

The irreducible place of the father – Éric Laurent

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I would like to show three ways in which Lacan emphasised the irreducible place of the father[1].

The father who wows (*épate*)

The first is a formula which is particularly amusing in French. It is to speak of the father as the one who is going to wow (*é-pater*)[2] his family. In colloquial French, *épater* means to produce an admiring astonishment, to cause an effect. But by playing on the theme of *pater* in Latin, it is to take a step away from the ideal of the « *pater familias* »[3]. Lacan comments on his choice of this function of *épater* by saying : « This is the only genuinely decisive function of the father. I've already marked out how it was not the Oedipus complex, how it was shot, how if the father was a legislator, the child this would produce is President Schreber. No more no less. On any plane, the father is the one who ought to wow the family. If the father no longer wows the family, something better will be found. »[4] It is therefore necessary to distinguish in the father, on the one hand – what relates to the name and what is on the side of the symbolic, and on the other, what relates to the father's rapport to the real. This opposition also overlaps with the distinction between the family as real and the Name-of-the-Father as symbolic that Lacan had introduced.

Lacan had made this distinction on his « Note on the Child » drawing the lesson from the failure of communal utopias of the 1960's. He spoke of « the function of residue that the conjugal family supports (and thereby maintains) in the evolution of societies »[5]. And, he situated the place of the father, « insofar as his name is the vector of the embodiment of the Law in desire »[6]. We already have the link, not simply as agent of a law, of a father with a desire. This is what underlines the function of wowing (*épater*) the family. It is a position of the father after the end of the law of patriarchy. Therefore, for us it is a matter of looking, on a case by case basis with today's parents, and the clinical problems that today's families are confronted with, for what sufficiently serves as an exception – exception on the side of man but also on the side of woman in order to define what wows (*épate*) the family.

The half-saying of the father's jouissance

The second place where the father is also irreducible, is in so far as he touches the real of jouissance, but does not say all of jouissance. In his 1975 conference at Columbia University, Lacan accentuates the real of the father as the one who is not there to uphold the law or to give meaning, but to mark the place of jouissance as viable. He says : « The father's mode of *existence* stems from this real. It's the only case where the real is stronger than the true. »[7] The father must stand half-way between this point of real and what he can say about it. This is what Lacan calls his position of « half-saying »[8] or of the father as « half-god. »[9] I quote him from Seminar XXII: « What [a woman] deals with are [the] objects *a*, which are the children, with whom the father nevertheless exceptionally intervenes in the right case to maintain in repression, in the just half-god, his own version of his *père-version*. »[10]

In this new position, the father does not have to impose his jouissance. That is why Lacan says that he must maintain it in repression. If he does not do it, he becomes the tyrant father, imposing a jouissance as unbearable as it is arbitrary. But if he never wants to know anything about his jouissance, he then reduces himself to the ideal of the father of the family. The father of the family is an ideal that varies according to the era. Today, he gladly takes the place of the cool father, of the playmate father. Lacan's perspective is that the father is the one helping members of the family to say no to jouissance in its mortifying form. He is the one who can maintain desire as something to be deciphered between the lines – the opposite of obscene jouissance. J.-A. Miller condenses this perspective as follows: « [t]he father is the one who does not say everything. [He] preserves the possibility of desire and does not pretend to cover up the real »[11].

The father-fiction and science

I would like to distinguish a third irreducible place of the father. This place is that of the fiction of the subject supposed to know as such. As the civilisation of science with its radical determinism imposes itself – with its « for all » that installs itself – Lacan says that psychoanalysis is like a lung that allows us to breathe. I quote him: « the discourse of science has unbreathable consequences for what we call humanity. Analysis is the artificial lung thanks to which we try to ensure what is necessary to find jouissance in speech so that history continues »[12]. Analysis allows one to sustain the contingency of encounters with jouissance and to give them their full value despite determinism.

Science has always needed a lung to accompany it. In antiquity, it was scepticism ; at the end of the Middle Ages, it was *De Docta Ignorantia* ; in the Renaissance, it was Rabelais' laugh as well as Erasmus' free will, or Montaigne's « What do I know ? » Psychoanalysis is neither a scepticism nor a religion. But, the breath of psychoanalysis with regards to science consists in its use of the function of the subject supposed to know. Psychoanalysis makes use of it in order to do without it. At the end of a psychoanalysis, the cause remains and the subject supposed to know is destituted. Such is the respiration from science : the subject finds the way with his/her particularity, in the singular experience of a psychoanalysis, but it is not the exalted particularity of the aristocrat. It is the particularity of a horror encountered. This is what Lacan called « being post-Joycean »[13].

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[1] Second part of the conference delivered by Éric Laurent in the framework of « Les Conférences pour la psychanalyse », Russia-Moscow Initiative, on the 16th of December 2022, in person and by video-conference.

[2] Cf. Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book XIX, ...or Worse (ed. Miller J.-A., trans. Price A.), Cambridge and Medford, Polity Press, p. 184. *É-pater* italicised in English translation of text.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Lacan J., « Note on the Child » (trans. Grigg R.), *The Lacanian Review*, n°4, 2018, p. 13.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Lacan J., « Columbia University : Lecture on the Symptom » (trans. Price A. with Grigg R.), *Culture/Clinic*, vol. 1, 2013, p. 10. « Le mode d'existence du père – le mot important, c'est *existence* – tient au réel. C'est le seul cas où le réel est plus fort que le vrai. ». *Existence* italicised in original French text.

- [8] Lacan J., « L'Étourdit », *Autres écrits*, p. 488.
- [9] Lacan J., *Le Séminaire*, livre XXII, « R.S.I. » lesson of the 21st of January 1975, (unpublished).
- [10] *Ibid.*, p. 107-108. Translation A. Mey.
- [11] Miller J.-A., « L'orientation lacanienne. L'Un-tout-seul », lesson of the 6th of April 2011, (unpublished). Translation A. Mey.
- [12] Lacan J., « Déclaration à France Culture », *Le Coq-héron*, n°46/47, 1974, p. 7, (unpublished). Translation A. Mey.
- [13] Lacan J., « Joyce the Symptom » (trans. Price A.), *The Lacanian Review*, n°5, 2018, p. 18.