

Incest yesterday and today: from conflict to ambiguity

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Summary

This paper deals with incest from the theoretical and clinical psychoanalytical viewpoint, without overlooking the various biological and socio-anthropological theories. Incestuous acting is differentiated from general sexual abuse and from incestuous phantasies. As well as the phenomenical aspects, the author analyses the conscious and unconscious levels that lead individuals to practice incest, as well as the damage that incest inflicts on developmental processes. The traumatic effect impairs psychic organization by dis-articulating the oedipal developmental stages and related drive vicissitudes as well as the real roles of the family members. The theme of the incest is discussed regarding the two crucial post-freudian psychoanalytical achievements: the exploration of early developmental aspects of the psyche (pre-oedipal stage) and the knowledge about the “feminine” and about women.

This leads to the discussion of different psychoanalytical paradigms.

The author further remarks the devastating effects, both at the intrapsychic and at the interpersonal dimension, of the failure to differentiate aspects of sensorial tenderness from the erotic.

Within a context of generalized tendency of regressive defences towards indifferenciation in the present time, in which the oedipal crux seems slackened if not avoided altogether, the author wonders whether perhaps incest provokes today less anxiety, less guilt and less horror, but no less damage.

Key words: incest, taboo, conflict, psychoanalysis

To which sphere of competence does incest belong? To the sphere of morality, of biology, of psychology, of legislation, of culture ...? What is certain is that during the course of time and of history, sexual intercourse between blood-relations has been the cause for reflection and debate on the part of censors, poets, scientists, ethnologists, sociologists, anthropologists - as well as psychoanalysts. The common starting point between so many disciplines is that the taboo on incest is universal although articulated in many complicated variations regarding the degree of relationship; or perhaps - as Demause says - it is incest that is universal and consequently calls for prohibition.

The first problem that we have to face, therefore, is taking into account all these different approaches while keeping a clear distinction between the methodologies.

We must also consider that the concept of incest is closely correlated with the equally multi-disciplinary concept of family. As the Dizionario di Sociologia [1]

says: the “nuclear family as a group of men, women and children is more or less universal on account of the great adaptive capacities of human beings. There are no linear evolutionary laws, but alternations, cycles; there is no ideal static model, but many variations.” From the sociological point of view, therefore, the irreducibility and the complexity of the phenomenon of family together with all its biological, sexual, psychological, economic, religious and political aspects, ensure that because it is so apparently obvious, it is always the expression of both nature and culture and belongs contemporaneously to the public as well as to the private sphere. This partly explains its continuity in time, to the extent that in his *Dizionario Sociologico*, L. Gallino states that: “The survival, not the end, of the family appears to be necessary to the historic development of democracy”[2].

Incidentally, I think that the way in which we deal with the concept of family in psychoanalysis requires a certain amount of caution. Psychoanalysis is not - or at least should not be - ‘normative’ about the family model. I believe that we must above all analyse what exists, what persists or changes, how it changes and what the consequences are. Instead, there is a strong tendency in psychoanalysis, in my opinion, to construct patterns of relationships and models that are absolute; for example, by speaking of mother or father as fixed stereotypes and superimposing levels of role, functions, gender identity[3].

Regarding the problem of exogamy, in accordance with the view of many sociologists and in contrast with that of certain anthropologists, I think that it is strictly correlated with the problem of incest but cannot be superimposed on it. If the taboo prohibits sex between blood-relations, then it is not only an exogamic rule; because exogamy, as well as prohibiting, prescribes the union outside of the family group.

We cannot assume that the destructive effect of incest on the family is the reason for the prohibition; however, it is certain that incest disarticulates the symbolic network of family relations. (Even on this assumption there can be discussion, although to us as psychoanalysts it seems obvious. For example, some people wonder whether the contrary is not the case, i.e. it is the fact that the taboo exists that renders incest destructive.)

Theories on the taboo of incest

Let us begin by saying that up until now, no single theory has managed to definitely and exhaustively explain why the taboo on incest, even though in various forms, is universal. The quantity of theories that have been produced (about 20 accredited and many that are bizarre to say the least) is already a clear indication of this. Even so, I think it would be useful to briefly summarise them.

Biological theories

At the beginning of the last century Hobhouse, Lowie [4, 5] and others considered the taboo itself to be of an instinctive nature. There would be a ‘natural’ and inborn repulsion against sexual intercourse between relatives, as though in the genotype of

our species there were a particular gene that produces a behavioural reaction against incest. This idea is not very convincing because, as Freud himself points out, it would not be necessary to threaten such harsh sanctions if the attraction were not so strong.

The eugenic hypothesis is less ingenuous and more substantial, stating that the taboo on incest is a 'spontaneous' protection against the damage that can be caused by reproduction between relatives, both by the appearance of recessive hereditary diseases in the homozygosis, as well as for the loss of the advantages of heterozygosis (greater vitality, fertility, longevity, etc.). The eugenic hypotheses are reinforced by arguments from the worlds of animals (weakening through inbreeding) and of plants (Mendel speaks of the thriving characteristics of hybrids, while self-fecundation of plants is considered to be an involutory process). Darwin [6, 7] says that nature "abhors continued self-fecundation". But, in fact, the scientific elements supporting this are very recent; there are only about 20 hereditary genetic illnesses and the risk of the 'taint' are relatively modest. On the other hand, the theories against incest date back to antiquity: from Aristotle who predicted dire consequences for descent amongst blood-relations, to the Romans who were the first to codify its illegitimacy.

In summary, these observations are non-systematic and, above all, do not make any distinction between sex and reproduction. These hypotheses - typical "ad hoc theories" - are an example of the defensive use that we can sometimes make of biological explanations in order to support ideologies without having to justify them. This also occurs when 'hygienic' justifications are sought for rationalising rituals such as circumcision or food interdictions of a religious nature. Attempts to find confirmation in the world of the primates are just as deceptive. The theories of Darwin, and after him Freud, on the behaviour of the great African apes were simply wrong [8, 9]. As we are told today by ethologists, the social regulations of the apes, our ancestors, are in reality extremely variable (ranging from solitary animal to family groups, social group, 'harem', etc.) and the mother-child couple (pertaining, indeed, to all mammals) is such only until the maturity of the young. Nor can the so-called proto-taboo, that in other species assigns to particular differential signals (smell, song) the task of stimulating sexual attraction only between individuals of other groups, offer more than a generic suggestion to the world of human beings.

Bio-psychological theories

Westermarck [10] believes that, through natural selection, an instinctive lack of erotic attraction develops towards those with whom one has co-habited. This line of thought is followed also by Havelock Ellis [11], Max Marcuse [12], and Marvin Harris [13], all of whom invoke a 'bio-psychological' component of the taboo. On the whole, there are more descriptions - contradicted by the facts - than explanations. Moreover, as we have learned from psychoanalysis, there is a substantial difference between lack of attraction and abhorrence; while the distance is minimal between desire and repulsion. Starcke [14] invoked the disrupting action of incest on the family, and Malinowski [15] strongly proclaimed the effect of social chaos and the impossibility of transmitting culture from one generation to another. But these are circular

propositions, with cause/effect connections that can be overturned; moreover, other family systems could be hypothesised (and, in fact, examples can always be found) that are 'compatible' with incestuous practices. Thus, the problem is simply shifted from sexuality onto the family.

Socio-anthropological theories

We only need to make a passing reference to the strange hypothesis of McLennan [16] according to which the shortage of women within the human horde would lead to the capture of wives from external hordes, and to the well known theory of Durkheim [17] that overturns the terms of the problem and considers the taboo a consequence of exogamy. According to this line of thought, totemism would be an obligatory phase of human evolution. The theories "of alliance and exchange" have their precursor in Saint Augustine [18], and - after Tylor [19] and Fortune [20] who emphasise the value of exogamy in promoting cooperation between different families, thus leaving aside the problem of sexuality - we come to the famous conceptualisation of Lévi-Strauss that met with such success during the past decades [21, 22, 23].

The theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss is too complex and too well known for me to try to summarise it. For the purposes of our discourse, I will limit myself to recalling that he overcomes the functional concept and states that the taboo is an ontological category of the human spirit; in his comparison between 'language' and exogamy, the prohibition to sexually use the daughter or sister obliges men to give them as wives to other men and, reciprocally, constitutes their own right to women. (As many feminists vehemently noted at the time, women were thus reduced to 'gifts' or merely objects of desire or renunciation.) After the world-wide enthusiasm for the structuralism of the recent past, I do not think that his ideas represent for us today anything more than a brilliant metaphor. (We are also indebted to him for the theory on the weakening of desire on account of cohabitation, and I shall return to this theme later.)

The taboo on incest as myth

None of the theories that we have referred to are sufficient to account for the eternal problem of incest, and every one of them (thanks to the careful exploration of anthropologists such as Margaret Mead or Lucy Mair [24, 25]) can be confirmed or refuted according to the variety of human customs throughout time and space. Even the psychoanalytical hypothesis has an implicit conceptual and methodological weakness; we all admit this, beginning with Freud himself [26].

I do not intend to go through the various stages of Freudian thought, and his hope of being able to base on empirical data the hypothesis that culture is founded on instinctive renunciation, that the taboo is transmitted with onto-philogenetic linearity from generation to generation, and that it resurfaces in a symbolic form in dreams, in delusions and in the fantasies of any human being whatsoever. We can, however, reach a compromise by considering the history of the primitive parricidal and cannibalistic horde that transmits the taboo on incest with its burden of anxiety and guilt, morality

and religion from one generation to another, as a myth. This is suggested by A. Green [27] who describes the myth in his own way as a kind of “collective transitional object”. Moreover, a long time before Green and before psychoanalysis, Plutarch wrote about myths: “These things never happened, but they always exist”.

Although we may renounce the ‘historic truth’ of the murderous phratry, certain definite points of reference remain:

- the taboo on incest is universal, as is the violation of this prohibition:
- the family as a structure is also universal, although extremely variable, and within it incest as a taboo and as a violation assumes meaning.

External reality and internal reality

Statistics in a field as elusive as incest are always unreliable. To us, who are more attentive to the deep levels of meaning than to those of overt behaviour, they are of little use; and in our turn we can offer data that are enlightening but difficult to compare with those gathered through other methodologies. Having said this, we must take note of the fact that according to those who have tried to translate the problem of incest into numbers, as far as I know in first place there is the incest of father with daughter, then brother with sister, brother with younger brother, father with son, and, lastly, mother with sons and daughters.

How do these statistical data change throughout time and in different cultures? It appears that progress in the rules of civil cohabitation has led to a decrease in the number of the coarser and more brutal cases of authoritarian, possessive fathers (It. “padre-padrone”), but at the same time to an increase in cases of reporting to the authorities and of no longer keeping things hidden within the family (It. “omertà” - family’s silent complicity). But probably other more subtle forms proliferate and continue to escape systematic enquiry. (The observations of Estela Welldon [28] come to mind - to which I shall return later - about the widespread refusal to recognise the problem of incestuous tendencies in mothers.)

From my by now considerable clinical experience, both direct (analyses, psychotherapy and consultations) and indirect (consultations and supervision of colleagues and students), I have been able to distinguish the following:

- dramatic cases of explicit and consummate incest over a long period of time, undergone by someone who has then come into analysis;
- cases of ‘soft’ incest, masked as ambiguous bodily contacts (the most frequent) reported by those who have committed them and also by those who have been the victims;
- cases of pathological defensive solutions against inhibited incestuous drives and fantasies.

Certainly, from the ethical as well as the legal standpoint, there is a sharp distinction between victim and perpetrator, between sexual violence, plagiary and abuse, and between someone who has materially carried out the sexual act and someone who has collusively facilitated it. But on the psychological plane, the situation is inevitably

much more tormented and elusive. The paradox that differentiates the psychoanalytical approach from that of other disciplines is that, for us, it is very difficult - at least from the genetic viewpoint - to separate the person who is the passive partner from the person who is the active partner in the sexual act; in many cases the person who commits incest has in turn suffered it, and just as frequently the psychopathological distortions that are the cause of incest are spread throughout the whole family group and are the same distortions that the incest then determines in the victim.

For example, there is the case of a woman who, in order to avoid the unwanted sexual attentions of her husband, sent him to sleep in their daughter's room while keeping the younger son with her. Or that of two parents with strongly perverse traits and whose sexuality was characterised by hatred and inhibition, who - especially the mother who needed to enact split-off aspects of herself - encouraged incest between their son and their youngest daughter with the almost explicit message that this was common and 'normal' behaviour.

Another dramatic clinical example was that of a consultation that unfortunately did not lead to a course of therapy. An attractive and intelligent girl aged 24, with a degree in literature and who worked temporarily, had to continue living with her family: upper middle class, cultured, well-off, composed of father, mother and a brother who was three years older, had interrupted his university studies and was tyrannical and violent. The brother was systematically physically violent to her and beat her, especially at night, for futile and often non-existent motives. The father pretended not to see, and the mother rebuked her for provoking her brother and for risking upsetting her father if she complained to him. The maximum paradox was when their parents took them on holiday to hotels or holiday villages, and put them in the same bedroom. In the morning when the girl appeared covered in scratches and bruises, the mother would silence her with a glance in case it would look bad in front of the other guests. This young girl was apparently unaware of the sexual problem masked by the physical violence, of the confusion between sexual drives and aggressive sado-masochistic drives; and I am afraid that it was her unconscious complicity with the perverse family fabric that interrupted the analytic project.

We know that an essential turning point occurred in Freud's thought when he understood that being seduced by a parent is a more or less ubiquitous fantasy in the child, and that only in certain single cases is this traumatic seduction experienced in reality. His most important intuition, however, was when he understood that both the fantasy and the real event could have the same pathogenic effect. Furthermore, we know that the same identical childhood dramas can produce both neurotic inhibitions as well as perverse forms of behaviour.

Another obviously important, but also elusive, fact is that of the age at which the incest is committed. In many cultures there is an initial, fairly long period of life during which children of both sexes can freely enjoy intimacy with their mother's body (sometimes also with the father's) without interdiction or conflict; until the time when cultural mores, or the father - if there are fathers - brusquely and peremptorily impose the caesura of separation. (The most impressive example is that of the Japanese tradition in which a little boy can live happily according to his own omnipotent whims or fancies

until the age of seven; at that point the child is traumatically torn from intimacy with his mother and from the dimension of *amae*, and is entrusted to a harsher discipline.) Perhaps it is this diffused habit of initial 'privilege' that has given rise to the fantasy that a historic 'pre-human' epoch existed in which incest was possible and pacific. Moreover, Freud observed that kings and queens, demons and gods were exempt from the prohibition of incest owing to the principle of omnipotence.

The significance of the rule of detachment between mother and son is certainly to avoid incest and to encourage individuation and growth - two aims that evidently coincide. This leads to a reconsideration of the age-old ambiguity according to which intimacy between mother and daughter could continue harmlessly *ad infinitum*, thus implicitly denying feminine instinctuality [29].

To return to the manifest problem, we know that, unfortunately, incest can occur at any age - from infancy to latency, to pre-puberty, to puberty, to adolescence, to adulthood - and that, on the whole, the earlier it occurs the more devastating it is, when the damage penetrates into the organisation of the structure and of the thought processes, producing the more invalidating defences of splitting and denial [30]. We should add that the kinship bond of the incestuous couple, from our psychoanalytic viewpoint, is important not so much because of the blood-relationship, but regarding the degree of intimacy and habit that exists during the growth period. Thus, we must discriminate between the significance of seduction on the part of a step-father living in the family since the children were young, and seduction by a biological father living far away and seen only occasionally: two situations that are obviously both pathogenous but are governed by different dimensions of trauma and confusion.

As we shall try to clarify later on, in the clinical dimension it is necessary to make further subtle distinctions; for example, the age when incest occurs, as well as the difference in age and in levels of power between the couple. It would also be important (although less important than in other contexts) to establish the type of violence - dramatic or 'soft', overt or covert - and the degree of the sexual act, from caresses to complete intercourse. Also the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual incest is not as sharply defined as would appear from the description. As I shall try to explain further on, we also need to understand what the underlying unconscious fantasies are and, for each of the couple, what is the sense of their own and the other's gender identity.

Lastly, I think that the specificity of our contribution as psychoanalysts in an arena that is conceptually so crowded and confused, is that of going beyond the phenomenical level and analysing what it is, at conscious and unconscious levels, that leads an individual to commit incest, as well as understanding the damage that incest inflicts on the victim's development process and organisation of psychic structure, disarticulating the maturational phases of the oedipus complex and relative drive vicissitudes.

The limit - but at the same time the resource - of the psychoanalytic approach is the impossibility of tracing clear boundaries between active and passive, between victim and perpetrator, seduced and seducer. Certainly, there are essential and unrenounceable differences on the moral plane of responsibility and of guilt, but in clinical reality these become organised into an ambiguous psychopathological interweaving of specularity, projective and introjective identifications, and the compulsion to repeat.

Psychoanalysis has always been concerned with the study of unconscious fantasies and the anxieties that lead to renunciation and the inhibition of incestuous drives, as a constant drama of the oedipus complex and of growth. More rarely, it has to confront the incestuous acting out through failure of the maturational process and of the inhibitory mechanisms. Starting from the clinical experience of all of us and from knowledge accumulated in over a century of psychoanalysis, it is the fascinating task of this meeting to investigate how these two poles of the problem, with all their interpersonal and intrapsychic articulations, have or have not changed during the course of time together with the changes in the type of society and family in which we and our patients are living.

Beginning with these premises, I think that two important advances in post-Freudian psychoanalysis today allow us to make a critical review of the theme of incest:

- the exploration of the very early, so-called pre-oedipal levels of psychism;
- knowledge about the feminine aspect of women, acquired mainly - but not only - by woman psychoanalysts.

The pre-oedipal levels

Classically, the theme of incest has been dealt with in the oedipal dimension as being a “nuclear complex of neurosis” that arises as a desire and wish on the part of the little boy or girl within the ‘triangular’ problems of the primary scene. Real incest, regardless of the stage of life at which it occurs, brings these early fantasies to the forefront (in both protagonists, although each one according to his/her dimension and history). But it also has the disruptive effect (mainly in the victim) of disorganising the coordinates of development that should have been guaranteed by the overcoming of the oedipus complex; in particular, the two basic differences between ‘big’ and ‘little’ and between ‘male’ and ‘female’.

However, as we know, since the 1940’s psychoanalysis has dedicated much attention to the very early phases of development - the so-called pre-oedipal levels - and to the pathologies deriving from the deficit and relational distortions taking place during these stages of life. (This has sometimes rather overshadowed both in theory and in clinical practice, the analysis of the oedipal levels and relative conflicts.) It is necessary, on the other hand, to understand how much the very early history of an individual counts in respect to the way in which he/she arrives at the oedipal appointment; especially regarding the way he/she may act - or react - to the incestuous impact. Indeed, as I shall try to show later on, in the case of incest, problems often come into play that is much more archaic than those of Oedipus. Today’s greater clinical experience provides us with better opportunities for analysing also from the perspective of the adult seducer the incestuous thematics and the profound motives for his/her actions.

We must therefore reconsider how the two levels - oedipal and pre-oedipal - may intertwine with each other; with what internal endowment the individual arrives at the oedipal crossroads; how the previous evolutionary vicissitudes developed beginning with the undifferentiated sensuality of primary auto-eroticism, from the separation-individuation processes to the primary identification-disidentification processes; how

the first defensive organisations against archaic anxieties of integration-non-integration, loss of self and annihilation, were articulated. In other words, we must try to explore to what extent the successive stages of growth were conditioned by what happened before; but also, retroactively, how much the 'after' reorganises and reconstitutes the sense of the 'before'.

The way in which these questions are formulated and confronted inevitably depends on how we conceptualise the very early levels. And thus we come up against the thorniest problem of present-day psychoanalysis - the confrontation/competition between models - that produces endless and, I am afraid, insoluble diatribes.

The different models

I shall now try to roughly outline the characteristic differences between the conceptualisation of the very early levels and their role within the various schools of psychoanalysis, using (with gratitude, although summarily) F. Pine's scheme of the so-called 'four psychologies' [31].

Drive psychology

Some analysts, rigorously faithful to Freud's drive model, do not seem to have problems because they do not give much relevance to post-Freudian thought, and therefore not even to pre-oedipal levels. The individual is seen essentially in terms of drives and their vicissitudes of struggle to satisfy needs, and of unconscious fantasies that produce conflict, guilt and anxiety.

Ego psychology

Ego psychologists see development as a fairly linear process; as the capacity for progressive adaptation between internal world and external world, within a dialectic between reality testing and defences, according to which evolutionary failures become translated into ego defects. Also psychopathologic constellations can reflect forms of primary attachment, the source of an albeit distorted 'feeling of security', independently of what it may cost in suffering or deficit.

Self-psychology

In contrast, self-psychologists, who explore the emerging subjective states, the delimitation of the boundaries between self and not-self, and the degrees of differentiation, have attached great importance to problems and pathologies connected with the 'dual', the 'maternal' and the 'pregenital'. The hypothesis is that there exists a stage in which there is not yet any discrimination between self and the other, between first and second object, and that development proceeds through the construction of psycho-physical boundaries and identity nuclei. In this context, some analysts believe that the 'pre-oedipal' is also 'pre-conflictual'; that is to say, at the origin the drives

have not yet come into play, or at least they do not yet have any mental sense. This results in a model that presupposes a specific dual/pre-genital/pre-oedipal and - earlier still - narcissistic space, with specific problems and specific times of elaboration in psychoanalytic cure.

Object relations psychology

These analysts have taken the Oedipus back to a very early phase, the so-called “very early oedipus”. They postulate a miniature, vaguely sketched triangularity right from the archaic phase of life. Thus, in the mother there is already the father, even though in a pseudo-triangulation, immersed in the heart of psychotic anxieties and under the predominance of orality, with continuous fluctuation between object relation and identification, between partial and total objects, and between schizo-paranoid anxieties and depressive anxieties. Breast and penis are thus equivalent and, to a certain extent, also mother and father, so that from the Freudian theory of ‘sole genital’ we are said to have passed to that of ‘sole parent’. In this picture, temporality has less value because ‘in the transversal section’ everything is already always there, in absolute contemporaneity. (Szpilka calls it an ‘archaeological model’ [32]). Each trauma in infancy is thus believed to be preserved internally as a trace that is continually put back into the scene. New events are assimilated to the old dramas according to the dimension of primary anxieties.

I should like to say that, personally, I find it difficult to definitely side with one model or another. I recognise the merits and the limits of all of them. Perhaps like many of us, I find myself using, at the preconscious level, various “implicit” theories [33, 34], even though they may be incompatible with each other. I would not like our discussion to become a confrontation between models, but rather that we should together look at the complexity of the matter, the technical impact of our choices and the clinical challenges deriving therefrom, particularly regarding the problem of incest. For example, by carrying to extremes the presuppositions of self-psychology, one can say that an adult patient “has not yet reached the level of ambivalence” and that “oedipus is still to come”, leading to technical consequences that are anything but banal. Thus, there would be no point in providing interpretations of transference or of aggressiveness ‘as long as’ one is moving in this area, leading to the paradox of believing that one should not interpret the oedipal level until the pre-oedipal level has been analysed.

However, not even an approach according to the fourth model, that takes into careful account the primitive vicissitudes of aggressiveness in the projections/reintrojections play but according to the concept of “very early oedipus”, would allow us to deal with the qualitative difference that is produced if the oedipus ‘complex’ is understood as being a new and quantitatively different event that, thanks to the retroactive effect, sets in motion the symbolic reorganisation of intrapsychic structure and interpersonal relations. In my view, it would not be possible in this way to account for the havoc determined by incest precisely in the oedipal crossroads which can be considered as a new and transformational structuring moment and regulator of the super-ego coordinates and

of its discriminatory function between good and bad, thus of introjection of the rule, and its function of protection as well as the administration of guilt.

An opportunity to focus on the possible theoretic and clinical divergences is offered to us by some acute observations by J. Mitchell [35] who realised that in certain cases of paedophilia and of incest by male adults on their children of both sexes, it was not a real sexual drive that came into play, but a primitive problem of envious attack against the female wife/mother who looked after these children instead of looking after them. A very archaic pathology, therefore, within the realm of the pre-oedipal or, if you wish, of the very early Oedipus. I think that, in fact, this interpretation on the primitive levels of envy throws a new light on incest and paedophilia; but I also think that the oedipal levels involved are in any case not indifferent (for example, they turn towards sexualisation an aggressiveness that could have expressed itself through explicit beatings).

Even though we may admit that in the clinical reality of the same person there can be all this - and even more - it is quite different to consider the problems that cause and are caused by incest (and then to interpret them) according to castration anxieties or primary anxieties of attack/penetration/reprisal, or else according to the need of contact, the anxiety of annihilation and of loss of self. As J. Amati Mehler [36] observes in "Love and Male Impotence", in the adult age the mature capacity to love and to fully live sexuality requires that each individual is able to host inside themselves the whole range of emotions and passions, and can recognise in themselves and then share with the other both the primitive fusional levels implying the momentary loss of boundaries, as well as those more mature drive levels of recognition of otherness, of sexuality and of that quota of healthy aggressiveness that the complete love relationship requires. But it is precisely the availability of a man - and of a woman, I may add - to immerse him/herself and re-emerge from the love relationship without too much fear, that depends not only on how the oedipal drama has been resolved, but also on how, in its time, the process of differentiation between self and object unfolded.

She writes: "... It is precisely the intricate separation and individuation processes, within the complex interweaving of regressive symbiotic trends, as opposed to differentiation - with its necessary quotas of aggressive drives in the service of growth - that may fall short of a sufficiently adequate outcome in terms of permeable self-object boundaries." That is to say, mature love means knowing how to share with the same person both the passion, when the object is at the same time the target of libidinous and aggressive drives, as well as the more archaic sensual pre-genital affects, until reaching the 'oceanic' totalising experience of fusion that entails the temporary annulment of boundaries without the fear of not re-emerging. This is exactly what has failed in the person who seeks an incestuous experience. For whoever commits incest is unable to share joint intimacy, because the capacity to recognise the other as such is lacking, as is the capacity to identify with him/her as being different. The 'true' other - whatever the 'soft' or violent form that the incest takes - cannot be met because, previously, the process of pre-oedipal differentiation has been too weak and precarious. In the majority of cases, the inequality between the two members of the incestuous couple is immense, in an emotional relationship that is tyrannical and parasitic. There remains

to be understood, from one case to another obviously, the qualitative and quantitative entity of this imbalance, such as in incest between siblings, for example; these are situations of lesser abuse than occurs between adults and children, between parents and sons/daughters, but on the clinical plane, they are the generators of just as much damage and confusion.

The problem of the interweaving between oedipal and pre-oedipal levels is illustrated in more detail in the following brief clinical vignette.

Y, a 22-year-old male patient, tells the analyst that during his childhood he was for a long time 'visited' by his father in his bedroom. The man would get up from the bed that he shared with his wife, go into the bathroom to urinate and then, with his penis still dripping, would creep into his son's bed and rub himself against him. In the meantime, the mother would continue sleeping, apparently unawares. For the rest of the time, their family life continued normally.

As an abstract conceptual exercise, let us try to formulate a list of hypotheses on the psychopathological motivations of the father according to the possible different conceptual frameworks.

- One could think of the man's need for tenderness and of physical contact, as he searches for a warm and dry welcome in the body of the child.
- Or one could emphasise the man's omnipotent fantasy that his penis dripping with urine is a powerful phallus, the bearer of fertility.
- Or again, in symbolic equivalence, that it is a breast offering nourishment.
- If, on the other hand, we tune in to the more mature levels relative to the elaboration of Oedipus, we could think of his search for sexual pleasure - the homosexual aspects - in order to avoid castration anxiety.
- Taking for granted that everything is plausible and potentially co-existent, one could also - and with good reason - think of a play of projection of infantile parts of himself in the son, thus satisfying his old incestuous wishes regarding his own father.

From time to time, therefore, one can choose to emphasise the need, or the sexual or aggressive drive in its various forms (from destructive narcissistic attack to envious attack directed towards a partial or total object, or a part of the self projected onto or confused with the other). The essential point, and I think the most difficult, is not to anchor our thought (and the patient) to a sole level of development; but to try to consider how even the most archaic functioning and defensive mechanisms have, in any case, passed through the oedipal crossroads, deforming it and being transformed by it. For example, using the same clinical vignette, in the background can be seen the deficit of archaic vicissitudes of the man with his mother, the confusion between male and female; but also the distortion of the oedipal triangle with mother and father that is expressed in reality with the significant exclusion of the woman - the wife/mother who sleeps in the other room - usurping her role, exploiting her complicity, and in any case annulling the two fundamental dictates of oedipus - recognition of the difference between big and little and between male and female.

The feminine

Let us now consider the feminine contribution to post-Freudian psychoanalysis: the patrimony of knowledge about the development process and feminine identity acquired mainly, but not solely, thanks to the thinking of women psychoanalysts themselves. As we know, the generation of the women pioneers formulated against their own sex the most deprecating and ferocious theories, thereby sanctioning a mutilated identity dominated by the triad of 'masochism, passivity, narcissism', condemned to an eternal infancy without instincts, and consigned to a destiny of envy and lack. Today, however, we can count on a rich patrimony of ideas that have reconsidered the identity vicissitudes of women as regards gender and sex, and that have also, of necessity, unhinged and then reconstructed, in the relational dimension, the classical parameters of masculine identity as well.

In the context of our meeting, planned and organised by our colleagues of COWAP with sensibility and attention to the theoretic and clinical problems of the feminine identity, I do not need to discuss such concepts that have by now become firmly established, including the possibility of finding *après coup* in Freud himself precursory intuitions in this sense. (I shall not include a review of the literature on the matter because, fortunately, it would be too long; also because it deals with matters that are well known to all of us. I refer the reader to previous works listed in my final bibliography and to the relative biographies quoted therein.)

Women are by now recognised as protagonists and are thus responsible for the whole range of sexual and aggressive drives, whether in a horizontal direction towards men or in a vertical direction in the parent-child relationship. Regarding the theme of incest, therefore, there is a radical change in the prospect of "furious attachment" of the little girl to the mother during the first years of infancy, mentioned by Freud [37]; and an even greater change in the sense of the subsequent brusque detachment, loaded with hostility and resentment, that was once attributed to penis envy and that would be the cause of the 'veering' towards the father. From Melanie Klein onwards, the woman's wish for a child will no longer automatically be seen as a narcissistic device to compensate for the lack of a penis, but as an object in itself of drive investment, whether healthy or pathological. In contrast, inasmuch as every human being, both male or female and with dramatic equality, is at the same time the bearer of a deficiency and of an excess [38], there is more evidence today of the regressive pathological quality of cases in which certain women who are unable to tolerate an intimate sense of void and incompleteness, stubbornly insist on becoming pregnant at any cost as the 'solution' for a narcissistic flaw. Dinora Pines [39], for example, understands very well that there must be a differentiation between a woman's wish to become pregnant and her wish to have a child; and how the experience of maternity can sometimes promote maturation and reinforcement of feminine identity, while at other times it can regressively push the woman back to primary identification with the mother, in a trap of early ambivalence.

Nor is it less important to consider how the bodily experience of pregnancy and the birth of a child can sometimes bring about a real upheaval in a woman's sexuality and the relationship with her partner. For example, quite frequently after the birth of

a child, the couple may have difficulties in their sex life. In the past this was thought to be only the man's problem because he was insufficiently attracted by the woman's transformed body. At most, it was recognised that there is a generic sexual unavailability on the part of the woman who is too concentrated on her child. Instead, for both of them a profound equivalence is in force according to which becoming a mother means becoming the mother, and the refusal of sexuality is the consequence of the fear of fantasies of incest between mother and child.

We may recall the old saying (mentioned also by Lévi-Strauss) according to which habit and routine weaken desire. This would be a normal, 'natural' and therefore so-called biological and not analysable phenomenon: not a repressed desire, but a flame that is extinguished. Freud's reflections in 1911 seem to be somewhat more convincing; he describes two 'currents' in the psychosexual development of the human being: one is tender and affectionate, the other sensual and sexual [8]. With maturity, the two currents can be integrated within the self and then directed towards the same woman: but often, defensively, they are split and distributed onto two different women - to the wife/mother goes the affection, and to the lover goes the passion. The cause of the splitting, therefore, is incestuous fantasy; were it not for the fact that, today, we find in the woman as well the 'typical' male splitting of the past.

I can present several clinical examples to illustrate this, such as that of a woman patient of mine who no longer wanted to make love with her partner whenever the relationship was stabilised in a situation of living together and making plans for the future. She made up for this coldness by having sporadic affairs with occasional partners.

Now that the sexuality of women is no longer denied, we can clearly see in them as well the deficits and the neurotic solutions. Another delicate terrain is that of breast-feeding (regarding which I have been able to acquire considerable analytic experience). The sensations aroused when a baby sucks the breast can, in fact, be the cause of complicated emotional upheavals in the mother. Some women are frightened by the pleasure that this experience produces in them; they have difficulty in distinguishing pleasure from pain, and they react with anxiety and by refusing the baby. Others, on the other hand, are equally frightened by the irruption of drive quotas of excitation in the relationship with the baby, but they find a way out by cutting away a part of themselves; i.e. they react defensively by inhibiting all desire and sexual impulse with the husband.

This reminds me of a young woman patient who, ever since she became a mother, felt uncontrollably 'annoyed' if her husband kissed her nipples; the sensations aroused in her when she breast-fed were too similar. Therefore, in order to protect the relationship with the baby, sexuality had to be excluded.

We must also consider the different conscious and unconscious attitudes of women according to the sex of their children; how they experience the mixture of pleasure and excitation caused by the sucking at the breast of a boy or of a girl baby. In the past it was often thought that there was an unbalanced 'mouth/breast introjection' with girl babies, destined to confirm the identity of the mother as nurturer; while to boy babies was assigned the function of 'narcissistic compensation' [40, 41]. Today, unfortunately, the events of maternity do not always produce the perfection and harmony that the conquests of these last decades would lead us to expect. Sometimes, in the guise of

'ideology', the girl baby is 'preferred' as the mother seeks in her a self-referring narcissistic link. Events such as these are a kind of 'litmus paper' for partial solutions of the oedipus. In them the priority of very early levels over adult levels is outstandingly evident, as well as the weight of unresolved problems of separation-individuation and of so-called dis-identification of the woman from the mother. Incestuous fantasies - both heterosexual and homosexual (it is hard to know which are the most disquieting) - with children are interwoven with the anxieties of annihilation and re-engulfment in the primary object.

The problem, therefore, is on the one side to discriminate, and on the other side to integrate within the self and in relationships, the various levels of development and of areas of psychic functioning. That is, to be able to differentiate without splitting. I think that this is what has failed in those who commit incest, and it is inexorably transmitted to those who suffer it: a lack of intrapsychic and interpersonal distinction between the tender, sensorial aspects and the erotic drive aspects.

I also want to refer briefly to the interesting observations of Estela Welldon [42] who, in her work as a forensic psychotherapist, was the first to understand the special difficulty that women have in making themselves heard, in public or private consultations, regarding their fears and anxieties in relation to their incestuous impulses towards their children. Often, operators unconsciously refuse to come into contact with incestuous themes, even more disquieting if they concern the mother. Their personal defence is thus camouflaged as kindly reassurance, and promotes denial; even more so because maternal incestuous acts are performed with less sensational gestures and can be mistaken for intimacy and tenderness.

I will briefly mention the case of a woman patient of mine, V., who during a psychotic and delusional crisis asked to go into a clinic, although continuing to come to daily sessions, because she was afraid of giving in to her incestuous impulses towards her two little girls and of masturbating them. She understood that this sexual impulse was at the service of a deeper desire to re-engulf the children in a regressive fusional dimension; and this was equivalent to the fantasy of herself being re-engulfed in by her mother. At home, she complained, there were no men; only nannies, maids, even the dog was female. And so was her analyst . . . By invoking a man, a father, she expressed her need for a presence that was bodily different and would guarantee a differentiating function by collapsing this symbolic function - according to her psychotic thinking - into the concreteness of a male-who-was-different.

What my patient was imploring so painfully is sometimes enacted clandestinely by mothers who sexualise the relationship in order to maintain indefinite possession of their children. They confer on their sons a premature and undeserved 'oedipal victory', thus depriving them of the structuring act of confrontation with the father who, in his turn, is probably quite happy to avoid the challenge, leaving his son 'in hostage' to the mother.

Protection and guilt

As we know, a complicated and contorted structure of guilt grows up around incest; ubiquitous in the case of unconscious fantasies, very unevenly distributed in the case

of actual incest. Paradoxically, it is rare for the seducer to be oppressed with feelings of guilt; indeed, the act itself, with its relative defences, has the aim of avoiding it [43]. In the rare cases when I have met someone in therapy who had committed incest, the idea that his behaviour could be harmful for the person who had suffered it, was for him intolerable. Admitting that his body, his 'love', the pleasure deriving from it, could be damaging unleashed the most violent resistances both as avoidance of guilt as well as narcissistic insult. The victim on the other hand is almost always tormented by a sense of guilt, with mixed feelings of resentment, shame, worthlessness, loss of self-esteem. This is the symptom of the damage to the structure that the incestuous experience has provoked in the intra-psychic relationships between id, ego and superego. The superego, with its normative, punitive and protective functions is, in fact, one of the 'outcomes' of the superseding of the oedipal knot, and among its connotations is the sign of how these events have been solved.

As Szpilka [32] summarized in the previously mentioned work, according to ancient Hegelian philosophy the value of the Oedipus complex as a reorganizing moment of psychism consists in the fact that the 'good' and the 'bad', until then simply in opposition to each other according to the dimension of the pleasure/unpleasure principle, now enter into a more complex dialectical relationship. 'Goodness' and 'good' no longer coincide, nor do 'evil' and 'bad'. What is good on one level – enjoyment of the mother's body – after the oedipal awareness becomes bad, as it is forbidden and the source of guilt and anguished expectations of castration. On the contrary, by renouncing what could be pleasurable but is the cause of unpleasure, the approval is earned of the superego as a superior gain. "... love and hate enter into a dialectic complexity, where the good and the bad cease being absolute categories, self-administered on simple biological grounds ...". (Ibid.)

A paradoxical but rigorous interweaving is produced; a symbolic network of complex legitimacies from which all human 'values' derive - cognitive, ethical and aesthetic - as well as the basic feelings of interior calmness and self-esteem. This is one of the gate-posts that becomes unhinged in incest, where the goodness and the evil, the good and the bad – and therefore the feeling of guilt – remain in an area of confusion, similar to that of perverse organisations.

A patient, C. who, when he became adult, was given to risky and disordered sexual activities, was very difficult to handle in the analytic relationship. He assumed an attitude of scornful superiority towards me, treating my interpretations concerning the damage he was doing to himself and others as if they were the timid worries of a moralistic little prude. He managed to protect himself from anxiety and guilt through the massive use of splitting and denial that, after a long time, began to show some cracks - at least in his dreams. Such as the time he dreamt that his penis "was therapeutic", but then he saw that its tip was covered in pus and a piece of gauze; or else that there was 'something' spherical and grey in his brain: a precious and very rare pearl ... or perhaps was it a bullet? ... But the most indicative dream is the one in which he recalls: "All my gums were swollen and sore; I was anxiously showing them to my ex-parents-in-law. I was asking them how to cure myself. I entrusted myself to them completely ... to those traitors! ... Those rotters who did me so much harm! ... and I

was so sure they liked me!” (He suffered very much when his in-laws turned against him during his separation from his wife and children). He associated that his gums really were bleeding and that this increased his worries about contracting HIV. In the manifest transference dimension, I was able to show him how he continuously risked directing his needs, impulses and desires towards unreliable people (for example when he looked for ‘affection’ in his nocturnal sexual meanderings with strangers, or in the financial swindles in which he repeatedly became involved while searching for the miraculous deal); and, as a result, how much all this was expressed in his unreliability regarding his present wife and his children.

In order for the passage from dual linearity to the oedipal triangularity to take place, it is necessary to have on stage the desiring subject, the desired object and a “third” who prohibits. Thus, for the oedipal knot to organise itself and produce ‘structure’, whether normal or pathological, the individual must be immersed in a ‘culturalised’ world, that provides an external prohibiter that can then be interiorised as internal legislator. In fact, Freud wrote that “... the beginnings of religion, morals, society and art converge in the Oedipus complex ... on the basis of one single concrete point - man’s relation to his father.” [26, p.156-157]. The sad point is that the one who commits the incest is often the father, thus causing the maximum of confusion and disorder.

But how much of the introjection process of the superego functions depends on the relationship with the real father? In psychoanalysis, especially according to certain models, much emphasis is put on the figure of the Father (with a capital F) as the carrier of ‘logos’ and of law, as he who promotes conflict and growth. Yet, in my opinion, not enough attention is paid to the distinction between the father and the symbolic paternal function, between penis and phallus. The superego, in fact, derives from parental introjections, that are as much maternal as they are paternal.

As Sigmund Freud [44] writes in a fundamental ‘note’ in the *The Ego and the Id*”, too often neglected also by psychoanalysts, we must not forget that when we analyse early infancy we are usually speaking about the relationship with the mother. “... Perhaps it would be safer to say ‘with the parents’; for before a child has arrived at definite knowledge of the difference between the sexes ... it does not distinguish in value between its father and its mother.” (footnote 1, p. 31) Similarly, according to the structural value of the primary scene process and of the Oedipus, the advent of the ‘second object’ does not mean that the father appears on the scene for the first time; but that he is no longer experienced as being homologous, equivalent to the ‘first object’ that, in its turn, is not only the real mother. The vicissitudes of separation foresee the physical detachment, and the intra-psychoic discrimination between self and not-self, as well as the distinction between the various objects. The promotion of this process is the task of the mother as well as of the father. It is the adult parental function of the institution of the ‘law’; it is a developmental goal that is perpetually re-negotiated, not an automatic ‘stopping point’ provided by the official sex of the parent. In this sense, incest with the father or with the mother takes the form of homo – or hetero – sexual not only according to the sex of the son/daughter, but also according to the more or less developed relational levels that are put into play. Likewise, the protective function is as much maternal as paternal, as long as they are both able to unite gentleness with the

capacity to hold and firmly contain: a 'taking care of', a psycho-physical holding in the Winnicottian sense [45], in which there is no irruption of levels of drive excitation.

Unfortunately this is not what happened to A. - today a young woman, wife and mother -who, since the beginning of adolescence, was for many years subjected to the overpowering sexuality of her father, surrounded by the indifference of her older siblings and the helpless resentment of her mother. Sometimes at night she would lock herself in her room, while her parents argued. Her father would sarcastically say to her, ridiculing her frail, pathetic self-defence: "Do you think a locked door is enough to stop me?" Every now and then her mother would submit her to painful questioning, accusing her of deceit and lying; she even reached the point, when the girl was older, of insulting her on the street, shouting "whore!" She blamed her, but she did not protect her.

In analysis A once told of a heart-rending childhood memory. When she was ten or twelve years old she was still in bed and pretending to be asleep. Someone came into her room and caressed her on the cheek. She felt a tormented feeling of great emotion and did not want to open her eyes. Who was it who caressed her? How she wished it could have been her father...

I think that the desperate need of this patient to be able to evoke within herself a protective function, not confused with sexuality, cannot be expressed any better; a 'nostalgia' for something that has never been, and that she calls 'father'.

I take this opportunity to add that occasionally – in spite of dramatic stories of repeated and very early traumatic incest such as this one – the victims have extraordinary individual resources of vitality that allow them to redeem their own destiny. This is what is happening to A., who has managed to form her own family and also to enjoy sexuality. In my own clinical experience, it frequently happens that both male and female patients evoke such a nostalgic image - the more yearned for and missed, the less it was really enjoyed; it must be strong and protective, but also tender and good, without conflicts, contrasts, aggressiveness. It takes the name and the appearance of the father, but it is a clandestine version, idealised and split, that we may call 'maternal father' [46].

Father and paternal function

It is difficult but necessary not to diminish the specific importance of the father, keeping clearly in mind the two coordinates of the interpersonal and the intrapsychic dimension of his real person and of his (but not only his) symbolic function transmissible from generation to generation. How much do the social and cultural mutations relative to the father, to his presence and to his role in present-day families, count in the organisation of the 'Oedipus complex' nowadays? For about half a century, since the sociologist Mitscherlich entitled his best known work *Towards a society without a father* [47], the rhetorical absence of the paternal figure dominates in Western culture. Indeed, the general decline of the so-called 'principle of authority' could not but overwhelm, for better or for worse, also the image of the Father and his symbolic value as superior power. For example, in clinical notes about a patient's family history, we

often find the words “absence of the father”, following a stereotype that nowadays no longer requires specifications as to what extent this absence is material or affective.

On a more commonplace everyday basis, complaints about the scarce significance of men during the whole period of time from birth to the growing-up of children have been a constant theme of feminist battles, and it was subsequently with dismay that we saw the passage – almost with no solution of continuity – from the authoritarian father to the father who is not there at all [48]. Therefore, while the authoritarian father of the past has left the stage, new types of absences are appearing. As a result of separations and divorces, there is an increase of emarginated fathers or in any case of marginal fathers; sometimes embittered and suffering, sometimes collusively fugitive, reduced to the role of ‘visiting father’, every other Sunday plus holidays. It seems to me that the widespread complaint about the so-called “loss of values” in present-day society is also closely linked to this theme.

How could all this not affect the way in which the Oedipus complex is articulated and manifested? I am thinking, for example, about what kind of relationship an adolescent girl can establish with a father who has lived separated from her for years. In the past, the father was the appointed guardian of his daughter’s sexual repression (the socially accepted other side of the incestuous father). But nowadays, the oedipal play has been completely upset. The function of the authority that prohibits is unacceptable, while the need to re-conquer a bit of oedipal intimacy risks slipping into the ‘confusion of languages’. The most frequent ‘solution’ is that of avoiding the conflict through tenderness. Thus, in order to escape the anxieties of intimacy with a father who is a stranger and absent in everyday life, the Oedipus is often acted out ‘outside’, in reality, by sexual and love affairs with older men and for periods of time that are considerably longer than the physiological period.

The mutation of the defences

The basic paradigms of psychism do not change with the changing of customs and one or two generations are certainly not sufficient to transform the foundations of our theory. I think that in psychoanalysis the Oedipus, even though by now we all write it with a small “o”, has preserved its main evolutionary, affective and cognitive meaning under the shield of drives. What might have changed, if anything, are the defences. We cannot disregard the fact that we are immersed in a reality that, in our advanced Western society, changes rapidly: single-parent families, precarious and atypical recompositions of family nuclei, technological pro-creations, maternal fathers, men and women turning towards homosexuality in advanced age, homosexuality itself that has changed its psychological and psychopathological features.

Today our tolerance of atypical expressions of sexuality is greater: the cross-dressing of adults and children, virtual sexuality, virtual paedophilia, sex tourism, the category of transgender, which now unites transvestites and trans-sexuals in a single category. Even perversions have now slipped from specific syndrome to generic symptom, from a sexual register to that of a regressive auto-sensorial modality. At the same time, there has been a general slackening in adult parental functions, with

difficulty in imposing rules and limits. As we have all been able to see, for at least two generations this has produced - for better or for worse - personality structures that are less rigid, more flexible, and with a superego that is less imposing and an ego that is more fragile. I am also struck by the 'endogamic' style of many groups of young people, where couples are formed and break up always within a closed circuit of reassuring familiarity. After the separations (so to speak) they continue seeing each other and being friends; even unfaithfulness occurs without conflict or passion. It seems as though the illusion of being able to find everything within the tight circuit of the heimlich is extended to the whole group. And thus the oedipal knot is loosened, if not avoided. The 'differences' between big and small, male and female, gender identity, maturity, individuation – once again, for better or for worse - besides being 'feeble' are no longer an absolute value.

The 'classical' resolution of the Oedipus complex entails that, in order to avoid castration anxiety, the oedipal rivalry has to be renounced. But who can we rival today? Where are the fathers to challenge?, In Totem and taboo Freud wrote: "... they are afraid precisely because they would like to, and the fear is stronger than the desire...." [26, p.31]. But, who strikes fear today? The paradox is that the fear has weakened, but so has the desire. We often prefer to find a regressive refuge in the niche of undifferentiation, well before having to confront castration anxiety or, in any case, the incompleteness of each individual.

For both males and females the acquisition of identity was considered to be inseparable from the acceptance of the prohibition of incestuous desires. In the past, many authoritative authors, from Grünberger [49] to Fornari [50], asserted that the Oedipus fades when the oedipal desire is perceived as impossible. The prize is in taking a distance from confusiveness. But what if, instead, the confusion has organised itself as a defence? As many have observed, the pathologies of our patients change, and today's defence mechanisms are not so much in the dimension of repression. or of repressive attitudes. With increasing frequency we find ourselves having to contend with splitting and denial; and even more so, at the ambiguous boundary with so-called normality, with primitive defence organisations of non-integration and ambiguity. That is to say, the persistence of the pre-oedipal defences heavily mortgages the Oedipus.

In a context such as this, of a general regressive defensive tendency towards indifference and undifferentiated, can it be that even incest gives rise to less anxiety, less guilt, less horror?

A young father, suffering and resentful because of sexual abstinence, turned out by his wife who had firmly ensconced herself in their marriage bed with the new-born baby, had to sleep with his son in a double sofa-bed. He tells me that during the night when half-asleep he realized he had an erection and that his penis was resting against the child's body. What is most significant is that he tells me this as if it were something trivial, in an apathetic tone and completely devoid of any disquieting feelings..

Also at the conceptual level, even in the psychotherapeutic field we today tend to use the more generic term of 'abuse' Finally, on the social level, the proposed law to de-penalise incest between consenting adults that was presented – not without scandal

– in a progressive Sweden in 1978, is today re-proposed in England without too much public outcry.

Does this mean that the cultural and psychological barrier against incest is crumbling? Can we consider that the classical emphasis on the damage caused by incest, that disrupts the sense of the two great differences, the metabolisms of anxiety and guilt and of the correlated thought processes, is now to be considered outdated? In spite of all this, I think that incest produces damage just as it did in the past and perhaps even more so, but more subtly, because destructiveness is manifested in forms that are covert, ambiguous and discreet. It penetrates into a psychological terrain that is already devastated, in a state of crisis, where the ‘confusion of languages’ is in action, and where individuals remain in an eternal ‘mirror phase’ in a combination of co-responsibilities, unhappiness and bad faith. The more developed oedipal drive levels are always involved in the problem of incest; but with increasing frequency they can go to the service of other levels, and of the regressive needs for contact and the annulment of boundaries.

The most illustrious victim is the thought process. In Bionian terms [51], the impact of the cognitive interrogative on one’s origins and one’s own identity becomes fragmented and weakened.

Referring to Sophocles’ “Oedipus Rex”, John Steiner [52] says that the fulcrum of the tragedy is not the search for the truth, but the inability to conceal it from oneself in spite of the desperate attempt to keep it hidden. But today even the concept of truth itself appears to be blurred and enveloped in the complacent veil of ambiguity.

As psychoanalysts, we too are presented with hitherto unknown problems relating to incest, and with new challenges at the countertransferential level. From the father we have turned to the mother, and from the sexual drive to the aggressive drive in its archaic manifestations of non-recognition of alterity. Consequently, the modalities of the transference are no longer in the dimension of the classical erotic trap; but they take on more viscous and elusive forms that are responsible for paralysing that healthy quota of aggressiveness that promotes maturation and growth. It seems as though, with the passing of time and history, human destiny does not change; forced from one generation to the other to confront the eternal problem of incest, it wavers between fascination and horror in a conflict that seems to coincide with the equally eternal antinomy between Eros and Thanatos, and between the drives of life and of death - an antinomy that, as we all know, in its most subtle forms assumes the beguiling vestiges of regressive attraction.

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