

Tales dead men tell¹

Rodney Kleiman²

'Après moi, le deluge'. These words are attributed to King Louis XV of France; so the story goes. He is gently asked to consider reining in the profligate spending that the treasury cannot afford; 'perhaps a little for the populace your majesty. . . some monarchical concern for the future of the nation'. His reply: *'après moi, le deluge'* – 'after me, the deluge'. His reply can be heard in a number of very different ways. It's a generous aphorism for us, if not generous in spirit for the people of France. It's an anecdote, a quotation, which gives us an important opening. For it raises some very interesting philosophical questions which go to the heart of man's relationship to life, to the meaning of that life, and to the manner and considerations, which dictate to that existence regarding how life should be lived.

The clearest interpretation, or most immediately obvious interpretation, is of a lack of concern for the future: 'after I'm dead, who cares for that? I will know nothing of it. I will be quite completely unconcerned, so why concern myself now? For what purpose should I temper my behaviours now, why lessen my pleasures out of an interest for a future in which I play no part?'

But does he play no part in the future? At what cost his current profligacy? Is it not a consequence of his attitude that his grandson loses his head in the revolution that he surely foretold and the deluge of blood that follows? Why should we care even for that; for our children's world; for that which happens when we are gone to the grave? As an aside I'm sure this is a question uttered regularly in the consulting room.

Does the world end when you die? Do the trees cease to fall in the forests? Do the forests themselves cease to exist? We don't know for sure. This universe may be but your dream and dissipate like smoke when you shuffle off your mortal coil, and anyway, why would you care? Should one care; I mean, really care? What is the point or outcome of such a caring when you will not be there to experience it? What do we bequeath to the next generation; to the future? It won't really matter to us then, after we are gone; so does it have any real significance to us now? What does our death imply; our absence from the scene as an ethical question for our desire and our action in this life? What relevance is this future world to the style and manner in which we live this life? Is the beloved King Louis right? Spend up, devour, proclaim hedonism; pursue the radiant reflection of oneself striding through a hall of mirrors filled with solid silver furniture?

According to Wittgenstein, death is not a part of life. But it is not an irrelevance.

For psychoanalysis, death is of the utmost importance; not least, in the concept of the death drive, which certainly for Lacan constitutes an absolute necessity for the theorisation in which we engage, based upon our clinical practice.

Now perhaps I'm getting old enough to feel this question with a greater intensity. I was prematurely grey. Now I'm just grey; it's no longer premature. But the place of death, both as a conscious preoccupation and as an unconscious instigation, exists and persists from the moment of one's birth, or indeed, death has its effects on you, even well before that happy event. After all, consider the examples of missed abortion, unplanned pregnancy, the question of wantedness, and parental desire for existence. To bring your being out of nonexistence from the darkness into the light; from death

into life; these are the antenatal factors determinative of your destiny.

So death is not a question that confronts only the ageing and aged. Every human is confronted from their first musings with death and its meaning.

Past generations inflict pain on the present. King Louis wielded the blade on his grandson's neck: he pulled the handle of the guillotine. Parentage counts with regards to its effects whether the blood is blue or red. The heavens open and we are the deluge. Parents and their parents before them: they speak. They speak of the unborn, the one-day to be born; thence to live inculcated with the weight of those words. That is a fact of psychoanalytic history, of history as articulated by and within psychoanalysis.

Lacan points never more cogently to this than in his consideration of the *Ratman* case³, as famously described by Freud. Freud's patient, an obsessional neurotic, numbers amongst his many symptomatic behaviours, several failed attempts to pay a small amount of money; the cost for his new eyeglasses, which he owes to a pretty girl at the post office. Lacan gives a curt summary of the story contained within an enormously complicated set of obsessive/ compulsive behaviours performed by the *Ratman* in order to never arrive at the point of payment:

The vain attempts at restitution, expresses perfectly the imaginary terms of this debt . . . this is the goal of bringing the subject to rediscover – in the history of his fathers lack of delicacy, his marriage with the subjects mother, the poor but pretty girl, his marred love life, the distasteful memory of the beneficent friend – to rediscover in this history, together with the fateful constellation that had presided over the subjects very birth, the gap impossible to fill of the symbolic debt of which his neurosis is the notice of non-payment.⁴

Without spending too much of our time on the details of the case, which I can only recommend that you read in conjunction with Lacan's article *The Neurotic's Individual Myth*⁵ wherein he highlights these issues; the father is a subordinate officer who marries above his station, procuring thereby some bourgeois status, money, and even his ongoing employment. He has chosen his partner, the *Ratman's* mother, over another; a pretty but poor woman to whom everyone refers regarding the fact of his strong attachment. He apparently chooses something other than love to determine his union. He has also previously gambled the regimental funds he held in trust and is only saved from disgrace by a friend who kindly lends him some money for a debt he never repays.

The *Ratman* discovers in his analysis, with Freud's insights, the repetition of his father's question in relation to the marriage: for love or money? In addition, the unpaid debt which the son carries for the father bears the mark of his father's style; his relationship to woman; to woman as that being with whom, impossible to relate, we are none the less obsessed; and perhaps the more so, the greater the distance we attempt to take from her. Here is a problematic passed on to the son from a scene enacted long before that son existed. The fact that this is not an isolated example is sufficient rationale to read the case; or finding in *Dora's* case⁶, in a father's sexual misdemeanours and inadequately clandestine affairs, something essential to *Dora's* anguish, symptoms and inhibitions. The father leaves his inheritance; his debt. The lives and loves of *Dora's* parents are clearly articulated for their relevance to her symptomatology and for *Little Hans*⁷ as well: parental problematics. It's mothers and fathers at play.

What the *Ratman* case example highlights is the fact that events, circumstances, sexual relations and love; thus both relations and non-relations, events that occurred long before the physical existence of the *Ratman*, have the greatest bearing upon his life and concerns. It's not just the house

of Atreus that carries the scourge of eaten children or only the palace of Thebes wherein is heard an echoing curse. Every family has a curse of its own. If you want further evidence, the most convincing evidence, it is to be found in your own history. That is a part of the wonder of an analysis; to discover the moment and merit, the privilege and problematics, of that history and as such, the family stories, the myths; not to mention the whispered secrets, which have their untold effect. Wherever we are heading in psychoanalysis, I don't believe we have exhausted the necessity of, to quote Lacan, "the realisation by the subject of his history in relation to a future."⁸

Here is my main point thus far: the past dictates, through the oral tradition and the words of history, the fate of the future generation.

Now a further note of the intrinsic importance of death is found in Lacan's reference to Freud in his 1958 *Ecrits* article, *On The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power*:

Who, more fearlessly than this clinician, so firmly tied to mundane suffering, has questioned life as to its meaning, and not to say that it has none, which is a convenient way of washing one's hands of the whole business, but to say that it has only one meaning, that in which desire is borne by death.⁹

It's not a question simply of acting in accordance with one's desire; but that that desire must be a desire borne by death. So we are drawn to consider the work of Heidegger and his philosophy of being and time wherein he raises this notion of being for death, which Lacan later introduced into the psychoanalytic fray with explicit references:

Being for death . . . this limit is death - not as an eventual coming to term of the life of the individual, nor as the empirical certainty of the subject, but, as Heidegger's formula puts it, as that 'possibility which is one's own own-most, unconditional, un-supersedable, certain and as such indeterminable.'¹⁰

It's not a matter of biology: people die; they cease to live. That fact surely figures, as does the anatomy that raises the question of castration, but not by being its cause; for the cause is found in language. Language has produced the fact of death for men who speak and think and thus recognise the fact of their disappearance. Not just their physical death but their disappearance within the chain of signifiers; the words of history.

A Woody Allen joke: "I'm not afraid of dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Perhaps you're not there in part; that part which preexisted you; the manner in which your history has designated and described your being. Does this not continue after your disappearance from the scene; after you have strutted and fretted a bit upon the stage and the next set of actors, the new generation, carries on the drama?

Of course it is a physical certainty that we will all die. It's nothing to be happy about, but it's not this fact that produces the impetus of desire. It's not irrelevant of course, for quite consciously we fret that our time is too short; but the knowledge of mortality, whatever effect that knowledge can have on encouraging one to get on with it, is not sufficient to render the full weight of meaning to a 'desire borne by death': it's a salient fact, but it's not sufficient. For whilst words have allowed us to think and to consider the passage of time with respect to our physical being, it is another mode of death; the death we live. We live death by virtue of the fact that our being, as subject of the unconscious, which is the only desire which really counts for psychoanalysis; that this unconscious

desire is only designated by its capture in the chain of signifiers, in respect of what constitutes our existence as subjects of language and all that that entails; both the possible and the impossible.

We are but words uttered into the void, which carry the meaning of our existence. We are but words. And beyond our physical being we have been designated by those who created our existence through the confluence of a desire; a desire that is other than ours, but still ours alone. As such, we might bequeath something of that desire in our turn to the future, through our articulations as not representing that desire, but by being that desire.

‘Life’s but a walking shadow – a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage – and then is heard no more’, according to *Macbeth*; and yet we are heard. The *Ratman*, in his address to Freud, articulates the tale of his father told to him by his mother. Dead men do not speak its true, but dead men do tell tales. We speak for them; we tell the tale. The *Ratman* tells his father's tale to Freud without knowing what he is saying. Who will tell your tale into the future?

What you then bequeath to the future does matter in that it falls within the realm of your creativity. For Louis XV, this was to bequeath the destruction of the monarchy, perhaps the most cogent and useful of proclamations that a king can make; a divine abdication. For each one then, one’s desire is imposed upon the next generation; one manner being in the act of producing that generation. Little wonder then that people seem so drawn to the question of parenting, even without knowing anything of the desire that they pass on, not through the genes or gametes, but through litanies of utterances; through denials of silence.

So with regard to what one might do in accordance with desire, the future does count: as it beckons you to truly engage with the baton passing of desire, only passed on by the signifiers that realise it. For in so far as we are subject to language, we are already dead in that our physical existence is a secondary consideration, but so then, we are immortalised.

Is the challenge of life not to determine the desire which bears you, and to prolong its existence, the only meaning that existence has, in the creative act? This is an act, which fate dictates can only take its impetus from the past promoted by the contingency of a possible future; a future where you have left a mark; an aphorism of your own drawn from the anecdote to which life is otherwise reduced. The Greek heroes are determined to fulfill the fate that the other has decreed. To die on the field of battle is the way to live on in the words that describe your deeds; a fate which Zeus himself cannot contradict. Even the gods bow to symbols, the force of the oracle, as men do before language. Heroes, like Antigone, attributed greater value to their place in the pantheon than in the prolongation of their physical being.

But it’s not a matter of suicide, quite the opposite. And when faced with the act which bears a certain relationship to what desire has made possible for you, to live in accordance with that, which is to perish in the battle. Or choose to stand on the sidelines and pursue a pleasant existence in which one would then be truly dead.

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² Analyst of the School. The Freudian School of Melbourne, School of Lacanian Psychoanalysis.

³ Freud, Sigmund. “Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis”. (1909). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. VII (1901 -1905). Ed. Anna Freud. Tr. James Strachey. London: Vintage, 2001, 153-320.

⁴ Lacan, Jacques. "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis". *Écrits: A Selection*. Tr. Alan Sheridan. London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977, 89.

⁵ Lacan, Jacques. "The Neurotic's Individual Myth". *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 18, (3): 405-425.

⁶ Freud, Sigmund. "Fragment of and Analysis of a Case of Hysteria". (1905). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. VII (1901 -1905). Ed. Anna Freud. Tr. James Strachey. London: Vintage, 2001, 7-122.

⁷ Freud, Sigmund. "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five Year Old Boy". (1909). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. VII (1901 -1905). Ed. Anna Freud. Tr. James Strachey. London: Vintage, 2001, 3-148.

⁸ Lacan, Jacques. "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis". *Écrits: A Selection*. Tr. Alan Sheridan. New York/ London: W. Norton, 1977, 88.

⁹ Lacan, Jacques. "The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power". *Écrits: A Selection*. Tr. Alan Sheridan. New York/ London: W. Norton, 1977, 276-277.

¹⁰ Lacan, Jacques. "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis". *Écrits: A Selection*. Tr. Alan Sheridan. London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977, 103.