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The Paternal Function.

Intrapsychic, relational and social factors

I remember the fashion for “Father Figures”; the mental landscape was such that one could not see one’s genetic father, the air was so thick with Father Figures.

W.R. Bion, *A Memoir of the Future*

Introduction

The decision to open a debate on the role of the father has come at a time when this subject is recognized as relevant not only by different sections of the psychoanalytic community, but also by many scholars of different background and orientations (Brunning & Perini, 2010, Kaes, 2012). For reasons that are not easy to explain, within “post-” cultures (post-modern, post-ideological, post-industrial, post-confessional, post-paternalistic etc.) the paternal function has come to represent a somewhat inescapable subject (Brunning, 2012; Delourmel, 2012; Villa, 2012). Thus, after years of disappearance and oblivion, the paternal function has become a widespread and increasingly perceived emergency (Kalinich & Taylor, 2009; Recalcati, 2011, 2013).

My purpose here is to contribute to the discussion with a few remarks and hypotheses. Those wanting to save time and avoid my perhaps too elaborate and – so they tell me – slightly “indigestible” arguments (the father being an inevitable and imposing obstructive object for many of us) are encouraged to skip directly to the concluding remarks. Once the short version of my contribution has been metabolized, the still hungry reader can go back and ingest the whole thing.

Designation and function

My point of departure for this analysis has a historical and methodological value. It is an excerpt from the concluding essay of one of Paul Ricoeur’s most important books: *The conflict of interpretations* (Ricoeur, 1969). The last chapter of the book is entitled “Fatherhood: from phantasm to symbol”. It opens with the following lines:

The paternal figure is not a well-known figure. Its meaning is not invariable and its changes, disappearances or disguised reappearances are impossible to follow. [The father] is rather a problematic, incomplete and uneasy **function** since it is a **designation** susceptible to include a variety of semantic levels, ranging from the ghost of the castrating father who must be killed to the symbol of the father who dies out of mercy. [...] Such is, in its schematic articulation, my working hypothesis. It designates fatherhood as a *process* rather than a *structure*, and it proposes a dynamic and dialectical constitution of it.

In my view, there are some points and ideas worthy of attention here. Through what we would now call a “conceptual research” Ricoeur argues that the cultural tradition of the West has never been steady and consistent on the subject of the father. By studying the theological, philosophical and psychoanalytic traditions, Ricoeur proves that the father has always played a “problematic,

incomplete and uneasy function". To think about the father – he writes – means to study a problem which has always been susceptible to “transformations, disappearances and revivals”. Decades after the publication of Ricoeur’s essay, the terms “designation” and “function” are still very useful and full of conceptual implications (also useful are the distinction between “structure” and “process”, and the idea of a double nature – dynamic and dialectic – of the latter). The first word – “designation” – highlights the fact that the paternal figure is a social construct rather than a fact of nature. While the maternal figure embodies a conclusive biological evidence, the father is simply a co-protagonist in the process of conception and his role is decided by the cultural group he belongs to (in fact, in cultures where there is no recognized relationship between sexuality and birth, the male who carries out the function of the father is often not the mother’s sexual partner, but the *avunculus*, namely her brother; Lo Russo, 1995). “Designation” is therefore a useful word, because it draws attention to the social and cultural specificity of the paternal figure, which is to be understood as a social construction based on a relational dynamics rather than as a biological fact.

The other word – “function” – refers to one of the most influential methodological proposals made to develop clinical research in psychoanalysis. Borrowed from mathematical language, the notion of function is adopted in order to prevent terms that are too conceptually pregnant from hindering the observation of the phenomena with premature theoretical conclusions and overconfident attributions of meaning (the delicate interplay between the transformations and the permanent features within such phenomena being the focus of our interest). “*If the analyst observes a function and is able to deduce its constituting elements* – Bion has written (1962, p. 21) – *he can avoid building new and perhaps misleading theories to bridge the gap between theory and observation*”.

Speaking of paternal function, in a footnote of his *A Memoir of the Future* (appearing on the same page I quoted from in the epigraph), Bion writes: “*Paternal figure: technical term used in psychoanalysis to indicate an obvious fact in psychoanalytic practice; often misused and taken as the “thing-in-itself” rather than as an indicator of the thing*” (*ib.*, p. 153). At the end of the book, after the characters of Robin and Roland have stressed the essential element of conflict and struggle, Bion’s conclusion comes in the form of an evidently rhetorical question: “*Must we keep our technical terms in constant repair?*” (*ib.*, p. 61). Now, this is precisely the plan we should stick to: the concepts we refer to when we try to understand the “paternal function” should be kept in good condition.

Intrapsychic, relational, social, historical and cultural factors

Since the purpose of this paper is to stimulate a discussion and call the attention on the different kinds of factors involved in the processes that lie at the heart of the “paternal function”, I have decided to organize my reasoning as a set of distinct and deliberately disconnected points. Instead of trying to develop a smooth and relatively harmonious argument, I will focus on a series of far-apart and conceptually heterogeneous issues.

It is not easy, in fact, to put order into the series of figures which the many factors constituting the paternal function refer to. According to our French colleagues, one should distinguish at least between the “*père du corps*”, the “*père de cœur*” and “*père de tête*” (Duparc, 2003). There is of course the castrating father, who keeps the offspring’s incestuous drive at bay, reducing the influence of the mother and establishing a space for the Other and the Law. But there is also a

loving and mother-like father, who is able to take care of the children both tenderly and physically. Then there is the lover-father, the mother's sexual partner and co-protagonist in her availability/capacity to share her emotional investments among the different protagonists of the family life. There is also the seducing and well-intentioned father, who successfully re-directs the children's psychic life toward an extra familial and social dimension. He does so by promoting interests and activities that compensate for the children's loss of the fusional relationship with the mother. And finally there is Our Father who is in heaven (Bion's "Arf Arfer"), the religious version of the parent, who spiritually nourishes his children and offers food for thought by providing them with the tools they need in order to be able to symbolize.

Against the most obvious expectations, my argument will not proceed from the specifically clinical aspects to the extra-clinical relapses or from the individual to the group and/or social dimension. Rather, I will try to show the constant interplay and reciprocal determination between the internal and the external, the subjective and the inter-subjective, the singular and the plural.

The topics I am going to briefly address are the following:

- the male crisis and the antinomy/complementarity of the genders;
- the historical and cultural determinants of the social role of the father;
- the decline of the Oedipus complex in the individual life cycle;
- the (apparent?) decline of the paternal figure in the "post-" societies;
- the manifestations of aggression and the problem of guilt;

The various hypotheses to be proposed here are all related to a basic idea that I will try to sum up as follows. Regardless of the factors at play, the paternal function – whatever the contexts in which it manifests itself – is characterized by an ability to conclusively assess difficulties and limitations by making a **decision** (the third keyword after "designation" and "function") at whose basis lies a **generative intention**. Such decision represents a provisional synthesis that is open to new developments and aimed at promoting new analyses and further synthesis. To know how to persevere in the face of uncertainty and to keep on reflecting and acting while maintaining a clear awareness of the partiality of one's own reasons: this seems to me the *quid* of the paternal role (as a structure) and the paternal function (as a process).

Male crisis and psychic bisexuality

A few weeks ago, at the Delfi conference, Jean-Claude Stoloff (author of the very useful *La fonction paternelle*, published in 2007) made some remarks on the subject of the father which deserve some attention. I will mention only a couple of them:

1) the crisis of the paternal function triggers nostalgic illusions and restoration-oriented strategies (when it should rather be used to better understand the present and to move on to a more fulfilling future);

2) the crisis is related to the male identity crisis (which would require a separate analysis), but should not be confused with it.

For some scholars the father is to be understood as “the Big Other”. This conceptualization is often an example of the trend number one: a longing for a father figure that is rooted in the dimension of the sacred and feeds on theological ideas. This of course does not mean that theological reflection is irrelevant. On the contrary, one thing is the theologian’s serious reflection about the role of the father, and another is the regressive/reactionary use of the dimension of the sacred for new age purposes (as with the phenomenon of the “devout atheists”, for example).

“It is too often forgotten – psychoanalyst Jean Cournut has written in *Pourquoi les hommes ont peur des femmes?* – that there is not just one single Other” and that the ability to recognize otherness is a precondition of the kind of thinking that is made possible in virtue of experiences that always include a third person (*à trois* experiences). This is a three-pole otherness due to the difference in gender and generations. “There are always at least three persons, two of whom are of the same sex, while the third is of a different sex. Besides, only two of them belong to the same generation, while the third belongs to a different one. Finally, the physical contacts between these three persons occur in a two by two fashion, the mother being the only one to have a necessary contact (although a highly differentiated one in terms of intimacy) with the body of the other two” (*ibid.*). Thus, Jean Cournut ironically remarks at the end of his argument, “my father, my mother and I form a very united trio and together we make such perfect couples” (Cournut, 2001).

Second point: the crisis of the male role.

In the current cultural climate, the male is increasingly aware that the myth of the strong sex (in psychoanalysis: the sexual phallic monism) was a rewarding and self-celebrating, but tragically fallacious illusion. He is also aware that the reality of the relational competences and the generative capacities of the two sexes represent for him a hard challenge. In certain dimensions of psychosocial functioning, facing such challenges becomes an enterprise doomed to fail from the start.

In a page of *The Age of Extremes*, Eric Hobsbawm summed up the major historical and social transformations which in just a few decades have changed the centuries-old structure of the relationship between the sexes:

- the universal suffrage;
- the women’s entry and participation in the labor market;
- contraception and the sexual revolution;
- feminism and the women’s movement.

I suppose this set of arguments is to be considered in relation to the purely psychoanalytic question of the psychic bisexuality and the integration/differentiation between the sexes, which is

one of the great contrasts every human being has to face throughout his life (the second contradiction being the difference between generations: adult *versus* child).

Every single person forms his or her psychic structure through the identification processes that take place in the relationship with both the parents. This fact lies at the basis of the construction of gender identity and its disorders. The identity of the subject is in any case at least double.

The two lines of identity always coexist and actually form a risky seismic line within the person's psychic structure. They can be strengthened, reinforced or weakened by the effects of the introjection and identification processes associated with different psychic and social dynamics.

Cultural transgenerational phenomena: Catholics, Jews and Protestants

Luisa Accati, an Italian historian and philosopher well acquainted with psychoanalysis, wrote a book about the paternal figure in the cultures of the north and south of Europe which I do not hesitate to define as fundamental (which is why she was invited to conclude the 2011 CMP meeting entitled *Authority and laws in post-paternalistic cultures*). The book, entitled *The beauty and the monster. Essay on the Catholic education of feelings*, was published by Raffaello Cortina a few years ago. Accati's arguments rely on different disciplines and are very coherently organized (the book is an excellent example of a transdisciplinary research). The book draws the reader's attention on a difference that we only know too well – and that therefore we are always at risk of neglecting.

In the cultures influenced by the Protestant Reformation movements, the paternal figure plays a role similar to that played in the Jewish communities. Within such an anthropological context, the father has been historically constructed as a strong authority working as a guarantor of the education of the offspring as regards the respect of the social laws. In cultures originated from the Counter Reformation movements, instead, the father is a rather weak and undervalued figure who had to leave room, in the system of family relationships, to the authority of the officials of the ecclesiastical institutions.

Judaism and Protestantism are religions of the Father and therefore do not underestimate the value of the male parent. Catholicism, instead, is a religion of the Son – or, better (as Luisa Accati argues), of the mother-son couple: as an unmarried man having authority over women, the priest is recognized as a son who chose to remain faithful to his mother and to the institution that represents her by way of a transference: the church. The consequences of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century theological-political and anthropological reorganization processes on the collective *ethos* were – and still are – far-reaching.

Psychoanalysts have always recognized the role of transgenerational bonds. Freud had already observed that the individual's Super-ego derives, with little conscious mediation, from the quality of the Super-ego of his or her parental figures. Besides, Green, recalling Lacan's contribution, has stressed that the symbolic tradition has a structuring effect on the imaginary (Green, 2009).

The historical context determines us and affects psychoanalytic theory and practice in at least two ways: 1) as a set of factors having a patoplastic impact on clinical practice (thus impacting on the manifestations of the patient's psychic reality); 2) as a cultural background that contributes to the forming/deforming of the technical style and theoretical horizon of the analyst

(thus influencing the mentality of the psychoanalysts as intellectuals who think in a certain cultural situation and as citizens of a given political-institutional structure).

In order to clarify the relevance of these issues, we might legitimately ask: how does the “maternal style” (I refer here to Glauco Carloni’s definition) applies to the different cultural realities of contemporary psychoanalysis? How important is the cultural capital of our tradition in determining our perception of the process of erosion/evaporation currently affecting the paternal function?

Untergänge I

Many psychoanalysts have rightly devoted themselves to a re-reading of Freud’s essay *Der Untergang des Oedipuskomplexes* (*The dissolution of the Oedipus complex*), where we find a major reconsideration of what we would today call the paternal function. There are different versions of such dissolution (*Untergang* actually meaning “sunset”, “decline”) of the Oedipus complex – hence the plural *Untergänge* (“sunsets”).

The father of psychoanalysis wrote the essay in 1924 in Vienna at the time of the “*finis Austriae*”, namely a) at the height of the crisis of the political and cultural entity that had dominated Europe between the nineteenth and twentieth century and b) during one of the darkest periods of his personal history. Giuseppe Pellizzari has written a very elegant comment on Freud’s essay.

In this typically concise and serene essay – he writes (Pellizzari, 2011) – Freud’s ideas [...] seem to have reached a firm and convincing clarity. The child must yield to reality. The decline of the Oedipus complex coincides with the final establishment of the principle of reality which finds its narcissistic guarantor in the Superego. How does this “establishment” take place? Freud hypothesizes two alternatives.

According to the first and most dramatic one, the child sooner or later suffers a trauma that suddenly and irreparably reshapes his ambitions and forces him to face and accept his impotence. The second alternative, we should say, is more “biologicistic”: it relies on the idea that the human being is born with a predetermined “program” under which the Oedipal phase is destined to decay spontaneously “as milk teeth do”, leaving room for the development of new and more mature skills. Freud believed that these two hypotheses were not incompatible, but ended up definitely leaning towards the former. The decline of the Oedipus complex has a traumatic origin: the threat of castration. The child becomes aware of the paternal superiority and sees the vanity of his efforts to contrast it; in fact, he realizes how greatly such efforts could jeopardize his own narcissistic integrity. A much better option is to come to terms with the enemy and accept the establishment of the paternal regime as a prototype of the reality principle under the auspices of the Super-ego. The castration threat is averted and turned into the paternal law.

However, Pellizzari points out many important problems that are far from being solved. First, we should not forget the issues related to the difference between the male and the female Oedipus; secondly, there is the problem of the Oedipal triangulation during the “linchpin stages” of life (Ferro’s expression). The role of the Oedipus complex is not confined to childhood, but also concerns the teenage years (the “second birth”, as Pellizzari puts it); it reappears during the early stages of adulthood, in the vicissitudes of work and family in the course of adult life, in the middle-age crisis, and, finally, during old age and in the imminence of death.

If the metaphor of the sunset is appropriate, it must be assumed that the sunsets of the Oedipus complex are many and that dealing with the paternal figure/function is a never ending enterprise, just like the exams for Eduardo De Filippo.

One of the most elegant hypotheses proposed to conceptualize this problem is to be found in the book *The missing link: parental sexuality in the Oedipus complex* (Britton, 1989). By relying on

Melane Klein's formulation of the Oedipus complex (Klein, 1945), Britton suggests that the Oedipal "complex" should rather be understood as an Oedipal "situation". He also suggests that the formation of the paternal "thirdness" is a far longer process than commonly thought. In the post-Kleinian theory, the paternal function should be understood as a factor emerging out of a complex web of links and relationships in which the Oedipus situation and the depressive position develop in parallel. According to this view, the most frequent obstacles to the development of such processes result, on the one side, from the difficulties in establishing "a securely based maternal object", and, on the other, from an only partial awareness of the Oedipal situation and from various emotional compromises. Within the person's psychic reality, such compromises conceal defensive organizations whose purpose is, in fact, the denial of the parental relations.

The second scenario is called the "Oedipal illusion" and is understood by Britton as a massive, though often unapparent, impediment to the formation of the triangular psychic space in virtue of which "the object relations can be observed" and the subject itself "can also envisage to be observed" (*ibid.* p. 87). In such a non-linear, recursive and somewhat endless processing, the role of external reality can be either energizing, spontaneously positive and evolutionarily oriented, or inhibitory, regressive and psychically negative. "External reality may provide an opportunity for benign modifications of such phantasies – writes Britton (*ivi*, pg 93) –, or it may lend substance for fears".

Untergänge 2 and 3

However, there is also another set of meanings that must be kept in mind in order to understand the sense of the word sunset. Since the beginning of the sixties, a number of scholars from different disciplines (philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari, sociologists such as Christopher Lasch and psychoanalysts such as Racamier, Anzieu and, more recently, Kaës) has pointed out the decline of the centrality of the *Vaterkomplex* as the organizer of the individual and group psychic life. In order to address these matters, the Italian Society of Psychoanalysis (SPI) has organized a few conferences whose aim was to assess the impact of social and cultural changes on the new discomforts of civilization (2004), on the processes that led to the formation of identity (2008), and, finally, on the question of respect and rejection of the rules (2012).

In the essay quoted in the previous paragraph, Pellizzari summed up the changes observed since the year 1924 in the following way:

What is striking about Freud's essay for the today's reader is the emphasis placed on the paternal figure and the threat of castration. We know that Freud's Vienna was dominated by a bourgeois morality based on male supremacy and the repression of – especially female and child – sexuality. But today everything has changed. Male supremacy has long been in free fall; sexuality in general, indeed sexuality of all kinds, not only is no longer repressed, but is exhibited and, so to speak, imposed. The latency-age seems to have disappeared, and some form of child tyranny (supported by the thousand stimuli of the new technological realities) has completely erased the image of a child afraid of castration threats and more or less hypocritically submissive to the authority of the adults, which by the way has now become fragile and far from undisputed.

The clinical consequences of the new cultural situation are impressive:

The tragic subject, dominated by guilt, seems to find no place in a society that glorifies enjoyment and success for their own sake. The patriarchal authority seems to have abdicated in favor of new superegoic, anonymous and ever-

changing demands. The so-called “peer group”, which vividly echoes the parricidal brothers of the primitive horde, is a reality without a center and a real leader, a sort of network made of uncontrolled automatisms: a container deprived of a real otherness to structure any projection it allows. *Facebook* and *Twitter* are certainly powerful and democratic communication tools, but they are at the same time, by virtue of their essentially anarchic power, capable of evoking a virtual Super-ego that is the result of a “mass” identification rather than an internalization of adult figures. It is a kind of invasive and ubiquitous public opinion. This anonymous superegoic reality lacks the features of a well-established tradition (think about what happened in Japan not long ago), and is as short-lived and fickle (the “web” has given way to the “cloud”) as the fashion and trends that inform and originate it. It is a variable and unpredictable magnetic narcissistic field that everyone is anxious to follow at risk of getting lost. And getting lost is precisely what is most feared, the loss being that of a recognized identity.

Authority, individual and collective identity, together with subjective autonomy, lead us to another dimension of the connection between the decline of the Oedipus complex and the paternal function. In his reading of Freud’s 1924 essay, Loewald has made a number of remarks that Thomas Ogden, in his book *Rediscovering Psychoanalysis*, considered like a real rediscovery of the paternal function.

After the apocalyptic reading of the Oedipal decline – understood as the disappearance of the complex in the individual history (*Untergänge 1*) and as the eclipse/evaporation of the father in the social history (*Untergänge 2*) – Loewald and Ogden describe the decline of the paternal figure as a dimension necessary for the development of the offspring. It is, they write, a “loving murder”: a metaphorical patricide through which the conflicting parties seek a precarious but dynamic balance in the distribution of authority and power among the generations. As for the son, the dialectic is between gratitude and fear of being conditioned on the one hand, and the claim of originality and the pursuit of liberation on the other.

Taken as a particular chapter of the great historical drama representing the perennial conflict between generations, the Oedipal situation is described as a noble battle in which the child asserts its legitimate need for emancipation and the search for a necessary and vital autonomy. According to this view, the paternal figure does not yield ground to his child because he knows that he or she has to toughen up by fighting for it. In so doing, the father, however, also agrees to “sadly and proudly take his place among those who are in the way of becoming predecessors” (Ogden, 2009; p. 190). This is the third dimension of the theme of the sunset: the decline and eclipse of the father as the inevitable fate of parenting and life itself.

Aggression and guilt

A few more remarks should be made before concluding this contribution. One could (rightly) say that the paternal figure appears now ethically and politically tarnished due the abuses previously committed in its name. In fact, the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is rich in terms of natural fathers and metaphorical parents contributing to the decline of the moral legitimacy and the symbolic force of the paternal figure. In this perspective, the problem of the father can be explained on the basis of a kind of collective post-traumatic syndrome: a disorder of thought that makes it difficult to implement functions that are essential in facing the responsibilities of the paternal figure.

An excellent treatment of this topic can be found in a film by Danish director Susanne Bier, a student of Lars Von Trier. Appeared in 2010 and originally titled *Hævnen* (Danish for “revenge”), the film was released with the rather dull title of *In a better world*. The story illustrates the difficulties encountered by two very well-behaved and respectable fathers in

understanding the aggressiveness unleashed in their children by the injustices they are confronted with. Simply unable to understand what lies beyond political correctness, the parents cannot interact with the aggressive passions of their children, and therefore cannot perform the necessary function of containment. The most interesting aspect of the plot conceived by Susanne Bier is that the two fathers' great capacity for self-containment lies at the basis of their inability to contain their children.

If neither the family nor the procedures of institutionalized justice intercept and process the human need for revenge (and this is precisely their function: to satisfy such need in a civil manner by turning it into the rule of justice), social processes end up breaking the continuity of the cultural tradition. As a result, relational dynamics develop spontaneously (which means primordially, and under the sole influence of the primary processes) in search of some mechanism of self-organization. The law of retaliation becomes the only viable way out, because the most advanced and civilized solutions deny, and therefore neglect, the nature of the emotions involved.

Psychoanalysts possess – or at least they should possess – the conceptual tools to understand these processes (examples of such tools being Freud's hypotheses about the "criminal out of guilt feeling" or the post-Kleinian theory of persecutory guilt, or Bion's and Winnicott's theories on the mechanisms of containment and holding). But it is as if something very powerful had paralyzed contemporary psychoanalysis, just as it inhibited the mind of the two fathers in Susanne Bier's movie (the awkward silence following René Kaës's talk at the FEP congress in Basel represents a very eloquent example of our difficulty in understanding the psychosocial dynamics that influence us).

Luckily, there are still many apparently non-psychoanalytic thoughts still patiently waiting for an examination. James Joyce's reflections on the father, on his role and function in the *Ulysses* (pp. 285 ff.) remain unsurpassed. Joyce's text represents better than any other the idea of the paternal function as a designation and mutual recognition (the critics have called it the theory of symbolic fatherhood):

A father, Stephen said, battling against hopelessness, is a necessary evil. [...] The corpse of John Shakespeare does not walk the night. From hour to hour it rots and rots. He rests, disarmed of fatherhood, having devised that mystical estate upon his son. Boccaccio's Calandrino was the first and last man who felt himself with child. Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. On that mystery and not on the madonna which the cunning Italian intellect flung to the mob of Europe the church is founded and founded irremovably because founded, like the world, macro and microcosm, upon the void. Upon incertitude, upon unlikelihood. *Amor matris*, subjective and objective genitive, may be the only true thing in life. Paternity may be a legal fiction. Who is the father of any son that any son should love him or he son?

What the hell are you driving at?

I know. Shut up. Blast you. I have reasons.

Conclusions

In order to facilitate the discussion, I have divided my concluding remarks in different paragraphs:

1. The importance of the paternal figure and the clinical and social consequences of its crisis are not an unprecedented cultural novelty. The first psychoanalytic observations on this subject

date back to the beginning the twentieth century (Freud 1900, p. 257); since then, they have reappeared with periodic intensification, especially since the end of the sixties, that is since the era of the great ruptures caused by the youth culture and the women's movements within the apparently unbroken continuity of the patriarchal tradition.

2. The theme of the father is hardly definable and those who try to deal with it may be tempted to resort to epistemological leaps that produce arbitrary interdisciplinary inferences, imprudent generalizations and rash conclusions. Hoping to avoid such risks, I assumed it was preferable to study not the Father, but the *psychic function and the relational dynamics* that produce what we call the paternal figure. The guiding question of my work was: which are the factors involved in the processes that produce the *paternal function*?

3. I tried to show that the factors influencing the paternal function can be detected in different areas of the continuum of phenomena that constitute the life of individuals and the history of cultures. There are many dimensions to the paternal role and, of course, different readings of the issues that concern it. There is the biological father who has cooperated in the conception of the offspring; there is the social father, recognized as a parent in the family context and put into place by the Law as a responsible and legitimate parent; in addition to these "external" fathers, there are also the internal father and the paternal imago, who lie at the basis of the constitution of the Superego and the ideal of the Ego.

4. More than any other character of the Oedipal drama, the paternal figure is characterized by a structurally complex and inherently ambiguous position which places it at the intersection of the inside and the outside, the family system and the social world, the intrapsychic and the intersubjective dimension. It is therefore important to distinguish the father from the figures who will later develop his function in the context of social life. But it is also essential to understand the synergistic effects generated by this process, such as the mutual reinforcement of the various father-like authorities (the interface between the intra- and the extra-familial) or their mutual impairment and progressive weakening.

5. The basic idea I tried to discuss is that the *Vaterschaft* (that is, the specificity of the paternal role: Freud, 1938) is characterized by the acceptance of the limits and the courage in pursuing one's own targets, despite the partiality of one's motives. It is a radical renunciation of the ideals of completeness and certainty – and therefore a renunciation of omnipotence – that makes it possible to face one's responsibilities by making typically generative decisions. In this perspective, the *quid* of the paternal role (as a structure) and the paternal function (as a process) refers to what in the Bionian and post-Bionian tradition is often described by means of the dialectic between *negative capacity* (pursuit, doubt, passivity) and identification of the *selected fact* (recognition, decision, activity).

6. Female sexuality – Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel has written in *The two trees in the garden* – goes hand in hand with the maternal function, while the path leading the male to the assumption of parental responsibilities is much more tortuous and uncertain in its development. The paternal function, however, is the indispensable relational premise for the constitution of the male and convex side of thought (♂). Didier Anzieu has described this basic difference of psychic functioning – the difference/integration between male and female (♀ ↔ ♂) – with the

following words: “*Male metaphors: straight or broken lines, bifurcations, self-dissociating and flipping planes, changing configurations, limits falling down like blades, the hardness of one’s protecting shell, the rigor of the course, the firmness of ideas, the logic of opposition*” (Anzieu, 1998, p. 84). The specificity of this half of the whole container/content is better understood when compared with the characteristics of the other half. “*Female metaphors: the spiral, the ellipse revolving around two foci (the self and the other, the mother and the child), the intertwining, the fold and its opening, the pocket, the edges running away from each other, emptiness and its magnetic pull, the welcoming and flexible container, the spool and its unfolding thread, flexibility, the adaptability of the shell, the malleability of thoughts, a logic of mutual inclusion, the search for crossing points, the openness to be penetrated, the unlimited, the indefinite*” (*ibid.*). The thought processes of the mother ↔ father couple mutually define each other since they structure themselves through antitheses as well as complementarities.

A question for the author: Having argued all this, don’t you end up producing precisely the effect predicted and deplored by Bion in the quotation you chose as the epigraph of this paper? Given such an explosion of paternal figures, will we be able to recognize our real father?

Author’s answer: It seems to me that narratives, theories and models should provide us with a better understanding of reality, not with a reproduction of it. Wouldn’t it be weird to think – as we often do – that our discourses are a *restitutio* (the word itself says it all!) of the ultimate meaning of our experiences or even the true essence of things? As for the natural father, you can rest assured: it won’t be easy to forget him (Foresti, 2003). Still today, for example, I remember very clearly what my father used to say when I pointed out that the weather wasn’t looking good for the weekend. “*One can always go to the mountains*”, he would say [pause]. “*Even when the weather is fine*” (Melchiorre Foresti, *personal communication*).

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