

Little Hans and the Myth of the Pregnant Boy

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Abstract

In his seminar on “The Object Relation” (1956-1957), Jacques Lacan studied in detail a case of phobia in a child known as “Little Hans”. This study is elaborated especially around the reading of the clinical case of Freud, but it seems clear that Lacan approaches the Freudian text equipped with the analytical tools of the ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. This is evident, first of all because Lacan analyses it in his seminar but it becomes even more evident when we take the trouble to read the Lacan seminar with the different concepts of the anthropologist that meant something for him. In this article we will develop a detailed study, demonstrating that Lacan’s reading of this case of phobia owes almost everything to a myth analyzed by Lévi-Strauss, known as the myth of the “pregnant boy” explained in a conference by the ethnologist in May 1956 in which Lacan was present, or perhaps a few months before the beginning of the seminar “The object relation”.

Key words: psychoanalysis, the object relation, phobia, mythology, rite, anthropology, case of Little Hans, Claude Levi Strauss, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan

The now famous conference of May 26, 1956.

On May 26, 1956, Lévi-Strauss gave a lecture at the *Société française de*

philosophie entitled: "Sur les rapports entre la mythologie et le rituel". Lacan came to listen to it. The whole conference was transcribed and published in the *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie*.¹ The author starts from the following idea: it is often considered that the rite is nothing but the application of the myth, or that the rite is to action what the myth is to the idea. However, Lévi-Strauss is interested in cases where between myth and rite is established a kind of contradictory analogy; the one trying, or at least "seeming to try to deny, to deny, to veil, to dissimulate what the other seems to affirm". Both thus maintain a "dialectical" relationship — the word is used by the ethnologist.

Lévi-Strauss studies in particular a myth present among the Pawnee Indians of the United States, a myth that can be called "of the pregnant boy" whose story relates the theme of "becoming a shaman" and of the initiation that this becoming supposes. Here is the story, which we quote as Levi-Strauss describes it, sometimes abbreviating the narrative:

We are told of a village where a male child is born. At a very tender age, this one discovers that he possesses gifts of the healer. He experiences this by chance. No one has taught him anything. He does not know any formula; this power belongs to him in an innate way (. . .). In another village lives a sorcerer of advanced age, solidly established and enjoying an official reputation. He hears about this miraculous case and feels some jealousy. Accompanied by his wife (. . .) he comes to visit the young colleague, brings him gifts and explains that he would like to exchange some secrets with him. For several days and nights in a row, he tells the boy how he acquired his power (. . .). The old sorcerer becomes impatient and says: 'I have told you everything. It's about time you told me where you got your

¹Lévi-- Strauss C., *Sur les rapports entre la mythologie et le rituel*, 1956, 50 (3) : 699-- 722.

https://s3.archivehost.com/membres/up/784571560/GrandesConfPhiloSciences/philosc24_levistrauss_1956.pdf

powers' (. . .). And the young boy answers: 'I don't know anything; I don't know why I'm a wizard who can heal.' The old man, incredulous, conceives a lot of bitterness from this apparent refusal and he bewitches the young boy by offering him a pipe filled with magic herbs; the young boy realizes with pain that his belly is growing: he is pregnant! Reduced to despair by such a humiliating condition, he decides to abandon his family, to go on an adventure, and to let himself be devoured by wild animals. He arrives in a perilous region; warnings come from everywhere: 'Do not enter, do not advance; you risk your life.' He answers: 'I don't care!' And he falls in the middle of supernatural animals which, among the Pawnee Indians, are the patrons of magical powers. The animals feel sorry for his monstrous state. They decide to heal him. Some rodents extract the bones of the fetus and devour them. The bears perform a caesarean operation (. . .). The young boy is cleared and healed. Moreover, the animals teach him their supernatural power, thanks to which he returns to his village and kills the old sorcerer.²

As soon as the story is finished, Lévi-Strauss indicates that it is impossible not to see that it is built around a long series of oppositions: initiated shaman/uninitiated shaman, acquired power/innate power, child/old man, and confusion of sexes/differentiation of sexes. But independently of these oppositions, we must not lose sight of the fact that the myth revolves around the theme of initiation into shamanism, and that it contains at its core something impossible, namely that one can have powers in an innate way without having been initiated into these powers by another. This is the reason why I emphasize the fact that he knew his powers 'by chance' — that is, without anything premeditated — that 'nobody taught him anything,' which is the obligatory correlate of knowledge by chance; in other words, there is no transmission of knowledge from father to son or from master to pupil. Better still: the myth tells an

² *Sur les rapports entre la mythologie et le rituel, op. cit.*, p. 702--3

impossible and paradoxical story because it is the child who initiates the old man and not the other way around. The proof of this reversal is that the old sorcerer tries to lure the child prodigy by this subterfuge: "the old sorcerer constantly invokes as an argument that he has no one to whom he can transmit his powers and that he would like to entrust them to the young man," an excuse that only describes the normal situation of initiation: it is the old man who initiates, and the child who is initiated.

Lévi-Strauss explains that we have in this myth three terms: man, woman and child, two of which are well differentiated and the third (the child) undifferentiated (sometimes boy, sometimes woman because he becomes pregnant, sometimes initiated because he has shamanic powers, sometimes trapped by the old sorcerer and without any more power, thus reduced to the status of non-initiated). According to the author, we also have four essential "functions": elder/cadet, male/female. But more importantly — and this will not fall on deaf ears (I am talking about Lacan) — is that the analysis of this myth will show us the existence of a series of reversals and permutations, that is, changes in the place of each term involved, which lead to a solution of the paradox existing at the beginning of the story: without these reversals and permutations, the story would be a dead-end and meaningless. I will come back to the content of this 1956 conference in more detail, as it will have other incidences both on the seminar « The Object Relation » and on the rest of Lacan's work; but let us stop at the decisive influence that it has, it seems to me, on Lacan's analysis of the case of little Hans, an analysis exposed in his seminar only a few months after the Lévi-Strauss conference.

Little Hans and the myth of the pregnant boy

We cannot advance in our text without evoking in broad outline the Lacanian reading of the case of little Hans. If we content ourselves with Freud's opinion, the phobia of little Hans is produced by an oedipal conflict, i.e. the child's desire to be with his mother and the process of rivalry (and sometimes friendship) that he develops with his father as the case evolves. For Freud, there is, of course, a relationship between the symptom of the phobia and the Oedipus as he conceives it. Let us also add the importance of the subjective experience of castration, which turns out to be inherent in the Oedipus complex.

Lacan immediately conceives the case of little Hans in other terms. He relies on Freud's text but to say something completely different. For him, it is in the dialectic between the lack and the phallus of the mother that the case of little Hans is inscribed, manifesting what is most characteristic of him, namely the relationship to his parents, in particular his mother, as well as the symptom of his phobia. Lacan stipulates, with Freud, that the child's symptom is related to what the mother lacks, i.e. the phallus: we are immediately situated in this famous lack of penis in women. As everyone knows, this theoretical positioning facilitates the arguments of those who reject psychoanalysis: why does psychoanalysis define the woman's psyche by the lack of the phallus? What is this idea that the woman lacks something and, moreover, a penis? It seems that time does not pass for psychoanalysts and that the "achievements" — to keep this union term — of feminism and gender evolution leave psychoanalysis

unperturbed, and that nothing moves these fixed ideas about women and about the relationship between the sexes. Paradoxically, it is Claude Lévi-Strauss who can help us. If we start from the theory of the gift, according to which relations of reciprocity and symbolic duties take precedence over the object of the gift (i.e. the object given, received and returned), we can only conclude that the object of desire "in itself" is something other than the gesture of the gift, than the expectation of the gift, than the very institution of the gift. If you desire a child, it is not simply the human being in question that you desire (namely, simple reproduction): you deposit in him all your desires, desires that will be, by definition, different from the concrete object. Lacan calls phallus this desire deposited on the child. We are simply applying here the theory of the gift to human desire, that of the man or that of the woman. The child is for the mother (the one who desires him and who is at the forefront of the relationship with him), what she lacks — insofar as, if we start from the idea that by the system of the gift we are in obligation, and that this obligation (to give, to receive, to give back) puts us in the position of debtors, we have a symbolic debt, and thus a lack: we must give, receive and give back something other than what we can give, receive and give back! In a certain way, the notion of "*plus-de-jouir*" in Lacan, modelled on the Marxist plus-value, is already present in Marcel Mauss: receiving obliges one to give . . . and to return, and to receive and to give . . . and so on. There is no lack of ethnological descriptions of an "inflation" of gifts (each party gives more and more in order to force the other party to do the same). In our civilizations, it is for example the technological

gadgets that constitute a good example of inflation and waste — inflation and waste that constitute a structural fact (that which shelters the gift as a total social fact).

If the symbolic system functions in this way — that is to say, it alienates all the desires in a given society, which makes Mauss say that we are faced with a total social fact -- we do not see why the mother of little Hans would be an exception. The idea of a "total social fact" implies that it is valid for everyone. The mother of little Hans wants her child as a substitute for the gesture of the "gift" that she lacks, like all "gifts" worthy of the name. Lacan adds that in her case, this desire of the mother does not necessarily imply the desire of a man who could appear as an "intermediary" of the gift: in her case, it is a "gift" without a donor -- both Freud and Lacan have diagnosed this "paternal deficiency". In any case, she would seem to be very far from the example of a woman who introduces the father as the one who has the phallus. What more could the detractors of psychoanalysis want? This is a case that contradicts psychoanalytic theory. We could go even further and say that all the cases examined by Freud contradict the analytical theory, which is why he reworked it several times. Following the same reasoning, that of the atypical character of the case which escapes the analytical theory, we would say that the father of little Hans has difficulty imposing his masculine insignia -- we would be very surprised if a woman like the mother of little Hans had been able to choose a man who would impose his masculinity (we are told that she is "Jewish and progressive"). This fact does not help the son: it is rather the mother, it is the case to say it, who wears "the pants", whereas the father. . . reads Freud.

As everyone knows, in the case of little Hans we have three characters: the father, the mother and the child, plus Freud, a distant character, but who counts as a fourth character. For Lacan, the starting point is a normalizing identification of the child with what the mother lacks, in this sense it seems obvious that the child fulfills the mother, that he is a gift from heaven, that he has become the most important thing in her life, that in the mother's life everything passes through the child and that the rest is only a pale reality, quite secondary. In any case, we do not see why it should not be so, even if the mother seems, in the best of cases, perfectly neurotic and that she probably has other worries in her life than her own child. But in order to remain on the right path of psychoanalysis, let us admit that the mother is fully fulfilled by her child: this is not a surprise and not only does it not contradict psychoanalysis but, moreover, it does not contradict the most common sense. According to Lacan, little Hans, and I quote: "is caught at the beginning in the luring relation where the play of the phallus first takes place. This is enough to maintain between his mother and him a progressive movement, whose goal, perspective, meaning, is the perfect identification with the object of maternal love." Obviously, this state of affairs is not a surprise and the situation, thus considered, has nothing more normal. Except that Lacan detects that it is a situation "without issue" insofar as nothing comes to relativize this value of the child for his mother: he has become all that she lacks, she needs, for the moment, nothing else. The father is not a secondary character, far from it; but he does not seem to count in this primary relationship between the child and the mother. Add to this everything we know about a certain promiscuity of the mother, the fact that the child

accompanies her when she goes to the toilet, etc. The father does not accompany his wife to the bathroom. The father does not accompany his wife to the toilet and, in principle, it is not sexual debauchery that prevails between them -- they will end up divorcing some time later, as we know.

Nothing and nobody (especially not the father) modifies a kind of phallic omnipotence of the child with respect to his mother, except that the child himself seems to be unaware, he the first, of where this "omnipotence" comes from: it is conferred to him by the desire of the phallus (of the gift) in the mother, by the omnipotence of the phallic system of the gift where it doesn't matter what one is as a being, what counts is that one is worth a lot since one is the object of a symbolic gesture, that of the gift. This is how Lacan sees the starting point of the story, of the case of little Hans: the child, like any other child, lives and desires according to the desire of others, and above all the desire of the mother who, through her desire, makes him exist not only as a living being but also and above all as a desiring being, inscribed in the symbolic world where objects exist and are worth according to the existence and the value that one grants them, and not according to a real value.

But there is more: not only is the child "all-powerful" and is, therefore, in a luring situation with respect to his mother but, moreover, Lacan inaugurates another reading of the case when he emphasizes the child's bodily experience. Indeed, what seems to him essential and massive in this clinical observation is the fact that not only is he identified with the phallus, with the precious object that fulfills the mother, but, above all, that this situation cannot last long because he cannot be satisfied with being

the object that the other lacks. And why? Because he has a body. What does this mean? Well, that he has erections, which reminds him that he has a penis. He is thus "embarrassed" by this bodily activity, onanistic, which has the merit to wake him up from the long sleep, from the idyllic and luring relation with the mother. This penis that starts to move, as Lacan describes it, preoccupies the child and makes him look for a solution to this contradictory situation: the mother wants him as a substitute of the phallus, object of a symbolic gift, but doesn't want to know anything about the penis that agitates. The father, for his part, spends long moments questioning his child about his own experience, his feelings and impressions of the relationship he has with himself and with his mother, he devotes himself without counting the cost to finding a solution to his son's phobia thanks to the theoretical tools of psychoanalysis (of the "anxious questionings of the father") -- and he keeps Freud informed of the progress of the "cure" he is carrying out with his child. Often, these discussions with the child do not produce anything important and the father leaves empty-handed. Let us not forget that Hans does not know much, he finds himself in a particular subjective situation, that of being the object of a gift, because, after all, since when has the object of the gift "known" why he is the object of a gift?

This impasse, this dead-end situation, finds a happy ending. Indeed, as the father does not manage to ensure his function as a father, namely that of symbolically "castrating" the child, substitutes for the father are needed who work in his place: this is the role of the installer, the plumber. Hans says: "The plumber came and first removed my buttocks with pliers and gave me another one; and then the same thing

with my peepee". Lacan, for his part, describes the situation thus: "If, on the father's side, there is no castrator, we have on the other hand a certain number of characters who have come in the place of the castrator -- the *Schlosser* who began by unscrewing the bathtub, and then who pierces, and another (. . .) who appears in the fantasy of May 2, which closes the situation. As the god does not perform all his functions very well, the *deus ex machina* is brought out, the installer, to whom little Hans makes him fulfill part of the castrator's functions required by the castration complex (. . .) . What the installer comes to change is little Hans's backside, his plate"³. Thank God! For the child, lost as he was, could only conceive the world in an imaginary way, outside of symbolic reference points, which is why he was even able to imagine -- and Lacan gives great importance to this fact -- that he could be a father who "had children", like little sausages, which Lacan interprets as being a pregnancy fantasy: "This moment of such striking oscillation in the dialogue [with the father] shows the repressed character in him of everything that is of the order of paternal creation, whereas from that moment on, he articulates on the contrary that he is going to have children"⁴.

Now this description of the facts, as well as the framework that Lacan conceives in his seminar « The Object Relation », and which extends between March 6 and June 26, 1957, therefore a little less than a year after Lévi-Strauss's conference of May 26, 1956, coincides almost point by point with the story of the "pregnant boy" studied by the ethnologist.

³ Lacan, J., *La relation d'objet*, Paris, Seuil, 1994, p. 366.

⁴ *La relation d'objet, op. cit.*, p. 384.

Let us review these points of analogy: 1) the "pregnant boy" is in the impossible position of being an innate, all-powerful shaman: before becoming "pregnant", the child has all the powers, he is an initiate in shamanism without having been one himself before (there is a "deficiency" of initiator) and, as a result, he is a "superinitiate" to use a word from Lévi-Strauss. The same situation applies to little Hans (in the Lacanian reading, since Freud does not present him in these terms): he is, in a way, a "superphallus" insofar as he experiences a "perfect identification with the object of maternal love", he is identified with the phallus that is missing from the mother, which gives him all the powers. 2) the "pregnant boy" is fooled by the old sorcerer but, in reality, he is fooled by the situation of believing that he has all the powers, whereas in reality he does not know himself from where he gets these powers: "he has no formula", he is thus fooled by the relation that he maintains with an omnipotence, more than by the old sorcerer. The same situation with little Hans, according to the Lacanian version -- for Freud never conceived the idea that the child was in an omnipotence: he is in a "luring" situation with respect to the mother, for the latter makes him believe that he is all that is missing. 3) the "pregnant boy" is interrogated by an old, greedy sorcerer ("For several days and nights in a row, he tells the boy how he acquired his power (. . .). The old sorcerer becomes impatient and says: 'I have told you everything. It's about time you told me where you got your powers'"). Similarly, we find a similar parallel for little Hans in the "anxious questioning of the father". 4) the "pregnant boy" realizes that he is pregnant -- just as little Hans is embarrassed by his erect penis which does not seem to interest his mother

-- so as not to evoke the fantasy of the "pregnant" little Hans of which Freud speaks.⁵

5) Finally, the "pregnant boy" is saved by wild beasts that open his belly and eat his fetus. The same story, according to the Lacanian interpretation, for little Hans: he is symbolically "saved" by the plumber, the fitter, who "pierces" (in the child's imagination) the bathtub but also his belly and allows for a beneficial symbolic castration.

Analogies and/or "invariants"?

The initial and paradoxical fact according to which the child has not been initiated seems to me fundamental because it is a child who does not need a father, -- and even more, it is the "father" (the old sorcerer) who comes to learn something from the prodigy that he has as a "son": the situation is thus doubly paradoxical, just as in the case of little Hans where the "dialogues" between father and son are destined to "acquire" information from the child, who occupies the place of the knower, the one who knows. As Lacan points out, "The child [little Hans] is the one who pretends, or who plays at pretending »⁶.

But Lacan's analysis naturally does not stop at the "luring" situation of the child as a substitute for the gift = phallus because, as we will see in more detail later, there is the introduction of a new element⁷: the child is indeed in a "luring" position, he embodies all that the mother lacks, he is identified with the gift, but he also has a body, a pulsional life. Lacan describes the intrusion of this bodily element in the following

⁵ Freud, S., *Cinq psychanalyse*, P.U.F., Paris, *Analyse d'une phobie*, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

⁶ *La relation d'objet*, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

⁷ *La relation d'objet*, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

way: "There arises then a new element" namely that his "genital" reality (his penis) is not up to the expectations of the other, all the more so because, and Lacan insists on this, the child's mother despises his penis. Lacan specifies this anguishing moment with these words: "confronted with the immense gap that there is between satisfying an image and having something real to present -- to present cash. . ."8, he finds himself in an embarrassing situation. He finds himself in an embarrassing situation, his body appears, through his erections, as a reality in its own right, a reality quite different from that which is valued by the fact of the gift, of the identification with the phallus, of embodying the object that the other lacks. We find exactly the same difficult moment in the child of the myth of the "pregnant boy" when the old sorcerer exhorts him to explain where or from whom he gets his powers. Let us recall the words of Lévi-Strauss: "the young boy answers: 'I know nothing; I do not know why I am a sorcerer capable of healing.'" Little Hans, like the child of the myth, cannot assume "cash" and especially does not know at all where he gets his supernatural powers, those of being the phallus (the gift) that the mother lacks, according to Lacan's idea.

But there is more in this obvious parallel between the reading of the case of little Hans and the story of the "pregnant boy" of Lévi-Strauss. Let us quote Lacan again: "Because nothing is predetermined on the imaginary level, a completely distinct phenomenon, but which, for the child, is attached to it imaginatively, comes to bring an essential element of disturbance at the moment when the first confrontation with growth occurs -- it is the phenomenon of turgidity. Just as the pregnant boy realizes,

⁸ *La relation d'objet, op. cit.*, p. 226.

after having been fooled by the old wizard, of his strange state: "the young boy realizes with pain that his belly is growing: he is pregnant!"

And that's not all, because the 1956 conference had on Lacan the effect of discovering -- or at least confirming -- the intuitions that were germinating in him: the plumber who screws and unscrews the faucet and makes a hole in the belly of little Hans is decisive for the evolution of the clinical case. It is this intervention that "cures" the little child. These data, it seems to me, will enable us to listen to what follows and to approach other striking facets of this meeting point between Lacan and Lévi-Strauss.

One can and should ask the following question: are these analogies the result of Levi-Strauss's influence on Lacan, or are they sufficiently prevalent to speak of "invariants" in the two accounts? After all, Freud was not present at the conference of 26 May 1956. But I propose a third possibility, which is to assume that one thing does not exclude the other. In a way, it would be necessary to: 1) know the analogies between Freud and Levi-Strauss (i.e., between Little Hans, "the real one" and not Lacan's reading, and the myth of the "pregnant boy") and 2) understand the analogies between the myth told by Levi-Strauss and Lacan's version of the case studied by Freud. What do we call "invariants"? These are structural constants that can be found in different cases that are not related to each other (clinical cases, myths, rites, folklore stories, etc.). For example, concerning the case of the Rat Man, as we have studied it, even if Lacan admits to having applied "immediately" the Levi-Straussian grid of the canonical formula to Freud's case, we can also assume that the clinical case may have

lent itself perfectly to it. Another example of invariant is the gift, as a total social fact. The question I ask again is: to what extent do the case of little Hans and the case of the myth of the "pregnant boy" not share the same structure? There are elements that are not "reconstructed" by Lacan: for example, the idea of an imaginary pregnancy is indeed present in Freud⁹. I would say that even the idea of the omnipotence of the child postulated by Freud in other writings -- and which would account for both the myth of the "pregnant boy" and the case of little Hans -- functions as an "invariant". Or let us take the anxious questioning of the father who expects alms from the son, which reminds us of the paradoxical situation of the old sorcerer who seeks to be "initiated" by the little boy while the latter does not know how to answer. This "reversed" situation can also be an invariant found in myths and in clinical situations. Consider this sample from Freud's case: "The next day I subjected Hans to an interrogation in order to find out why he had come to join us in the night and, after some resistance on his part, the following dialogue took place, which I immediately *shorthanded* (my emphasis):

Him: There was in the room a big giraffe and a crumpled giraffe, and the big one shouted that I had taken away the crumpled one. Then she stopped screaming, and so I sat on the crumpled giraffe.

Me (puzzled): What? A crumpled giraffe? What was that?

(. . .) Why did you come to our room?

Him: *I don't know myself* (emphasis added)."

It is clear that the old man "immediately shorthanded" the information given by the child, but that at the same time, the latter "didn't know anything". The situation is

⁹ *Analyse d'une phobie, op. cit.*, p. 184.

perfectly superposable to the story of the pregnant boy -- and one can exclude any reciprocal influence of the sources.

It is undoubtedly in this intertwining of the Levi-Straussian source (Lacan applies the instruments of Levi-Strauss) and the "invariants" present in the objects studied by both authors, independently of their dialogue, that the key to the encounter lies. One could object: if it is a question of invariants, one does not even need a meeting between the authors! But the meeting took place.