

Family Portrait, Estrella de Diego

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In psychoanalytic jargon, it is quite common to use the expression 'to kill the father' —or the mother. What is meant, of course, is not a literal but a symbolic murder: the pressing urge to free oneself of the morbid ties that link us inexorably to the family, to our family.

Indeed, each family is not only a world in itself, as is usually said, but, above all, a complexity of relationships which, badly managed, may end up becoming rather thorny.

We see ourselves reflected in our family and we struggle before our family. We rebel against our family. Our family demands a lot from us and we demand a lot from them. Family is, ultimately, the most effective —albeit unconscious— control method, since each of its members dreams of the similarities and the differences with the others. Blood ties, we say very often. The strongest, the most enduring. How can one resist such a powerful cultural invention, the family?

On the other hand, as Enlightenment thinkers already said —one of the few things they were right about—: family is no more than a social contract which, once the children are grown, it is fair to break. However, who could convince the family of such an insightful theory? Without family there is no conflict —or, at least, no first conflict. Without conflict, maybe, there is no art. You trade one thing for another. With such a perspective, it is better to succumb to temptation.

But temptations are not good guides for the construction of the subject, a fact psychoanalysis is well aware of. It is necessary to kill the father or the mother —or both—, symbolically of course, to reach a healthy solution, which is the ultimate intention of every well designed therapeutic process. Others, less imbued with Freudian rules, would talk of a certain form of exorcism. But anyhow, yes: one must free oneself of the family. And the methods are very similar one to the other... possibly because family problems are all very similar.

That is the reason why only few particular solutions, expression of the necessary symbolic crime, are able to intrigue me. We all carry the weight of our crime as good as we can, it's true.

And not only that. Every crime entails not a punishment, that would be the least of our problems, but an uncomfortable feeling of guilt with which we must deal from the psychiatrist's couch before getting up. When we start dealing with one thing after the other, the therapy process seems to go on forever.

Maybe that is why Enrique Marty's strategy never fails to amaze me. I have been studying his personal manoeuvre for years, the way he refines and perfects it, and he fascinates me with every new step, with every new proposal. Just when I think he won't be able to go one step beyond, he surprises me with a new achievement. And he does it in such a subtle, particular way, that the whole family feels ready to live with their respective conflict, as if he had found the perfect solution that would transform the psychoanalytical murder in a relaxed group therapy. Miracles of art.

He first 'demonised' his mother, then turned her into the well-worn 'phallic mother' and later convinced other family members to be present in the photograph as alleged suicides. 'Portraits of people taking their own life, an apparent contradiction in terms (portraits imply a wish to last)', the artist remarked impassively in one text when referring to the photographs of Carlos, Teresa or Alfredo, the dear cousins who one day found guns at home.

But that was not enough. The father came to take part in the show and Marty literally crumbled him into pieces: father broken in a thousand parts, father made up only of organs, like in his video of an eye that cannot see, the eye as a clinical interiority that now the phallic mother observes with curiosity at home, in their television, as if she was watching a quiz show.

Enrique Marty's manoeuvre is, then, much more than a criticism of the family —that is for the sociologists to do. Making it visible, Enrique brings awareness to this family trauma that we all have inside and that the rest, sometimes even in an aggressive manner, turn into a symbolic murder.

He has recently done a replica of his father, reducing his size. It shares space with that phallic mother who no one had ever sculpted so literally. They live, side by side, with their doubles. Sometimes they commission portraits of themselves, original and replica, as in one of those Renaissance paintings of couples: Enrique is very much a portrait artist.

I see them living in perfect harmony and suddenly wonder how many hours at the shrink's couch has Enrique saved himself. A portrait artist who is, above all, a collector. In fact, the phallic mother and the miniature father are part of that tradition, deeply rooted in the Western World, of collecting rarities: something to look at, something that cannot see, something that cannot see us. Masterly.

Not even Doctor Lacan in his most lucid moments would have shelved the conflict in a more skilful way. Against symbolic castration, the phallic mother; against the father as representative of the social order, a child father, deprived of the power that the subject gives to its own construction.

They live together. We live with them comfortably. They are, like the conflicts family generates, a necessary part of everyday life. Freud was right when he said that trauma, once put into words, leads to healing. Never before had a family portrait been more convincing, never before had a family been on such good terms in it. Everything is in its place. The portrait artist has portrayed the invisible. And we will all recognise ourselves in his family portrait: families are very similar, after all.