## LAPLANCHE: FROM THE ENIGMATIC MESSAGE OF THE OTHER TO THE UNCONSCIOUS ALTERITY WITHIN

THE TEMPTATION OF BIOLOGY: FREUD'S THEORIES OF SEXUALITY. By *Jean Laplanche*. Translated by *Donald Nicholson-Smith*. New York: The Unconscious in Translation, 2015, xii + 140 pp., \$73.50 hardcover, \$39.50 paperback.

Between Seduction and Inspiration: Man. By *Jean Laplanche*. Translated and with an introduction by *Jeffrey Mehlman*. New York: The Unconscious in Translation, 2015, xxii + 304 pp., \$68.50 hardcover, \$48.50 paperback.

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These two books, The Temptation of Biology: Freud's Theories of Sexuality (hereafter, Temptation) and Between Seduction and Inspiration: Man (hereafter, Seduction), by the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche are complete English translations, compiled by Laplanche himself, of his major writings and lectures from 1992 through 1999 and published here in 2015 by the American press The Unconscious in Translation. Although Laplanche's name is well known, linked with J.-B. Pontalis as co-author of The Language of Psycho-Analysis (1967; hereafter, Language), as well as from his Life and Death in Psychoanalysis (1970) and New Foundations for Psychoanalysis (1987), it is important to keep in mind that until his death in 2012 Laplanche was also in charge of the complete translation of the works of Freud from German into French, translating many of the papers himself. This process provided him a particularly intimate knowledge of certain aspects of Freud's writing, not easily available to the exclusively anglophone reader of Strachey's Standard Edition. Importantly, Laplanche's thinking and writing stem also from his clinical psychoanalytic work. And even absent examples from his own practice,

Laplanche's deep engagement with this side of psychoanalysis becomes increasingly evident, the more time one spends with his ideas.

What may make reading these books difficult, no matter how directly written and carefully translated, is that one is coming into the middle of a conversation with and about Freud and about the nature and genesis of the unconscious, in which Laplanche was engaged for almost forty years (see Laplanche and Leclaire 1960). Invoking the metaphor of a spiral, Laplanche describes his own continuing examination, elaboration, and extension of Freud's primary concern, the unconscious, circling around the topic again and again, each time approaching it from a different angle and with more complexity and differentiation. Joining this conversation, the reader may be helped by having some familiarity with a few basic Laplanchean assumptions and concepts. Laplanche came to the theoretical rationales for these ideas from a close study of Freud's writings, and in particular from his discernment of certain points where Freud seems to contradict himself, indicating some sort of intellectual or theoretical difficulty or impasse. Laplanche refers to these moments in Freud's writings as "goings-astray," and approaches them as possibly suggesting a shift or increased complexity in the specific human phenomenon being described; he makes use of them to focus on crucial clinical and theoretical phenomena. An example is the oscillating role of ego-as-self and ego-as-agency-of-theself, both discussed by Freud as early as the Project (1895). Laplanche draws on the implications of this oscillation for understanding Freud's 1914 paper "On Narcissism," and the impact of this latter work on Freud's conception of the death drive (1920).

Laplanche's central thesis argues for the exogenous origins both of the unconscious and of the sexual *drive*. The sexual *instinct* is another matter, to be clarified below. Laplanche initially referred to the constellation of ideas related to the origins of the unconscious and drive as the *general theory of seduction* (in contrast to Freud's *specific* theory of seduction); then, around the turn of this century, he described it as the *fundamental anthropological situation*. Laplanche points to the significant asymmetry in capacities between infant and caregiving adult. What makes the situation fundamental is that it is universal and independent of who the caregiver is—whether mother, father, or someone else. The adult, a fully sexual being, with a (sexual) unconscious, in the course of tending to the (self-preservative) needs of the infant, will inadvertently convey, through gesture, facial expression, tone of voice, and other subtle modes

of metacommunication, much more than the pragmatics of such activities as feeding, soothing, or diapering. In fact, we accept this as how cultural norms and expectations are conveyed, Erikson's anthropological studies of Native Americans (1950) being a good example. But Laplanche is addressing the unconscious and sexual side of these metacommunications, calling them *enigmatic* or, later, *compromised* messages. Both terms are used in these books. The messages are compromised because they reflect unconscious sexual fantasy fragments of the adult (analogous to Freudian slips), in addition to what the communications are consciously intended to convey. So a seemingly normal diapering situation can be compromised by the exhausted and repulsed new parent's unconscious fantasy of throwing the baby out with the diaper. Similarly, the nursing situation, experienced by the mother as a sublime pleasure, can simultaneously become infused with (unconscious) sexual fantasy.

The infant, in its basic effort to survive, will be motivated to make as much sense of its environment as possible, the most crucial element of that environment being the caregiving, life-preserving adult and what that adult is communicating. The infant's attempt to understand the meaning of communications, a process that for all its complexity will inevitably be incomplete, partial, and limited by development, Laplanche calls simply translation. In Laplanche's model, what the infant can make sense of what the infant can translate—becomes part of a progressively developing ego; and what is untranslatable, unmetabolizable, but nonetheless perceived—for example, a caregiver's particular type of smile or grimace or quality of touch or intonation—are "failures" of translation that will be retained, "stripped of meaning" (Seduction, p. 85), and repressed, becoming the initial and continuing source of the unconscious. The psychic and embodied discomfort resulting from these untranslated, unclarified, somatically registered elements of the adult's unconscious sexual communications remains as the "splinter under the skin" (Laplanche 1992, p. 209) or the "sting of the enigma" (Seduction, p. 276) and constitutes the origin and ongoing provocation of sexual drive. Drive (as distinguished from instinct) is generated through interaction with other people or with a specific other person and is thus exogenous in origin. It is not there at birth; it is not part of the baby's initial biological makeup. As Laplanche puts it, "The Freudian disaster is his abandonment of a theory of human sexuality as exogenous, intersubjective and intrusive . . . " (1992, p. 198).

If one holds this framework in mind, knowing it is always on Laplanche's, then one can follow the direction of much of his writing more easily.

Understanding the distinction between drive and instinct is also essential for appreciating almost all of what Laplanche writes, and particularly in getting started with *Temptation*. Laplanche points out that Freud in his writing uses the two words *Trieb* (translated in French as *pulsion*) and *Instinkt* (*instinct* in French) in distinctly different contexts, making their meaning clear. "*Instinkt*/instinct denotes behavior that is (1) goal-directed; (2) *relatively* [emphasis added] unchanging; (3) inherited, not acquired" (*Temptation*, p. 121). Laplanche (2000) locates many attachment behaviors here. In contrast, *Trieb* or drive "denotes a force that is (1) not goal-directed to begin with; (2) variable from one individual to the next; (3) determined by the individual's history. The drive par excellence is the sexual one. Even if its presence is inevitable in a given individual, it is bound to fantasy, which for its part is strictly personal" (*Temptation*, p. 121).

The notion of the human sexual drive as fantasy that is embodied, yet not biologically determined, is a central organizing concept that must also be held in mind when reading Laplanche. He reminds us that sexual *instinct*, coming later, in puberty, encounters a complex and already well-established sexual *drive*.

The Temptation of Biology: Freud's Theories of Sexuality, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, who also translated *Language*, is a thin volume comprising eight lectures given during the academic year 1991–1992 at the Sorbonne-Université de Paris VII. In addition, it contains a 1997 lecture, "Biologism and Biology," pursuing the same topic as the Sorbonne lectures: Laplanche's exploration of what he calls Freud's "biologizing tendencies." Laplanche is not trying to deny biology's place in psychoanalysis, but rather is looking carefully at how "fantasies can invest, divert, and indeed 'shore up' the functioning of that biology which human ethology [attachment theory] is now beginning to describe more accurately" (p. 4). In these lectures, Laplanche follows much the same path he did in Life and Death in Psychoanalysis, except that here he focuses on changes in his thinking and shifts in emphasis occurring in the ensuing twenty years. He begins, as he did then, with a chapter on his methodology in approaching Freud's thought: his identification of and work with the "goings-astray" referred to earlier. Chapters 2 through 6 trace the

evolution of Laplanche's thinking around Freud's notion of leaning-on (also called propping or anaclisis in *Language*), which "posits a sexuality that emerges by supporting itself or leaning on self-preservation" (p. 3). Laplanche and Pontalis first identified this concept in Freud in 1967, and here in these five chapters Laplanche shows how this leaning-on model of the genesis of the sexual drive does not work, leading him to his own "translation model" and the general theory of seduction. Having shown how his (not Freud's) ideas about "seduction explode the notion of leaning-on" (p. 75), Laplanche moves in chapter 7 to a discussion of narcissism and the ego, and in particular the implications of Freud's 1914 paper. Laplanche is preparing the ground for his understanding of the theoretical necessity for the death drive concept in Freud's work.

In chapter 8 Laplanche shows the problem created by Freud's 1914 thinking (he presents it again, even more fully elaborated, in "The So-called Death Drive" in *Seduction*): How, by bringing self-preservative activity under the aegis of the ego and sexualizing it by way of narcissism, Freud then had two kinds of one libido—narcissistic libido and object libido—and thus had essentially lost his conflict model. Equally, Freud had lost a crucial idea that distinguished his work from Jung's monism. As Laplanche puts it, "In his dispute with C. G. Jung, who wanted the term libido to designate nothing more than vital energy, Freud did not have a solid position, to the extent that he himself had contributed to just such a hegemony" (*Seduction*, p. 170).

The idea of the death drive as a force in opposition to Eros provided Freud with a new way of introducing conflict—and indeed a new kind of conflict. Rather than the earlier conflict model of sexuality vs. self-preservation, Freud had conceived the internal, inescapable conflict of Eros and the death drive—love and strife. Although at first glance this may seem a valid step, Laplanche believes that Freud's salvage operation failed in several ways, reflecting one of Freud's most significant goings-astray. Thus Laplanche concludes this yearlong set of lectures: "In the context of a systematic refoundation of psychoanalysis... the death drive will probably seem to us a superfluous idea when it comes to defining the players and stakes in mental conflict" (p. 112.)

I will elaborate Laplanche's problem with Freud's death drive below, in discussing the second of the books under review, *Seduction*.

Laplanche's "Biologism and Biology," written five years after the Sorbonne lectures, turns to a different aspect of the biological within psychoanalysis. Here the focus is on the extent to which humans have a tendency to biologize ideology, fantasy, and mythology, and how Freud's notion of phylogenesis reflects this very tendency. It was written around the same time as the more detailed papers on narrative, hermeneutics, and mytho-symbolic thought in *Seduction*, repeating the same arguments, and will be described below. Because *Temptation* is in a way a simpler, yet significantly revised version of *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* and includes clear and concise discussions of so many concepts and ideas central to understanding Laplanche, this set of lectures serves as an excellent, though hardly easy, primer for the complex and provocative papers found in *Seduction*.

Between Seduction and Inspiration: Man was translated into English by Jeffrey Mehlman, who also translated Life and Death, and here he provides a challenging but informative introductory essay, showing the arc of Laplanche's thinking across the years—something of which Mehlman has thorough knowledge. Laplanche's own brief introduction to this set of thirteen essays outlines what he wants us to be sure to note within them. The "overriding motif" (p. 3), as expected, is the fundamental anthropological situation, referred to in this text as the general seduction theory. Review of this book lends itself as much to consideration by theme and topic as by chapter, as certain recurrences run through several papers, linking them together. I will move back and forth between both approaches.

A crucial implication of Laplanche's model of general seduction involves a decentering. The alienness of our unconscious is confirmed by and resonates with its alien source—the other. This otherness (alterity) creates a disequilibrium. In chapter 1, "Seduction, Persecution, Revelation," Laplanche describes the tendency of people to deny and recover from destabilizing intimations of an awareness of the centrality of the other in the existence of our mind, and he points to the processes of closure sought by an individual through the use of fantasy, delusion, and religious belief. Chapter 2, "Notes on Après-coup" offers a clear and succinct summary of the different meanings found in Freud's use of the terms nachträglich and Nachträglichkeit, as well as a comparison of these concepts with the Jungian idea of Zurückphantasieren (retroactive fantasy). Here Laplanche suggests his own conception, differentiating it from both Freud's and Jung's, proposing both progressive and retrogressive

processes of translation, detranslation, and retranslation, particularly relevant to the process of clinical psychoanalysis.<sup>1</sup>

Chapters 3 and 5 ("A Brief Treatise on the Unconscious" and "Forces at Play in Psychical Conflict") provide dense, concise, and well-organized summaries of Laplanche's theory of mind and the unconscious. They are the kind of papers one will come back to again and again, always finding more to think about. As such, they are also a helpful reference for understanding elements of the other papers. Here Laplanche highlights binding and unbinding, central processes well known in psychoanalytic thinking, but not usually given such a central organizing position. He refers to them as "two distinct types of functioning in the fantasy life of humans . . . the principle of binding which would regulate the sexual life drives and the principle of unbinding, which would have authority over the sexual death drives" (*Seduction*, p. 160).

Binding and unbinding are related to primary and secondary process, but are not exact parallels, as Laplanche identifies some aspects of primary process that function in the service of binding. Binding has a central role in the containment and symbolization of affect, particularly anxiety, and becomes an underlying theme found in most of the subsequent papers concerned with the analytic process. Unbinding leads to Laplanche's considerations of the death drive (chapters 6 and 8). Uniting and binding is the essence of Eros, whereas the death drive (Todestrieb) involves and is a manifestation of unbinding. In 1992, as I have noted, Laplanche raised the question of whether there is utility in Freud's death drive; here, as part of his argument, he counterposes the object-oriented Eros of uniting and binding with the polymorphous, anarchic, fragmented and fragmenting infantile sexuality of *Three Essays* (Freud 1905), with its radical tendency to unbind. In chapter 8 Laplanche demonstrates convincingly how the kind of infantile sexuality described in *Three Essays* actually fits the picture Freud would paint of the death drive. With that, Laplanche relabels the death drive the (sexual) death drive, showing how the chaotic and untamed infantile sexuality of *Three Essays*, now the (sexual) death drive, operates in conflict with Eros. Here and in chapter 6 Laplanche also

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Laplanche has worked on this topic extensively. His lectures from the academic year 1989–1990 were a major elaboration of his thinking about *après-coup* and were later published as a monograph, *Problématiques VI: L'après-coup* (2006), an English translation of which will be published soon by The Unconscious in Translation.

asserts that unregulated (sexual) drive, not instinct, underlies much of the human violence in the world—a perhaps controversial position.

While Laplanche refers to the analytic situation in almost every essay, six of them are specifically concerned with it. In chapters 4 and 7, he challenges the idea of a training analysis or any other psychoanalysis "on command." An analysis, because of the built-in asymmetry within the analytic relationship, and the analyst's implicit restraint and "refusal to know," will provoke certain responses in the analysand, similar to the patient's original experience of the fundamental anthropological situation. Laplanche refers to this as the *hollowed-out* transference because of the content-free space it leaves to be filled in with the specifics of the individual's personal history of translations, as well as responses to the original infantile situation of passivity and asymmetry. This filled-in transference can be neither regulated nor preordained. The analysis will take on a life of its own. And the filling-in process provides a new opportunity for detranslations and better retranslations, and thus the possibility for change. Any expectation of trying to fix a specific, circumscribed problem is unrealistic and also erodes the basic foundation of the work; and within the analytic institute, any attempt to use the analysis to educate the patient into a particular frame of reference or set of favored categories of interpretation of that institute will likewise compromise and corrode the analytic process.

In chapter 9, "Goals of the Psychoanalytic Process," Laplanche provides one of his best descriptions of the fundamental anthropological situation. He reiterates that the goal of treatment cannot be extrinsic; rather, he holds, it is related to the nature of the treatment, which concerns both the situation (the asymmetry) and the method (free association-dissociation and interpretation), highlighting by the addition of the word *dissociation* the alertness of analyst and patient alike to noticing gaps in the associations. This process of free association is one of unbinding, opening up, loosening of boundaries. In that sense, one is courting the sexual death drive: "For where in the world, prior to and outside of psychoanalysis, is it proposed and permitted to say everything, even one's most secret thoughts of carnage, racism, and rape? A strictly individual method, favoring individual connections, from element to element, 'associations' established to the detriment of any self-construction or self-theorization" (p. 211).

If psychoanalysis proper involves the work of unbinding, furthering the re-creation of the imbalance, asymmetry, and helplessness of the

fundamental anthropological situation, the transference, in this respect will be "hollowed out,' a reiteration of the relation to the other as conveyor of enigmas" (p. 200). What Laplanche focuses on in chapters 9 through 12 are the various analytic modalities that move toward closing off and binding—toward synthesis—engaged in by the analyst. What makes psychoanalysis "antihermeneutic," to reference the title of chapter 10, is that the hermeneutic process, involving as it does translation, "reading," and synthesis, serves to bind, to close off, and to promote repression—all, technically, antianalytic acts. Likewise, directly speaking to the work of Viderman, Spence, and Schafer, Laplanche shows how narrativity—"an approach to the human being that gives primary importance to the way in which each person formulates his existence for himself in the form of a more or less coherent tale" (Seduction, p. 245)—serves to close off, bind, and synthetically organize the patient's material, which functions in the service of repression as opposed to opening up. "One cannot situate 'narrativization' into the framework of analysis without taking into account that its function is, first of all, defensive. . . . Whether it be a matter of an ultimately 'normal' (and in any event inevitable) defense and whether 'narrativization' need be correlated with the psychotherapeutic aspect of all analyses do not in any way modify the metapsychological assessment that sees in it the warrant and seal of repression" (p. 251).

That said, Laplanche is clear that within any analysis there will be a balance of binding and unbinding.

A third mode of binding found in the analytic situation with which Laplanche takes issue as a practice, but not as a topic in itself worthy of extensive study, involves the analyst's recourse to organizing material, either for the patient, or within the analyst's own thinking, to one or a number of favored categories of interpretation. Laplanche has been working for decades with manifestations of mytho-symbolic thought and their place within and outside the practice of psychoanalysis, most extensively discussed in *Problématiques II: Castration-Symbolisations* (1980a), a series of lectures delivered between 1973 and 1975 at the Sorbonne. He makes his position clear: "I definitively refuse to see myself committed to the truth of the 'theory of castration' or even in the grips of the shibboleth of an Oedipus complex that is scarcely canonical any longer and whose variants may well constitute its major interest" (*Seduction*, p. 236).

These myths and fantasy schemas, including the oedipus complex and castration fantasy, operate at two levels. First, they function as interpretive codes for the child, as translation tools, as the child tries to make sense of the communications of the adults in its world. "Among the codes that the child finds in his reach is what I call the mytho-symbolic, which is of cultural origin and transmitted by the adult world" (p. 241). The other place one finds mytho-symbolic thought is in the conceptual tool chest of the psychoanalyst, which Laplanche challenges—to the extent that these tools are seen by the analyst as unconscious sexual fantasies in the patient's mind. Rather, Laplanche contends, "far from being sexual, a mytho-symbolic formation is what is proposed in order to frame, bind, and ultimately repress the sexual" (p. 241), serving the function of relieving "existential anxiety... correlated with the attack by the message emanating from the other; first the adult human other (das Andere), then the other thing in us (der Andere: the unconscious)" (p. 217).

Recognizing this anxiety-provoking alterity both within us as our unconscious and outside of us as the enigmatic other, Laplanche revises his decades-old formulation of sublimation in chapter 13, "Sublimation and/or Inspiration," to take all this into account. In his earlier consideration of sublimation, comprising lectures delivered at the Sorbonne between 1975 and 1977 (Laplanche 1980b,c), he proposed it as a basic synthesizing process, not an esoteric process for the elite few. It can be seen in gardening, carpentry, cooking, and other purposeful and organized activities. It is what the human, under good-enough circumstances, will do as part of going on being (if I may borrow words from Winnicott). At that time, Laplanche showed how sublimation intersects with his thinking about symbolization (differently conceived from present common usage), which he described as a basic process not just of replacing one representation with another, as we might see pathologically in phobia. Symbolization is "a more extreme process . . . involving the linking of a symbol not only with another representation but with an affect, without which it [the affect] would have remained floating" (1980b, p. 10; translation mine.) It serves to give affect, most notably anxiety, a representation, and thus some kind of meaning, in the service of "soldering" or binding it. In this context, symbolization, which Laplanche invokes regularly in both books under review here, refers to a process of binding the raw anxiety of drive by giving it some form—any form—of representation. In this chapter Laplanche contends that symbolization and sublimation, as basic synthesizing processes, are essentially the same. This view of sublimation is similar, in some respects to Erikson's notion of identity (1956), which involves,

among other things, ego synthesis and a feeling of being at home within one's own skin; the ideas differ, though, in that sublimation as synthesis, rather than being an experiential state like Erikson's identity, involves organized activity with an evident outcome, even if that outcome may be the revision of an object representation.

Using both Leonardo and Giacometti and their relationships with their mothers, Laplanche revisits sublimation with respect to his new emphasis—the evocative, provocative, and inspiring role of the other and that other's message. The initial synthetic aspect of sublimation is generated, instigated, provoked by one's awareness of the existence—past, present, and future—of an other. In this, Laplanche reasserts a crucial point about the relationship between self and other. It is not only that one orients toward the other, but also, more powerfully, that one must contend with "a vector, emanating from the other" (p. 278; emphasis added). It implies a certain helplessness, passivity, in the face of the other's "gravitational pull." Whereas Kris (1939), whose work Laplanche knew, has explained inspiration as a projected internal experience taken from a fantasied passive position, Laplanche, in his view of inspiration, insists that it in fact originates from outside of us, created by a message; and one is, indeed, in a passive position with respect to the impact of that message. This relationship between fantasy and some kind of "originary" reality ties back to the beginning of this book, where Laplanche works with the self-reorienting roles of fantasy, projection, and belief in original situations of seduction, persecution, and revelation. In inspiration, intimation of the other's message acts as the sting of the enigma, generating an urgency to create some kind of response.

In closing I would like to say a few words about the impact of the absence of clinical examples from Laplanche's own work. This reflects, as I understand it, a certain French tradition, a wish to neither reduce nor distort the broader conceptualizations and ideas by implanting within them concrete clinical material. Such material can only limit the generalizability of the ideas by binding, symbolization, and closure, and it can also sidetrack the reader into further exploration and discussion of the case, leaving the ideas behind. In addition, the effect of Laplanche's "refusal" to include clinical material, leaving us feeling helpless and insufficiently informed, evokes through its absence, the sense of the hollowed-out transference; and this can provoke us, as readers, to fill in that hollow with certain of our own patients (or simply our own

past) as examples to be fitted within the conceptual space that Laplanche provides. Soon enough, one will begin to try out one's own clinical encounters, to see how they do or do not fit with his ideas, engaging in our own process of translation, detranslation, and retranslation of what we have made of Laplanche's message. To continue with this identification: ending this intense engagement with both Laplanche and the unknown others "scattered in the future" who may read this review, I am reminded of Laplanche's description of the work of mourning—in life, in analysis, and thus in work. It involves "the irreparable realization that the discourse of the other . . . [will] remain forever incomplete" (*Seduction*, p. 282). And so I am sad because there is so much more rich material, so much brilliant thinking, by Laplanche of which I will not have been able to "speak" in this essay.

Laplanche is not easy reading. But once one submits to the temptation to explore the depth and complexity of his thinking, it is easy to feel seduced into following his carefully drawn paths of logic, first astray and into dead ends, then in new directions, and then further into the open clearing of psychoanalytic space to a fuller appreciation of the struggle in which the patient must engage, in a reconciliation with the alienness of that stranger within.

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