

Book Review

Robert Lévy: *l'infantile en psychanalyse (the infantile in psychoanalysis)*. Ramonville Saint-Agne: Érès (Collection Arcanès), 2008.

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In this book published in France in September 2008, Robert Lévy endeavours to reformulate the concept of the *infantile* in psychoanalysis. In doing so he gives a new value and status to this concept in the clinic of psychoanalysis with children and their families. He situates the infantile as a specific position in childhood in which the demarcation of the unconscious for the child, through the function of repression, is incomplete. Whilst Lévy promotes this position as a structural phenomenon, he gives it a rough timing of between two and five years of age. Hence this is something akin to what Freud refers to as the Pre-genital Organizations in his “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality”. Curiously, Lévy also specifies this position as being structurally similar to psychosis, with a corresponding failure of metaphor, noted clinically in both the young child and the psychotic, since in both cases there is a similar difficulty with repression.

Lévy underpins this theoretical investigation into the concept of the infantile from questions which have appeared in his thirty years of working with children and families, both as a psychoanalyst in private practice and in public child psychiatry in Paris. He argues that the shift from Freud’s clinic of repression to Lacan’s clinic of metaphor enables a different way of understanding the construction of the symptom in the child. In particular, this book raises questions about how to theorize the experience of the complaints and sufferings in young children. He notes that these often disappear following a few consultations but that older children tend to require longer term psychoanalysis. For Lévy, the relation between the child and his mother and father is the middle ground upon which the demands of each can be elaborated in the clinic. It is precisely within this middle ground, as transference, that he situates the infantile.

Such a proposition allows Lévy to put forward the argument that the child is not the symptom of the parents, which he claims is that many put forward, but rather that the child may function as *sinthome* (*fait sinthome*) for the parents. What Lévy refers to here is the place that the child takes up in the complaints of the parents who bring him. It is this place which then functions as *sinthome* and produces a fourth knot of identification for these parents. This is the manner in which Lacan nominates the fourth ring of the Borromean knot in his Seminar *The Sinthome*.

We first heard Robert Lévy’s proposition regarding the infantile when he presented an aspect of what was to become this book in a paper at the *Joyce-Lacan Symposium* in Dublin in June 2005.¹ In that paper Lévy made a link between Lacan’s analysis of the position of Joyce’s father, that is, as “radically deficient”², and the structural effects such a lack may induce during the infantile period:

We consider that it is possible to extend what Lacan says here regarding Joyce’s father to other types of lack, and, especially in the infantile period, to the position taken up by the parents. At

that time, the child may supplement (*peut faire suppléance*) the parents' lack, and his symptom may function as "sinthome". There is a circular relationship between the symptom and the symbolic in the unconscious. The symptom and the unconscious constitute what is called a new sort of symbolic register that induces the symptom.³ [Our translation, as are all those from Lévy's work that follow.]

Lévy further argued that a clinical consequence of this proposition is that, with the younger child, the analyst must work with the parents to re-direct the manner in which they position the child. Such work may offer the possibility for the child to produce a work of repression proper. In other words, when the child is no longer identified as object for the parents, they may then be able to become objects for the child.

The concept of the infantile in psychoanalysis

Many of the early chapters of this book are devoted to a re-working of the concept of the infantile in Freud's work from the knowledge gained from Lacan. Jean-Jacques Rassial writes in the preface that this is a Freudian reading of Lacan. In reference to Lacan's promotion of a return to Freud, it is also a return to Lacan through Freud.⁴ This reworking of Freud with Lacan, Rassial argues, is precisely a rescue of Freud's questioning of the psychogenesis of the symptom. This is at the heart of Lévy's reopening of the concept of the infantile, as both a period in which the young child or the infant is marked by infantile sexuality, and as a structure that apprehends the symptom formation through the unconscious of the child in his relation to the parents.

We know that for Freud this concept of the infantile played an important part in his thinking from the very beginnings of psychoanalysis. He associated it with the various means through which sexuality functioned for the child. In the first instance, the infantile emerged through the fantasies of the adult. In his "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality", Freud proposed the notion of the infantile as a pre-historic period, which situates it as a logical position outside of time, generated through the history of each subject as a consequence of repression. Thus the infantile underpins Freud's Pre-genital Organizations and provides a reference point for each of these structures in the form of a logical exception. Our reading of Freud is clearly in contrast with a developmental reading that posits the infantile as a specific stage of the pre-genital period of the libido.

In Lévy's book the infantile is situated as a specific epoch or period for the young child who is presented to the analyst by his parents. Upon a first reading, this is at odds with the manner in which we understand the infantile following Lacan, that is, as a logical moment outside of any lived experience. Nonetheless, in Lévy's proposition the demarcation of the infantile period is relevant only in terms of understanding the construction of certain symptoms. It designates the process of repression for the child in a dialogue with the parents, each with his or her own symptom. The infantile as a period is not something we can discern outside of clinical practice. More importantly, it is not a concept we can use to construe any kind of metapsychological theory regarding the child's overall psychological development.

Following Freud, for Lévy the infantile has the status of a concept in psychoanalysis only if it is understood as "the moment of the psychological constitution of the subject of the unconscious".⁵ This means that the child, like the adult, becomes a subject through the symbolization of infantile sexuality. Infantile sexual theories are effectively attempts at responding to the riddle of sexuality, that is, to the question of where babies come from. As Lévy states:

In effect, we had to wait for Freud so that psychoanalysis, via the dimension of infantile sexuality, could give recognition to the child as having his own existence, by attributing a sexuality to him. Curiously, precisely at the point at which the child had been refused in the society of the beginning of the 20th century, according to the equation: no sexuality/no subject, Freud, by lifting the fundamental repression on sexuality of the child, allowed him to finally be recognized as subject. Since that time the child has a sexuality and exists as subject, which created a scandal at the time of that “right-thinking” era.⁶

Lévy envisages the *infans* as the confrontation of the child with anguish and the successive means of remedying it. He puts forward that all psycho-pedagogies exist in order for the adult to avoid an encounter with the orgasm of the child. Thus he places infantile sexuality as a sexuality that is already fully-fledged. If this sexuality, and thus anguish, is contingent in the first instance upon those around the child, satisfaction is henceforth maintained in a permanent equivocation between the presence and the absence of the object.

For Lévy any sort of mythology of auto-eroticism is resolved by distinguishing the imaginary other (as object) from the Other:

The object invested by the child, as partial as it might be, is lost from the very beginning, and, as such, is erected as master signifier, master of all *jouissance* in the way in which Freud continues to put forward that: “the individual devotes himself exclusively to his mourning”.⁷

This is a reference to the way in which the mother is imbued with death, since for Lacan weaning is the original form of death. The anguish pertains then to this initial weaning from the mother and the means that the infant utilizes to escape it, starting from the *Fort-Da*. *Jouissance* then is what is repeated in the dissatisfaction tied to the organ. This is the first instance of Lacan’s *there is no sexual relation*. It is also tied to the notion that the phallus, which is constituted as lack and as primordially lost object, is the objection made to the sexual relation. This is a means of resolving the opposition between narcissistic and object libido that Freud proposed.

The phallus assumes its fundamental character when tied to the (male) organ via its loss or deficiency, as Lévy emphasizes. Thus it is a question of the idea of loss of what neither the boy nor the girl has ever had: the phallus. The phallus is the symbol of the absence of organ. It is the fact that the meaning of the phallus is lacking that gives it its power of signification. We could say that it is through the Name of the Father that the phallus is signified, this being the formula of the Oedipus.

What matters is to listen to the manner in which this infantile symptom is presented in the discourse of the parents. In Lévy’s words:

[...] to be attentive to the difference between desire *for* the mother (the classical version of the Oedipus) and the desire *of* the mother (the Hamlet version introduced by Lacan)”.⁸

In Lacan’s elaboration, for the child the Oedipus is knotted by the manner in which this desire of the mother is tied to her *jouissance* as Other for the child, as well as by the manner in which she designates the child as phallus. Birth, in other words, is first and foremost castration of the mother. It is on this background of anguish, and the manner in which the Oedipal law has intervened for her, that the mark of castration is left upon the child.

According to Lévy, the difficulties at play in the infantile symptom emerge in the child’s acquisition of language. His conception of such a relation between language and the drive is

underpinned by Lacan's notion of *lalangue*, or mother-tongue. He attributes the force of the death drive to the ability for the child to oppose one phoneme with another in representing the absence of the mother's response.⁹ The drive is considered to be a *constant force* and is therefore no biological function. Rather, it is an irruption of the real: the real as obstacle to the pleasure principle. For Lacan it pertains to the impossible, the impossible of the satisfaction of the drive. Hence it has no object. It is for this reason that the *object a* can come to the place of cause of desire. For Lacan, the drive forms a loop around the erogenous zone from which it arises. In this way it can attain its satisfaction without reaching its object. Thus the object can only be envisaged as an empty space, a hole that can be occupied by any object.

Through this Lévy touches upon the new notion of the subject introduced by Lacan: an empty subject, a subject of division which is equivalent to the *other*. The subject here is insubstantial in this opening/closing of the unconscious. It is on the background of the missing object that the subject will solicit the desire of the o/Other. This allows a realization of the drives and the appearance of the new subject in a manner that is tied to the formula of the fantasm.

As indicated by Lévy, however, the fantasm is being constructed in the infantile period, and hence the child is effectively limited to a metonymic psychical functioning. The infantile symptom is produced without metaphor and is consequently a metonymic formation. In this way Lévy points to the question of metaphor on the side of the parents, and thus infantile symptoms are effects of language in the subject of the child together with the parents. As he outlines:

Let us add a few words to what we call the difficulties in the acquisition of language, the various and different delays in speech and language that we can never tackle without also considering them in another manner as symptoms in the position of responding to what is symptomatic in the "family structure". These symptoms present with a particular acuteness in this infantile period, but are nevertheless able to be resolved rapidly if we work with the parents.¹⁰

The infantile symptom is a formation of partial repression

Another theme of the book that follows from the above is the hypothesis that the infantile symptom is a result of an absent or partial repression, and that such infantile symptoms therefore require that repression be put to work.

We see that the symptom of the young child is always presented through the demands of the parents, and that it is a response in the child to the anguish of one or both parents. If we recall Freud's hypothesis that the superego of the child is carried unconsciously from the superego of the parents, then we can recognize that this symptom is the result of an identification with an ideal infantile parental position. There is a relation between the infantile symptom and the castration of each of the parents, and thus the manner in which this symptom in the child may function as *sinthome* for one or both parents.

We could argue that the infantile symptom is not so different to Freud's infantile neurosis. This infantile neurosis is a necessary precursor to the constitution of the child as subject of the unconscious in reference to infantile sexuality. Nonetheless, we could say that Lévy produces a further elaboration of infantile neurosis in a Lacanian manner. He puts forward that the infantile symptom is a response in the child to the way the relation to the object as lack is played out between the mother and the father. For the child the parents are the agents of the metaphoric operation that renders the Name of the Father efficacious as a signifier.

What Lévy allows us to understand is the way in which the symptom in the young child is situated at a particular moment in which the child's unconscious is still hooked into that of one or both of the parents. It is this *hooking into* the unconscious of the parents that characterizes what Lévy defines as the infantile symptom. Hence it is a formation that is under the sway of an only partial repression, and a response to the return of the repressed for one or both of the parents.

Lévy proposes that, for the child, the psychic conflict is not a result of repression due to sexual thoughts transgressing the law, but on the contrary: it is because the law has intervened that these sexual thoughts are possible for the child subject. It is in this way that the symbolic order of language structures sexuality as desire. The infantile symptom is the effect of the failure of this law for the parents, in so far as it is carried as a failure of the Name of the Father in the child.

It is the failure of metaphor in the infantile symptom which, according to Lévy, situates the child in relation to his unconscious and the Other, in a position similar to that of the psychotic. He follows Freud's notion that the mnemonic sign at play in symptom formation is closely connected with the functioning of repression proper. Lévy thus concludes that there is "no metaphor without complete repression".¹¹ This leads him to propose that the infantile symptom, like infantile sexual theories, are contingent upon the non-acquisition of metaphor:

Consequently, this first period simply does not know of repression. In this way each theory nevertheless is comprised of, as Freud had supposed, a part of truth, which functions, metonymically, to constitute these theories devoid of metaphor.¹²

We know that Freud states that the truth in these theories relates to the sexual interest of the child spurred on by the questions raised by the birth of a younger sibling, the one who may appear as *other* for the child in his relationship with the parents. They are true in so far as they are attempts to respond to the enigma of where babies come from, that is, by providing a symbolic link without the acquisition of metaphor. Lévy's argument is that the truth of infantile sexual theories are articulated in the form of *metonymy*, not metaphor and fantasies. This proposition enables us to understand infantile sexual theories in relation to the structure of language.

These theories, for Lévy, are constructed precisely on the basis of the lack of metaphor, according to the equation: signifier = signified. Thus in Freud's first infantile sexual theory, the young child is unable to represent a peer who lacks a penis and thus disregards the difference between the sexes. In the second theory, the inability to represent the vagina leads to a borrowing of the signifier for the known anal orifice. Similarly, in the third theory that Freud qualifies as cloacal, the mouth becomes the orifice through which a child is made. In the fourth theory, that of *the sadistic concept of coitus*, due to the lack of metaphor the child takes the signifiers that he is presented with such as screams or the bloodstains on the sheets to metonymically represent sexual intercourse. For Lévy, Freud's discussion of the child's intellectual endeavours to solve the riddles of sex indicates a lack of repression that is the hallmark of metonymic function.¹³

The infantile symptoms that, according to Lévy, may present as enuresis, disturbances of sleeping or eating or even hyperactivity, for instance, are formations that are not sustained by a repression proper in the child. Rather they occur as a response to the return of the repressed for one or both of the parents, as a failure in their Oedipus. We may understand from this hypothesis that the infantile symptom functions as *sinthome* for the parents, as a repair of a

fault, effected by a new symbolic production by the child. In the lesson 17th February 1976 of his seminar *The Sinthome*, Lacan outlines the sinthome for Joyce precisely as a formation of such a new symbolic order that allows the Oedipus and the symbolic to be written for Joyce, in order to make good this fault.¹⁴ The sinthome allows the rings S, I and R to be held together, since they do not hold due to a fault in their knotting.

The sinthome, the fourth ring that is added by force, is in the same place as the infantile symptom, that is, as a supplementary link that functions as a new symbolic order that repairs the failed castration of one or both of the parents.¹⁵ As articulated by Lacan in reference to Joyce, such a link is necessary when, for instance, the father's presence testifies to a failure or a deficiency in the metaphorical function.

This argument provides us with an understanding that the metonymic constructions at play in the infantile sexual theories at the heart of the infantile symptom. These are examples of this new symbolic order that presents the truth of the parental couple. This is the child's attempt at symbolization prior to the acquisition of metaphor, in the face of the impossible for him, as well as for the parents, of the sexual relation. We can say that with Lévy's hypothesis, the infantile symptom is what allows, for the child, a writing of the Oedipus and the symbolic register in a metonymic mode.

Lévy takes up Alexander Lorand's¹⁶ case of little Harry as an example of an infantile symptom, here in the formation of a shoe fetish. He points out that both in phobia and fetishism there are difficulties with repression. Lacan reminds us that both are an indication of the child's anguish of being devoured by the mother, by the gaping hole of maternal castration. The horse in little Hans' phobia is an attempt at symbolization amidst the all engulfing metonymy of the jouissance of the mother. With fetishism, in little Harry's case, the shoe is the emblem of the jouissance of the mother and points to a difficulty with the symbolization of the phallus, other than by identifying with it as pertaining to the mother through this metonymy. With little Harry, there is a difficulty with his appeal to the father, leading to the moment of a division: "I know very well, but nonetheless..."¹⁷

Lévy notes that the child is always situated in relation to a jouissance of the mother.¹⁸ It is in this paradise that the lure (*la leurre*) of the desire of the mother guarantees the child's position as subject. He is, at the same time, the object of this desire. According to Lévy, the mark of maternal castration is revealed in the same way that Lacan, in the seminar *The Object Relation*, indicates that the child is situated as phallus for the mother:

It is clear that it is not at all the same thing for the child to be, for instance, the metaphor of the mother's love of the father, or for him to be the metonymy of her desire of the phallus, which she doesn't have and will never have.¹⁹

It is in the latter position that the child is taken as a metonymic whole and not a part such as little Hans' penis as object of jouissance for the mother. This sends him towards his Oedipus in search for the phallus elsewhere, including in the sexual jouissance of his own body. Such an encounter may lead to the child being able to write the paternal metaphor. Lévy emphasizes that the formation of the infantile symptom is the child's attempt to articulate his position as subject in the gap opened up by the metonymy of the mother's desire for the phallus. We could put forward that the infantile symptom which, being the child's first attempt at symbolization in making up for, or supplementing, the non-acquisition of metaphor, also functions as sinthome for the child.

There is no analysis of the infantile symptom without the parents

Lévy also discusses the clinical effects of the proposition that the infantile symptom is the effect of partial repression for the child. He notes that this symptom may be located in its function as *sinthome* for the parents. He states:

[...] there is no analysis of the infantile without the parents, and for the analyst, the infantile is a “passant” of the parents through the symptom.²⁰

Beyond the reference to Lacan’s device of the *passee*, Lévy here plays with the connotations of this *pas* (‘step’ or ‘not’) as *pas-sage* (‘badly behaved’) and as a *pas sans* (a ‘not without’) by which he designates the relation of the child with his parents in reference to the symptom.²¹ In this way Lévy proposes that the symptom essentially refers to these positions as signifiers, in that “the child’s symptom exemplifies the fact that the signifier of unconscious desire of the parents represents the subject (child) for another signifier (his symptom)”.²²

The infantile symptom of little Harry represents this *pas-sage* to the phallus. In another reference to the device of the *passee*, Lévy puts forward that:

We could say that [...] Harry’s mother becomes the *passeeuse* of the phallus but not of the Name of the Father. Harry identifies with this”.²³

In this case the child is sustained in the network of the *jouissance* of the m/Other which leads him towards an identification with the phallus that plays a part in the mother’s own enjoyment, hence the metonymic substitution of penis for shoe, now the fetish object.

Consequently we can see that for Lévy there is no work with a young child in psychoanalysis without the parents. Structurally we may hear this *not without the parents* in resonance with what Lacan proposes in the *Anguish* seminar: anguish is “not without an object”.²⁴ In both cases there are two logical positions in which one cannot be articulated without the other. It is in this manner that we can read Lacan’s statement that the child’s symptom “may represent the truth of the family couple” and that “the child *realizes* the presence of what Jacques Lacan designates as the object *a* in the [mother’s] fantasm”²⁵. Thus it is not possible to elaborate the child’s symptom without reference to the position the child is allocated in respect to each of the parents.

This also enables us to question Lévy’s proposition that the infantile symptom may function as *sinthome* for one or both parents, since it appears to have this function on the side of the child by providing him with a *first* rather than a *new* symbolic order, by knotting the unconscious without metaphor, to make good what was not previously knotted. We can argue that in Lévy’s hypothesis there is a risk of a confusion of the notion of the *sinthome* with the idea of a *family symptom*, which may also lead to the idea of a shared unconscious between the child and the parents. As pointed out by Françoise Dolto, in psychoanalysis we can only listen to one unconscious at a time. This unconscious is the singular way in which the discourse of the Other is articulated for each subject.²⁶ Thus we may listen to how the *infantile symptom* is situated in different ways as symptom for the child and as symptom for each of the parents. Consequently, what may function as *sinthome* for the mother and father is tied to each of their symptoms. The notion of *sinthome* is what sustains the position of the *paternal* as exception, outside of the reality of the actual parents and the child. The *sinthome* then is what has to be determined as an effect of the knotting of the symbolic, the real and the

imaginary in the writing of this paternal position for each subject, that is, for the child, the father or the mother.

In our reading of Lévy's book the most important clinical consequence of his hypothesis is that the infantile symptom is not one symptom for the child and the parents, but a marker that provides different answers to the question posed by the child as well as the parents. For the young child, this marker is in the place of a first sexual theory and hence a sign of the intervention of the law of the signifier, if only through a metonymic function that is the effect of a partial repression. For the parents, it functions as a marker of the truth of the prohibition of incest, the impossible of the sexual relation of the mother and the child (or the father if he takes the child as object in this way). This posits the relation between the child and the parents in logical terms and also refers to the way in which the child is positioned as an object for the parents. In this way we can situate the different places that the child, the mother and the father take up in the place of a lack.

To say that there is no child without the parents and no parents without a child is the only way that we can logically take up such positions in the clinic. To see the parents as an entity in itself would be to partake in a conflation that may produce a barrier to any possible treatment of the child. Such a conflation promotes a simplistic and facile solution to the difficult question of the place of the parents in the psychopathology of the child. This has been a longstanding dilemma that has marked the whole field of child psychoanalysis, as well as associated fields such as child psychology, child psychiatry, and so on.

The mother, and indeed the father, have a particular relation to what Lacan refers as the Name of the Father which places a limit on the mother's enjoyment of the child. The Name of the Father also brings the child into language and therefore allows the child to separate or detach (as opposed to what is proposed in *attach-meant* theory) from the primordial relationship that is imbued with the duality of narcissism. The Name of the Father allows the child to enter into discourse, including into the discourse of social relations. In these social relations we must consider how the *others* function as a third place for the child in the construction of Otherness.

Another important aspect of Lévy's hypothesis, however, concerns the manner in which he views the construction of the infantile symptom. For Lévy, this symptom primarily reveals a structure of defence that is characterized by partial repression due to difficulty with the acquisition of metaphor in the young child. It is thus central to see the construction of metaphor for the child as linked with the manner in which metaphor functions for each of the parents. This possibility of metaphor for the child is linked with the manner in which the child is identified with the place of metaphor in the discourse of the parents. It is also tied to the way in which the child identifies himself with the position of the phallus in his own discourse, that is, the way in which this reveals the *truth of the family couple* or that of *object of the mother's jouissance*.

Lévy advocates for a mode of listening to the symptom of the child that passes through a listening to the discourse of each of the parents. The child may be re-presented in the position of phallus for the mother and/or the father. However, rather than referring us to the child as such, this sends us back to the question of how this position speaks of the jouissance and desire of each of the parents in regard to their own Oedipus. This enables us to determine the manner in which the paternal metaphor has intervened for each of them. If we listen to the metonymic signification at play in the child's symptom, this may lead to the possibility of the

identification of the child within his own Oedipus. This in turn may enable us to work with the movement from metonymy to metaphor in the process of repression proper for the child.

From our reading of Lévy's book, we could propose that: preliminary to any case of repression of the infantile symptom, we listen to the possibility of evoking the Name of the Father for the child in the discourse of the parents.

In the cases of both little Hans and little Harry, Lévy emphasizes that we find a third person who intervenes, one who had a shared knowledge of the parents and a close relationship with them. It is through this intervention of the analyst in each case that the infantile symptom was able to be written, including as a case history. In both cases it made possible a clearer separation of the child's position in regard to the jouissance of the mother. The third position for the child enabled a repression of the symptom to come into play. It enabled each of them to forget, and, by situating themselves in regard to this *infantile* as a past, also provided each with a different answer to the problems of their own sexual jouissance, as well as of that of their parents. Thus we can hear the naming of each case, *little Hans* and *little Harry*, as designating a real of this infantile sexuality outside of time, as *what they were once upon a time*.

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- ²⁵ Lacan, Jacques. "Deux notes à J. Aubry". These two notes were handwritten by Jacques Lacan to Jenny Aubry in October 1969 and were first published in a book by her in 1983. We have translated these excerpts from the text available at: <http://www.ecole-lacanienne.net/documents/1969-10-00.doc>. This was in turn taken from: "Deux notes sur l'enfant". *Ornicar ?* 37 (1986): 13-14. A translation into English has been published as: "A Note on the Child". *Analysis* 2 (1990): 8.
- ²⁶ Dolto, Françoise and Juan-David Nasio. *L'enfant du miroir*. Paris: Rivages, 1987.