

## THE FUNCTION OF THE FATHER IN THE CONTEMPORARY FAMILY: Psychoanalytic Notes

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**F**or psychoanalysts the neurotic behaviour and character disorders of adult life are ways of continuing to ask vitally important questions that have been left unresolved since childhood. Hence the importance analysis has always accorded to the family structures and events that mark the first interactions between the human offspring and the social world within which he is called to take his place. But contrary to popular belief the teaching of psychoanalysis is not that human beings inevitably repeat the patterns laid down in childhood. It is rather that men and women will be powerfully propelled towards such repetition unless one concrete question is resolved in such a way that the emerging human being can stake out a particular position in regard to the people who accompany him on the first steps of his journey.

### **What is a father?**

'Every new arrival on this planet,' wrote Sigmund Freud in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 'is faced with the task of mastering the Oedipus complex; anyone who fails to do so falls a victim to neurosis.' This proposition is seen by Jacques Lacan<sup>1</sup> as providing the axis for all authentic psychoanalytic research and practice. But he has given it a new twist and a new vividness for our time by insisting that what it amounts to in practice is the task of effectively answering the question: 'What is a Father?' This then for him is the concrete question that must be answered if the stagnated repetition of neurosis is to be avoided and some little freedom and creativity attained.

Lacan would go further by arguing that the very emergence of psychoanalysis at the end of the last century is linked precisely with the psychological crisis that arose for all human beings, men and women, with the decline in contemporary society of the largely unconscious representation of the Father that he calls the '*paternal imago*'. So that the question of the Father is not addressed solely to the

individual or the family but to contemporary society as a whole.

This essay is not immediately concerned, then, with the practical question of the share that should be taken by the contemporary father in the care and rearing of the children - a question that the economic and social conditions of our time have made increasingly urgent for many women. Nor does it deal directly with the problems faced by the increasing number of single-parent families. It is concerned with the more fundamental question, also made urgent by social and economic conditions, of the specific nature of the paternal function.

I would suggest that without some serious attempt to approach this issue the reflections of sociologists, psychologists and theologians are in danger of remaining Utopian and idealistic and of providing little in the way of useful guidance for the parents, educators, and religious and political leaders who determine the shape of our society.

### **The Anglo-Americanization of Freud**

Some preliminary clarifications may be in order here. There have been two traditions at work in psychoanalysis since the death of Freud in 1939, and one of them has been so dominant in English and American writing that it has almost completely obscured the other, which carries much more explicitly the message of Freud's revolutionary view of the human condition. By and large the post-Freudian Anglo-Americans have promoted a theory and practice that puts the mother-child bond at the centre of psychological development. Basing themselves largely on the learning theories derived from academic psychology as applied to the observation of children and animals they have argued that the failures of socialization that manifest themselves in adult life as illness or delinquency are caused by an affective frustration arising primarily from the absence, loss or distortion of early maternal care.

### **John Bowlby**

The most popular expression of this point of view is probably John Bowlby's 'Child Care and Growth of Love'. Basing himself on studies of children evacuated from large centres of population to avoid bombing during the Second World War, Bowlby argued that premature separation from the mother made it impossible for the child to acquire those emotional predispositions that would make him capable of the love and fellow-feeling that are essential for life in society. And he went on to speculate on the inhumanity to be anticipated in adult life from those armies of orphans produced by every war and from those children whose mothers had been forced to abandon the home for the work place.

Bowlby's work strongly influenced the thinking of a generation of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and educators and through them affected child-rearing practices and the understanding of anti-social behaviour especially in the young. It came to be seen as a corrective to a massive oversight on the part of Freud regarding the importance of the mother in the development of the child and reinforced traditional views that the place of women was indeed in the home. Maternal deprivation and other forms of bad mothering became the key concepts for understanding the alienation of mental illness and also for grounding a psychology of the human subject in terms of the gratification or frustration of needs. Few of our social ills would arise if society were so arranged that the needs of its individual members were satisfied. Non-satisfaction of certain vital needs leads to frustration; frustration causes a regression to more primitive forms of seeking satisfaction; and this regression sets up patterns of either withdrawal or violence.

Lacan considers that this schema of frustration-regression-aggression is fundamentally misleading as an account of human development, and that the therapeutic, educative and political action based on it is totally inadequate. Far from being a much-needed corrective to Freud it was, in fact, a pre-Freudian position that neglected the radical distinctions that Freud had drawn between the specifically human and the animal modes of socialization and development.

The confirmation for his thesis that Bowlby sought in animal psychology - Harlow's young monkeys reacted to maternal deprivation in much the same way as young children - only served to indicate that what was specific to the human child was in fact being overlooked in his model. Without denying the obvious fact of the primacy of the biological and emotional bonds linking the child to his mother Lacan argues, after Freud, that in the human being biology and emotion are always secondary to modes of identification peculiar to human beings, and even more so to the social laws - particularly the marriage laws - which govern the institution of the family into which the human child is born. And this brings him back once again to the central position held in that system of laws by the Father.

### **Lacan's Return to Freud**

It is not possible here to give any adequate account of the views that Lacan developed over fifty years of psychoanalytic research and teaching between 1932 and 1981, especially since he continually calls on a previous fifty years of work by Freud. But let us try to lift the veil a

little and catch some glimpse of what he calls 'the paternal mystery' and gain some appreciation of his reasons for putting it at the centre of his concerns.

In the five major case histories of Dora, the Ratman, Little Hans, President Schreber and the Wolfman in which Freud attempted to unravel the intricacies of hysteria and phobia, obsessional neurosis and paranoia, it is always a failure to master the Oedipus complex or to answer the question of the Father that is at the core of the problems that brought these patients to Freud or, in the case of President Schreber, to years of enforced psychiatric confinement ending with his death. But to find a starting point we will not turn to these infinitely nuanced case histories to which Lacan constantly refers us as being the indispensable sources for understanding what Freud was trying to communicate. Instead we will use the eye of an Irish artist to help us see that this struggle is relevant to our own society and does not concern only those who master it so incompletely that they are brought with the passing of time to the psychiatrist's chair or the psychonanalyst's couch.

### **Oedipus in Ireland**

In 'My Oedipus Complex', set in Cork at the end of the First World War, Frank O'Connor has made his own contribution to forging the uncreated conscience of our race by sketching an authentically Irish myth in which many Irish men may perhaps find an echo of their own early struggles with the question of the Father. I say it is a myth because even though little Larry's father has been away in the war and only intrudes into his life at the age of five, there is always a sense in which the specific type of presence that is associated with the Father is masked from the child in his early years and only emerges with its own particular clarity between the ages of four and six. Clearly, in the complete conjugal family that we are taking as the typical family structure expected by our culture, Daddy has always been around and, given the economic and social circumstances of the day, may even have had the principal caring role in the life of the child. But if this is so he is nevertheless seen in terms of the biological needs of the child and plays the role of surrogate mother rather than father.

O'Connor's unpretentious little tale has the merit of vividly illustrating the subjective world into which the Father intrudes. It also shows why this intrusion gives rise to questions which have nothing abstract about them since they concern the very existence of the subject, and it illustrates ways of achieving a resolution of sorts of the psychological

crisis to which these questions give rise.

### **The Imaginary Order**

The world which little Larry had constructed on the basis of his exclusive relationship with his mother gives the flavour of what Lacan has described as the Imaginary Order. This is the world of the dual relationship that gives rise in the child to the illusion of completeness and omnipotence. The high point of every day was the early morning conference when Larry would climb into the big bed to tell his beloved mother his schemes, and to be thawed out by the warmth of her body. True, she imposed some limits on his phantasies. Whenever he pointed out to her the waste of making two beds when they could both sleep in one she insisted that it was healthier for him to sleep in his own room. And there was the little matter of the baby that he and his mother could never agree on. Larry was all for having a new baby - theirs was the only house on the terrace without one. But his Mother insisted that they could not afford one until Father came back from the war.

The development of this imaginary world in which the child sees himself as the focus of his Mother's desires and sees her as the all-enveloping and omnipotent object of his, is, of course, an essential phase in the emergence of a properly human sense of identity. Lacan sees as the gateway to this world those moments in the first eighteen months of his life when the child comes to delight in his own image as reflected in the mirror and in the loving gaze of those who care for him - moments that he has made into a key theoretical reference point called the 'Mirror Stage'. A failure to enter this world of the captivating image would leave the child sunk in the miseries of motor incoordination characteristic of the human animal in the early weeks and months after his birth, and leave him with a sense of himself - another Lacanian reference point - as a 'fragmented body' vulnerable to dislocation and death.

But in one of his most illuminating case histories Freud has shown how the desire of the Mother for the child, which in its origin draws the child away from his early misery into a sense of life and joy, can, when excessive, become deathbearing and prevent the child from moving beyond this phase of imaginary captivation into the symbolic ordering of human affairs within which he must eventually find his place. So great was the need of the Mother of Little Hans for her child that she imposed onto the phantasies of her son none of the limits set by Larry's mother. She not only had him in her bed - against the

remonstrances of a physically present but totally ineffectual Father - but also encouraged him as a spectator to all her most intimate physical activities, dressing and undressing, using the toilet and so on. So that, without any of the traumas or abuse that are supposed to be necessary for the production of a neurosis, Little Hans found himself at the age of five in the grip of an overwhelming set of phobias and anxieties that, without Freud's intervention, might well have perverted the whole subsequent course of his existence.

Ulick O'Connor in his biography of Brendan Behan, gives without comment a description of Paddy English, the son of Brendan's favourite Granny, lying asleep in bed beside his Mother, with his cap on, when he was well into his thirties. This image of stagnation may well be enough to show that not all the problems of assuring a properly human existence can be solved in terms of the warmth of the relationship between mother and child. The mechanism by which this relationship can be transformed (not abolished) in such a way as to allow the child a new access to his own originality, creativity and truth, is the appearance of the father in his life.

### **The Symbolic Order**

What the paternal appearance brings is a revelation of a Law, of what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order, which up to this had only been dimly perceived by the child. That law is the primary law of marriage which cuts across the natural desire of the little boy for his mother and the little girl for her father. Sexual partners, society says, may not be chosen simply on the basis of a natural attraction. Why his father had a greater attraction for his mother than he had was the great mystery for Frank O'Connor's little hero. After much cogitation he concluded that it all hinged on that unhealthy habit of sleeping together and that this in turn seemed to depend on being grown up and giving people rings.

At first it is hard for the child to see the father asserting his primary right to the mother, who is after all the most natural focus of the child's interest and affection, as anything but a hated rival who threatens the foundations of his existence. Little Larry does not take kindly to being put out of his Mother's bed by this stranger.

*'Mick, Mick!' cried Mother. 'Don't you see the child isn't used to you?'*

*'I see he's better fed than taught', snarled Father, waving his arms wildly. 'He wants his bottom smacked'.*

*All his previous shouting was as nothing to these obscene words referring to my person. They really made my blood boil.*

*'Smack your own!' I screamed hysterically. 'Smack your own!  
Shut up! Shut up!'  
At this he lost his patience and let fly at me.*

Freud would sometimes wonder how he, a serious neurologist and investigator of psychopathology, had found himself writing a new type of monograph that owed more to the genre of the short story than to science. But it was part of his genius to link the banalities of family life to the deepest problems of human existence. Because it is nothing less than a struggle for existence that is crystallized here in this little drama. Will his father and mother be able to say the words and make the gestures that would help Larry to make the inner changes that are necessary if he is to undo the apron strings that bind him to his mother; or will they make that transformation too difficult or even impossible for him and condemn him instead to making an aborted entrance into the Symbolic Order?

The drama surrounding the entry into this order has been anticipated with the naming of the child at his birth, with his weaning from his mother's breast and his toleration of her inevitable absences. And it will surface again with a new intensity in the struggles of adolescence and the challenges of adult life. But for Freud, as for Lacan, these years from four to six when a child usually begins to go to school and be considered to possess the elements of the power to reason are the decisive ones, and they are made decisive because they mark the access to a new type of presence that points to something beyond the maternal and imaginary world.

### **Desire and the Law**

'The true function of the father,' writes Lacan, '... is fundamentally to unite (and not to set in opposition) a desire and the Law'. Despite the early resentment it causes, his appearance in the life of the child is in its essence, not an intrusion but a revelation of new possibilities of existence. Very briefly, Lacan sees the Father as exercising his function in a two-fold operation, prohibition and promise, which will have as their effect the setting up of two new agencies in the psychology of the child which will thenceforward allow him to proceed with his life in a quite different mode.

The purpose of prohibition is to complete the detachment begun with the weaning of the child from his mother, and, more specifically, to repress the sexual desire for the mother which reaches a high point at the age of four or five. Both the sexual desire and its prohibition by the father are what emerge so clearly in Frank O'Connor's story. A correlative but

not symmetrical process must occur in the little girl with regard to her father, the difference in the two sexes turning on the fact that the object of the boy's desire is the same person from which he was originally weaned, whereas the girl directs her desire towards that new object which is the oedipal father, while also completing her detachment from her mother. In both cases the successful completion of the operation of prohibition results in the setting up of an internal agency called the super-ego which essentially represses the sexual images and desires associated with the parent of the opposite sex. This repression releases the energy necessary for the pursuit of a dimension of reality that goes beyond the self-interest of the pre-oedipal years.

For the Oedipal crises to be fully mastered, however, the dimension of promise must also be introduced, a promise which allows the child to find a new type of identity beyond that which sustained him in the bipolar relationship with his mother and to see the death of the old imaginary constructions as heralding a new form of life. This promise takes effect through the identification the child assumes with the parent of same sex. What is quite extraordinary in this new type of identification is that it takes for its object not the person who is desired but the person who opposes that desire in the oedipal triangle. It is a process that is quite uniquely human and it results in a sublimation of reality for the child allowing the people in his world to take on a certain affective depth which allows them to be considered as people in their own rights, having their own subjectivity independently of the needs of the child. For both sexes it is the *imago, the* unconscious image of the Father, that allows this identification and sublimation to take place and it gives rise to the formation of the second crucial subjective agency, that of the ego-ideal.

The setting up of the super-ego and the ego-ideal cannot be understood in terms of behaviourist psychology nor in terms of natural biological or emotional evolution. They are brought about through the operation of the paternal function, and the degree to which they come to structure the subjectivity of the individual depends on the concrete way this function is brought into play in the particular family structure in which the child finds himself. Once they have been established the child is well on the way to being able to love and work in a way appropriate to a human being, and is as well fitted as possible to take his chance with the biological and social crises that later childhood, adolescence, maturity and old age will bring.

There is an infinite variety of ways in which a good-enough resolution of the oedipal crisis can be achieved, each resulting in the



establishment of a particular balance of super-ego and ego-ideal which gives each individual his own particular stance with regard to a successful detachment from preoccupations with the mother and the creation of a view of reality that is not excessively narcissistic. Little Larry reached a reconciliation of sorts with his own Father which though still coloured by memories of the golden age with his mother - 'he was bony but better than nothing' - apparently allowed him to get on with his life.

### **Conclusion**

But there is also an infinite variety of ways in which the process can fail. Earlier problems at the stage of the fragmented body, the mirror stage, weaning and sibling rivalry may leave the child personally incapable of taking the final hurdle posed by the appearance of the Father in his life. It is a gross oversimplification to see these earlier problems simply in terms of the mother-child relationship, since they are affected from the beginning, by the relation of the mother to the man whom she calls the father of her child. But it is overwhelmingly to the social order, as it is concretized in the family, and to the place that social order allows the father to assume, almost independently of his personal qualities, that Freud and Lacan direct our attention. In our contemporary production-oriented world everything has conspired to diminish the place of the Father, and the process has been powerfully assisted by a psychology too preoccupied with the gratification and frustration of need to realize that this perspective overlooks an essential dimension of human reality.

These remarks are in no sense intended to offer a complete view of the psychoanalytic conception of the family and still less to propose any synthesis of the way in which this conception might be articulated with other equally valid views. But lest anyone be tempted to make any rash applications on the practical level let me say in conclusion that in my view psychoanalysis provides no moral guidelines, no system of ideals, no ultimate reference points.

Its mission is to question the desire of those individuals or groups who turn to it for guidance, and in this way to encourage their steps towards a threshold beyond which ethical choices can be made.

#### **Note:**

- 1. Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) is considered by many on the Continent to be the most significant psychoanalyst since Freud. Through a re-reading of Freud he developed a teaching on the scientific status of psychoanalysis, the politics of the psychoanalytic institution and the training of analysts that runs counter to many of the received ideas about Freud to the English-speaking world.**