

A Psychoanalytic Reading of Destiny

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From the material of an admission interview carried out in a mental health centre, the present article aims to address the trace of destiny that is heard in the patient's speech. From this angle, this paper will analyse the material by articulating it with the contributions of different authors belonging to the field of Lacanian orientation psychoanalysis.

Two questions will guide the central axes of this work: Has everything remained unchangeable? Will the subject have room to manoeuvre a different path?

Excerpts from the first interview

A = analyst

O = Oliver, a 24 year-old young man.

Oliver enters the office, greets the analyst and sits down. He speaks slowly and is quite reticent throughout the interview.

A: *What brings you here?*

O: *A promise to my girlfriend... To be honest, I don't know if I really want to see a psychologist.*

A: *Why not?*

Oliver says that his mother and father have passed away, so he is currently responsible for taking care of his brother and his grandparents.

A: *Why did your girlfriend send you here?*

O: *We have fought several times, she says I take it out on her...*

A: *And what do you think? Is that so?*

O: *Surely so... because I'm quite angry...*

A: *What kind of anger?*

O: *I feel that things overwhelm me, that there is no justice, and sometimes things explode... The responsibility for my family weighs heavily on me... I can't think about the future... I can't make plans for anything...*

A: *What do you do?*

O: *I work in a company.*

A: *Do you do anything else?*

O: *No, I don't.*

A: *Do you study?*

O: *I tried college but it didn't work.*

A: *What happened there?*

O: *I don't fit in with people. I can't handle everything they ask me to study.*

A: *Why can't you?*

O: *Because of how I am.*

A: *What are you like?*

O: *It takes me a long time to study... It costs me more than others... But I'm also interested in computing, and computer technicians are in demand...*

(Oliver stops talking and remains silent. He looks around and observes the office. There is a long silence...)

¹ Text revised and modified by the author from the article '[Del destino inamovible al camino de las nuevas posibilidades](#)', National Autonomous University of Mexico, November 2005.

A: *Don't you think that through talking things might decompress a bit?*

O: *To talk about intimate things, I'd rather talk with a friend than with a stranger... I don't know... I'm not saying it's not useful, I'm here for a reason... But I don't know if there's going to be any solution. My life got off on the wrong foot.*

In 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle,' Freud describes the ways in which a neurotic patient finds himself inexplicably reliving certain painful and unwanted events from his life over and over again, without a sense of control. This, he writes, can provoke a sense that the patient is living out his life according to a predestined formula. 'We have come across people all of whose human relationships have the same outcome... or the man whose friendships all end in betrayal by his friend ... or, again, the lover each of whose love affairs with a woman passes through the same phases and reaches the same conclusion.'² This *eternal return of the same*, Freud goes on to say, is less surprising when it occurs in people whose behaviour he describes as *active*. What is surprising, however, is when this repetition occurs in people who experience the repetition in a *passive way*.³

Ideas of destiny or fate are raised in Oliver's speech, too. 'I feel that things overwhelm me, there is no justice,' he says. Elsewhere: 'I don't know if there's going to be any solution. My life got off on the wrong foot.' Observing the ways in which the subject can feel possessed by some 'daemoniac' power, Freud was led to the conclusion that in psychic life, there is a repetition compulsion that exists beyond the pleasure principle.⁴

Discussing the same concept, Lacan underlines that behind every automaton lies what he terms the *tyché*, or 'the encounter with the real'.⁵ The *real* is beyond the automaton; it is, in his language, beyond the insistence of the signs to which we are directed by the pleasure principle. The only way to encounter the real, for Lacan, is through this *failed encounter*, through that which always escapes in each repetition

In Oliver's repetitions—those tragic biographical events that he experiences over and over again—

something of the *real* is heard, even as it remains ungraspable. For Lacan, in each 'failed encounter', what remains ungraspable is, at the same time, the 'cause' of each repetition. This is what Lacan has named as 'that which never ceases not being written'.

In his seminar on 'The Purloined Letter', he emphasizes that everything captured by the symbolic order is overdetermined in a way that creates a 'law of series'. This is a chain of signifiers that, when deployed, creates possibilities and impossibilities. It is in this way that the 'series' becomes a writing that repeats itself in the unconscious.

Regarding chance and determination, Diana Rabinovich explains that there is always an element of indetermination linked to how the signifiers organize the 'match' (a metaphor she borrows from chess) in which the subject is *played*. Rabinovitch stresses the passive position here, and she emphasises that this match does not exist a priori. She demonstrates that there are certain expressions that turn out to be difficult to use in psychoanalysis; for example, we cannot strictly say that someone 'plans his own ruin'. What we observe retrospectively is a consistency and a legality, but this only can be seen when the game is over, when that person is ruined. That is to say, this determination is a determination where the person is 'played' – and this is how the *passive* characteristic arises; the subject does not recognise himself as having any control in this game. The psychoanalyst in turn, must intervene in this repetition or *chain of determination*.⁶ To do this, *necessity* must be turned back into *contingency*.

In *Écrits*, Lacan emphasizes that 'only speech bears witness ... to that part of the powers of the past that has been thrust aside at each crossroads where an event has chosen'.⁷ That is to say, the event implies a certain degree of chance. That Oliver had become responsible for his brother due to the early death of both his parents is beyond his own choice, but these remain facts that will have a direct impact on how he will position himself subjectively.⁸

Unlike in Greek tragedy, where destiny denotes a degree of necessity, in psychoanalytic discourse,

2 S. Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', *Standard Edition* vol. 12 (London: Hogarth, 1958), 22.

3 Freud, 'Beyond', 22.

4 Freud, 'Beyond', 22.

5 Lacan, 'Tuché and Automaton', *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Hogarth Press: 1977), 53.

6 Diana Rabinovich, Seminars given at the Psychology Department of Buenos Aires University, 1997. Unpublished.

7 J. Lacan, 'Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', *Écrits* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 213.

8 Rabinovich, Seminars.

destiny is not immovable; it is not *necessary*.⁹ In psychoanalysis, a subject's history has been structured out of contingencies. What might seem necessary could in fact have been quite different. This is why Lacan underlined the importance of recovering the *true memory* and not the exact memory.¹⁰ In other words, what matters is what the subject recalls and not what has really happened.

Discussion of contingency raises questions of responsibility. For J. C. Mosca, responsibility implies that something is being asked of the subject. The subject is required to take responsibility for his actions. Our interest is in the subjectivation of the action. It is no longer just any action, but rather one that falls on the subject himself, throwing him into action. In Oliver's case, if he appealed to chance, he would find a way to absolve himself of responsibility. But in this matter J.C. Mosca wonders: 'does the necessary result determined by a pre-existing combinatory erase the subject? If the subject is the subject of the unconscious, an abided subject, is he then exonerated from the enactment of a kind of obedience due to potentially pre-existing determinations? In other words, is there no longer any possible act?'¹¹

Mosca emphasizes that this is not a question of morality, nor is it about changing the facts. Rather, what must be stressed is that the fact *is* important for the subject himself. The unexpected events in Oliver's life touched him profoundly, bordering on the *real*.¹² This raises a question: if Oliver subjectively involved himself and took responsibility for what he lived through, could there be a chance to open up some analytic work? For Mosca, whether or not the subject has a choice, he is nonetheless responsible.¹³

In his 'Introduction to the psychoanalytic method' Jacques-Alain Miller proposes that *subjective location* introduces the subject into the unconscious. That is to say, analytic work attempts to question the *position* taken by the speaker in relation to what he has said (*dit*) in the clinic. Taking into consideration what a person has *said*, the analytic work can locate a person's *saying*; the analytic discourse differen-

tiates a subject's *statement* (what is said) from his/her *enunciation* (how he/she says it). So when Oliver says: 'I don't fit with people because of how I am', one should listen to not just the statement itself, but also to the enunciation, which here gives expression to Oliver's sense of victimhood. Miller writes: 'there is no signifying chain that does not raise the question of the subject, who speaks and from what position the subject speaks, since in every signifying chain the matter is about the attribution to the subject, to the subject of what is said.'¹⁴

For Miller, it is the analyst's task to attempt to separate the statement from the enunciation. In so doing, he guides the patient towards an encounter with the unconscious. On this path, the analyst leads the patient to question his *desire* and what he *wants to say*. At one point in the interview with Oliver, the analyst asks, *What are you like?*, to which Oliver answers: *It takes me a while to study... It's harder for me than the others*. He then changes the subject: *But I'm interested in computing*. In this statement, it seems something of the patient's desire is suddenly glimpsed.

Miller emphasizes that a *subject* is neither a person nor an individual. In his terms, the subject is not a datum but a *discontinuity* in the datum. Miller highlights that at the level of objectivity the subject does not exist, and it is the analyst's responsibility to produce another level to the subject. This is an ethical matter for psychoanalysis.¹⁵ On the other hand, Miller emphasizes that though the subject can arrive at a position by which he can name his suffering, analysis is not about suffering *per se*. This is because from the moment he addresses the analyst his suffering is transformed into a complaint, a complaint for the Other.

In this regard, Lacan emphasizes that when a patient is referred to the doctor, or when he arrives to the doctor's office, one cannot be sure that he is coming with the intention to be cured. Patients, Lacan reminds us, sometimes want doctors to simply authenticate them as sick.¹⁶ Similarly, it is by no

9 Rabinovich, Seminars.

10 Lacan, 'Function and Field', 249.

11 Juan Carlos Mosca, 'Responsabilidad: otro nombre del sujeto', in J. J. M. Fariña (ed.), *Ética, un horizonte en quiebra* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2002), 119.

12 Mosca, 'Responsabilidad', 120.

13 Mosca, 'Responsabilidad', 121.

14 J.-A. Miller, *Introducción al método psicoanalítico* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1997), 50.

15 Miller, *Introducción*, 63.

16 J. Lacan, 'Psychanalyse et médecine', *Lettres de l'École Freudienne de Paris*, no. 1 (1967), 34-61.

means clear that Oliver has come to the analyst to rid himself of his symptom. He may well have come to receive confirmation of his miserable destiny.

Legal responsibility and subjective responsibility

What distinguishes Freud's understanding of intentionality from that of the jurists, according to J. Jinkis, is that for Freud, intentionality cannot be restricted to the bounds of the ego; it is not always deliberate.¹⁷ In most courts of law, an individual cannot be blamed for certain acts if he was not fully lucid or in a state to govern his reasoning at the time. For Freud, this lack of lucidity does not, however, mean that a subject is less responsible for his actions. How does the analyst make the subject claim responsibility is the work of analysis? Jinkis argues that revealing the symbolic coordinates of a particular set of circumstances can help the subject reintegrate those coordinates into his own history. That is to say, by introducing the responsibility of the subject into the analytical work, that position of feeling trapped by destiny—a destiny that was already written even before the arrival of the subject—will eventually dissipate.

As Lacan underscores, 'One is only responsible within the limits of one's *savoir-faire*.' 'What is *savoir-faire*?', he asks. 'It is art, artifice, that which endues a remarkable quality to the art of which one is capable'.¹⁸ In this sense, the analytic discourse can enable a path in the patient's speech toward contingency. In so doing, it can reopen the game of chance, and reopen the game of *contingencies* and his *savoir-faire*.

17 J. Jinkis, 'Vergüenza y responsabilidad' (Buenos Aires: CEP, 2003).

18 J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII, The Sinthome* (1975-1976) (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 47.