

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON MYTHOMANIA AS “SINTHOME”

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Translated by Richard Klein

He is a story teller, he cannot help it. He is a mythomaniac, that is his symptom. As an adolescent he could play with it; it gave him self-esteem. As an adult, it is overtaking him. “It erupts suddenly, and when it starts, it has to go to the end.” He feels he is at the end, now that his wife has left him, taking their little daughter away with her. So, the consultation.

His fictions had become so numerous that he had more and more difficulty coping with them. The partitioning off of his life no longer worked. He couldn't avoid anguish, taking to alcohol and anxiolytics, but he could still have gone on. He had pretended he was a doctor, although he had never completed his studies, and when his wife learned the truth, she understood his disappointment, his painful and unconfessable failure, and she forgave him. He pretended to do his military service at the other end of the world, while in fact he was only a few kilometres away, but hadn't he always loved adventure? He got her to believe that one of his toes had been amputated, and she understood once more that he was looking for her compassion. But when he pretended to be a widower, that was too much! She could put up with it no longer, and asked for a divorce.

All his stories (and they are numerous), and what he can say to me about his past, he reports to me with care, but in a way that, straight away, I find (grammatically) peculiar. He tells the stories in the present tense, which is not the present tense of narrative, but rather an actual present tense. It is difficult for him to order chronologically the different parts of his life, to make dates precise. He evidently has the excuse of having told so many stories that he has learned to dissemble, never to be too precise. But all his short stories remain disconnected, they don't add up to a novel. His grammatical present tense no more refers to the historical time of the novelist (or of the neurotic) than to the circular time of the eternal return, so well presented by Borges in his History of Eternity.¹ But nevertheless, it is by evoking cycles, biochemical cycles of metabolic breakdown, that he can best account for his digestive functions, and by making an analogy with the programme of a washing machine that he can plot the position of his mental functioning. “Morally, I am spinning around, sometimes I am tumbling, sometimes I am draining out... It never stops, it would be better if I could punctuate.” Therefore no linear or circular chronology, but rather, so it seems to me, an arrested, immobile time. On the basis of this element (the arrested time of his discourse), in the absence of elementary phenomena and patent neologisms, I was inclined towards a structural diagnosis of psychosis (which subsequently declared itself clearly). As for his appeal to cycles and programmes to account for his functioning, isn't it his way, thanks to the real and the symbolic, of overcoming a defect in the imaginary?

Let us come on to what I was able to reconstruct of his biography. First, his idyllic childhood, abroad, in the former French colonies (his father was an army doctor).

¹ Borges, J.L., *Histoire de l'Éternité*, in Oeuvres complètes I, Paris, Gallimard, 1993, pp. 363-447.

He describes himself as a cute, blond little boy, neat, clean and meticulous, extremely intelligent. For his coloured playmates, boys older than he, he was “the little king”, “the little god” they enjoyed carrying around on their shoulders. But around the age of nine, the little king began to become frightened of open spaces, of the night, of silence. The little king was scared. It was time for him to enter the world of little men, to begin his secondary school, and he asked to apply for a military boarding school in France. His parents, thinking he was too young (he was two years ahead) refused. But they agreed that he could apply later on, hoping that he would not be accepted. But he was, and, sorrowfully, they let him go.

A new life began, a total break from the previous one. He was only thirteen, and found himself among older fellows for whom he was no longer “the little king” - they called him “baby-face”! His intellectual superiority was not enough for him to be accepted by them. So he had to use his fists, always against bigger and stronger adversaries. Pain had no effect on him. He started then to tell stories, another way for him to be accepted and loved.

He survived the ordeal of boarding school, passed his A-levels, and still modelling himself on his father, decided to become a doctor. His medical studies took him, for the first time in his life, into a mixed world of men and women, where he was introduced to womanhood... at first in the most raw and brutal way: the anatomical sex of the woman, the hole exposed to examination and investigation of the consultant gynaecologist and his team. This first hospital experience was unbearable. He felt embarrassed, ashamed, humiliated because he could not avoid putting himself in the place of these “sadistically investigated and wounded women”. He progressively lost interest in his studies, and finally gave them up. But at university there were also other encounters with women, love affairs. Thereafter, his mythomania took another turn; it was as if, in the company of women, his stories overtook him. Twice he fell in love, and twice he was dropped for another man. Everything collapsed. Depressed, he attempted suicide by dissecting out his radial artery with a scalpel; a true surgical exploration of his wrist as if it were an anatomical specimen. Later on, he considered his suicide attempt as an “appeal for help by self-mutilation” (the first mutilation, in the dimension of the real of his body), “a general appeal to the population”.

Soon afterwards he met the woman who became his wife. He fell out of a boat, she fished him out of the water, warmed him up, comforted him. She was called Sylvie (Sylvie is homophonic with s'il vit, i.e. “if he lives”) ... and he lived. She “concretised” - it is his term - their meeting. He lived, he married her, she fell pregnant. When informed of the pregnancy, he began to worry about a small brown spot on one of his toes. He transformed this spot, in his mythomania, into a malignant tumour, a melanoma, and, as his wife's belly filled out, he grew his “cancer” according to a textbook of pathology. He absented himself for a supposed hospitalisation, in order to undergo chemotherapy, and then surgery. He was afraid he would lose the toe, or worse, the whole foot. Finally, in his story, he only lost the toe (the second mutilation, mythomaniacal, but just as real as the first, appeared in the real). Ever since, he wore a sock, day and night (which Sylvie never questioned, out of respect for his dignity). So this sock, which was there to hide the supposedly missing toe, in fact concealed its presence, since the cancer, like the amputation, was nothing but fiction. A few weeks before the delivery, he announced that his cancer was in remission, and they ‘gave birth together’ to a little girl, whom he was crazy about. He chose to work at night, and to take care of her, exclusively, during the day. He loved

bathing her, changing her, dressing her, feeding her. He discovered in himself a new talent, and he dedicated it to her: for her he knitted, passionately. And when finally one day he told his colleagues, who were all women, that the mother of his daughter had died, can we not consider that he was telling them that he actually was the mother of his daughter?

To conclude, I would like to come back to the mutilation, which appears twice in the real, each time the foreclosed paternal signifier is evoked.

Firstly, he loved in vain. His sweetheart left him for someone else, and nothing of his love was left to him but the hole, the gaping wound that he made himself where one takes the pulse, on that artery whose pulsation testifies to the beating of the heart.

Then, he was going to become a father. His attempt at an ideal identification with his own father had already failed; he was not a doctor although he pretended to be one. So, the hole, the mutilation imposed itself once again on him - this leads us to the only man he could talk about consistently and warmly, his maternal grandfather, who lost a leg in the war, and who could never tolerate a prosthesis, because of a painful stump. This one-legged grandfather, permanently provided with an empty trouser leg and with two sticks, was nevertheless, according to him, "full of life and joy, despite his amputation". These are the two sticks he begged for, and managed to get, during the "acute phase" of his "melanoma", i.e. during Sylvie's pregnancy. He could no longer put his foot on the ground, and only these sticks could support him. It was with this grandfather that he spent all his summers as a child, from him he learned what he knew of life. With him he ritually put flowers on the grave of his two uncles, killed during the colonial war of liberation.

This grave, shared by the two brothers, was singular: on the stone were engraved, side by side, the two Christian names, but under it there was only one body, the other having been blown up on the battlefield.

When he mutilated himself, in the wake of his unhappy love affair, our patient had just gone through the difficulties of having his identity card renewed. He had then to face the fact that, because of an administrative error, he no longer existed on the central register of the state. Nowhere was he registered, under the name of his father, on the symbolic register of the state. But he knew there was a place where he was inscribed, he had seen it, a place where he was inscribed even before he was born, but under the name of his mother. This place was the cemetery where his one-legged grandfather took him every summer; it was the gravestone and the eternal present of its epitaph, which covered the single body and the missing one of the two beloved brothers. His mother could never overcome her grief at their death, and she insisted on giving him both their Christian names. The entire logic of his being rests there, articulated in a striking condensation: life and death, presence and absence, transmission from generation to generation, the name, summarising his identity around real castration, which he could not metaphorise.

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