

BOOK REVIEWS

LIFE WITHOUT FATHER

The Father: Historical, Psychological and Cultural Perspectives. By Luigi Zoja, translated by Henry Martin. Hove and New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2001; xii+314pp, \$24.95 pb.

Luigi Zoja, President of the International Association for Analytical Psychology, has written a book that is flawed yet still significant. His theme is the loss of the father and of fatherhood in modern society, a loss that he sees as having been progressive over a period of centuries. He sets out to provide a psychological history of fatherhood from prehistoric times down to the present, and to show what the loss of the father signifies for society.

The flaws in his work quickly become evident. In the first section of his book, Zoja considers the prehistory of the father, drawing on animal material, particularly mammalian and primate evidence, as well as early hominid information. In itself, this is very welcome. Psychotherapy, of whatever school, makes claims about the way the human mind works and about human pathology. Consequently, to ignore the progress being made through ethology, especially primatology, and evolutionary psychology is in the long run to align oneself with the flat-earthers. But the use made of these sources by Zoja is one sided. He argues, for example, that in mammals,

the paternity of an infant is unknown and the father plays no role in the upbringing of the young. That is *suppressio veri*. It is known that in not a few species males will destroy young they have reason to believe are not their own, and that in some animal groupings male-female relationships exist in highly complex forms. He wishes also to hold that there is a fundamental difference in kind between primate and human fatherhood. There may be; but to ignore the increasing and well documented evidence for the existence of culture among the primates is grossly to oversimplify the state of affairs. To cite De Waal on the Bonobo while omitting any reference to his work on, *inter alia*, politics in chimpanzees or conflict resolution in primates is a somewhat surprising and partial use of the available sources. Some primates, for example, do appear to recognize their own family relationships.

It is, however, when Zoja turns to the hominids that his argument becomes unacceptable rather than just questionable. He supposes that the evidence gained from primates can be read back to hominids - conveniently overlooking the fact that primates are just as evolved as humans. He describes complex putative social behaviour patterns among hominids, involving the development of sophisticated relationships between the sexes. There simply is, at present, no evidence adequate to support assertions so detailed. Our knowledge of

hominid society is actually extremely limited. While we can be almost certain that there would have been social structure, we have no real basis for describing what such a structure would have been like. When Zoja does make some acknowledgement of the lack of evidence, he continues: 'As stated before, there's no way of knowing the dates at which such changes took place. Yet nothing should stop us from trying to shape an image of these creatures, who, after all, at just this time, were beginning to specialise in mental images.' In other words, he is saying he knows what was happening at a specific time but has no idea what that time was.

That should alert us to what is really going on: Zoja is describing how he imagines things to have been, and that imagining is directed by the things he wants to say about the present. It is mythopoiesis in action.

His description of the development of fatherhood through historical times through to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also leaves a great deal to be desired, and for the same reason. He isn't actually that interested in the details of history, as he does, in places, admit. But without paying attention to those details, saying that particular psychological developments were happening at particular times just is not justifiable. That cannot but weaken the force of his analysis, and that is a shame, for he does have some pertinent points to make. In fact, much of his historical account is not essential to the observations he has to offer on the present-day state of fatherhood, although it is to the overarching myth he wishes to create: that fatherhood is entirely socially constructed and defined, whereas motherhood is relatively invariant across time. He believes that the traditional understandings of fatherhood have been

permanently destroyed, leaving behind longings for, and memories of, them. He sees the market as having replaced the vertical father-son relationship with a horizontal brother-brother one, in which males are competing in the manner of the primal horde, and in which fathers are judged purely by reference to their economic success, and judged by their children, who increasingly see them as irrelevant.

In its explication of specific myths, his book shows considerable strengths. His accounts of the stories of Hector, Ulysses and Aeneas, and of the myth of the male as sole progenitor show him displaying great sensitivity to the texts, and to the psychological drama being worked out in the various narratives. That makes one wish he would treat his observations about present-day developments in a manner that is as carefully nuanced, and that shows a finessed care for the distinction between the mythic, the sociological and the economic. It may be fine to talk of the primal horde if one is clear that the horde is a piece of early twentieth-century imagery, and uses it as a clue to the anxieties of that time; but to conflate the imagery with talk of people actually regressing to the state of the primal horde is to give up any claim to precision of thought. There almost certainly never was a primal horde, in the sense of an actually existing early human/hominid group without social structure, and if there was not, regression to that state cannot occur. Modern males do compete; but so did sixteenth-century ones: to describe the difference one needs to say a lot about the particular ages and about specific societies. Zoja knows this, but his analysis is far too thin, because it is far too schematic.

Zoja does have insights to offer on the present state of the father in the West. He is

right that children lose out when fatherhood is weakened, and that they resent it when the father does not play a proper role in their upbringing. He is also right that there is a sacral element to fatherhood: the father does have a benediction to give that the child needs and wants to receive. And that points to the central failure of Zoja's book. He sees that there is an archetype of fatherhood; but if there is then fatherhood is not *qua* fatherhood socially determined. An archetype and the psychological demands that it makes stands over and against any society, as the first and most powerful critic of that society. Zoja should be saying far more about what the human psyche requires of society with regard to fatherhood. It would enable him to use psychology to offer a political critique of modern society.

That might lead him to a rather less pessimistic conclusion than holding that fatherhood has been destroyed. History, society and mythology are all eurocentric in Zoja's work. One will find nothing here of the Arab father, or of the African or the Chinese. Certainly, there isn't a culture on the face of the earth that isn't affected to some extent by Westernization or the triumph of capitalism, but there is a wide range of responses to those effects. Examining some of that range of responses would enable one to see more clearly just which factors do act to undermine the role of the father, and, just as importantly, what factors can buttress it.

Zoja's expositions of the Greek myths, and his insights about modern European and American culture, mean that there is reason to read this book, but overall it is a disappointment.

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PSYCHOLOGY LITE

Tracking The White Rabbit: A Subversive View of Modern Culture. By Lyn Cowan. London: Brunner Routledge, 2002; 135pp, £9.99 pb.

As a child, Lyn Cowan never trusted anything she could see easily and never believed anything she was told if it sounded too assured. This scepticism did not give her a great deal of security but it did create within her a tendency towards deploying subversion as both a coping mechanism and an intellectual strategy. Jungian psychology most accorded with her subversive turn of mind as it observed an unconscious psyche that was paradoxically both conservative and creative and that was affected at once by archetypes and experience. And, for Cowan, this was just as well, as an attitude requiring a single explanation, as in, say, most absolutist and essentialist doctrine, sees problems in terms of solutions instead of offering up the interesting complexities that sustain paradox. Hence her observation that if it is true that the psyche is by nature paradoxical, where we cannot sustain paradox we lose psyche. Jung saw analysis as amongst other things an exploration of this experience. It is this process that Cowan identifies as the one that has brought her to her particular way of thinking. So while *Tracking The White Rabbit* is psychology lite, which is to say it is accessible, it does not shirk complexity.

Cowan herself was a child of the McCarthy era. When she was a young girl, her father drew cartoons for comic books – a profession thought to be un-American and, ergo morally suspect. Growing up in a liberal Jewish home, however, she believes that many of the conservative messages regarding accepted norms of behaviour that

were prevalent at the time were far more morally suspect. And it is for this reason that Cowan begins her journey, casting a scrutinous eye over a range of topics from abortion to sexuality, eccentricity and melancholy to the use of language in psychoanalysis, in an attempt to engage with the complexities of these phenomena in the context of their social and political readings.

Cowan begins by paying homage to eccentricity and to the work of one eccentric in particular – Lewis Carroll. In her deconstruction of his famous children's book *Alice in Wonderland*, she reveals a reading of the book that pokes fun at the rigidity of conventional Victorian mores. The central tenets of the Wonderland story, Cowan believes, are articulated by the Tweedledum twins who claim that Alice's waking of the sleeping Red King is impossible since she is only one of the things in his dream (p. 16).

'You know very well you're not real.'

'I am real!' said Alice, and began to cry.

'You won't make yourself a bit realler by crying' Tweedledum remarked.

Cowan suspects that The Tweedles are right: we are each an image and reflection of the 'reality' that we live and experience on the earth's surface. Under that surface however – and we must remember that Alice has chased the white rabbit underground – there is quite literally and metaphorically acres of space for another version of 'reality'. Wonderland is a place where we discover new ways of perceiving reality, where we discover how we can make sense of ourselves through unconventional stories and readings. How, though, does this insight aid us in the process of analysis? Cowan believes that by making ourselves more aware of the myriad ways to make sense of

ourselves, we can make the journey of self-knowledge that little bit easier. The goal of psychoanalysis is not, she believes, to make us more 'balanced' because being centred requires that we remain fixed, as in 'dead centre'. To be eccentric, or out of centre, is a mode of survival. Paradoxically in this statement, Cowan relocates eccentricity, placing it within a wider psychoanalytical discourse, and thus removes it from its fringe status.

In her study of abortion (p. 44), Cowan asks the reader to consider the myth of Artemis, the Greek goddess, who is wild and self-sufficient. She kills for herself and knows when young life is unable to be sustained, hence her decision, in the case of abortion, to kill her unborn child. If we view women in this way, as powerful and fearless hunters, society in general, and men in particular, are intimidated by the ultimate power of woman, able to give and take life, seemingly at will. Cowan suggests that we consider women in this way, because women are earthly, free spirits whose innate self-knowledge is primal and to this end cannot not be questioned by those who seek to impose control over a woman's body.

Cowan's analysis seems to be predicated on this fundamental belief, so 'true' as to require an almost religious leap of faith. Cowan neglects to confront the anti-abortionists' assertion that termination of pregnancy is about ending a human life. Rather it is about the ending of a potential human life. The subtlety is key here, since the growing mass of cells are still wholly dependent on the woman in order to continue to exist. Surely it is this factor that provides a more convincing argument for abortion?

Cowan comes into her own when she talks about the language we use to describe our states of mind in everyday and psychoanalytic

discourses. In her chapter ‘feeding the psyche’ (p. 25), Cowan takes issue with words such as ‘issues’ or ‘dysfunctional’ or ‘co-dependent’, which reduce the human experience to a series of catch-all, generalized ‘conditions’. In one such example she says

This is why I’m not sharing anything with you here. Instead, I’m telling you what I think. Share is a nice word but it has a shadow and it means that whoever is sharing is giving only a part, not the whole . . . The word is less generous than it sounds, and it is often used as a moralistic weapon, implicitly obligating whoever is on the receiving end to accept what is shared or risk appearing to be arrogant, aloof, anti-social, ungood. (p. 27)

What Cowan is describing is a transition in the way society performs tolerance, understanding, acceptance, even. Prior to the wholesale use of words such as ‘share’, public and private discussions about our inner life have been limited to therapy treatment rooms. The increased use of ‘mentalspeak’ (as opposed to a more corporeal or visceral language that she believes is essential for the examination and expression of our emotions) has made us passive.

If I say, ‘I have a lot of anger,’ I can have my anger and never have to be angry . . . Mental-speak reflects our culture’s schizophrenic split between mind and body . . . It perpetuates those splits by not including the language of the body and the physicality of words. It does not help us repair the self-divided condition with which we enter the world. (p. 31)

In her examination of lesbian sexuality ‘Homo/aesthetics, or, romancing the self’ (p. 94) Cowan explains the importance of healthy narcissism and of the self-love that comprises a healthy sense of self.

Narcissism is a pathology not when it suggests homosexuality but when it excludes love of an Other, an Other of either sex whose separate reality ought to evoke and excite love rather than to preclude it . . . My love is not only of self; it is required in the image of my lover’s face, and all my senses, feasting on her, draw forth my delighted recognition. (p. 99)

This statement is all the more significant in the context of a Jungian analysis of sexuality, which she believes, ‘tends to speak almost exclusively of romantic love as heterosexual projection, not noticing the thick emotionality and convolutions of the heart that attend romantic love are not at all different when the “other” is of the same sex’ (p. 95). As beings who live in a culture where the predominant and most widely accepted form of sexuality is heterosexual, Cowan says we are taught to eroticize people of the opposite sex and experience this, and only this, as romantic love. This, Cowan believes, has been so normalized that we learn to experience this projection in a culturally predetermined way, so that to experience and express romantic and erotic love for someone of the same sex is perceived at best as atypical/unusual and ergo kinky, or at worst as sinful. This has indeed been the experience of many lesbians and gay men up until very recently in many countries in the Western world. ‘Romancing the self’ is an explanation of why some people still mis/understand homosexuality as problematic. It’s an important observation that, if the growing acceptance of homosexuality in public life continues to accelerate, may require further analysis. Cowan writes briefly on this one element of same-sex love – there are many more areas that may benefit from a careful examination. I look forward to reading more of her writing on the embracing of

difference and sameness within heterosexual as well as homosexual relationships. In all, *Tracking the White Rabbit* is a bold side step from conventional psychoanalytic discourses, which took the author 20 years to complete. Let's hope further

thoughts from Cowan come sooner in future.

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