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The Fatherless Clown¹

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Abstract

Starting with comments on Todd Phillip’s film *Joker* and Victor Hugo’s novel *The Man Who Laughs*, the author stresses the historical shift from the Freudian Oedipal father to what he terms *the new Oedipus*, where the figure of the father is replaced by a new figure: the figure of “power”, power being politicians, and above all the rich, corporate business figures, stars—in short, the winners. The author states that the Freudian axiom of parricide as the origin of both civilization and the human psyche should be read against the background of Nietzsche’s theme of the death of God. This means that our adversary no longer has a phallic qualification, he is no longer our generator, but rather a collective *other*, the *system*. It is as though the human psyche has re-collectivized itself: once the individual father is dead, the symbolic Father crushes us, which somehow castrates all of us, as impotent “people”. Once the sun of the familial Oedipus has set, a political Oedipus makes his appearance. With the decline of patriarchal culture, the tyrannical father today is no longer encountered in the house, but in the hyperbolic projection of a social order. The father to kill is the inscrutable Other of power, the kaleidoscope of the countless figures of dominion. The father of the oedipal triangle can be seen as an historically specific epiphany of something more essential and primary, which can assume various political, cultural or familial forms.

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Commençant par le film *Joker* de Todd Phillips et *L'homme qui rit* de Victor Hugo, l'auteur souligne le décalage historique entre le père œdipien freudien et ce qu'il nomme le nouvel œdipe où la figure du père est remplacée par une nouvelle figure : la figure de « pouvoir », c'est-à-dire, les politiciens, les riches, les figures d'entreprises, les vedettes – bref, les gagnants. L'auteur déclare que l'axiome freudien du parricide en tant qu'origine de la civilisation et du psychisme humain devrait être lu à la lumière du thème de la mort de Dieu de Nietzsche. Ceci veut dire que notre adversaire n'est plus doté d'une qualification phallique, il n'est plus un parent mais un *autre* collectif, le *système*. C'est comme si le psychisme humain s'est collectivisé encore une fois ; une fois que le père individuel est mort, le père symbolique nous écrase. Ceci nous castré tous en tant que « peuple » impuissant. Une fois que le soleil de la famille œdipienne s'est couché, un œdipe politique se lève. Avec le déclin de la culture patriarcale, le père tyrannique aujourd'hui n'est plus rencontré chez soi mais dans la projection hyperbolique de l'ordre social. Le père à tuer est l'autre insondable du pouvoir, le kaléidoscope the figures innombrables de la domination. Le père du triangle œdipien peut être considéré comme une épiphanie historique spécifique de quelque chose de plus essentielle et primaire qui peut prendre plusieurs formes politique, culturelle ou familiale.

Todd Phillips's film *Joker* – which has had great success worldwide - draws on the Batman comics, but in reality, is inspired by Victor Hugo's novel *L'homme qui rit* (*The Man who Laughs*) and by James McTeigue's film *V for Vendetta*.

The protagonist of *Joker*, Arthur, is a young, failed comedian, with periods of psychiatric hospitalization in his pedigree, who demeans himself to working as a street clown. He has always lived with his very odd mother; he has never known his father. To a certain extent Arthur, believing revelations on the part of his mother, persuades himself that he is the son of a great tycoon, Thomas Wayne. (This is the name of the father of Bruce Wayne, alias Batman, in the famous comics; a father who was assassinated.) Wayne is running for Mayor of Gotham. The mother claims that she was Wayne's lover as a young woman and that she had Arthur with him – a son whom the father didn't recognize. But according to another version of the story, Arthur was

adopted by the mother, who had abused him when he was little, to the point where she ended up in a lunatic asylum. We never learn, right up until the end of the film, whether Wayne is really the father or not. Arthur is marked out as the son of an unknown father.

Arthur, one evening, shoots three yuppies who accost him aggressively in the subway, and kills them. The word goes out all over America that a man masked as a clown is the assassin of three brokers. Very soon this clown who dispenses his own justice becomes a hero for the mass of the dispossessed of Gotham, who protest against power by donning the masks of laughing clowns. It is interesting that all those disguised as clowns are men. The whole city is put to sword and flame by thousands of clowns. Arthur, who has meanwhile killed his mother and various other people, comes to be recognized as the assassin of the three yuppies and is glorified by the rebel clowns. While all this is happening, another man wearing the mask of a clown kills Wayne. I shan't say how it all ends up.

I have lingered over this film because it seems to me that it expresses in its own way the passage from the Freudian Oedipal father to that which I should term *the new Oedipus*, in which the figure of the father is replaced by a new, pervasive figure: the figure of 'power'. Or, as they say in America and also in Phillips's film, 'the system'. Paolo Sorrentino, in a recent film, has used the term *Them (Loro)* to name it. Who are Them? They are all those who have power: politicians, above all, the rich, figures of big business, stars... Perhaps, in time, we psychoanalysts too, ... All those who by now are termed *winners*, in contrast to whom the mass of *losers* who suffer and fret.

The figure of the melancholy clown has a centuries-long history. Shakespeare's fools have the task of making the king laugh, but really follow the king into his downfall. They tell the king truths that go unheard because they are bitter. The fool denounces the folly of the king.

Gwynplaine is the protagonist of Hugo's *L'homme qui rit* (*The man who laughs*), published in 1869. Gwynplaine has been kidnapped as a child in England by villains who have subjected him to facial surgery, which has left him looking as though he is always laughing. He is adopted by a vagabond who then puts together a touring comic performance, centred on the smiling role of Gwynplaine. Hence the recognition that takes place: at a certain juncture it is discovered that the jester is in reality the son of an English lord. Hugo's lord corresponds to the magnate Wayne in *Joker*. Gwynplaine, recognized as a nobleman, makes a speech in the House of Lords in which he is to attack the peers' privileges, but he only excites laughter.

The important difference between Hugo's novel and the film of 2019 is that it is discovered that Gwynplaine is really the son of a nobleman, whereas in *Joker* we have the impression that the tycoon father is a product of the mother's deception. In

Joker, moreover, an act of parricide actually takes place, even though this act is carried out by a mysterious killer disguised as a clown, and the parricide doesn't happen in Hugo's novel. The revolt of the dispossessed with clown masks in *Joker* is a strong reminder of the blind, endless and pointless revolt of the *gilets jaunes* in France in 2019.

Another source for *Joker* is the film *V for Vendetta* (2006). In a dystopian future, a mysterious anarchic radical, dressed as Guy Fawkes, with a mask fixed in a constant expression of laughter, stirs up the British people against an oppressive Fascist regime. Guy Fawkes was a conspirator in the failed Gunpowder Plot of 1605, an event that has imprinted itself upon the collective memory of British popular tradition. The plot was intended to blow up James I of England and both houses of Parliament. On November 5, in England, effigies of Guy Fawkes are still burnt. It seems that in recent years this figure of hyperbolic regicide has tipped over into the role of a positive character – in short, people is on the side of the parricidal son. The mask and the logo 'V for Vendetta' have been adopted by various populist movements, and even by our *Movimento Cinque*

Stelle ('Five Star Movement'), which is indeed run by a joker, Beppe Grillo (earlier he was a comic comedian on TV).

In some way or other, all these works turn upon the theme of parricide, or on the killing of a powerful figure. Parricide, Freud's great obsession. Almost every one of us has an obsession that seizes our spirit; Freud's was parricide. This is the ultimate meaning of the Oedipus complex.

Freud esteemed three works as outstanding pieces of Western literature: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. He singled them out because all three are concerned with the murder of the father; parricide, moreover, in these works, is linked to rivalry between father and son for the possession of a woman. Parricide is always on the part of the son, and that is why Freud has spoken of Oedipus and not of Oedipus-Electra, for example, as has been proposed. That is, even woman is 'oedipal'. Something that has displeased many feminists. Now, Freud makes of parricide not only the fundamental fantasy of every subject, but also the inaugural act of *Kultur*, of civilization, that is of social life, which for him signals, too, the beginning of the individual psyche. The psyche, the unconscious, is for Freud the fruit of a historical event, and this event is parricide. Being unable to demonstrate this, Freud had recourse to reconstructions of an openly mythic kind, which today can't fail to make us smile – much water has passed under the bridge of our historiographical methods.

In *Totem and Taboo*, he imagined the murder of the father of the primal horde by his sons, acting in concert, with the aim of dividing equally among themselves the women of the tribe, whom previously the father had kept for himself alone. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud's visionary testament, he tries to persuade himself that Moses, who in his view was not Jewish but Egyptian, was killed by the Jews themselves, who didn't want to submit to the strict rules of monotheism that Moses laid down. In this instance,

parricide or regicide as we might say, isn't motivated by a rivalry for the conquest of a woman, but by a refusal of monotheistic power, of that kind that today we call *populist*. Behind Jewish religion, Freud sees a sort of Jewish Guy Fawkes who laughs over Moses' shoulders.

It has been said many times that this centrality of the father, and so of parricide, is no longer something applicable to contemporary society, because it reflected a society that was still patriarchal, and which has to a large extent fallen apart over this last century. In reality, as we have said, for Freud the father is the central figure of the unconscious for a real original sin, an inaugural crime to which our entire history is tied, and which is, precisely, parricide. That is, far from taking the primacy of patriarchal society seriously, Freud dramatizes its decline and disappearance. His obsession with parricide in his theory echoes Nietzsche's theme of the death of God. Nietzsche thought that God, killed by humans, was a historical event, just as the killing of the father was a historical event for Freud. The difference is that while for Nietzsche the killing of God is a modern event, which opens up modernity, Freud's murder of the father is an archaic event; it is the primordial act that at one and the same time opens up social life and the individual unconscious. Before this event there is, for Freud, no individual psyche, but only a collective one.

As Jacques Lacan then said explicitly, the father with whom psychoanalysis is concerned is always the dead father – even if the real father is alive and well. It is not the death of our own father but the death of the Father: that is, of the structuring symbolic function of paternity. In other words, our adversary no longer has a phallic qualification, he is no longer our generator, but a collective *other*, called precisely, as in Sorrentino's film, *Them* – the system, 'the powers that be'. It is as though the human psyche has re-collectivized itself: once the individual father is dead, the symbolic Father crushes us, which in some manner castrates us all, as an impotent 'people'.

Why, from Shakespeare to *Joker*, do the wretched, the subaltern, the 'losers' often assume the comic forms of the jester or buffoon, as in the cases of Verdi's *Rigoletto*, or Leoncavallo's 'Canio pagliaccio' ('Canio the clown') in the opera *Pagliacci*. Where does this antinomic superimposition of the comic and the tragic originate? We can recall that in ancient tragedies the humble characters, 'the people', were for the most part comic, ridiculous figures, while tragic figures were kings and queens. The clown, the buffoon, is the very figure of the son – not of the daughter. Female clowns, I believe, are rare. Clowns are castrated male children, Freud would say. The subaltern laughs, but his laughter is frozen; it assumes the fixity of an unsettling grimace. The masses, we know, want to laugh, to laugh incessantly through shows, and as a result they have the power to make us crying, and are despised. But the clown is the crazy son, the fool, in fact, crazy because fatherless. If I am allowed a moment of allegorical intemperance, we can see the angry stream of clowns in *Joker* as a fatherless mass. The strange Lacanian theory of psychosis as foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father seems to me to derive precisely from this centuries-old metaphysical figure of the jester, without father and without homeland, and therefore mad, who laughs at power for the very reason that he is dominated by it. The eternal pasquinade of the weak.

Today we speak constantly of populism. In particular, of the populism of the right, which, in opposition to globalization and cosmopolitanism, revalues the patriotic and vernacular narcissism of one's own *Heimat*. Populism, it is said, is snarling, it is the rage of the marginalized against the prestigious élites, politicians and experts, financiers and intellectuals, left-wingers and Greta Thunberg! The paternal function is today socialized, we might say, and assumes the persecutory forms of a power that appears to manipulate us. Once the sun of the familial Oedipus has set, a political Oedipus makes his appearance.

The figure of the father and of his death, in Freud, is certainly a mythical construction. But myths are symptoms; they are a mode of murmuring or half uttering (*mi-dire*, Lacan said) the truth. The truth is that, with the decline of patriarchal culture, the tyrannical father today is no longer encountered in the house, but in the hyperbolic projection of a social order. The Oedipal father has broken away from that wretched creature who, in fact, is every father – my patients consider more often their mothers rather than their fathers to be figures of the superego. The father whom it is necessary to kill is the inscrutable Other of power, the diffracted kaleidoscope of the countless figures of dominion.

This year the Ukrainians elected as president of their country, with an avalanche of votes, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, a comic actor, a clown, in fact, without any political experience. In his country he was known as *the joker*. The film *Joker*, made before this election, shows that, as Oscar Wilde said, life imitates art. After all, we too in Italy are currently governed by a political movement thought up by a comic actor. And, in the end, doesn't Boris Johnson himself, the British Prime Minister, seem like an imitation of a clown? In Ukraine, in Great Britain and in Italy, clowns are raised up by sons who are 'losers', irrelevant and castrated, in opposition to the frowning seriousness of 'Them'. The time of overthrowing 'them' has come, the time of the power of buffoons. But the son-who-laughs risks becoming, in his turn, the new despot, a despot elected by the sons themselves.

In a certain sense, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were right when, in *L'anti-Œdipe* (*Anti-Oedipus*), they reproached psychoanalysis for reducing a much wider function, that of the Other by which individuals feel themselves crushed, to the familial father. The father of the oedipal triangle can be seen as nothing other than a historically specific epiphany of something more essential and primary, which can

assume various political or cultural or familial forms, and for which we strive to find a name.