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**THE MOTHER UNKNOWN SYNDROME: FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS
ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF FICTION AND FAMILY ROMANCE**

Alles am Weibe ist ein Rätsel, und alles am Weibe hat eine Lösung: sie heisst Schwangerschaft. Der Mann ist für das Weib ein Mittel: der Zweck ist immer das Kind.

«Du gehst zu Frauen? Vergiss die Peitsche nicht!» — Also sprach Zarathustra. (Nietzsche, I:588-9) [sic]

Facts exist. Fiction exists as one of these facts. Facts can be narrated (see also Miner, 163-5). There are narratives, however, that tell us not about facts but about fictions. It is also an observable fact that fiction is in great demand in all cultures, namely in the form of oral, written or filmed narratives.

Let us now postulate that fiction exists because certain facts of human life are difficult to cope with without it; that fiction exists so that we can communicate about phenomena that are hidden inside each of us, that are somehow shapeless and nameless, and cannot therefore be conveyed to others in any straightforward way. Except perhaps in those cases in which fictions imitate other fictions, let us also postulate that there is nothing adventitious about fiction; that, on the contrary, fantasy is a precondition of any engagement with reality (Wright, 83-4). Fiction is a means by which we give name and shape to our fantasy world. Everything else is not genuine fiction, as when for instance a clergyman tells a parable about sin and repentance, and makes it *look like* fiction.

It seems evident that fictional narratives use the same language skills as factual narratives. Not only are the worlds of fact and fiction interrelated, they are more so when they take recourse to the same system of communication. A diary, a biography, a memoir, and a chronicle are not fiction, even if their authors may on occasion make them pose as such to please their audience. Fictional narratives, in turn, may look like a diary, a biography, a memoir or a chronicle, but they will be fictional nevertheless. They will remain fictional even when they appropriate segments taken from the world of fact, or when they contribute to change that world.

I am not concerned, therefore, with questions of language and verbal transmission, important though they are. Once we agree that one way that human beings have of communicating with each other is through narrative, what is important is to establish what authorizes us to state that one narrative is factual and the other is fictional, even when they sound alike, or appear to be equally truthful. Even the narrator's physical context may be the same: a sailor who tells about a distant adventure to a group of drinking mates may be transmitting a factual narrative as well as a fictional one, or perhaps, a mixture of both. I do not think that you can distinguish one from the other from a strictly linguistic point of view. This holds true for written texts as well.

Factual and fictional narratives are essentially different things, nevertheless, in terms of content. They deal with different kinds of things. Fiction deals with what this paper shall refer to as *fictional objects* (see also Aguiar e Silva, 639-54). These *fictional objects* appear in the minds of individuals. They may be rooted, in their origin, in specific kinds of facts, namely those facts that psychoanalytic theory has taught us to call instinctual needs and psychological desires. In the vacant space of an unfulfilled need or a desire, fiction may arise in lieu of that fulfilment. We have to be cautious, therefore, when we say that fictional objects are «representations». If the individual is trying to represent a need and a desire, what may acquire representability is the imaginary fulfilment of that need and desire. A process of figuration has taken place. The *fictional object* is a mental construct which uses bits and pieces of factual reality in order to give visible shape to what reality does not provide; at its inception what we may find is a complaint. Since lack or absence are not available for direct representation, what we may have to contend with may be the result of an inversion: fiction representing as present that which in fact is absent.

According to Nietzsche's aphorism, «we have art so that we do not perish of truth» (Sandor, 38). Freud expressed a similar idea several times, as when, for example, he said in one of his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, that «human beings cannot subsist on the scanty satisfaction which they can extort from reality» (Freud, SE, 16: 372). Assertions such as these converge to substantiate the thesis that the *fictional object* is something that exists with characteristics of its own within each one of us. When the artist utilizes it as his raw material, as it were, he or she is utilizing something which although mental or immaterial, is already in existence and is, moreover, of a metaphorical or metonymical nature in itself. In a sort of hallucinatory way it has fickle and furtive forms and configurations but the relations that these forms and configurations bear with reality are of an indirect and complex nature, as Freud, and several other psychoanalysts after him, have succeeded to some extent in explaining for us.

I shall not go over those particular aspects of Freudian theory that explain how imaginary constructs come about, since they are generally well known. Let me nevertheless recall that they originate in Freud's work on the interpretation of dreams where he postulates that the so-called work of the dream (*Traumswerk*)

consists in processes of condensation (*Verdichtung*), displacement (*Verschiebung*) and figuration (*Darstellbarkeit*). The apparent lack of logic of dreams that ensues from this «work» is compensated, as it were, by a process of further distortion, the so-called «secondary revision» (*Bearbeitung*) of the dream by the dreamer when he, once awake, decides to tell it to another person, or even to himself. In this revision, the dreamer tries to make sense of his dream. This specific activity of making sense of fictional objects is of the utmost importance in the case of literary texts. So much so that actual *fictional objects* may, as it were, become buried under a heap of sense-making explanations and representations, directly borrowed from the factual world. It seems obvious, therefore, that there is a great deal of factual data in most narratives that nevertheless we classify as fiction. I suppose that we classify as fictional all those narratives in which reality is subordinated to fiction, and not the reverse. Primarily, fiction aims at making sense of our inner world of need and desire. Only through our imagination can we respond to this task. Naturally, this inner world is correlated in a multiplicity of ways to the historical world of fact, the world in which and through which we discover ourselves to be discontent.

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Departing from this notion of the *fictional object* as the precondition for the existence of fictional literature, I would like to propose that a more systematic study be made of how these objects make their appearance in fictional narrative. The clinical world of psychoanalysis has travelled a long way towards describing for us the configurations that our inner, phantasmic lives can take, but it seems to me that a systematic study of how these are, in turn, reworked by literature remains to be done. Single novels and short stories have been examined in great depth, but a more global, comparative approach could well be in order.

This is why in this second part of my paper, I would like to bring up Marthe Robert's *Roman des Origines et Origines du Roman* (Paris, 1972), which I understand to be one of the most fruitful attempts at looking at this issue from a global and comparative perspective. I shall take issue with only one aspect of her essay so as not to go beyond the time limits which I have been assigned.

As Freud has suggested in his essay «The family romance of the neurotics», family life is an important locus for the formation of *fictional objects*. This is so because it is usually within the family context that we, human beings, first experience and cope with emotional deprivation. No matter how supportive and providential the family can be, and so often it is not, it seldom fulfils all the child's needs and desires. From an emotional point of view family life is like a powerful energetic field where everything that belongs to it is in mutually interdependent, perpetual motion. This motion must follow a major unidirectional time vector because people can only grow older. Family life is, therefore, particularly suited to stimulating narrative formations in people's minds, since narratives, too, follow an unidirectional time sequence. The great importance that the thematic configuration

of the Oedipus Complex has for the followers of Freudian theory in a variety of cultural fields is well known. They see in this Complex a sort of invariant narrative structure which characterizes the human psyche.

The psychic configurations of the so-called pre-Oedipal child have been more difficult to establish. Freud has told us how the family's incapacity to satisfy the pre-Oedipal child's emotional needs generates a compensatory fictional narrative entailing the idea that parents other than those at hand must be the child's real parents. Otto Rank proceeded to show how this paranoid projection of a higher-ranking set of parents transmutes itself in myth into the recurrent narrative sequence of the hero who is exposed at birth in order to die or be symbolically reborn; is then raised by a couple of humble or humbler parents; and only later, after puberty, discovers who his real parents, identity and inheritance are. Otto Rank deals only with myths in which the central protagonist is male. Marthe Robert has, in turn, transposed this family romance theory to the novel, with remarkable results. She, too, deals with male heroes only, however. She elaborates upon the idea that family romance has two phases, that of the Foundling (*enfant trouvé*), corresponding to the pre-Oedipal phase, and that of the Bastard (*bâtard*), corresponding to the subsequent Oedipal one. According to her, parental quaternity characterizes the first period, whereas the second presents a triadic structure. Similarly, the fanciful romance would present a quaternary structure, whereas the realist novel would present a ternary one. In fact, when the child «falls into» sexual consciousness and learns to face the so-called facts of life, he or she realizes, according to Marthe Robert, that mother is always *certissima*, whereas Father remains uncertain (Robert, 49-50). I do not know if Marthe Robert has revised this assertion since the publication of her book, so I apologize if she has. In my opinion, in this part of her essay which deals with the disillusioned Bastard, she neglects to pinpoint the differences in psychological behaviour that must necessarily characterize the female or female-oriented child when compared with the boy. Regardless of the fact that biological logic should not be confused with psychic constructs, Marthe Robert fails to examine the feminine version of the Oedipal condition. It is therefore no wonder that she does not examine novels by women or with female heroines.

If the female Oedipal condition were symmetrical to that of the male, it would be natural that the little girl, as she falls in love with her father, humble as he may be, would retain the ambivalent relationship with her mother thereby justifying the maintenance of the dual mother: the good, and the bad; the powerless and the powerful, the legitimate and the illegitimate. And indeed, fairy tales such as «Snow-white» and «Cinderella» seem to be proof of this. Snowwhite's good mother is dead, and as she grows up she has to compete with her hostile stepmother. Cinderella, too, lives with her stepmother, and we may see in the good fairy a symbolic figuration of the mother. In both the stories, the stepmothers are terrifying creatures even if they do not exercise their power in war and politics, but inside the home. These illegitimate mothers are in the way of their stepdaughters growing up and marrying.

They are castrating figures in the sense that they bar the gates through which princes may penetrate. In the end, however, the heroine succeeds in uniting herself to the high-ranking male figure as fits the happy ending of a fairy tale.

There seems to be no doubt that a locus of uncertainty about who the real mother is arises when the female child reaches the age at which she competes with her mother for male love. Ambivalent feelings of admiration and hatred may justify the maintenance of the double mother idea even if at least one peculiar difference may be noted in the case of the female family romance, namely that at times it is the humble mother who was good but has disappeared, and the bad but powerful mother who remains in the home. Be it as it may, Freud himself had already referred, namely in his essay on «Femininity» (1930), that the girl's Oedipus Complex is not symmetrical with the boy's. When the female child begins to compete with her mother for male love and, perhaps, domestic power, she is threatening her first and foremost emotional attachment to her nursing mother. Matricide, therefore, is hardly symmetrical with parricide, even if the violence of the ambivalent hatred for the bad mother may, therefore, be only the stronger. In the end the result appears to be that the girl is condemned to coexist with the hostile competing parent, and that for her there are no chance meetings at the crossroads capable of contributing towards that parent's disappearance. Even if protecting princes operate as liberating factors, hostile mothers may surface again in the guise of preposterous mothers-in-law and conniving old hags.

In the case of the so-called realist novel a curious fictional phenomenon is the frequency with which mothers are spirited away in novels written by women, and how often, too, heroines once they grow up, have to choose between two contradictory kinds of men, one of whom may be the father, or father-like. Although we cannot discuss the issue here, much remains to be studied about how *family romance* operates in fiction from the point of view of woman as heroine. Can it be that what Freud called the Minoan-Mycenean pre-Oedipal phase is too terrifying and must therefore succumb «to an especially inexorable repression» (Mitchell, 109), or is it simply that women as dispossessed individuals within a patriarchal society must perforce act as mute and disinherited creatures whose single public mission is that of engendering men? If we excavate deeply enough we may discover that female-oriented *fictional objects* are more archaic indeed than (Greek) patriarchy. It would be interesting to inquire whether, in the case of the heroine, the Foundling and Bastard motifs play a role in any way comparable to that which they play in the myth of the birth of the hero. On the other hand, the figuration of a hostile stepmother (in French, *la marâtre*) appears to be a *fictional object* specifically generated by the woman's mind. Perhaps this is so because this hostile stepmother is also a projection of guilt, the guilt that the good mother's death or exile into fairy land has generated in the psyche of the female child.

If the good mother is the heroine's only true mother she will probably remain absent and desired forever after. In romance, when the heroine grows up and

discovers her true identity, she finds herself occupying the more or less metaphorical throne of the good mother. But since in fiction reinstated Foundlings are correlated with rejected Bastards, let us meditate about what woman's adventure, what woman's curse become in the fallen world of reality. In other words, we may wish to speculate about what woman's *master plot* is (see also Brooks, 90-112), once she has obtained recognition of her sexual identity and decides to struggle against its limitations. As she goes out of her endogamic enclosure to seek power and plenitude, perhaps through a love relationship with the Other, with a sexually differentiated object for her unfulfilled desire, she may soon find herself condemned to lose her beloved — her father-like man, her princely personage — once the seed he has had the power and the grace to deliver, begins to germinate in her womb providing her with another human being to love and be loved by. The female Bastard's destiny may well be that of having to choose between occupying the throne of the loving but lover-less *good mother*, or else, in order to keep her lover(s), of becoming an usurper, a childless, or an illegitimate stepmother. If this is so, if the woman's inner world is rent by a contradictory loving desire, the love for a father or father-like male, and the love for the mother-seeking son, then a recurrent female *fictional object* may well be the figuration of the woman's complaint against not being able to reconcile these two desires. Whereas in the happy ending of romance, the reinstated female Foundling succeeds in conjugating the possession of her Betrothed with the exercise of motherhood, in the realist novel the female Bastard, forced to struggle within the boundaries of the real world, has to choose one or the other. In order to avoid Jocasta's destiny, the heroine of realist fiction has to choose between Lover and Son.

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