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My Country ‘Tis of Thee

At some early point in my psychoanalytic life, more than a decade ago—still a trainee at The New York Psychoanalytic Institute and Society, as well as studying Lacan on the side—I spoke at an International Lacanian conference in New York for the first time. I don’t have the notes that I used but I remember well the question I wanted to pose to the audience of mostly European Lacanians (the segregation of Lacan amongst clinical psychoanalysts in New York, or the US more broadly, has abated some; then it was fairly comprehensive): what about the next generation, here, in America, or elsewhere, since at this point, what it takes to become a psychoanalyst is quite extreme, at times even dire?

I spoke about a fractured and chaotic field, having to study for years in a discipline only psychoanalysis adjacent, the realities of student loan debt, the problems establishing a private practice, and the miserable gatekeeping practices of psychoanalytic institutes on all sides. Psychoanalytic study felt bogged down in an older generation’s fights, quarrels, acrimony, without any sense for what was different about our position in an unfolding history one hundred years after Freud, how much has changed since the prevalence and power of mid-century New York psychoanalysis or Lacan in Paris in the heydays. Often, I felt like there wasn’t even good-will towards aspiring candidates—just suspicion or attempts at seduction.

In retrospect (though I probably could have admitted it at the time), my position was certainly hysterical. I even ventured towards the audience that I was afraid of them, and that it didn’t help me if they called their institutes ‘schools’. I invited, as I tended to do, dismissal, despite what may have been real about the appeal, no less its naïve earnestness. It was a kind of challenge typical to hysteria—hear me, or give way to your identifications! How long it would take me to learn that the stick is always grabbed from the wrong end in this kind of challenge. I still probably haven’t learned *really;* in part because I’m not wrong to make the complaint, to ask for it to be heard, even if it cannot be satisfied and must be repeated anew with every generation.

Upping the hysterical ante, I then launched into a description of a clinical case of Selma Fraiberg from an article in *The Psychoanalytic Study of The Child* in 1972, whose unfortunate title is so typical of ‘American’ psychoanalysis contra what is actually fascinating about its content: “Some Characteristics of Genital Arousal and Discharge in Latency Girls”. Fraiberg investigates little girls’ awareness of their vaginas (yes, this debate was still going on), early experiences of vaginal orgasm, and states of genital anesthesia in children and adult analysands. She goes a long way to re-centralizing castration anxiety, not in relation to ‘not having a penis’ as it were, nor clitoral substitutes or deepened female masochism, but with a particular kind of turning away from peaks of excitement and experiences of pleasure that felt unending.

Fraiberg spoke to failed attempts to undergird this excitement through the elaboration of fantasies or ‘stories’ because they induced guilt, brought the little girl too close, on the one hand, to experiences of the omnipotence of the mother, and, on the other hand, to dread of penetration by the father. The search for this lost pleasure, like a treasure in the attic—mementos abound in her cases—is what she then heard repeated in her adult female patients. The case material is exquisite. But what exactly was my point? Well, to be honest, I’m not entirely sure how I made the leap between the plight of candidates and genital arousal in latency

girls.

I do remember the example I chose to quote in full and end on. Fraiberg asks a little girl she names Nancy to explain to her the feelings that she says 'don't get finished' and frighten her. She says, "You know what it's like? It's like when you're playing the piano. Suppose you play *do, re, me,* and *fa*. Well, the *fa* is like just crying for *sol* to get finished. It's like a baby whining for its mother" (p, 452). Do the feelings ever get finished, Fraiberg pesters her again. Well, no, says Nancy—seemingly annoyed that Fraiberg failed to comment on the extraordinary articulation she gives to the problem at hand. She then launches into an explanation of what it's like:

"All right. It went like this. [She now sang in a queer atonal voice, using, of all things, the first phrase of "My country, 'tis of thee."] All right it goes like this. My country 'tis … my country 'tis … my country 'tis…"

She seemed prepared to repeat this interminably.

Finally, I asked: "And how does it get finished?"

Nancy:"Well, it ends when I go to sleep." (p. 453)

I love this exhausted, lyrical, child, impatient with her psychoanalyst—"All right, you want to know so bad. Here!" Her demonic repetition, her voice that communicates interminability. Interestingly, the analyst repeats her all… of all things, of all tonalities, of all songs—America?!

Fraiberg, who ends her paper with a kind of Masters-and-Johnson obsession with genital arousal, asks yet again, "does it get finished?" She answers… I'm going to sleep. And the other half of the sky is left in elision, all-but-said, 'of thee' to which we could also add, 'sweet land of liberty'. The point isn't getting finished, the drive in any case being interminable, but the articulation of the experience—the wish, the longing, the fear, the losing, the re-finding—addressed to the Other, thee, thou, the outermost limit of any experience. All this, in a process of analysis which, we must admit, went quite far, all things said.

I made some summary remarks that are murky in my mind. If I wanted to reconstruct them, it was about failing to hear the wish of the next generation of psychoanalysts, no less that of a 9 year-old girl, even if couched in a language of liberty I'm well aware Lacanians are suspicious of, or spoken in enigmatic but rich signifiers Fraiberg has no inkling of really listening to because she never would have encountered Lacan, or the feminine *jouissance* that interests the psychoanalysts I've studied with, American and French alike, but which nonetheless still has the power to frighten them. Perhaps we are left, like latency girls, with no choice but to go to sleep, as the rest think only of finishing the project of psychoanalysis as they imagine it. Something like this.

I remember well the comments that followed my little speech. One analyst thanked me somewhat patronizingly for sharing "my suffering" as a psychoanalyst and then told me "there are other ways to be a psychoanalyst." Another excitedly told me about his research on the voice and the crystallization of the super-ego, looking at the blue-note in jazz. He was surprised to hear a child articulate so clearly and started muttering about the death drive. Another analyst, on my way out, stopped me with some urgency and bewilderment, asking if I really thought it was possible to speak to children about such things. I stumbled around, finally replying, "yes, why not, I mean, she did?" He shrugged, and said he could not imagine doing so. Maybe it was because he was a man.

I look back on this moment with a degree of nostalgia, not only surrounding my time at The New York Psychoanalytic Institute and Society, but my first encounters with so-called Lacanians. The division, 'American' and 'Lacanian', feels quaint, practically provincial; the encounter, regardless of the sea of misunderstanding, took place on a precipice, even as the institutional effects on psychoanalysis were overwhelmingly manifest. On the other side of just ten years or so, the violence and fragmentation of the field is the same but the possible transmission of the Freudian structure, ironically present in equal degrees

in both the orthodox version of American psychoanalysis and the first generations of Lacanians, feels as if it is under a kind of foreclosure—even as there are more and more students searching for it without knowing what they are looking for. They will drift into other discourses if there isn't anyone there to meet them.

It is as if this tale was waiting dormant for this paper by Darian Leader, *Lacan and the Americans*, and the exchange with *Essaim* published alongside it. That what I had implicitly understood because of my odd dual training needed his exasperation and attentive ear from across the Atlantic; the Other English-speaking Lacanian psychoanalysts. To have come to the defense of American psychoanalysis, what passes for the name of ego-psychology or the Orthodox American Freudians, would have seemed like a self-justification. Leader can do so, and with a degree of polemical force, because he does not speak as an American, while having paid his dues to Lacan and French psychoanalysis for long enough. Isn't it wonderful that the song "America" steals its tune from "God Save the Queen"?

It's tragic that a paper that acts like a call to *all* psychoanalysts to return to a place where we were less divided than we imagined because we shared the same questions and research, where the schism between Lacan and the International Psychoanalytic Association wasn't an unending series of aftershocks that rent the discipline in two, is taken as a cause for battening down the hatches. In the end, the divide isn't necessarily cultural, for what would it mean if we couldn't transcend culture as psychoanalysts, but follows linguistic divisions, then tribal ones. While it always feels like we are catching up to Freud, such is the incredible body of work Lacan produced with his seminars, it seems that psychoanalysis has finally caught up with the current state of affairs—the decline of empire and the re-assertion of tribal lines, atmospheres of offense, the degradation of discourse.

Darian Leader, a Freudian-Lacanian in England, and, yet another irony of ironies, *The European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, whose editorial team shifted from Italy to America but which has always published in English (along with Italian, French and Russian translations), will pick up the pieces of the debate that, in not being published in *Essaim*, is lost to the francophone audience of Lacanian psychoanalysts. In a time that feels like so much is being lost, to continue to imagine the Americans like an epidemic of watered down Freud invading the continent of Europe is just silly, the poor taste of the allusion to the Coronavirus notwithstanding. All in all, the point is, there is too much work that needs to be done and we cannot afford the sleep of group psychology and its cultural clichés. My country, as the song goes, 'tis of thee.

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I would feel remiss if I ended my preface without pointing to the extraordinary wealth of knowledge that Leader brings forward as fertile lines of inquiry around Lacanian and Freudian disciplines. This is work that he executes in detail in his extraordinary new book, *Jouissance: Sexuality, Suffering and Satisfaction (Polity 2021)*, where the complex knot of identification, pleasure and unpleasure, and signification, concerned many psychoanalysts in their research well into the 70s. He worries that this complexity is lost in the current jargonistic use of the concept of *jouissance* among contemporary Lacanians, especially the technical specificity with which it was meant to point us.

There are variants of this problem in mainstream psychoanalytic contexts, especially when it comes to diagnosis and the remnants of psychiatric power that still linger in the psychoanalytic ether, continued issues around pre-oedipal and oedipal configurations that polarize issues of technique and listening too quickly, object relations seen as relations with real others and what is imagined should be possible there, and the long contentious battle around sex and gender identity that straddles psychoanalysis in its clinical and political dimensions, to name a few. It is a lot to ask students to take up the debate twice or even three times, on parallel running tracks, if they are interested in studying Lacan and mainstream Freudian analysis, to say nothing of all that lies beyond these, from contemporary object-relations theory to self-psychology to relational psychoanalysis to Winnicottians, and so on. Some work from the older generation is necessary here, which Leader is trying to give us a map for.

In this paper, the question is more one of undoing a reductive vision of American psychoanalysis and reasserting the work of Fromm, Erikson, Horney, Jacobson, Abfelbaum, Fromm-Reichman, Ferenczi, Fraiberg, Leites, Spitz, Searles, Greenacre, Knapp and Galenson, to foreground those who Leader names. There are plenty of others I could add to this list, along with going back to those Lacan himself spent time with and admired, contra his statements about ego-psychology and its supposed triumvirate: Gitelson, Glover, Reik, Tower, Sharpe, Isakower, Robert Fliess, and many others. For some time I've been fascinated by Bertram Lewin who tackled ground so close to that of Lacan from the dream screen, to the relationship between the unconscious and language, the psychology of elation, and the body as phallus. As well, while Leader mentions Edith Jacobson on psychosis, in her work on the super-ego, the female super-ego in particular (1976) you will find claims that are as contemporary as any, stating what should be obvious, namely that a woman who doesn't externalize her ideal in a male counterpart but takes this ideal inside has nothing to do with being a masculine woman, and instead represents the intersection of something old (namely the place and problem of introjections) and new (cultural changes) that psychoanalysis should take stock of. This work is further elaborated by Jacobson in relation to identifications, mood states, and depression more generally, work I always imagined could provide a cross-roads for object relations, classical Freudianism, with Lacan's early and late theories of the ego stretched between the imaginary and the real of the body.

In this same vein, one could return to Charles Brenner's work on compromise formation which bears an uncanny resemblance to many of the questions raised by the *sinthome*, the fourth ring of the Borromean knot, and the idea of doing without the (strong, castrating) father in the Oedipal tale of resolving libidinal and narcissistic conflicts. Otto Isakower, whose paper from 1939 "On the Exceptional Position of the Auditory Sphere" Lacan loved, gave a series of unpublished lectures on "The Analytic Instrument" at The New York Psychoanalytic Institute in 1963 that exerted an enormous influence, the lectures having been recounted in papers by Leon Balter, Richard Lasky, Herb Wyman, and whose influence can be felt in the works of Roy Schaefer, bastard child of David Rappaport, on the analytic attitude, or Ted Jacobs on regression and the use of the analyst's subjectivity. This work runs against the notion of identification with the analyst's healthy ego that comes to define the French idea of American psychoanalysis, and in fact comes close to many of Lacan's notions concerning the desire of the analyst. And, if one wanted to find a tone as acerbic and funny as Lacan's, as undoing in its pushing of a performance that is none-the-less rigorous in its aim as critique and force, I'd point readers to Leo Stone and Philip Reiff. In fact, the diversity of tones in American psychoanalysis that Leader puts before his reader's eyes is one of the most pleasurable aspects of the article.

Finally, there are real questions about psychoanalytic technique implied in each of these theoretical explorations, something that never really gets talked about, even as there have been plenty of debates over the last 50 years, here and overseas. For reasons I haven't been able to deduce, the discussions are always reductive, and at the intersection 'American'-'Lacanian' they are perhaps at their most reduced and obscene—this side of the Atlantic harping on the supposed violation of the frame via the variable length session while reducing the attention to language to some kind of uncaring intellectualization, that side of the Atlantic, as Leader points out, making American psychoanalysis tantamount to some indoctrination into 'health' through the analyst's ego as the image of his power and sanctity while also being obsessed with the understanding of the content of what is said and never its form. It's just too stupid for words, and always leaves me first speechless, then sad, and finally angry. I thank Darian Leader for this opportunity to find my feet again.

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