

currently working in telecommunications: therefore, neither through my training nor through my work have I known or been expected to know the history or culture of these countries. What's more, my interests lie totally outside these areas.

But reincarnation, as intended by the scholars mentioned earlier, is only one of the possible explanations. There could be another.

Can memory be transmitted?

5. Transgenerational transmission and familial unconscious

Can memory be transmitted?

Psycho-genealogy studies the family scripts passed on unconsciously from generation to generation. It aims to individualise the influences on a person and to understand what has 'programmed' him/her.

According to this theory, the transmission of sentiments, behaviours and 'memories' can persist from one generation to another. It seems that the unconscious retains every memory, particularly losses and traumas that have not been overcome (but also pleasant events); this memory is received and drives an individual to recreate situations lived by his/her ancestors. Therefore, from a transgenerational perspective, the fears that torment an individual may be those of a parent or an ancestor; his/her 'afflictions' could have originated in the unconscious of the person who conceived them, of their grandparents, or might even go back several generations.

In her interesting and well-researched book *Aie, Mes Aieux!*⁴⁶, Anne Ancelin Schützenberger mentions several cases drawn from her own clinical experience, among which

⁴⁶ A. Ancelin Schützenberger, op. cit. pp. 187-188.

are the cases of Nathalie and Barbara.

Nathalie is a three and a half year old girl, born on 26th April. She has been having the same nightmare for months. One day, in front of the psychoanalyst, she draws a gas mask (although she has never seen one), saying: "This is the beast that stops me from sleeping every night!"

By examining the family tree, it is soon revealed that a great uncle had died in Ypres on 26th April, during the First World War, overcome by Ypres⁴⁷. *This fact, not assimilated by the parents, was unconsciously transmitted to their daughter.*

Barbara, another patient, has recurrent nightmares that always occur between the end of August and the beginning of September: she sees men on horseback that fall on top of her: "The Ulans...", she tells the psychoanalyst.

Following research carried out within her family, she finds out that at the age of six, her great grandfather had witnessed the Sedan massacre (1st – 2nd September 1870). Thousands of men and horses, dead, dying and screaming, had been fixed in his memory.

Napoleon's surgeons, says Ancelin Schützenberger, had already noticed a similar phenomenon in the descendants of soldiers returning from action in Russia in 1812: the traumatic shock of the soldiers who had brushed with death and seen their fellow soldiers massacred, seems to have been transmitted to some descendents, who – around the anniversary of the 'original event' – were subject to distress and nightmares [*anniversary syndrome*⁴⁸]. One often tries to

⁴⁷ We should remember that during the First World War, in April 1915, the German army attacked Ypres, in Belgium, occupied by the British Forces, using chlorine gas (or mustard gas), officially called 'Ypres' since this incident: it was the first time that chemical warfare was practised on a vast scale.

⁴⁸ Generally, we refer to 'anniversary syndrome' when, in certain periods or period or on particular dates or date, a person goes through the same event. Elisabeth Horowitz (op. cit., p. 268) points to various cases of anniversary syndrome, among which is the case of Laura. Laura – she writes – lost her *third* daughter a month after her birth. Not being able to

hide a terrible memory (deportations, violence, death, etc.) from children; however, research has shown that these children and their families often suffer from nightmares and traumas that they cannot overcome.

Once again in reference to the traumas of hidden, 'unmentionable' wars, the psychoanalysts who have been able to work on the generation of the Holocaust children⁴⁹ confirm the transmission from one generation to another. The 'unmentionable' becomes, for the second-generation children, a distress rooted in the unconscious. In the third generation, the secret – the unspeakable – becomes a 'ghost' that haunts the unaware offspring who often presents inexplicable symptoms, an indication of the secret that the parent has projected on to him/her (once again without being aware).

The studies conducted by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok have shown more generally, how unmentionable secrets, losses and injustice – when 'not surfaced' – can become rooted in oneself, like a 'ghost' in a 'crypt': this 'ghost' (the unspeakable secret) can be passed on *from the parent's unconscious to the child, from one generation to another*. Once transmitted, the 'ghost' becomes a constituent of the unconscious, without ever having been conscious.

In *L'écorce et le Noyau*⁵⁰, the two scholars mention a symbolic case. A man suffering from constant distress consults Nicolas Abraham. The patient is an aficionado of geology and every Sunday goes looking for rocks, which he

express it, this emotional shock was suppressed. In what we could call the familial unconscious, her daughter Cécile is encumbered with the initial drama, but inverting the initial situation. This time, she is the one who develops cancer, when she is three months pregnant with her *third* daughter.

⁴⁹ Nicholas Abraham, Maria Torok, Martin Bergmann, Hilton Jacouy, Françoise Dolto, Didier Dumas, Serge Tisseron.

⁵⁰ N. Abraham and M. Torok, "*L'écorce et le Noyau*", Aubier-Flammarion, Paris 1978.

selects and then smashes; he also chases and captures butterflies, killing them later in a jar filled with cyanide.

In order to understand the cause of his illness, Nicolas Abraham suggests examining his family tree; and this is how the man realises he knows absolutely nothing about the background of his maternal grandfather, of whom nobody in the family speaks. Investigating more thoroughly, the patient finds out that there are certain aspects of his grandfather's past that are not clear: it appears that he had robbed a bank, if not worse. He had then been sent to the disciplinary battalions ('Bataillon d'Afrique') *to break rocks, and was later executed in a gas chamber.*

Although the grandson was not consciously aware of these facts, his unconscious actually knew... According to the two scholars there is obviously a connection between the grandfather's story and the actions of the grandson who on weekends *smashed rocks and chased butterflies, killing them in a jar filled with cyanide.*

Memory transmission can manifest itself at different levels and in more varied manners.

"A fascinating fact about the 'family tree'," says Elisabeth Horowitz⁵¹ on this subject, "is that *we can be possessed by images that actually belong to other people in our family.* [...] One of my patients told me that when she was twenty-three years old she had a love affair with a man who was a fighter pilot in the army and had been trained in Istres, in the south of France. Later, going through the family photos, she was surprised to see how her former lover was practically identical to her maternal grandfather's brother who had also been a fighter pilot and had been trained in Istres! [...] My patient had identified herself in her maternal grandmother, who – in her youth – had been in love with the pilot, before marrying his brother, the patient's grandfather."

The family tree retains everything in memory. And these

⁵¹ E. Horowitz, op. cit. p. 276.

memories or desires – of whatever nature – will come forth sooner or later in the familial unconscious, in future generations.

But is it really so?

To support the theory of a possible transgenerational memory transmission, besides numerous clinical verifications indicated by the scholars in the field, we should also mention statistical research, conducted by Josephine Hilgard on 8,680 patients admitted to the Agnews State Hospital (California) in the period 1954-1957. This research has indicated that the anniversary syndrome is statistically significant, verifying – in several families – familial repetitions and synchrony in birth-death dates.

Psychogenealogy is a relatively new subject, but it has illustrious predecessors. In fact, in *Mosè e il Monoteismo*⁵², Sigmund Freud stated that man's archaic heritage implies not only predisposition, but also creative contents with mnestic traces that the experiences of the previous generations have left. Similarly, in *Totem e Tabù*⁵³, he maintains that a sentiment can be transmitted from generation to generation, with reference to an event or a trauma of which no-one living has either awareness or the slightest memory; if the psychological processes of one generation did not continue to the next, everybody would be forced to start life learning from the beginning, and that would exclude any possible progress and development.

Applying this concept again, in describing the case known as "L'uomo dei lupi"⁵⁴, he maintains that we do not need to be threatened with castration in order to suffer from

⁵² S. Freud, "Mose e il monoteismo", Pepe Diaz Editor, Milano 1952 [S. Freud, "Moses and Monotheism", Random House 1967].

⁵³ S. Freud, "Totem e tabù", Mondadori, Oscar, Milano 1997 [S. Freud, "Totem and Taboo", Routledge Classics 2001].

⁵⁴ S. Freud, "L'uomo dei lupi", Feltrinelli, Milano 1994 [S. Freud, "The Wolfman and Other Cases", Penguin Classics 2002].

a castration complex, because everybody has phylogenetic memories of that complex. The slightest hint of the possibility of castration is enough to make that memory re-emerge in the form of neurotic anxiety. Another recently discovered essay, *Una Fantasia Filogenetica*, follows the same argument.

It is worth mentioning here that Freud specialised also in Biology and in Neuroanatomy.

Summing up what has been discussed so far, various scholars have noticed the transgenerational transmission – at least on the unconscious level – of ‘memories’, repressed traumas, un-assimilated losses and un-confessed secrets, but also happy events; one question however remains unanswered: *how can these elements be transmitted?*

Anne Ancelin Schützenberger is not thrown off balance, “we are still far from explaining these traces of memory. Are we dealing with a genetic memory? [...] Both from psychological and neurological points of view nothing we know allows us to understand how something can torment families for generations. [...] Why ever that may be, in order to answer this question, further research is necessary. [...] Let us hope that the progress of the inter-disciplinary research [...] and the discovery of new neurotransmitters in the future can explain this sort of ‘communication’ between generations.”⁵⁵

On the contrary, according to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, the sources of transmission should be looked for in *the mother/child dual unity*. Moreover, when in the womb, the baby, whether he/she likes it or not, receives a certain number of messages: “as early as the seventh month of pregnancy,” observes Schützenberger, “the foetus begins to dream, and according to indications in the *Somatothérapie* journal, it is the mother who passes on her own dreams: the baby would have the same dreams as the mother and,

⁵⁵ A. Ancelin Schützenberger, op. cit., p. 114.

through these, gain access to her unconscious. This intuition goes hand in hand with the theory of Françoise Dolto, who suggests that the unconscious of the baby is linked to that of the mother: the baby knows, senses and feels 'the family matters' of two or three generations."⁵⁶

We could even speak about the *genetic transmission of memory*; however, on this subject, we must point out that there is extreme caution on the part of biologists, despite various experiments conducted on animals, which, although they do not confirm the existence of genetic memory (in our sense) – because of the underlying limitations the use of animals brings about – should at least make us reflect.

Let us begin with a banal consideration. Mice, even those born in a laboratory, are *indeed* afraid of cats. All mice, when they see a cat for the first time, become suddenly immobilised as if they were dead. Atavistic memory? Or rather, one can conclude, an instinct of self-preservation.

If, however, we minimise everything to a conservation or survival instinct, then the behaviour of the animals under the conditions of the experiment we are about to describe does not seem coherent. The experiment in question, referred to by Joseph LeDoux⁵⁷, was conducted by Steven Arnold on two groups of garter snakes living in California.

"Those snakes," writes LeDoux, "belong to the same species, but some live in the marshy areas of the coast, while the others in the arid inland regions. The coast snakes live on snails; the inland ones do not. Steven Arnold [...] took some snake eggs from both areas, and when they hatched, he placed the young in separate cages immediately; they were isolated from the other young, their mother and their natural habitat. A few days later, he gave snails to both groups of snakes. *The snakes from the coast ate the snails, while*

⁵⁶ A. Ancelin Schützenberger, op. cit., p. 172.

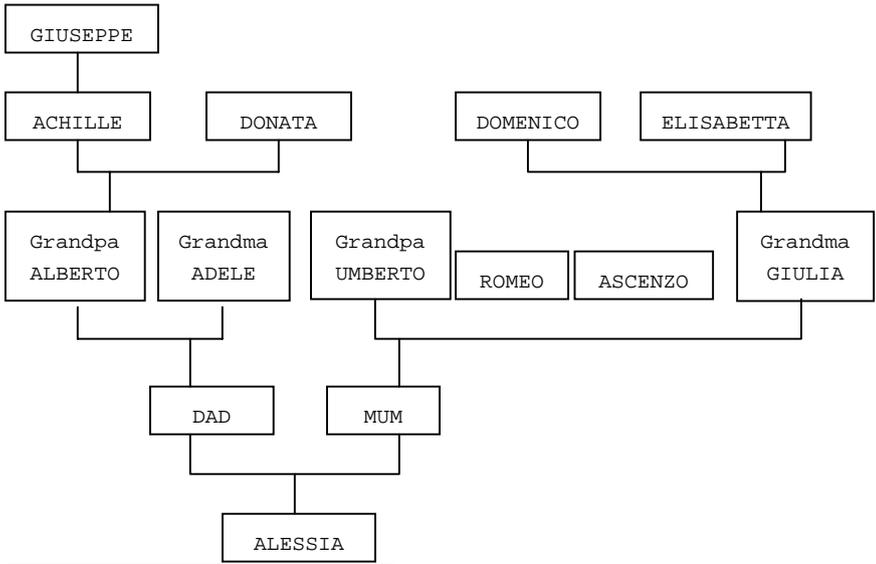
⁵⁷ J. LeDoux, "Il Sé sinaptico", Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2002, pp. 125-126.

those from inland ignored them."

However, how proper is it to speak about the transmission of memory? There is certainly evidence, but no proof: besides, "genetics and genealogy" (I would like to conclude this paragraph with one of Horowitz's expressions) "will remain a labyrinth as long as we do not have the key."⁵⁸

6. Confirmations

In view of the observations mentioned in the previous paragraph, I have tried to lay down my family tree, going back to my great great-grandparents. However I will only indicate the ancestors useful to our story, simplifying the relationships on this chart.



⁵⁸ E. Horowitz, op. cit., p. 304.