

Totem and Taboo, A Clinical Myth

Totem et Tabou, un mythe clinique

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Abstract:

This article rereads *Totem and Taboo* as an obsessional way to save the father. This myth of the foundation of “social organization” is oriented around the figure of the father, an essentially neurotic arrangement that the Freudian myths give an account of. In a final interpretation of the paternal myths, Lacan will come to separate the Father-of-the-Name from the Name-of-the-Father: preceding the Name-of-the-Father is the Father-of-the-Name, he who names. The accent is thus displaced from the statement to the enunciation, to the act of saying, to this hole in the real that nomination forms. We can thus come back to Freud: in the beginning, one does not find a deficit from thinking, but rather that there is the act that conditions the very possibility of thinking.

Résumé:

Cet article relit *Totem et Tabou* comme façon obsessionnelle de sauver le père. Ce mythe de la fondation de « l'organisation sociale » s'oriente autour de la figure père, agencement essentiellement névrotique, dont rendent compte les mythes freudiens. Lacan en viendra, ultime interprétation de ces mythes paternels, à dégager le Père-du-Nom du Nom-du-Père : premier par rapport au Nom-du-Père, le Père-du-Nom est celui qui nomme. L'accent se déplace ainsi de l'énoncé à l'énonciation, à l'acte de dire, à ce trou dans le Réel que fait la nomination. On rejoint ainsi Freud : au commencement, on trouve non pas le défaut de penser, mais l'acte qui conditionne la possibilité même de penser.

Keywords: myth, father, obsessional neurosis, Oedipus complex, parricide

Mots clés: mythe, père, névrose obsessionnelle, complexe d'Œdipe, parricide

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How are we to read *Totem and Taboo* today, this theoretical fiction, Freud's very own myth, the only one that he constructed from beginning to end on the basis of scientific fiction? For a long while this text was neglected, since it did not correspond to any valid criterion of scientificity in its account of the origin of religions and of social organization, that is to say, of culture. Now, if today we accord an essential place to *Totem and Taboo* in the field of psychoanalysis and beyond, this is very much thanks to Lacan, who suggested that we read it as a myth. According to him it is the only modern myth, the only myth that the modern world has created. From the very start of his teaching, approaching it as a myth in the sense that Claude Lévi-Strauss gave to this term, he placed it from the outset in a series with two other Freudian myths: those of Oedipus and Moses. It will be remarked that Freud did not situate his invention – this articulation between the Darwinian horde and the first states of known societies – any differently.

However, when one makes the correlation between Freud's translation of the totem and the fact of the totemic meal, along with the Darwinian hypothesis on the originary state of human society, the possibility of a deeper understanding emerges: the perspective of a hypothesis that might seem fanciful, but which has the advantage of establishing an unexpected unity between series of phenomena that had hitherto been separate:

There is, of course, no place for the beginnings of totemism in Darwin's primal horde. All that we find there is a violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up. This earliest state of society has never been an object of observation. The most primitive kind of organization that we actually come across – and one that is in force to this day in certain tribes – consists of bands of males; these bands are composed of members with equal rights and are subject to the restrictions of the totemic system, including inheritance through the mother. Can this form of organization have developed out of the other one? And if so along what lines?

If we call the celebration of the totem meal to our help, we shall be able to find an answer. One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde.¹

Thus, Freud forges a myth, the killing of the father, which allows us to conjoin the father of the Darwinian horde to the totem observed in the most primitive societies.

These Freudian myths – of Oedipus, of *Totem and Taboo*, and of Moses – thus manifest how “a forgotten drama comes down through the ages in the unconscious.”² In other terms, there is a killing, which is not always at the origin, in each of these myths. But on a certain side – on Freud's side – as a scientific hypothesis, *Totem and Taboo* has the function of grounding the Oedipus complex. This perspective shows, therefore, that the Oedipus complex is there from the very start, which is what Melanie Klein asserted. So too did Lacan,³ in a more radical fashion, by drawing on psychoanalysis with children and the developments of his colleagues and pupils like Françoise Dolto and Maud Mannoni.

If we fall in step with Lacan in order to single out his readings of the Freudian text and to accentuate a very important shift in his approach, we can note that, in an initial phase, his reading of *Totem and Taboo*, in line with Freud, makes reference to phobia so as to interpret it; the same phobia that isolates a signifier and promotes it in order to supplement the signifier of the father and to protect the subject from the

“omnipotence of desire,” Hans’s phobia or that of Arpad, the phobia as a return of the Totem-Animal that precedes the appearance of the one and only God. Thus, we have the animal in the place of the father, because God is the figure of the father *par excellence*. But what father? In this sense, Lacan is able to affirm that Freud’s myth is “the myth of modern man,” he who “believes he knows” that God is dead, and who adds the notion that God has always been dead. Evoking Christianity with Hegel, the religion in which God’s death is embodied, he reminds us that it includes, from the perspective of this God-made-man whom man survives, a destruction of all gods, that is to say, an atheist dimension, which one can align with Kojève’s hypothesis that Christianity is a necessary condition for the emergence of modern science.⁴

Totem and Taboo is thus a myth of the origin of the Superego, this legacy of the mourning for the father that is known as the decline of the Oedipus complex. If, in the superego, there is a signifier that marks its relation to the signified, an appeal to the Ideal, then it is above all else a commandment. The signifier of the phobia, a legacy of the mourning for the father, *Totem and Taboo* is thus interpreted, in reverse, on the basis of the totem, the totem as a name, as a signifier, the word as the killing of the primordial Thing. Each first enunciation is received by the *infans* as an imperative, and *Totem and Taboo* presentifies the subject’s relation to the primordial signifiers that he is subjected to. Therefore, up to this point, *Totem and Taboo* makes manifest a killing at the origin of culture, marking inaugural consent to Law, to the Totem, with the return of love once the murder has been carried out. As Conrad Stein insisted, the killing of the father does not open up the path towards the *jouissance* that he forbade, but rather reinforces the prohibition. The Law of language imposes itself all the more when the father is dead, which makes Lacan say: “God is dead, nothing is permitted any more.”⁵

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For a long time, Lacan thought of the Oedipus complex and *Totem and Taboo* as equivalent or joint. They have the function of marking out the gap between desire and *jouissance*, of locating a pure and absolute *jouissance* as something that has either been lost (a fiction that is borne out by the transitional object), or is impossible (as in the castration of Oedipus in the first myth, and the prehistoric *jouissance* in the second, with its articulation to symbolic Law). “The original myth, that of *Totem and Taboo*, the Oedipus complex, to spell it right out, is an aphasic drama.”⁶ Note that language – the signifier – fails here in its scope. But it is here that we find a grounding of the first relation to language that turns us into a subject, in an originary *jouissance* with its corollary of a loss due to the signifying articulation. “The father enjoys all the women, this is the essence of the Oedipal myth, under Freud’s pen, I mean.”⁷

But Lacan’s examination, his reading, aims at something else. It follows the thread of this something in Freud’s desire that was not analyzed, this unanalyzed something that has been transmitted from generation to generation throughout the history of psychoanalysis. One can see that the theoretical effort is specific and singular, and opens the question of the status of theory in psychoanalysis, a question that is not a contingent one, at least for psychoanalysts.

There is an originary mistrust in psychoanalysis with respect to philosophy, “the passion of youth” that Freud confessed, as is borne out by his reticence for the term “theory,” which is set aside for the sexual theory, and childhood sexual theories. This is borne out as well by the choice of the term “metapsychology,” with the project of transposing metaphysics into metapsychology. It will be admitted that, for psychoanalysis, the myth of *Totem and Taboo* does not occupy the same place in the theory as the fiction of the crafty spirit, or the myth of the cave, even though exporting it into other fields undoubtedly changes its status. This mistrust with regard to speculation is also what comes to us from Freud’s scientism. But Freud’s hope and belief in science is merely the name of a gap that he fills with his recourse to biology – and here his recourse to Darwin can make us prick up our ears. We meet this same hesitation in Winnicott, who was nevertheless one of the most crypto-philosophical

psychoanalysts. Lacan threw himself into this eagerness to do science; it was hoped that linguistics, then logic, would allow this to come about, but on each occasion, with linguistics, with logic, and with philosophy, what psychoanalysis showed was instead the points of suture in these discourses, their dead ends in the face of the obstacles that psychoanalysis meets and which determine it. This is why one should not stay at the level of analytic myths, because they too have to be analyzed in order to displace and to overcome the obstacles that they camouflage.

Therefore, there is a fundamental hiatus in psychoanalysis between theory and practice; this is even, among other things, the locus of what is known as *contrôle* or supervision – not to resolve this hiatus, but to make it grow, in order to approach what cannot be known except through hearsay, hence the analysis of supervision. Psychoanalytical theory is always in an awkward position in relation to its object.⁸ Lacan indicated that there is an inevitable reinvention of psychoanalysis by each analyst, because the analysis of the analyst is terminable and at the same time interminable because it is also the genealogical question about psychoanalysis.

This was how Lacan attached himself to something of Freud's desire that had not been analyzed – and his seminar is in some way his own analysis, a seminar whose method he set out in his first seminars, in its very first lessons, under the heading of the "return to Freud," reading Freud with the means that he had invented himself. Now, with regard to the Freudian text, Lacan underlined that reading a text is like doing an analysis, with the question of knowing what it means to read! Lacan designated this unanalyzed something in different ways, but for what concerns us in this article we can isolate the formula "save the father", which can be made out in all of the constructions that Freud builds, then takes apart, deconstructs, then reconstructs again to this end.

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Lacan took seriously Ernest Jones's affirmation that *Totem and Taboo* was the text that was dearest to Freud. It was not the one that he held to be the most important – that was *The Interpretation of Dreams* – but his preferred text, *die Sache selbst*, as Lacan comments, quoting Hegel. *Totem and Taboo* is Freud's *legs*, his bequest, in every sense of the term. Lacan reread this text with the Bible and with the commentary by Rashi, identifying in the sacrifice of Isaac⁹ the father of the horde with the primordial ram – an Elohim, says Rashi – that is sacrificed in place of the son in order to mark out the sacrifice of our bestiality, thus breaking away from Pagan rites where the celebrations unite the community with the *jouissance* of a God in order to accentuate – with this sacrifice of the ram and the circumcision that comes in its place and follows it – the desire of this God, and not his *jouissance*, thus marking out the gap between desire and *jouissance*, and not their union. But in 1970, Lacan differentiates the two myths that, until then, had been almost blended into one, by underlining "the divide that separates the Oedipus myth from *Totem and Taboo*."¹⁰

While the Oedipus complex had been dictated to Freud by the hysterics, with their dissatisfaction, the second was dictated "by his own impasses." *Totem and Taboo* invites us, therefore, to hear the expression "Freudian myth" in a different way, namely, as Freud's individual myth. Lacan specifies that if the Oedipus complex is a hysterical myth, then *Totem and Taboo* is to be read as an obsessional one, which is limpid in Freud's text in its proximity to the *Rat Man*. Thus, *Totem and Taboo* is a clinical myth. In one case – that of the Oedipus complex – the *jouissance* of the royal couple is veiled and the impotence of the father is repressed. In this way it can sustain the promise, and the *jouissance* also guarantees the *jouissance* of the people; in the other case – that of *Totem and Taboo* – *jouissance* is at the origin and is not veiled. In one case, the Law comes from the profusion of *jouissance*; in the other, *jouissance* is there at the start, and the Law follows. While the Oedipal drama traces out the genealogy of desire, that of *Totem and Taboo* proceeds from *jouissance*, which means that Lacan identifies the pact after the killing as a law, with a

correlate of perversion that is borne out by the sons' communion in the totemic meal, sealing the taboo put on women. This is a taboo that all women are put under, and not only mothers. This remark is illustrated in the particularities of the sexual life of obsessionals, just like this love of the brothers grounded on the love for the father, on this version of the father, "*père-version*," that is to say, the equivalence between psychical reality and religious reality, since it is organized around the father, which, in the fourfold Borromean knotting, Lacan will call "Freud's knot." One could create a parallel between, on the one hand, these two aspects of Oedipus and of *Totem and Taboo*, and, on the other, what Freud put forward in his seduction theory so as to distinguish hysteria from obsession with regard to *jouissance*.

Totem and Taboo is a myth without a hero, and while the Oedipus complex as a hysterical myth bears witness to desire in the register of dissatisfaction, the second proceeds from *jouissance*, with desire being located within it as impossible desire. Indeed, we owe this myth of Freud's to the "testimony that the obsessional brings of his structure, to that which of the sexual relation reveals itself as impossible to formulate in discourse,"¹¹ to this real, to that which cannot be said and can just barely be circumscribed, to that which does not find a place in any discourse. There is no social bond that holds together here, no other mode of statement besides neurotic associativity. So, there is no normative solution by this path, by the path of *Totem and Taboo*. There is no other Oedipal accomplishment but that of neurosis, a normalizing outcome, therefore, the "norm-male," which is the normal in our social bond, but which does not allow the relation to be written in any case whatsoever. This in no way regulates the wall of love, *l'amour*, insofar as it is a myth without women.

Totem and Taboo is Freud's response to his question, the question that permeates his whole life's work: "what is a father?"¹² A seducer, a master, a dead man, and so on. In neurosis, the father is the name of this fragment of the Real that the neurotic makes speak, and the Oedipus complex and *Totem and Taboo* can be considered as the delusions of neurotics. The father is the real of the neurotic, a father who speaks. But this is an abuse, a screen, because the father is not the one who is speaking, it is language itself. The question about the desire and the *jouissance* of this father will occupy the subject: what went on between the father and mother, and so forth. All the more so given that in obsessional neurosis the father is a call to *jouissance*, "to non-castration," which explains the patent erection of the imaginary father, of an ideal father where this dimension of *jouissance* comes to the surface, that is to say, something very real that is masked by the ideal, and at the same time sustains it; for this ideal, which functions as the Name-of-the-Father in obsessional neurosis, is *père-version*. This is the name of the totem, the name that has a specific status with regard to the full set of other signifiers. Now, this relation to the father implies, therefore, that he be killed in order to start living... tomorrow! And in the meantime, he needs to be kept alive.

One can understand Lacan's recommendation to analysts to maintain the maximum amount of space between the ideal and the object in their treatments. Now, this covering up is fundamental for the obsessional neurotic, and this is the sense of *Totem and Taboo*. If there is no repression of the master signifier for the obsessional in the way that there is in hysteria, there is a distancing, a displacement of the drive affect that is untied from the representation. Hence the following observation: *Totem and Taboo* puts in place a Real, the father of the horde, an original father who pushes towards pure *jouissance*: enjoy! Thus it maintains this figure beyond the taboo, beyond the name as an avoidance of castration; for the father is castrated, like any human, in the sense that in order to enter among his fellow men, he has had to renounce a *jouissance*, an effect of symbolization, a lacking *jouissance* that is fictionalized as lost. This castration of the father is that before which the neurotic recoils. The hysteric sustains his desire, the father's desire, in order to repress impotence. The obsessional foments an enjoying father who is a master of this limitless *jouissance*, a father that is borne out by clinical practice in the form of a confusion between father and master,¹³ a father that drifts between the *jouissance* of a cruel captain, a *jouissance* of which I can make myself the object, and the *jouissance* of a father who has chosen the young rich woman over the

young woman of his desire, giving her up in favor of *jouissance*. In this sense, the very construction of myth, the fantasy of an enjoying father at the origin, before history, is thus Freud's own mode, his individual myth, his way of "saving the father" by attributing to him a *jouissance* that does not exist.

Faced with this father who is supposed to enjoy, the solution is love for the father so as to maintain idealization. This demand for love is the rejection of the castration of the Other. In neurosis, the demand of the Other takes on "the function of the object in the neurotic's fantasy – that is, his fantasy [...] is reduced to the drive,"¹⁴ but this prevalence given to demand "hides the anxiety induced in him by the desire of the Other," desire in the face of which, in the fantasy, the hysteric slips away as its object, and which the obsessional negates by accentuating "the impossibility of the subject vanishing."¹⁵ However, where the hysteric needs to maintain this place of the Other, the obsessional strives to preserve it while cancelling it out. More precisely, it is the desire of the Other that he strives to cancel out, by plugging up this fault in the Other, its lack, hence his insatiable curiosity: what does the Other want? What does he want? This is a way of bypassing the question of what he himself wants. Because confronted with primary repression, with this fundamental flaw in the signifier, while the hysteric foments a woman, he throws himself into the testing search for The Thing (like the Rat Man wanting to see naked women). Alienation is what he wants to ignore, to avoid, by playing on isolation in place of separation – he will wash himself compulsively so as not to be contaminated by the desire of the Other, will try to pay off an imaginary debt that binds him to the Other, and so on. In his way, he strives to produce a missing signifier, hence the importance of language, of speech. He is a veritable compulsive thinker – "I cannot think about nothing," said one analysand penetrated by imperative thoughts that seemed absurd to him. He then sought out an Other who would guarantee the truth, a weak Other, for in this configuration we can understand very well the reference to faith and the fact that the Name-of-the-Father is God. In this way, we can grasp the affinity between obsessional neurosis and religion, a religion that, when it wove the social bond in a community of belief beyond doubt, allowed obsessional neurosis to be treated and to be made invisible. This is why it is absent in the ancient medical texts, whereas one can find descriptions of hysteria dating right back to the Ancient Egyptians. Now, obsessional neurosis was isolated by Freud in a century when religious doubt became extreme.¹⁶ It manifested the diffraction of beliefs into multiple private religions. *Totem and Taboo* thus appears as the clinical myth of our times.¹⁷ The sick body of the hysteric, which bears witness to the rejection of the *jouissance* of the body by the discourse of science, is followed by the sickness of thought that is obsessional neurosis. It is a testimony of thought as sickness, in this world of information, of the accumulation of knowledge, of Big Data, of the proliferation of discourses, and of the annexing of thought by technique.

Totem and Taboo is thus the obsessional way to save the father. This myth of the foundation of "social organization" is oriented around the figure of the father, an essentially neurotic arrangement, the same that the Freudian myths give an account of.¹⁸ In a final interpretation of the paternal myths of psychoanalysis, Lacan will come to separate the Father-of-the-Name from the Name-of-the-Father, the Father-of-the-Name being first in relation to the Name-of-the-Father. The Father-of-the-Name being is who names, he who shifts the emphasis from the statement to the enunciation, to the act of saying, to the hole in the Real that nomination forms. We can thus come back to Freud: in the beginning, one does not act through an absence of thought, but rather, in the beginning, for each of us, for all of us, there is the act that conditions the very possibility of thinking.

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- ¹Freud, S. (1958). Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics (1913), translated by J. Strachey. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIII, *Totem and Taboo and Other Works (1913-1914)*. London: Hogarth Press, p. 141.
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- ³On this subject, see for example, Marie, P. (2015). L'Œdipe : Freud, Lacan, et aujourd'hui ? *Figures de la psychanalyse*, 1/2015 (issue 29), p. 9-20.
- ⁴Cf. Kojève, A. (1984). The Christian Origin of Modern Science (1964), translated by D. R. Lachterman. In *The St. John's Review*, Vol. 35, no. 1, p. 22-25.
- ⁵Lacan, J. (2005). Lecture of March 9th 1960 at the Faculté universitaire Saint-Louis, published under the title given by J. A. Miller, "Discours aux catholiques". In *Le Triomphe de la religion, précédé de Discours aux catholiques*. Paris: Seuil, p. 36.
- ⁶Lacan, J. (1968). Lesson of February 21st. *Le séminaire XV, L'acte analytique, 1967-1968*, unpublished.
- ⁷*Ibid.*
- ⁸Cf. Vanier, A. (2014). Après Lacan, psychanalyse et philosophie. *Cités*, Issue 58. Paris: PUF.
- ⁹On this point, see Perelberg, R. J. (2013). Paternal function and thirdness in psychoanalysis and legend: has the future been foretold? In *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, Issue 82, p. 557-585.
- ¹⁰Lacan, J. (2006). *Le Séminaire*, Livre XVIII, *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant (1971)*, text established by J. A. Miller. Paris: Seuil, p. 158.
- ¹¹Lacan, J. (2006). *Le Séminaire*, Livre XVIII, *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, *Op. cit.*, p. 161.
- ¹²On this question, which seems fated to remain chronically pertinent for psychoanalysts after Freud, see for example: Eizirik, C. L. (2015). The father, the father function, the father principle: some contemporary psychoanalytic developments. In *Psychoanalytic quarterly*, Issue 84, p. 335-350 or Aisenstein, M. (2015). The question of the father in 2015. In *Psychoanalytic quarterly*, Issue 84, p. 351-362.
- ¹³On this confusion, which Freud himself gave rise to when he returned to the hypothesis of the Darwinian horde, see Lepoutre, T. (2013). Le « père » de la horde était-il un père ? In *Revue française de Psychanalyse*, Issue 77 (5), p. 1631-1637.

¹⁴Lacan, J. (2006). The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious (1961). In *Écrits, The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by B. Fink in collaboration with H. Fink and R. Grigg. New York / London: W. W. Norton & Co., p. 698.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 698.

¹⁶Cf. Lane, C. (2011). *The Age of Doubt. Tracing the Roots of our Religious Uncertainty*. New Haven: Yale University Press

¹⁷Cf. Vanier, A. (2005). Aujourd'hui, la névrose obsessionnelle. In *L'Évolution psychiatrique*, vol. 70, No.1, Elsevier, January / March 2005, and (2006). Névrose obsessionnelle, névrose idéale. In *Figures de la psychanalyse*, Issue 12. Ramonville Saint-Agne: Érès.

¹⁸On the "innate" character of any social organization to organize itself around the question of the father, see Putois, O. (2013). Le parricide originaire fait-il partie du fonds inné de l'espèce humaine ? Une note épistémologique. In *Revue Française de Psychanalyse*, Issue 77 (5), p. 1597-1599.
