

FROM FREUD'S MYTHOLOGY OF SEXUALITY TO LACAN'S FORMULAE OF SEXUATION

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Introduction

Given that this day is meant to be a celebration of Freud's one hundred and fiftieth birthday and that many non-specialists as well as specialists have been invited to it, I was advised to keep my remarks simple and not to presume the sort of knowledge or interest that we usually have in our regular meetings on different aspects of Freud's and Lacan's work.

I should explain that my arcane and esoteric title comes out of what we have been working on in the MSc Programme for the past twenty-five weeks, but I assure you that my paper will not be largely directed to an exploration of what Lacan came to only towards the end of his life and describes as 'formulae of sexuation'. So, I propose to give only a brief explanation of why I chose this title and then, if time permits, to fill out more fully the movement from Freud's mythology to Lacan's formulae.

But I have also been asked to set the scene for the day and to outline in particular some of the more important general issues in contemporary psychoanalysis. It is in fact hard to avoid Sigmund Freud in this anniversary year. Just this week in *The Irish Times* we have had excellent articles by Peter Crawley¹ and Kate Holmquist² and an hour-long discussion on BBC Four's *Women's Hour* between a number of prominent British psychoanalysts. Earlier in the year, we had *Newsweek*³ devoting its front cover and many pages to a discussion of Freud's work headlining it

¹ *The Irish Times*, 8.5.06, p. 12.

² *ibid.*, 9.5.06, *Health Supplement*, p. 4.

³ *Newsweek*, 27.3.06.

*'Freud is **not** dead, the couch is out but the culture of therapy is everywhere and science is taking a new look at its theories'.*

So at one level it would be easier to leave it to the journalists to present a popular and well-informed judgement of Freud, but on the other hand it seemed to us in APPI that enquiring non-analysts, especially those in the caring professions here in Ireland, had a right to hear and to question people for whom psychoanalysis has been their principal activity for thirty years or more.

Personally, I regret that Martin Daly who has worked as a psychoanalyst in Irish prisons for twenty years, and Rik Loose who has become a world authority on the psychoanalysis of addiction, cannot be here today, but it is a tribute to Barry O'Donnell's organisational skills that we still have a splendid and varied programme of topics and speakers that I hope will engage your interest and stimulate your questions.

Psychoanalysis: a nineteenth century dogma?

The main reason for my obscure title is that one of the most constant critiques that emerges in the popular discussions of Freud that I have mentioned, is that psychoanalysis is fundamentally a static set of dogmatic beliefs penned by Freud in the late nineteenth century, and repeated *ad nauseam* in every psychoanalytic journal and conference ever since.

This is the position of Dr Eric Kandel, a Columbia professor who earned a Nobel Prize for his work on learning and memory, who admits to having had an early passion for psychoanalysis and still considers Freud to be a giant, but who claims in the same issue of *Newsweek* that *'the problem with psychoanalysis, and it is a deep problem, is not with Freud. Subsequent generations have failed to make it a more rigorous biologically based science.'* This is the opinion of a highly intelligent and rational man but, as *Newsweek* reminds us, to innocently type Freud's name into a search engine is to unleash a torrent of denunciation that began with the moment he began publishing his work in the nineteenth century.

I can tell you from personal experience that in the United States of the 1960's being a psychoanalyst was to be at the peak of the psychiatric hierarchy and that reading Freud was an absolutely essential exercise for all psychiatrists and psychologists. But to quote *Newsweek* once again we learn that now there are only five thousand psychoanalysts in the country as opposed to thirty-five thousand psychiatrists and one hundred and fifty thousand psychologists, all of whom would consider themselves capable of carrying out psychotherapy. Today, to look for books on Freud and psychoanalysis in the major bookshops of New York is a fool's errand. Jim Dalsimer, who knows Ireland well and whose late wife Edel was one of the prime movers in developing Irish studies in American universities, told me not too long ago that he had finally been appointed a training analyst in the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute. But, as he sadly said, this was like being appointed one of the chief stewards responsible for moving around the deckchairs on the Titanic.

Has psychoanalysis **had** its day?

So, I think we can take it as read that even though American and even Irish newspapers question whether Freud is still a modern influence, the overwhelming consensus is that psychoanalysis - just like Marxism - has had its day or its century, and that it is time for all of us to move on: in psychiatry to a biology of the mind and in politics to the post-Cold War optimism that made a bestseller of Francis Fukuyama's book *The End of History*. 9/11 brought crashing to the ground not just the Twin Towers but also the notion that American liberal democracy would triumph throughout the world. It remains to be seen whether the current trend of trying to reduce psychiatry to a neuroscience will not meet its own 9/11 or whether it can be averted by a radical rethink that includes the insights of Freud and Lacan into the importance of the unconscious and language in the understanding and treatment of the speaking human being.

It is often forgotten that psychoanalysis was the invention of a neurologist and that there is a certain irony in the claim that its future and that of psychiatry should be in a return to the study of the central nervous system!

A recent article in *Le Monde*⁴ has pointed out that while Freud and Martin Heidegger are arguably the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century they are also the most hated and the least easy for their opponents to discuss in a rational way. Freud's early flirtation with cocaine - which has been compared to his version of methadone - and Heidegger's association with Nazism are enough for many to dismiss their theories as false, even pernicious, and unworthy of serious discussion.

The revolt against Freud and psychoanalysis has been going on in the United States and other English-speaking countries since the late sixties or early seventies but even though it has always been contested by individual psychiatrists and psychologists, the work of Jacques Lacan in particular made it an essential point of reference in France and other Latin countries for many decades and was widely referred to by much read philosophers and sociologists, such as Michel Foucault and Claude-Lévi Strauss.

The Black Book of Psychoanalysis

However, in 2005 there was published the *Black Book of Psychoanalysis*⁵ which claimed that the French would live and think better without Freud, and this argument was taken up by the French equivalent of *Newsweek* - *Le nouvel observateur*⁶ - in a series of articles that more or less repeated the critiques that had been addressed to analysis by English-speaking authors for several decades.

I have not read all the eight hundred plus pages of this book but in the section on sexuality - which is my topic - the author, a cognitive

⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy. *Freud, Heidegger, noire histoire*. *Le Monde*, 4.11.05, p. 13.

⁵ C. Meyer, (ed). *Le livre noir de la -psychoanalyse*. Paris, Les arenas, 2005.

⁶ *Edition, 1-7, Septembre, 2005.*

behavioural therapist, asks: Would you go to see a dentist who used the old hammer and chisel methods of the nineteenth century? Obviously not. So why take your sexual problems to a psychoanalyst who will cost you lots of time and money, when you can go to a contemporary specialist who will solve your problems of impotence or frigidity in six to ten sessions, and avoid years of fruitless free association on the couch?

This may well be a justifiable position in many cases but one purpose of this paper and this day is to show that psychoanalysis has moved on, and that although rooted in Freud as physics might be said to be rooted in Newton, it has been hugely developed in theory and in practice, in particular by the work of Jacques Lacan.

Jacques Lacan: renewing Freud

Now, Lacan was not a linguist as was stated this week in *The Irish Times* but one of the outstanding psychiatrists of his generation who certainly made use of the discoveries of linguistics in elucidating the "talking cure" but who worked with the most seriously ill psychiatric patients, and was still doing case presentations - that I attended - in the early 1970's in the prestigious *Hopital Sainte Anne* in Paris.

I am not naive enough, any more than Lacan himself - and I could quote you instances of this if we had the time - to deny that many psychoanalysts are caught in a time warp and that many articles published in 2006 are little different to those of the 1920's. But he is claiming that the rigorous development of psychoanalysis that Eric Kandel would argue psychoanalysts have failed to develop, is not to make it more biologically based and return it to the neurology from which it emerged but to see how its practice as a talking cure can be theorised in terms of linguistics, logic, and mathematics, and made more therapeutically effective by focusing on what is essential in the interaction between speaking beings. From their earliest infancy experiences, and even more from the family and society histories and mythologies into which they are born, subjects are caught up in forms of human bonding

that he describes as discourses. What Freud discovered was a form of discourse that did not confront the ill person with the dogmas of the state or the university but with the exigencies of their own unconscious.

Now Freud, as has been said earlier, was a giant, an observer and therapist of genius but when he was trying to provide a generalised framework within which to situate his findings about human sexuality, he felt he had to turn towards myth, first to the Oedipus Complex, as described in Sophocles⁷ play, to explain how boys loved their mothers and eventually identified with their fathers, and how girls loved their fathers and identified with their mothers. He then proceeded to his own myth - borrowed in part from Darwin - that the origins of civilisation, morality and religion were to be found in a mythical primitive state of civilisation in which a savage father possessed all the women and killed or expelled all the challenging sons until his sons finally sat down together and arranged to share out the women after having killed him.

Now, there is lots more in the course of the twenty-four volumes of Freud's *Collected Works* but the Oedipus theory in particular has been the backbone of psychoanalytic theory and treatment for over a century, and from it were derived such highly controversial notions as the woman's envy for a penis which outraged feminists, particularly in the United States, and became a subject of ridicule that spread to the whole of Freud's corpus.

Lacan was at one with his psychoanalytic colleagues in adopting this position for many years, especially in his 1930's encyclopaedia article on *The Family* where he sees attachment to the mother and rivalry with siblings culminate in each individual history in a wrestling with the question of the father through which sexual identity - male or female - is attained. Very briefly, he saw the failure of individuals to successfully negotiate this history as being at the core of neurotic and psychotic illnesses.

Lacan's post-oedipal analysis

But in the late 1960's and early 1970's he concluded that if psychoanalysis was to be convincing to contemporary philosophers and anthropologists and even theologians, Freud's myths of sexuality had to be recast in the language of contemporary logic which had begun with Boole and Frege in the nineteenth century and was carried on by Cantor, Russell and others. This logic claimed to supersede the logic of Aristotle, which had dominated the Western world for the previous two and a half millennia, and it drew its essential strength from the dialogue between logic and mathematics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I do not intend to go into the complications of what some people have described as the greatest intellectual revolution of the nineteenth century, but let me say briefly that this dialogue resulted in the development of a set of signs or symbols which are broadly described as quantifiers, which allowed logical statements to be expressed more exactly, but in particular led to a questioning of the age old distinctions developed by Aristotle between the universal affirmative, the universal negative, the particular affirmative and the particular negative.

It is from these reflections that Lacan develops his formulae of sexuation which are essentially intended to undermine the myth of the binarity of the sexes - a set of men confronted with a set of women - and to allow a new way of looking at sexual identity and sexual relationship, or indeed non-relationship.

This is a huge departure from the Oedipal theory but it is by no means the ultimate statement on sexuation, and we have years of work ahead of us to carry on and to develop these initial insights - and here too I am quoting Lacan.

Psychoanalysis today

Let me end with a few remarks on contemporary psychoanalysis. It has to be said that Lacan is tremendously disliked by the majority of

traditional, Freudian analysts. He is seen as incomprehensible, anti-Freudian, unclinical etc., etc. The thirty-odd years that his theories have been studied and applied in lectures and case conferences in St. Vincent's University Hospital has gone some way to correcting this picture of Lacan - but only for some. Mostly in the great UK and USA traditions of psychoanalysis, but now in his native France, a sustained attack is being mounted and, as we have said, is summarised in the infamous *Black Book*. This book is unlikely to be translated because, as has been pointed out, it is for the most part a rehash of the 1970 English and American critics such as Cioffi, Crewes, Sulloway, Swayles, etc., etc., about whom very little would have been heard if they had not attempted to make their reputation by attacking Freud.

We began in this hospital in a timid, eclectic way, which included the cooperation of behaviourists, English and Austrian-trained psychoanalysts, and visits from distinguished American and UK psychoanalysts. But as graduates emerging from the MSc in Psychotherapy became more Lacanian, and applicants too made it clear that they had chosen this course over the many now available in order to understand his work better, we became less eclectic. In cooperation with the LSB - now DBS - College the graduates developed a BA in Psychoanalytic Studies, an MA in Clinical Psychoanalysis and a number of other programmes which have led to what Barry has been able to pull together today in terms of an introduction to the clinical practice of psychoanalysis as initiated by Sigmund Freud.

Let me say one final word about the easily held perception that Lacanian psychoanalysis is an affair for effete Francophile snobs. I would argue that Lacan is as Irish as the Euro, the CAP, Joyce, Beckett, and John McGahern, much loved and respected in France. It is no wonder in retrospect that Lacan and Lacanians have begun to make their mark in the health and university scene in Ireland and will continue to extend the role of psychoanalysis in prisons, in family centres, in addiction centres, and in various training schemes as well as through meetings like this and publications like *The Letter* and *The Review*.

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