



Book Review

***“The Unconscious in Translation”* (Jonathan House general editor)**

New York: *The unconscious in translation*

Jean Laplanche, *Between Seduction and Inspiration: Man* (2015).

Jean Laplanche, *The Temptation of Biology: Freud's Theories of Sexuality* (2015).

Jean Laplanche, *Freud and the Sexual: Essays 2000-2006* (2011).

J.-B. Pontalis, *Brother of the Above* (2006).

Dominique Scarfone, *Laplanche: An Introduction* (2015).

Dominique Scarfone, *The Unpast: The Actual Unconscious* (2015).

The ‘Unconscious in Translation’ (UIT), the new book series expertly guided by general editor Jonathan House, fills several significant lacunas within Anglophone psychoanalytic literature. It was initially created to make available English translations of Jean Laplanche’s writings. Since Laplanche (who studied with Lacan but distanced himself from him) is a major figure of Francophone psychoanalysis, UIT’s commitment to the translation of his works is an important and most welcome undertaking. Written with great rigor and clarity, Laplanche’s contribution indeed stands out as one of the most original Francophone contributions ‘after Lacan.’ UIT, however, is not limited to the translation of Laplanche’s writings, but also includes the translation of “other important psychoanalytic thinkers whose work remains mostly untranslated into English.” Because of this twin mission, UIT is a crucial initiative, making available to an Anglophone audience a wide array of Francophone psychoanalytical thought.

UIT should be commended for fostering the translation of Laplanche’s writings – and for having done so with great judiciousness in terms of the chosen texts, all of which represent major theoretical developments. In addition, it offers a remarkable presentation of Laplanche’s theory in Dominique Scarfone’s *Laplanche: An Introduction*. As Scarfone rightfully insists, Laplanche (who had a thorough and deep knowledge of Freud’s corpus) meticulously follows the lines (both convergent and divergent) of Freud’s texts in order to question and extend Freud’s thinking in a way that reopens psychoanalytic investigation and reinstates its specificity. Scarfone shows that Laplanche keeps returning to and criticizing the leaning-on theory of sexuality that he reads in Freud’s *Three Essays*, since that theory risked positing the vital order (i.e., the vital processes linked to self-preservation and adaptation) as the ‘source’ of a sexuality that emerges from it by ‘leaning on it’ – that is, both attaching itself to it and detaching itself through a process of derivation. With his general theory of seduction, Laplanche departs from a conception of sexuality as a mere extension, however deviant, of the vital order by foregrounding what he calls a “fundamental anthropological situation”: the human infant depends for its survival on the care-giving of adults whose sexual unconscious compromises

their messages (verbal as well as non-verbal) and turns them into enigmas (since neither sender nor receiver knows what they signify), which the child tries to comprehend by translating them in whatever code available. This translation, however, leaves untranslatable residues that constitute the sexual unconscious, what Laplanche calls the 'source-objects' of the drives, internal sources of excitation that demand an endless work of translation, symbolization, and self-theorization.

Thanks to Scarfone's Introduction, one is better equipped to appreciate the developments that Laplanche gave to his general theory of seduction in the three books that UIT has thus far published. These texts allow the Anglophone reader to understand the full scope and wide-ranging relevance of Laplanche's theory as well as the impact that it can have on important debates in the Anglophone community. *Between Seduction and Inspiration: Man* expands on his general theory of seduction by showing how the primacy that it gives to the other leads to a reconsideration of phenomena ranging from persecution, revelation, and dreams to sublimation and inspiration. It also addresses topics such as the specific temporality linked to his translational model (Laplanche's development of the concept of 'après coup' [Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*]), the relations between id, ego, and superego, the notion of "psychic reality" and of "death drive" (reinterpreted as a sexual drive and not as an endogenous and non-sexual tendency of destruction). Finally, Laplanche provides crucial reassessments of the analytic situation as a reactivation of the fundamental anthropological situation prompted by the 'enigma' that the analyst is for the analysand: this reactivation must lead to a de-translation that allows for re-translations, that is, new responses to the strangeness of the sexual embedded in the subject.

The Temptation of Biology: Freud's Theories of Sexuality expands on the distinction between drive and instinct that Laplanche shows was already operative in Freud's texts, but got lost in Strachey's English translation that translates '*Trieb*' (drive) as 'instinct' (*Instinkt*), thereby fostering confusions in Anglophone psychoanalysis. At the same time, he shows that Freud himself participated in this 'instinctualization of the drive' that he criticizes as a major theoretical 'straying,' since it leads to a primarily endogenous conception of sexuality that ignores the exogenous turn performed by his general theory: that is, the role of the other in the genesis of the sexual drive. The concluding text 'Biologism and Biology' addresses the specific position of psychoanalysis in relation to the neuro-sciences and genetics.

Freud and the Sexual represents a culminating point of Laplanche's theoretical reflection. Under the name of 'sexual,' a neologism in French, he foregrounds the primacy and provocative aspects of the 'enlarged' sexuality that Freud discovered under the name of 'infantile sexuality.' He further explores the distinction between drive and instinct as two distinct modes of functioning, reassesses the relation between sexual instinct and sexual drive, engages attachment theory to rework it within his own general theory of seduction, and provides innovative reconsiderations of the Oedipus and castration complex as translating codes. He also contributes to the field of

trauma studies by distinguishing between the ‘implantation’ of seduction and a violent ‘intrusion’ that prevents any translation process and considering the consequences of such failures of translation. Finally, he engages the field of gender studies in a crucial text where he overturns the binary sex/gender by showing that gender is constituted by an ongoing assignment that can be compromised by the sexual unconscious of adults. Thus compromised, ‘gender’ becomes multiple and conflictual, an infantile ‘sexual’ diversity that is then translated in the code of ‘sex’ (i.e., a binary sexual difference dominated by a rigid phallic logic).

One can only eagerly anticipate UIT’s forthcoming translations of other Laplanche texts. For all those interested in acquiring an in-depth knowledge of his work, UIT has indeed become an indispensable resource. It should also be noted that it has adopted a very helpful terminological consistency regarding the translation of some of Laplanche’s key concepts, and that clear and convincing justifications are provided for these translating choices. As for the translations of Laplanche’s texts, as well as other books in this collection, they are all quite simply excellent, the brilliant results of the work performed by first-rate translators.

As noted, UIT does not limit itself to the translation of Laplanche’s works. It is not here a question of promoting exclusively a Laplanche ‘school,’ a notion that would be quite antithetical to Laplanche’s method. As Scarfone puts it in *The Unpast: The Actual Unconscious*, “Laplanche has succeeded in prompting each psychoanalyst to think for herself or himself, bequeathing a method conducive to a better engagement in and safeguarding of the freedom thus yielded” (p. 53). It is therefore fitting that UIT published the book where Scarfone brilliantly exercises this freedom of thought, and in relation to Laplanche himself: *The Unpast*. In this superb book, Scarfone goes back to the *Project*, where Freud notes that in the perception of ‘the fellow human being’ a part evades judgment that he calls the ‘thing.’ Scarfone elaborates on what he sees as a partition between the ‘thing’ (an opaque and incomprehensible core) and the predicates, attributes, representations that psychically ‘coat’ it, and traces this thing/predicate partition throughout the Freudian corpus (actual neuroses, hysteria, dream, fort/da game). Moreover, he argues that the incomprehensible ‘thing’ of the *Project* finds its counterpart in Laplanche’s “untranslatable residues,” the “source-objects of the drive.” As for this sexual unconscious ‘thing,’ if it is ‘timeless,’ as Freud famously claimed the unconscious to be, it is in a specific sense. ‘Timelessness,’ he argues, is not an absence of time, but another time outside chronology. The unconscious remains ‘actual’ – that is, acts ‘now,’ but in a ‘now’ that does not pass, and therefore does not become a ‘past,’ an ‘unpast.’ Consideration of the actuality of this unconscious ‘unpast’ leads him to make important distinctions between presentation, (re-)presentation (presenting anew) and representation (symbolic inscription) and to an examination of transference as a (re-)presenting. Moreover, Scarfone’s clear and complex theoretical reflection opens onto innovative elaborations of the analytic situation, of the analytic position (which requires what he elaborates as a ‘passibility’) and of the analytic goals (instituting the psychic category of the past, moving from (re-)presentation to

representation). The choice of Scarfone's book augurs well for the quality and originality of the future works that UIT will bring to an Anglophone audience.

UIT also offers a translation of *Brother of the Above* by J.B. Pontalis, with whom Laplanche co-wrote *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, an indispensable reference text. *Brother of the Above* explores the modulations of the fraternal link through various fraternal couples: Pontalis's own relation with his older brother as well as Cain and Abel, Vincent and Theo Van Gogh, Freud and Fliess etc. In this meditation on the fraternal link that extends to a reconsideration of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* and the French Revolution's ideal of 'fraternity,' fraternal struggles of various kinds are uncovered and traced to a passion for exclusive possession. The refusal to share an 'indivisible' mother leads to jealousy, rivalry, the exacerbation of one's difference to the point of opposition, to what Pontalis calls "the passion to separate, to set up oppositions" which can stamp thinking itself once it is turned into a "binary thinking." It is the 'prison' of this binary thinking that Pontalis (a great reader of Winnicott but also of the philosopher Merleau-Ponty and his notion of 'intertwining,' in particular) refuses in theoretical texts such as *Entre le rêve et la douleur* where he evokes Freud's early definition of psychoanalysis as the "kingdom of the in-between," an intermediary field in which, for Pontalis, thought must resist rigid oppositions in order to 'move' (as Freud's concepts did) in accordance with the "mobility at the heart of psychic reality" (*Entre le rêve et la douleur*, éditions Gallimard, 1977, p. 9, my translation). As he engages psychoanalytic theory but also literature and philosophy, Pontalis explores different variations of intermediary spaces: "between masculine and feminine, death and life, transference and countertransference." (*ibid.*, p. 10). This exploration of the 'in-between' extends to his own writing practice. He himself notes in *Brother of the Above* his "willful inability to sort books, my own included, according to genre ... or discipline (literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis)" (pp. 97–98). Indeed, while his early works could still be categorized as 'psychoanalytic theory,' Pontalis increasingly moved to a unique writing practice that *Brother of the Above* (winner of the Prix Médicis, a French literary award) brilliantly exemplifies. The author of books that defy classification, Pontalis wrote 'in-between' psychoanalysis, literature, philosophy, an 'in-between' from which psychoanalysis has much to learn. One can only hope that more of Pontalis's texts will be made available, thereby encouraging a serious (and much needed) consideration of a remarkable and unique body of work.

Throughout its book offerings, UIT demonstrates its commitment to the kind of translation that psychoanalytic reflection needs. As its name 'The Unconscious in Translation' suggests, it is not simply a matter of providing English translations of Francophone psychoanalytic works that take the unconscious as their object of investigation, but of opening psychoanalysis to the various ways in which the unconscious demands to be translated, theorized, written; a translation which may require, as it does for Pontalis, the creation of a powerful literary voice in its own right. Each book, each 'translation of the unconscious,' that UIT offers is distinctive, but all are

driven, each in its own singular way, by the exigency to clear a path that remains open to its enigma and to its questioning.

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