interviews, rules the father was invited to uphold.

1) There will not be any visits to Courtil -- counterbalanced by the following interpretation: he can believe his daughter. Thus we refused to allow his demands for the whole truth to enter the institution.

2) Laura will not be present at the interviews -- counterbalanced by the interpretation given to the father that he can tell his daughter all about what happens in the interviews, it is even his responsibility.

In other words, he can leave a place to the unverifiable for Laura, which would also leave a place for the speech of her father as act.

Requests for everything, requests for nothing

At her arrival, all that was on the order of submitting to a social bond was difficult for Laura. She addressed incessant demands to the intervenants (especially the women), demands that bore on almost everything: «Sit beside me at dinner,» «Take me to school,» or yet again demands for the objects that belong to another and form part of her dress: «Give me your earrings.» Demands for everything and nothing. The object of her demands changed so rapidly, and the subject to whom she addressed them, that Laura often interrupted herself as if she no longer knew what to ask, nor from whom. She would then say, before parting in a fury and calling us names, «Oh, forget it.» She showed very clearly that, whatever the object of her demand, all could be summed up by a request for exclusive attention; Laura wanted to be unique.

Implicit requests for love, requests for a constant presence, moments of separation were particularly hard for her. On Friday, when she had to leave the institution, she clung to the intervenants. She wanted to stay to the last. When I finished working and left, Laura would follow me, throwing rocks. At night, I often found her sleeping before the door of the intervenants' room.

If the adult didn't respond right away to her demand, she flew off, slamming doors, upsetting chairs and whatever else was in the way, slapping the other children, hurting the little ones and cursing the big ones, threatening to run away. And all this often before the adult even had the time to formulate a response. It was precisely this temporal suspension for the response which indeed pinned down, for Laura, the unbearable gap between demand and desire. Laura was jealous. She would place herself in my line of sight the minute I looked at another child. She would then manipulate this child as it were an object, either fondling or striking, usually hugging him so tightly as to suffocate him, mumbling, «I'm gonna kill you, you hear?» For the same reason, it was very difficult to integrate her into a workshop with other children. She could only work if the adult gave her

a privileged place. Passing from a seductive position (when she formulates her requests) to a position as torturer (when her demands are not satisfied), her abrupt mood swings are what characterize best the theatrical staging of her subjective division.

On the one hand, we attempted to dislodge her from the place of exception in which she put herself, and on the other hand we tried to shift ourselves from the place where she awaits the Other. And in all this we tried to leave our desire empty in such a way that she would find herself facing an enigma which would bring her to ask herself what she is for the Other.

How do we present an empty desire, without speech, while dealing with daily life? Make a third party intervene, have an unpredictable attitude, surprise her, invent: these are some of the ways which only had short-term effects. Any attempt to distance ourselves would push her to pass from the position of seducer to torturer, from love to hate, only making her pass from one face to the other in the same register. For the last four years, it is only in putting her in the place of exception that things calm down. Not much has happened in daily life. But on the side of all her implicit requests for love, Laura has an explicit request which is: «I want to read my dossier.» She addresses this request to most of the intervenants. For one year, we hadn't followed up on it.

As always, her behavior problems -- this constant theatrical demonstration -- are only the mask of her real question: that of the desire of her mother and her origins. Thus, on the side of this massive, omnipresent and theatrical interrogation of the Other's desire, would appear something which concerns her own desire. In fact, she announced her question from the outset: «I want to know how it was when my mother was alive.» One day, I responded to her, «Not now. Tomorrow if you like, you can come at 9 p.m.» Her only reaction was to curse me and throw pebbles. The next day, to my surprise, she called me. «It's Laura. Can I come?» Since then she comes regularly. I see her, thus, in the daily living situation, and during what I would call «privileged moments.» Our daily relations have changed. Laura has gotten much better at bearing presence and absence. A certain distancing is possible, she can work with others and often reminds me: «I'm coming Wednesday.»

What does she say during these «privileged moments»?

Laura gives consistence to a lack in the Other

For six months she came without a question. At first, everything was fuzzy as to the contents, but she held to the form. She reassured herself that there was a moment appointed to see me; she was punctual and never

missed the meetings which she always came to with sacks full of presents. She assured herself that there was an Other and that he lacked. If I addressed her directly, she fled slamming the door, did everything possible to attract my attention, signifying to me that she was there while also signifying to me that I must leave her alone. After awhile, and after having prowled around me, she tirelessly recounted her days, pointing out the castration of the other. Finally, this ended with a series of insults that she addressed to me, but which appeased her.

Laura assures herself of the desire of the Other

Then the request that had been present well before these interviews made its appearance: «I want to read my dossier.» Moreover, it was because of this request tirelessly made in the quotidian that the interviews had been established. She then asked me, «Is it true that my mother is dead? My dad says that my mother is dead. Should I believe him?» This question returned like a leitmotif. In the same movement, Laura brought me a drawing each time, always more or less the same: a cross, continually present object. This cross could represent her genealogical tree with «real mother» on the left, «papa» to the right and «Laura» at the bottom. Beside «real mother» was a second cross and a sentence (her question). In the farthest corner was «false mother» and a question mark -- «Where does she go on the genealogical tree?» On this cross, Laura might also draw another character about which she would always say, «It's my mother. It's me.» She might also draw this cross with a coffin and say, «It's me. I'm dead like my mother.»

At the same time, she would stage scenarios in which she appeared with her real mother who would always offer her presents. «Everyone says that she is dead, but it's not even true. I went to see her with my Dad without telling my second mother. She gave me birthday presents.»

I don't think we can speak of an identification to the dead mother, nor of a subjectification of her mother's death, much less the grieving process. A certain lapse of time seems to be necessary before she can position herself in relation to «my mother is dead.» Laura remains at the same question, without deploying it. More than a question, it is a demand for a response. Throughout the week, I receive numerous folded letters that she never puts directly in my hand. She has numerous messengers. The letters always say, «Anne, my mother is dead? For Wednesday at 9, I want an answer.» And she signs, «Laura.»

I never give her a response. She always came back, and to each attempt on my part to ask her what makes her no longer believe her father, or what is in the dossier that she so wants to see, she tirelessly returned, «Look in the dossier. It's written in the dossier.» During a second period, Laura searched a verification in reality: «Is it true that...? Can I believe my father?» From this Laura would construct a «may be the father!» She identifies thus to her father, in the lie.

The truth of desire or the impossible proof

Searching a verification that I never gave her, Laura then stole the dossier. Did she want a written proof? In any case, this theft modified the contents of our interviews. Her question changed to, «Tell me how it was when my mother was alive?» Even if her questions always remained on the order of a claim, Laura searched in spite of everything to elaborate a knowledge of her origins.

At the same time, she staged scenes in which she no longer appeared with her «real mother,» but with her father and her «false mother.» These were essentially her complaints: «My parents yell at each other, and I don't even know why. I didn't do anything.» Fighting is the thing that holds their relation together. What does she say? «My father beats my mother -- the false one. She threatened to take him to court.» Laura punctuates, «It's good if she leaves, like that I can stay alone with my Dad. My mother doesn't want me to speak of my first mother. She says it breaks my dad's heart. Then she hits me.» Later, she says with a big smile that her father hit her and that it's better like that. We see here that, manifestly, she puts into play an oedipal desire in which the mother is evacuated in favor of the father. It also appears to be an attempt at the subjectivation of the maternal division: «real mother» on the side of the ideal, «false mother» on the side of the ravaging mother who beats her.

This goes along with the question of the father's desire. She no longer looked for her father's lie; she no longer identified to her father but told stories in which her father beat her, and that without complaining. She had passed from identification to the father to desire for the father.

Laura then elaborated, but when she quickly found a limit to her elaboration of knowledge, she concluded: «It's in the dossier.» In this way her elaboration was only brought about in reference to a verification in reality supposedly fixed in the dossier -- a verification that she still hasn't

got. If the version of her mother's death was always too meager, I tried to bring her signifiers by telling her stories so that she could construct her own. She showed herself perpetually unsatisfied; that wasn't what she wanted to know, it was something else. This other thing, it was evidently in the dossier, the place detaining a true knowledge, but also a «readywear» knowledge.

The avowal awaited from the Other, mask of the supposition of knowledge

Laura then stole the dossier a second time. She took it with her to her father's house. Meanwhile, she also stirred up everyone around her. Firstly, her father accompanied her to the tomb of her mother for the first time. Then, the team contacted a social worker who set in motion the judicial procedures to establish Laura's right to see her grandparents. In brief, she put everyone to work. In staff meetings, we asked ourselves how we should react to this theft. Should we send her home for one week for theft of confidential papers? This didn't seem pertinent to us. In effect, professional secrecy is situated on our side rather than on hers. Additionally, to punish her for this reason would only confirm her question and signify to her that there is something she mustn't know. She was in this way invited to write her story, one hour per week, in the director's office.

She had written her story for six months during our «privileged moments.» She had read her dossier, knew it. She knew it so well that on the first page of her notebook, Laura wrote...her dossier, then another, word for word identical to the first one that she had learned by heart. She didn't say anything and repeated the rewriting of a deposited knowledge. Would she be able to one day «suppose» it?

The enigma of desire...virgin or dead?

I read out loud while she wrote. From then on, this subterfuge allowed her to pose more precise questions bearing on responsibility: «Mr. B. is responsible for the death of Mrs. B., what does that mean? Mrs. B. died at the birth of Laura. Am I responsible for her death?»

She described scenes in which she interrogated, no longer her mother's desire for her, no longer her father's desire for her mother, but her father's desire for another woman: «My mother lived with another man before. She threw her wedding ring in the water and went with my father.» She also questioned her own place in her father's desire: «A friend wants to be destroyed because her father is gone.»

Can we say that she symbolizes the fact that her father desires elsewhere? Can we put this in relation to the fact that, for three weeks, Laura told me she has a boyfriend and regularly asked me if she could go see him when, earlier, she had followed me everywhere or run away?

The request to read her dossier has been transformed into a request to «read in her memory.» She interrogates the truth insofar as the assurance of exactitude that she takes from the Other, the Other of the dossier, has vacillated since this dossier was stolen. I kept myself from making any enunciated interpretation. I didn't say to her that she could believe her father. Perhaps it is in my refusal to read to her her dossier that she was able to steal it two times, in the process distinguishing between deposited knowledge and my desire that she elaborate another knowledge? In this way the interpretation of my refusal, my silence came to her side when she said she wanted to read in her memory.

Moreover, I have been updated recently concerning her passages to the act: a series of thefts of statues of the Virgin. She hasn't said a thing. Her room has become a veritable museum of the virgin with photos of her mother on the wall, candles and a golden plaque at the entrance which makes one expect an epitaph. All that Laura says can be summed up by «It's because my mother died a long time ago.» If she is grieving her mother, we might ask, «why a virgin?» and «why a series and not just one?» What meaning should be given these statues? Is it the means Laura has found to grieve her mother? If so, isn't the mother then put in the position of ideal? Doesn't the Virgin, insofar as pure mother and ideal woman, come to plug up the question of femininity?

Laura, divine hysteric, veils and unveils on stage the question which crosses and divides her. Can she render it operable? Mother? At the risk of death! Woman? At the risk of desire!