The Fall of a Will: Acting Out and Suicide

by Roberto Harari

How can Freud’s theoretical concepts on suicide be condensed since he never dealt exhaustively with this subject in one specific text? He did not even use the notion of suicide as a decisive factor to elaborate his notion of the death drive. Instead, he based this notion on three specific problems: traumatic neurosis, children’s play, and transference. It is also possible to add to this list the notion of repetition compulsion (Freud 1920a). In view of these premises, I proposed some time ago that the inquiry on suicide should concentrate on Chapter VIII of Psychopathology of Everyday Life in which he discusses Vergessen, bungled actions or clumsiness (Freud 1901, 162). To discuss committing suicide in a book whose title deals with “life,” can be regarded as a paradoxical Moebius strip concerning drives. I propose, now, to understand the meaning of the suicide attempt which appears in Freud’s paper “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman” (1920b, 145) according to the point of view provided by this chapter “Bungled Actions.”

To begin with, we should notice that the chapter is divided into seven sections, each marked with one of the first seven letters of the alphabet. What criterion is there for this division? Even though each has an introductory explanation, it is not easy to know. The fact is that the richness of the casuistry outstrips the purpose of each introduction. Still, it seems as if a progression is sketched, as if a seed of what is repressed tries to sprout. However, this progression—from unimportant matters to what Freud calls “fatal clumsiness”—is not homogeneous; like all those who say one thing thinking they say exactly the opposite. Why? Because

In Spanish “La caída del querer,” where querer implies both to will something and to love something or somebody.

Of what and how many “lives” was Freud thinking? One is daily life, another erotic life, still another the struggle for life, yet another sexual life, another.... These are conceptual categories then, and not just biological entities. In a manner of speaking, so many lives captured by one signifier relates us to cats... Oh the single trait! And now, a digression: Why does Strachey omit transcribing “life” in the title of Contributions to the Psychology of Love (Freud 1910), when Freud’s original text reads Liebeleben (love-life)? Strachey chooses to write simply “love.” And why does Etcheverry, the last Spanish translator of Freud’s papers, omit the same word? Thus we embark in the repression of a category that deserves to be worked on: the perspective of the “lives” considered by Freud.
already in paragraph "c" we read a parapraxis that happens to Freud when he hurriedly takes a suburban train to visit a patient who "had fallen from a balcony some months earlier and had since then been unable to walk" (166).

Freud associates his own parapraxis with the fact that "the little railway station was at the same place at which some years before I had seen a young man who had not been able to walk properly after an emotional experience" (166). Let us retain these signifiers: suburban train, falling from a balcony, suffering a strong emotional experience, being unable to walk properly. Later, I will confront them with the suicide attempt of the young woman in Freud's paper "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman."

As in all readings done from a psychoanalytical point of view—in which we read a meaning through deferred action—I will attempt to read section "c" from paragraph "g." What does Freud suggest in this last point? Freud writes: "suicide can never be ruled out as a possible outcome of the psychical conflict" (178). Amazing! The sentence does not say "a psychical conflict," but it clearly states "the psychical conflict." Where does this indetermination come from?

It is in this context that Freud proposes an illuminating differentiation. He writes that "many apparently accidental injuries...are really instances of self-injury" because of a tendency "to self-punishment which is constantly on the watch" and which "normally finds expression in self-reproach or contributes to the formation of a symptom." Suggestively, Freud adds that this tendency knows how to take "advantage of an external situation that chance happens to offer, or lends assistance to that situation until the desired injurious effect is brought about" (179).

Such is the case of the injuries mentioned earlier. What makes Freud distinguish between these two types of manifestations? To the best of my understanding, a difference between the symptom and the order that entails agieren (acting)—in function of the division of the subject against himself—appears here. In other words, a return dimension, which does not come from what is repressed but from what is Real. I will thus put forward a thesis, without attempting to demonstrate it right away, in the shape of a question: Is suicide the pristine example of an imagined jouissance of the Other, a sudden appearance and climax of what every single act seeks as manifestation of "life"?

Let us continue. We have pointed out a non-exclusive disjunction between the symptom and the act; now if we take into account what Freud proposes in Inhibitions, Symptom and Anxiety, it could happen that if the symptom is excluded, the act may depend on motor or sensorial inhibition (1925, 77). This is certainly so in those cases in which the fatal clumsiness was such as a result of momentary absence of a sensorial or motor ability regularly possessed by the subject. This is a short-circuit that points to the paralyzing, benumbing impact of the a-signifier jouissance whose end could mean death.

So we have to point out that in the cases mentioned before, the subjects had verbalized either a weariness of life or a suicidal intention. In this way, those who could hear had already been warned of the presumed "accident" or "misfortune." In spite of this, a disjunction is valid. Freud says that one thing is "half-intentional self-destruction" and something quite different "consciously intentional suicide" (180-81). Therefore, the most elementary difference lies in whether the purpose of the suicide is conscious or not, aside from whether it is achieved or not. This is systematized in the following graph:

![Suicide Chart]

We will see that the place of "X" is precisely that which illustrates Freud's "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman." Momentarily, this will be another mystery to unfold. But first, there are two questions to single out. Is this phenomenon, which necessarily involves the body, decisive for understanding the meaning of jouissance? What is the reason for Freud's insistence on the character of "consciousness" concerning suicide and what implications does the "Cns" have in this particular subject? It is remarkable that its place suffers a mutation in reference to the symptom, which is defined as such by its exclusion from the "deliberately conscious."

Lacan used to say that the one who wants to be insane is not so, while the one who wants to commit suicide does so. Thus, those who commit suicide will state a will, a different dimension from that of desire. This is confirmed by Lacan's reference to Empedocles' suicide who "by throwing himself into Mount Etna, leaves forever present in the memory of men this symbolic act of his being-for-death" (1953, 84). In Lacan's view, the act of Empedocles "shows that a will is involved" (1960, 271; emphasis added). Brocca adds that the one who commits suicide poses the question of how to operate with his Being (1982).
Given the precision of Lacan’s writing, the allusion to the will (also in the original French) should not be regarded as a result of synonimical carelessness. In the same way, it is known that the disjunction pleasure/jouissance has a strict sense in Lacan’s theory that removes these words from their common connotation. It is not by chance that these two concepts are grouped in a quadrangle—according to Lacan’s graph—together with desire and will (1967).

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That is to say, pleasure fulfills the same functions with regard to jouissance that desire does in relation to the will. What separates desire from pleasure must have something in common with what separates the will from jouissance. In other words, if desire seeks pleasure, beyond the hedonism of the metonymy proper of the chain of signifiers, the will of jouissance opens. This is the opening of Goodness in a Super Ego manner, to the clashing of the with the Well Being of the subject, which constitutes the register of the Real, whose awakening is based on negatively hallucinating the pregnancy of the body, which is blocked—not able to be sensitively conducted, as it is captured by the will (Harari 1981, 89). It goes beyond the pleasure principle which abolishes any kind of dialectics. Desire constitutes a barrier against the will, it fends it off. Che va? What do you want? The jouissance of the Other.

Let us return to clumsiness and this time in order to recall how Freud describes offering: propitious and/or sacrificial giving that entails either the breaking or the destruction of the beloved object. Offering then can be understood as a call, from the Other and at the Other, by means of a substitute of the performed act of castration, i.e. S(A). Yes, just like the violent battering inflicted on an adored fetish. Furthermore, this object, which is present in all clumsiness, leads us to the formula of phantasm (S ↔ a) in which the object becomes the pendant of the barred subject. I would like to emphasize the paradigmatic stature of this, though it may seem an empty generalization as it is a-singular. That is to say, clumsiness injuring the object or with a topological return against the "self"—the image, the ego—establishes a complete staging of the "a" of the plus de jouir (surplus jouissance), as the niederkommen of the young homosexual woman does (Freud 1920b). I emphasized "separate," "fallen," "lost," in connection with what Lacan says. Object a’s destiny is precisely this: to fall, to let fall, to be fallen.

And in Vergreifen? It is to note in paragraph “c” that in each case something falls: a lid of an inkpot falls, a copy of the Venus of Medici falls, an Egyptian statuette falls, Freud’s son falls when his leg is caught in his father’s walking-stick, a clay vase falls, medicine drops accidentally in the eyes of an elderly patient, a woman falls from the carriage, an officer on horseback falls and dies, the woman falls in the street when she trips on the stones, a pot of hot soup falls on someone’s foot, another woman falls and dies when she is run over by a carriage, a child falls pushed by his father who is playing a dangerous game with him, a door’s key falls out of a woman’s reach.

Why such anaphora with “fall”? Because the order of repetition imposes itself. Besides linking two signifiers, the act aims at the fall of something: object a. And where is object a? Either the subject identifies with object a, or the subject intends the identification of object a. If the subject identifies with object a, its fall summons suicide; if it is of object a the scales shift to clumsiness. This is a new Moebius strip in which successful suicide attempts are truly understood. Now if the attempts are unsuccessful, after the fall object a will locate itself in an "encrusting" on the body.

Sex and death, these important psychoanalytic notions, show their strength. As Freud himself points out in the chapter under discussion:

Falling, stumbling and slipping need not always be interpreted as purely accidental miscarriages of motor actions. The double meanings that language attaches to these expressions are enough to indicate the kind of phantasies involved, which can be represented by such losses of bodily equilibrium... I had an impression that these events were differently connected and that the fall was already a product of the neurosis and expressed the same unconscious phantasies with a sexual content, which could be assumed to be the forces operating behind the symptoms. Is not the same thing meant by a prover which runs:

'When a girl falls she falls on her back?’ (174-175)

This reference to a prover allows Freud to elaborate on the popular accounts which—like superstitions or jests—look for a "meaning" in such actions as spilling salt, overturning a glass of wine, etc. In short, a hanging of ornaments like the ones mentioned before, which still required an interpretative task. As it is obvious to ask why, I will ask something different: if all the clamor of life depends on Eros, is it through this that the function of the fall is made a signifier under its rule, and that the voiceless drive is dispersed according to the function

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1English language knows this when it allows the expression: To fall in love.
of "the fall" in "voluntary" death? Should we say that in the "symptom" of falling sexual desire prevails as the cause, while in the "act" of falling the will does?

The Singular Niederkommnen

Freud uses the word Niederkommnen for interpreting the young woman's suicide attempt as related to the fantasy of giving birth—because of her father. Thus far, it seems that the signification derived from the fulfilled staging of sexual desire shows the whole view until it exhausts it. A singular circumstance, based again on the written design of the text, will help to clarify this: in Freud's text, a repetition of the account of the same attempt is ostentatious—at times gratuitous. However, we think it is not just a slip of the pen. A written repetition alerts us to notice a repetition of the attempt, just as it is found in the writing. Where? Where Freud writes that the cocotte "had spoken in just the same terms as her father, and had uttered the same prohibition" (162). How did this repetition come about? After the young woman confessed to her beloved lady that the man who had disapprovingly glanced at them was her father, the lady became angry and ordered the young woman to leave her immediately.

Leaving aside the confession the patient herself gave of her attempt to commit suicide—which was linked exclusively to the lady—, Freud centers his analysis on the articulation of the relationship father-daughter which indicates desire. But, is not this "confession" the way in which the young woman is able to receive her own message in an inverted way? And in the repetition is not the minimum signifier unity, mathematized as $S^1/S^2$, perceived as constitutive? That is to say, the other scene eradicates all behavioristic and unilinear characteristics in the consideration of trauma.

If it is so, aside from the revenge, her challenge against her father, her attempt should be understood as a tentative restitution of the Name-of-the-Father, doubly summoned in its imperative and prohibitive presence. Double insofar as she looks for her father, who carries his Name precariously; as well as because she brings on, like an "honest gentleman," the anger and prohibitions of her beloved lady. From this two circumstances emerge, the command to jouissance, together with the urge to alienate herself and to disappear under the alluded signifier.

Therefore, is there not any more than just the gaze? This restitutive summoning of the Name-of-the-Father is endorsed by another circumstance: after the attempt, the young woman's father takes her to visit Freud, trying to sustain and support his place through his reassuring mediation. The displaying character, the visual provocation in the way of "look at what you are unable to hear," the hostile forcing in the other's desire; the attempt to put—the other—into a corner to draw out from him something he supposedly knows, is a clear acting-out.

And so, this is my thesis: the attempt of the young homosexual woman is an acting out rather than a passage to the act. Why? Because it is the "realization of an answer" (1976) which will be later capable of being articulated in the Symbolic order. Even though Freud teaches at length about the technical problems of this frustrated analysis, there is someone to listen, and this is not the "out-of-discourse" of the deliberate conscious suicide act, in which those who will commit suicide choose—rather paradigmatically—to address their explanatory letter to the unknown official who will conduct the inquest. The young woman then only falls partially from the scene; later she will return to it. And she returns transformed by her act. As Freud explains so well: things were never the same as before, neither with her parents, nor with the lady.

So this is the meaning of the "X" of the unfinished graph: acting-out. The young woman acting-out, like any other, is the accomplishment of a response. To what? To the vel of alienation which, according to Lacan, "is defined by a choice whose properties depend on this, that there is, in the joining, one element that, whatever the choice operating may be, has as its consequence a neither one, nor the other" (Lacan 1973, 211).

To the young woman this vel of alienation is presented as "the cocotte or your life." What does the young woman answer to this? "There is no life without cocotte," because she could only find "the cocotte without life" in the underworld reached through a deadly passage to the act. By removing herself from the world, this act would give her freedom to have access to the woman. Yet our slave is thrown by her own acting out, into a choice between the alienation of the master or a deadly fight for prestige. This means that through this acting out her condition as a slave—in which she claimed that "there is no cocotte without life"—suffers a change. She obviously refuses a "life without cocotte," which would be a severed life.

Following Lacan's elaborations, we can say then that if alienation seems to rule any acting-out, the passage to the act seems to be ruled by separation. We would then get a similar quadrangle to the one we had before, with similar relations:

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<th>QUADRANGLE 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACTING-OUT</td>
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<td>PASSAGE TO</td>
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<td>ALIENATION</td>
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*In Spanish speaking countries, there is a belief that before committing suicide, one should leave a letter addressed to a Magistrate who will be in charge of the inquest.*
When Lacan develops this notion of separation, he alludes to Empedocles' suicide as an attack on the weak point of the binary signifier (1960, 271). According to Miller (1982), through this operation the subject wants to say "no" to his position in the field of the Other. This is not the case of the young woman. In her acting out she puts on stage—we said—a summoning statement to the Other, and not to the no-discourse of the separating passage to the act, which is governed by the passion for ignorance, the not knowing "what to do." Nevertheless, it is impossible to exclude separation as the operator which enables us to understand the patient's acting out. For, when she falls identified with object a, is it not an attempt to separation from the chain of signifiers? This ratifies dominances but not exclusions.

Let us go back now to "falling," in the "letting oneself fall." I have already pointed out its articulation to sex/death. I would like to elaborate now on my reasons for emphasizing the details of the suicide attempt of the patient that Freud had to visit, according to his account in *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. These were: "city train, throwing oneself from a balcony, suffering a strong emotion, not being able to walk properly." The young homosexual woman: city train, throwing herself from a wall, suffering a strong emotion, not being able to walk properly due to the fact that she had a "long convalescence" later on. And, in regard to the aforementioned "fatal clumsiness," two cases out of three occur because of problems with carriages and horses. This also happens in "Signorelli's Case," when Freud is travelling in a carriage and is affected by the suicide of a patient he cares for very much (1901, 2-8).

Trains, carriages, horses. Does by any chance this attractive insistence suggest that *when death, the Absolute master, is summoned by the will it arrives by some means of transportation?* What happens with this kind of transposition—sanguineous or mechanic—of voluntary mobility which replaces at length the limited efficiency of the speaking being and leads him to death? Is this a Freudian irony regarding the products of progress? And if this is not the case, it would be enough to remember that the substitutes of locomotion find their acme in those objects a which speed through air continually, provoking in those they transport the jouissance object a-fraid of their possible shrinkage.

One feature remains to be seen: it is "letting (oneself) fall," *yes, but also overcoming an obstacle*: the balcony, the wall and—why not?—the cradle rail of Freud's grandson, the one in *Fort Da* (1920). This verticalization is cut through by an object a which fulfills its destiny as refused, falling from the heights. Is this narcissistic? This cutting through, on the other hand, creates the illusion of breaking the hiding vel when it omits the barrier that would separate the familiar visible from the uncanny invisible. This means that the scene of the one that retreats claims for *an-Other*, one that is generated at that instant by an unexpected presence: that of the falling.

To sum up, let us listen to de Rougemont speak: "Eros submits to death because it seeks to exalt life over our limited and final condition as human beings."

**Works Cited**


