

The Apres-Coup, Apres Coup: Concerning Jean Laplanche *Problématiques VI. L'Après-Coup*¹

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Abstract

Here the author examines the question of après-coup (afterwardsness) in psychoanalysis, commenting in particular on Jean Laplanche's book, *Après-Coup*. The author appreciates Laplanche's determination to avoid either a positivist interpretation of après-coup (as a "delay-action bomb", as simply a delayed psychic effect) or an hermeneutic interpretation that makes of it a post-factum re-signification of past events. Yet at the same time, the author shows that Laplanche's solution—which assumes an initial trauma to the subject, who must "translate" an ambiguous and enigmatic message originating from an adult other—ends up being, in effect, a clever combination of the two approaches, positivist and hermeneutic, that Laplanche was trying to avoid. Laplanche advances a much too linear theory, placing "the other" (that is, the desire of the adult) at the beginning of the process, while Lacan's approach to après-coup opens up far more complex and disturbing perspectives for psychoanalysis. The author, having shown the limitations of Laplanche's result ("the primacy of the other"), proposes his own interpretation of après-coup, wherein it would connect, in a unique way, the cause and the sense of the psychic world: a subsequent event in some way makes the *sense* of a preceding event to function as the cause of later psychic phenomena or symptoms.

Introduction

In time, later, we realize that the question of *nachträglich* – après-coup in French – is one of the central knots of psychoanalysis. And one – both in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis – hard to untangle. The après-coup is, I would say, one of the symptoms of psychoanalysis, a point in which it reveals itself and at the same time suffers itself. It suffers for what it is and endures itself as such. This is what I shall discuss here by commenting Jean Laplanche's 1989-1990² seminar *Problématiques VI* dedicated to the après-coup.

Après-coup is an Apres Coup Concept

Laplanche recognizes that it was Jacques Lacan who put the concept of *après-coup* (literally 'after the blow') back into play. Before him no one had identified it as a unitary concept. Though Freud coined the term *Nachträglichkeit* starting from common terms such as *nachträglich*, *nachtragen* and similar ones, the official translation of Freud into English (*The Standard Edition*) does not use a single term to convey its various occurrences: "understood later", "understood subsequently",

¹ English translation: Laplanche 2017.

² See the review by Hewitson 2017. We notice that Laplanche took up again the issue of après-coup in Laplanche & Pontalis, 1985, and in the entry "Après-coup" in Laplanche & Pontalis 1988; in Laplanche 1970, 1987.

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“deferred action”, “after-effect”, “subsequent”, and so on. Whereas the translator could have remained faithful to a single term, *afterwards*, as Laplanche suggests. Something I find quite significant is that the English translation of this seminar by Laplanche does not adopt the author’s suggestion and is not entitled *Afterwardsness*, but simply keeps the French title *Après-coup* (something that the Italian translation does too). I shall also stick to *après-coup*. It’s as if the English and Italian translators had subtly, and certainly unconsciously, belied Laplanche’s theory: by leaving the French term, they are somehow challenging the fact that it’s a genuinely Freudian concept.

I shall follow Laplanche in writing “*après coup*” without the hyphen when used as an adjective or adverb and “*après-coup*”, with the hyphen, when used as a noun. “In the case of *après-coup* the French discovery and the French translation are one and the same “*coup*”, Laplanche (1999a, p. 22) says. The point is that it is difficult in English and in other languages to render the sense of the French expression *après-coup*.

A sentence like “*Il a remanié son livre après coup*” (Laplanche, 1999a, p. 28, French original) is difficult to translate, because “He revised his book later” (Laplanche, 1999a, p. 22) does not convey the correct sense. The French sentence draws a wake of signification, something that is said and not said: it insinuates that the book seemed complete, but that then something undefined made the author realize that this completeness had not actually been accomplished; in other words, the revision was not simply an addition to improve the work, but something that hadn’t been captured or said in the first version but that now, with the *book completed*, can be captured and said. The previous version of the book already seemed to contain what would be added later, but in a sort of latency. In short, the meaning of *après-coup* in common French discourse already absorbs the (likely) sense of the Freudian concept, as for Freud something is *nachträglich* when it takes place in two stages; in the first it is something latent or potential, in the second this something comes out of latency. But we could even say that today, in common French discourse, at least among intellectuals, the Freudian sense of *après coup* has enriched the current usage of the term, which has become “Freudianized”.

Now, when we admit that a concept word is untranslatable, it means that we have come across a form of opacity, something that Lacan, to distinguish it from the sign, called *signifier*. We have a signifier when a term does not resolve itself in semantic transparency, when by translating it we misfire. Therefore, the use of the word *après-coup* adds to the *Nachträglichkeit* a surplus of sense that has opened the way to the profoundly problematic nature of *Nachträglichkeit*. In short, the French translation of the Freudian term, *après coup*, establishes itself as a detector of the sense of the Freudian concept itself: the translation of *après-coup* is in itself an *après-coup*.

Laplanche’s exegesis inquires above all on the pertinence of this concept: when Freud uses *nachtragen* and its derivatives, is he defining *one* general concept of psychoanalysis? Or is it merely a question of homonymy, of different concepts that give the impression of being a single concept only because Freud uses the same words? Or is it a question of polysemy, where a single term has several senses? Evidently Lacan, and Laplanche and Pontalis in his wake, by reaffirming the term *après-coup* have given an *après coup* sense to all the occurrences in which Freud used a derivative of *nachtragen*. The sense of the concept of “*après-coup*” expresses,

repeats and hence defines itself in the very history of its conception. In other words, the specific temporality the concept of *après-coup* designates reverberates in the time span within which the concept developed; the sense and the history of the concept tend to coincide. This text by Laplanche, therefore, wants to be an *après-coup* itself, not only in regard to Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, but also in regard to Lacan's *après-coup*. In other words, in this work Laplanche states – without saying so with explicit statements – that, thanks to his analysis, the true sense of both the Freudian *nachträglich* and the Lacanian *après-coup* emerge, albeit *après coup*, tardily³.

Later is Earlier

In this seminar Laplanche tries to avoid both Scylla and Charybdis. Scylla is a sort of deterministic positivism (which he sees in the English translation choices) and Charybdis an interpretation of the hermeneutic kind, which he thought is what prevailed among analysts (at least among International Psychoanalytic Association analysts) at the time. A discerning Lacanian would agree: avoid both positivism and hermeneutics.

Let's take one of the first examples of *Nachträglichkeit* in Freud, from 1895 (pp. 353-356), Emma's "two scenes". Here is the relevant passage from Freud:

Emma is at the present time under a compulsion not to go into shops alone. She explained this by a memory dating from the age of twelve (shortly before her puberty). She went into a shop to buy something, saw the two shop-assistants (one of whom she remembers) laughing together, and rushed out in some kind of fright. In this connection it was possible to elicit the idea that the two men had been laughing at her clothes and that one of them had attracted her sexually.

Both the relation of these fragments to one another and the effect of the experience are incomprehensible. If she felt unpleasure at her clothes, being laughed at, this should have been corrected long ago – ever since she began to dress as a lady. Nor does it make any difference to her clothes whether she goes into a shop alone or in company. It is not simply a question of being protected, as is shown by the fact that (as happens in cases of agoraphobia) the company of a small child is enough to make her feel safe. Then there is the totally disconnected fact that one of the men

³ As Laplanche himself stresses in "Notes sur l'après-coup", in Laplanche 1999a, pp. 57-66.

attracted her. Here again nothing would be changed if she had someone with her. Thus the memories aroused explain neither the compulsion nor the determination of the symptom.

Further investigation brought to light a second memory, which she denies having had in mind at the moment of Scene I. Nor is there any evidence to support its presence there. On two occasions, when she was a child of eight, she had gone into a shop to buy some sweets and the shopkeeper had grabbed at her genitals through her clothes. In spite of the first experience she had gone to the shop a second time, after which she had stayed away. Afterwards she reproached herself for having gone the second time, as though she had wanted to provoke the assault. And in fact a “bad conscience” by which she was oppressed could be traced back to this experience.

It has been noticed that Freud calls scene I not the older scene, but the more recent one; the older one is actually scene II. This choice corresponds to the rhetorical device of *hysteron próteron* (“later earlier”). In other words, we find here an inversion of the temporal order of events and what should logically be put forth first is put forth after. A famous example is from the *Aeneid*, “*Moriamur et in media arma ruamus*”, “let us die even as we rush into the battle”⁴. This inversion is a symptom of something Freud does not say, but that he shows. *What* does he actually *show* by inverting the numbers of the two scenes? The answer to this question will be crucial.

Meanwhile, this is how Laplanche (1999a, pp. 41-42) sums up Freud’s paragraphs on Emma:

Thus, Scene II, which occurs before Scene I, is the scene of sexual assault, a more-or-less obscene and sexual gesture toward the little girl (I will let you read details); in contrast, the second scene (“Scene I”), which also takes place in a shop, may be called “innocent” but has associative connections with the preceding scene.

⁴ Virgil, *Aeneid*, II 353.

In short, Scene II is apparently a clearly sexual scene, whilst Scene I has no sexual connotations. But a more careful observation proves this reconstruction wrong. Something sexual also emerges in Scene I, if only because Emma is attracted to one of the two shop clerks; going inside that shop therefore had erotic implications for her. We can suppose that she interpreted the clerks' laughter as a way to mock the fact that she was still dressed as a child (twelve years old) and not as a woman. In short, Scene I would seem linked to problems specific to puberty, therefore sexual issues, even though Freud doesn't tell us anything else about them. It is by no means an "innocent" scene. We could instead say that the childhood scene puts into play the sexuality of the (adult) other, whilst the puberty scene puts into play the sexuality of the subject. But this can't be said either, because the child, at the age of eight, goes back to that shop, a sign that, after all, she appreciated the man's touching (very often pedophilia moves on to the act thanks to the complicity of the children themselves). Freud hypothesized a phase of sexual latency in children, from the age of six to puberty, but we know that many children are never "latent", and that they react almost like adults to sexual solicitations and provocations. Ferenczi talked of "confusion of tongues" between children and adults (see Ferenczi, 1949, pp. 225-230), but ultimately I strongly doubt that children are so unfamiliar with the language of adult. They obviously speak it in their own way, but they do speak it. We can therefore say that on both occasions Emma responds sexually, even if in different ways.

In what sense is then Scene I an après-coup of Scene II? Should we surmise that Scene II is an après-coup of an even more primitive scene, one absent from Emma's memory? In any case, Freud's brilliant turn here is the way he reconstructs the signifier "shop" for this phobia: he relates it to two experiences that have to do with sexuality. In other words, Freud's true exploit is the way he digs up something of the sexual in a symptom that doesn't come across as particularly connected to sexuality. Because this is what the après-coup ultimately is: the revelation, once all has been said and done, so-to-speak, of the sexual sense of scenes or symptoms.

Now, according to Laplanche, it is thanks to the second scene, non-sexual (but we saw that this is not the case), that the first takes on a traumatic value. As Freud says, "a memory becomes traumatic *nachträglich*", in a second moment. The Scylla to avoid is seeing the *nachträglich* as a "time bomb": in other words, the first scene, the childhood scene, produces a traumatic effect, but only years later, when the girl had become a woman. The Charybdis to avoid is the vision according to which each one of us *re-signifies* – this is the term Laplanche dislikes – remembered events from the past. Scylla interprets the whole in terms of a classic linear causality: a childhood cause produces effects in adulthood. Instead, Charybdis reverses the arrow of time not in terms of causality but of signification: an event from the past changes its meaning according to the interests and desires of the man or woman of the present. Beyond a "cause and effect" vision or a "re-signifying the past" vision, between the primacy of the cause (explanation) and the primacy of sense (interpretation), Laplanche suggests a third way, which we shall look at soon.

Construction or Reconstruction

Laplanche only mentions in passing an issue that seems to me entirely analogous; to our eyes, which are already in Freud's après-coup. In his 1937 essay *Konstruktionen in der Analyse*, Freud (1937c) seems to shift the psychoanalytical conception from a

previous primacy of *Deutung*, interpretation, to a primacy of *Konstruktion*. Analysis becomes more a sort of historical *reconstruction* than an interpretation of dreams, symptoms, parapraxis, and so on. I spontaneously wrote “reconstruction” and not “construction” because the difference between the two terms is sometimes essential. In German *Konstruktion* is an ambiguous term that can be used in both senses of “construction” and “reconstruction”, but German also has the term *Rekonstruktion*. In English the difference is more marked: a historical event, for example a murder, is “reconstructed”, whereas a novel or film is “constructed”. *Reconstruction* is historiographical research, whilst *construction* is a purely creative activity. It’s true that in his article Freud seems to give *Konstruktion* the sense of a historical *Rekonstruktion*, but then why did he not choose that term? Psychoanalysis teaches to give weight to the choice of one signifier opposed to another as the sign of a non-explicit problem. It’s as if by choosing “*Konstruktion*” Freud were obliquely assuming that (historical) analytic reconstructions can only be (mythical) constructions. What emerges here is the most controversial question in psychoanalysis: the fact that its reconstruction of subjectivity always refers us to myths (Oedipus, primal scene, and so on). Now, the whole *après-coup* problem in Freud, as Laplanche re-constructs it, seems to me very similar. Causalistic interpretation corresponds to the idea of historical reconstruction, hermeneutic interpretation to the idea of *ex novo* construction.

Let’s take a look at Laplanche’s third way. He supposes a first scene, an original event he calls “of seduction”, not in the sense that the adult literally seduces the child, but in the sense that the adult expresses to the child something the latter finds enigmatic, something the child needs to “reconstruct”, or, as Laplanche says, “translate”. The adult will recognize this enigmatic something *après coup* as “sexual”. The child will have to translate into his or her own language something “sexual” in the adult. As Laplanche (1999a, p. 80) says:

As I see it, analysis cannot occur except in relation to the other because the little human being has emerged as sexual – and as neurotic in a primordial relation with the other [Laplanche’s italics]. Event plus recapitulation: for me, that evokes time in the form of a “spiral”, because “spiral time” is also the time of *après-coup*.

Because each turn of the spiral takes into account the previous turn.

This theory – of the *primacy of the other* – has rightly been put into relation with the so-called “relational” trend, very popular among many psychoanalysts. I.e., in any case *après-coup* refers us back to a sort of original message that makes the other (the adult) and the subject (the child) confront themselves; an enigmatic message that the subject will have to process in future, syncopated, times. Let’s see how Laplanche reaches this conclusive theory through Freud’s text.

The Enigma of the Wolf Man

Laplanche dwells on an anecdote by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He talks about a young philanderer who, when the beauty of the wet nurse who suckled him as a child is praised, comments that he is sorry did not take better advantage of his opportunities. This is the anecdote that Freud (1900, p. 211) quotes to illustrate *Nachträglichkeit*. Laplanche considers the story ambiguous and writes:

There are two symmetrical assertions he [Freud] could have proposed: “This is how the pleasure-taking in nursing precociously determines the sexuality of adults”. Or: “This is how a young adult retroactively puts himself back in and injects sexuality into an infantile situation, which in itself is absolutely innocent”.

In Fact, the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* leaves the choice between the two directions completely open. (Laplanche, 1999a, p. 105)⁵

The essential point is: the two directions *seem to always remain open* in psychoanalysis. But Laplanche has the urgency of closing them. And his third way would close them. This solution implies a criticism of Freud, who fails to consider the wet-nurse: “Even if she is physically present, she is absent as an interlocutor, as a subject sending a message in the direction of the child” (Laplanche, 1999a, p. 106).

Frankly quite an odd note, because what could Freud have known about this wet-nurse? Laplanche seems to forget that it was only a witticism, but treats the question as a “serious” clinical reconstruction. In fact, the first hypothesis (the child’s oral pleasure is the *cause* of successive adult sexuality) and the second (the adult sexually *re-signifies* childish oral enjoyment) correspond to the alternative between reconstruction and construction. The former, reconstruction, sees things within the perspective of causes, with these always coming before the effects (if a cause is simultaneous to the effect, it is in any case logically precedent). The latter, construction, sees things within the perspective of signs, with signification producing retroactive sense. Pontalis and Benvenuto (2018) used the ‘Storming of the Bastille’ in 1789 as an example of *après-coup*: those who took part could not have been aware of the historical significance of that struggle, or rather the mythical significance it would later take on. The sense of that event emerged later. The *après-coup* could then be described as a *construction of sense* given to the past, on the basis of successive effects.

Laplanche lingers extensively on the case of the Wolf Man, where Freud uses the concept of *nachträglich* most extensively. Freud (1918b) conjectures that at the age of one and a half the patient had witnessed a scene of intercourse from behind between

⁵ Note that in this case – actually only a quip – we have an inverted order compared to Emma’s case as Laplanche reconstructs it. In the case of the young philanderer Scene I, the childhood scene is entirely innocent, whilst Scene II, the adult witticism, sexualizes the original experience.

his parents. Freud tries to date that scene exactly, Christmas Day, and even give it a specific time, five in the afternoon. And he provides even more details: intercourse, he claims, occurred three times! According to Freud, this *Urszene*, original scene, only has a traumatic effect *après coup*, when the child is four years old and has the famous dream of the wolves sitting on a tree. This dream leads the patient to a childhood neurosis, which in adulthood results in the neurosis that brings him to Freud. In other words, we have an *après-coup* of the *après-coup*, insofar as the adult neurosis re-actualizes, so-to-speak, a childish neurosis that was in turn the traumatization of a previous experience.

Here too, the crucial question for Laplanche is whether we should consider the scene of coitus from behind a historical reality or a construction in itself. In this case Jung spoke of a “retrospective fantasy”, i.e., for him the primal scene is actually a fantasy of the adult (and I would say: more of the analyst than of the analysand) projected back in time as a childhood scene or fantasy. It’s important for Freud to confute the Jungian thesis and Laplanche follows him on this line. Even if his French reader makes a symptomatic terminological choice: “The observance of parental coitus – he writes (Laplanche, 1999a, p. 118) – is entirely a construction of the analyst” (“*construite dans l’analyse*”, in the original French version). He could have said *reconstruite*, but he prefers the “creative” term. However, this does not mean that Laplanche fully subscribes to the idea that the event in itself – the sight of adult coitus – is the primary cause of neurotic sequences. What counts for Laplanche is not the fact of the sexual act being seen, but the fact that the child is confronted with “messages” – in this case a message in the form of an act – that are difficult for him to interpret; and also the fact – that Laplanche insinuates – that it was *no coincidence* that the adults let the boy surprise them, that perhaps they wanted to be seen having sex... Their will to seduce or upset the boy may have been unconscious. In any case, for Laplanche the vicissitudes of the unconscious begin in the relation between at least two subjects (an adult and a child). Or, to put it more bluntly: we have an unconscious thanks to a mainly unwitting adult pedophilia.

Laplanche substantially rejects Freud’s vision, which he calls solipsistic, “*après-coup* is a phenomenon that is not played out within the *intrapersonal* but within the *interpersonal*” (Laplanche, 1999a, p. 156). Originally there’s an adult, with his or her unconscious and sexuality, and a child who receives messages from this adult. And “the messages sent by the adult are ‘enigmatic’ because ‘offshoots’ [i.e., the untranslated residues of failed/incomplete translations] contained in the adult’s unconscious creep into the message; without the adult’s awareness they insinuate themselves into the messages sent by the adult” (Laplanche, 1999a, p. 152). Our life is then entirely inscribed in the *après-coup* insofar as we try to understand – to “translate”, as Laplanche says – these original messages. But evidently every re-interpretation of these messages always leaves something out, always turns out incomplete, hence the need, in the course of life (and of analysis), to re-translate this “*coup d’avant*” according to the codes that are topical from time to time. Laplanche substantially accepts the underlying hermeneutic formulation (though criticizing it at the same time) according to which Freud’s analytical work, for example on the fantasies and original experiences of the Wolf Man, somehow repeats the work we are all required to carry out throughout our lives. Freud’s interpretative setbacks are an expression of the interpretative setbacks that make up the history, I would say, of our unconscious. Analysis, therefore, is the interpretation of interpretations – even if

Laplanche calls them ‘translations’ – and original interpretations are attempts to understand what the other (the adult) wants of me.

Laplanche rightly notes that the question of whether the original scene is a reality is a replay of the dilemma Freud posed himself years earlier in his correspondence with Fliess, when the question was whether the fantasies of hysteric women referred to a scene of *real seduction* by adults when the patients were children, or whether these scenes *were* fantastical *constructions*. In both cases the problem is: is the adult *après-coup* construction or return? Rehabilitating the theory of seduction, Laplanche seems to be saying: in a certain sense there was a seduction, but in the sense that adult action and adult saying come across as enigmatic to the child. It’s the enigma that seduces. There’s an original uncertainty on the sexual sense of the acting and saying of adults.

It would seem that for Laplanche the adults rarely want seduction to occur, but it’s as if they have made it happen *de facto*. For Laplanche the real trauma is always, somehow, a seduction. This third way of Laplanche doesn’t convince me. And I shall try to explain why.

The Freudian Axiom

Though a fascinating read, the case of the Wolf Man is the least convincing of Freud’s clinical cases, because, in contrast to all the others, here Freud attempts to use dreams and fantasies claiming to access a determined and datable historical reality. It doesn’t take an exceptional logical and analytical spirit to realize that the supposed reconstruction of the original scene is based practically on nothing. It is, as Laplanche lets slip, a pure *construction*. Today we can say that it was all a delusion of Freud’s in which he involved his patient, who, moreover, never accepted it as real (he kept repeating that in his stately home the children never slept in the same room as their parents)⁶. There’s not enough room here to explain why I’m convinced of what I’m saying, but it’s something I’ve developed it in other writings⁷. In fact, the text on the Wolf Man is full of acute observations and precious intuitions, but I think that what Freud meant to be the core of his essay is a failure: to prove – against Jung – that the bases of certain neuroses are *real*, let’s call them traumatic scenes or events, especially of a sexual nature (even if the traumatic effect is *après coup*). The prime mover, in this case, is having witnessed that coitus. Freud then concedes that it may not have been a coitus between his parents, that it may even have been one between animals, but that he must have in any case assisted to *a coitus scene*. Freud waters down the original scene *après coup*, but the core remains: witnessing coitus. The *sexual act* is a sort of dogma Freud feels compelled to insist upon.

The disappointing thing about Laplanche’s reconstruction on the other hand, is the fact that he never questions the reconstruction (which I think is pure construction) of the scene. Years earlier Laplanche had said, with Pontalis, “Freud’s demonstration [in the case of the Wolf Man] is facilitated by the very likely *reality* of the primitive

⁶ This forced Freud to develop an ad hoc hypothesis: that the child had *exceptionally* slept in his parents’ room because he was ill. See Obholzer, 1981. See the entry for “PANKEJEFF Serguei Costantinovitch (1887-1979), ‘cas de L’Homme aux loups” in Roudinesco & Plon, 1997, pp. 753-8.

⁷ Benvenuto 2017.

scene in that case” (italics by Laplanche and Pontalis, 1985, p. 55), whilst I would have said: precisely because Freud finds it difficult to prove what he wants to prove, he fabricates a coitus scene that allows him to distinguish himself from Jung. Basically, the reality of the scene is on the contrary quite unlikely. There is in fact an ambiguity in Laplanche’s text. Because on the one hand he seems indirectly to raise doubts on the fact that Freud’s reconstruction can actually hold, but on the other he insists that *we must take Freud seriously*; i.e., that we must take the original scene seriously.

Laplanche describes Freud as someone “running in a cage”: the cage consists in the alternative between “the original traumatic scene is a real event” versus “the original traumatic scene is a fantasy”. According to Laplanche we can come out of this cell only by accepting his third possibility. But his solution also keeps as a staple the validity of the reconstruction of the scene, whilst it would need to be finally challenged as an explicative dogma. In this way Laplanche rejects the Jungian hypothesis of “retrospective fantasy”. Now, I think this is a necessary starting point if we really want to “take Freud seriously”: throwing out the dead weight of the original scene precisely to make the pure gold of his clinical intuition shine. I.e., that there are crucial childhood scenes is not something we should exclude, but the inability to ever re-construct them authentically is a more or less constant factor of analytical work.

In a sense, Laplanche’s “third way” does not really override the opposition between the positivist and hermeneutic interpretations of *après-coup*, but is an ingenious combination of the two. Because Laplanche does not deny that a *real event* somehow took place somewhere – even if only a ‘relational’ event, a message more than a vision or physical contact –, and this comes across as a *parti pris*, a bias; but at the same time he says that this real event is essentially a hermeneutic process, a translating effort that belongs to the order of interpretation on behalf of the child subject. The plasticity of the original scene is made to fade away – more important is that which the adults *wanted to show* off their sexuality to a child than *the sight* of the sexual act itself – but it still remains an original scene. An intersubjective ambiguous scene that requires interpretation, but still a foundational one.

Cause and Sense

I am not convinced by Laplanche’s interpersonal, or relational, solution. And not only because Laplanche doesn’t actually bring any clinical elements that could make his hypothesis more persuasive; he limits himself to an exegesis of the Freudian text, which, however, lacks precisely those interpersonal details that he thinks should be considered fundamental. He argues that, being the original scene of the Wolf Man a real event, we should take into consideration the “message” the adults give the child. But of course we can only conjecture this “signifying intention” of the adults. Yet for Laplanche this primacy, or antecedence, of the adult message is essential – it is *his* construction.

It is essential, because deep down Laplanche understood the explosive power that the concept of *après-coup* involves in the very moment Lacan isolated it as a specific concept, i.e., signaling the Freudian *après-coup* gave this notion an uncanny or embarrassing sense *après coup*. What’s uncanny and embarrassing is the fact that the

après-coup gives substance to a “coup” that wouldn’t exist without this après-coup. The game is becoming dangerous.

The fundamental point is the so-called arrow of time. For the physics of today, time is an illusion⁸, but in our concrete life it is by no means that: we know that we can’t go back in time. Now, we can come out of the alternative between deterministic causality and hermeneutic re-signification by describing après-coup as a form of magic or miracle. This is a road some are ready to take. In other words, the “before” is caused by the “after”; the after is the cause of the before. We can change the past starting from the present – not in the dull sense of re-signifying the past starting from the present, but in the sense that we can miraculously correct and change the past. As we see in Frank Capra’s film *It’s a Wonderful Life*, for example, or in some of the films of Robert Zemeckis’s *Back to the Future* series. A process of correction of the past that occurs, in the case of Capra’s film, thanks to divine intervention. But then we are completely in the domain of anti-science, or science fiction, a road Laplanche would never take.

There is, however, another way of conceiving the inversion of the arrow of time: seeing *nachträglich* as a process thanks to which *the sense* of a later event gives an earlier event a *causal power*. But the opposite is also possible: in the two Emma scenes, Scene I (the later one) acts as the cause of a phobia thanks to the sense of Scene II (the earlier one). The *hysteron proteron* form Freud adopts then expresses the following: there is a causal primacy of the later scene, in the sense that its sense makes an earlier scene the etiology of later symptoms. Now, this retroaction of the present on past is only possible in a humanized world⁹.

Let’s imagine a connection of this type. A subject crosses a bridge. Then he reads that the area has a high seismic risk and that years earlier that same bridge had collapsed; but the information doesn’t particularly trouble him. Years later he sees a house collapse because of an earthquake; and later he develops a phobia for... bridges. He can no longer cross them for fear that they will collapse. It’s an imaginary clinical case, but a plausible one. What happens here? Let’s leave out any symbolical interpretations of the phobia. What counts is that the first experience of crossing the bridge only becomes the cause of a phobia through the sense that the later event gives to the former: *collapsing*. A previous event becomes a cause thanks to a sense given après coup by Event II.

This is certainly an inversion of the arrow of time, but not of the magical or miraculous kind, because the reality of the earlier event isn’t modified: its *force* is modified. It will have the power to produce a phobia insofar as it will receive a different sense from the later event. Now, that a sense may be the cause of acts and facts is a basic fact of all stories and even of collective history. We know that

⁸ It is a subjective effect of the irreversibility of the thermodynamic processes.

⁹ This is not exact, because quantum mechanics leads to describing situations where in a certain sense the future conditions the past, as the famous paradox of Schrödinger’s cat aimed to prove. In any case, quantum mechanics deals with processes that take place in a microcosm very different from our biological world, where the arrow of time has no exceptions. We live on the earth, not in an atom.

discourses can change the course of history. For example, Christian, Islamic, Liberal and Marxist discourses... have produced quite concrete historical effects. Concepts produce enthusiasms, tears and blood. In the human world, sense causes events, and there's nothing magical about this, because human beings always act on the basis of discourses, i.e. of the schemes of sense they find in the world. But *après-coup* is a special case of sense because it produces a cause: it's not the sense of an event that is directly causal, but it works so as to make an earlier event, with a different sense, take on causal power. It is not the past itself that's modified, but its power. Hence Freud's *hysteron proteron*, the fact that it represents as earlier what comes later, *shows* that it is sense that produces a cause.

Of course, the *après-coup* effect is not specific to psychopathological processes, even if Freud did describe it in a context of neurosis. Instead, the *après-coup*, as we have described it, is something which determines many forms of life. Even an analytic cure might be considered an effect of *après coup*, in the sense that the analysis could give later a fresh significance to the past, and thus bring about a change in present life.

Why does Laplanche then not lean toward this interpretation – neither magical nor hermeneutic – of *après-coup*? Because turning retroactively an event into a cause is in any case a way of inverting the arrow of time. Now, we could suspect that this is what happens in analysis itself – or rather, it's the paradox analysis would seem to imply. It is usually thought that analytical elaboration works like medicine: a pathogenic cause ceases to be a cause thanks to the cure. But the suspicion is that analysis is based on a more artful postulate: it gives causal power to earlier events that had none before analysis. It is not therefore a process of sense that cancels out causes, but a process of sense that turns a past event into the cause of the present. Something difficult to accept for someone with a “positive” mentality.

Indeed, with *après-coup* the concept of an event as a *primary cause* falls through. Laplanche therefore wants to defuse all the conceptual dangers inherent to the idea that sense is a cause of the past. Hence his clutching to the axiom of a primary event, albeit an ambiguous one that needs to be entirely “translated”: seduction by the adult. Lacan's promotion of the concept of *après-coup* had something scandalous about it: the cause does not come before but after, through projection into the past. In this way there is no primacy of anything, in the sense that there is no absolute *before*. By betting on the “primacy of the other”, actually making it his banner, Laplanche indicates a reassuring *primum movens* indicated in the other with respect to the subject and in the adult with respect to the child. In this way we are reassured about what comes before, about what holds primacy, about what gives psychoanalysis itself its origins and consistency. Thus saving it, though a little at the last minute, from Lacanian subversion, from the dizzying ambiguity into which Lacan had pushed it.

Secondariness of the Original

Laplanche often repeats that psychoanalysis is a science and indeed accepts the Popperian method of falsification (see for example Laplanche, 1999b, pp. 173-189). He is convinced that psychoanalytical hypotheses are falsifiable. Yet Popper didn't limit himself to proving that psychoanalysis is not scientific because it is irrefutable, but went as far as declaring it the champion of false sciences. It's a real enterprise declaring to be at once Freudian and Popperian! In contrast to Lacan, who did not

consider psychoanalysis a science, Laplanche painstakingly reiterates the scientificity of psychoanalysis, evidently to safeguard its respectability. We live in an era in which only the scientific is intellectually respectable. In short, Laplanche realizes – even though perhaps only unconsciously – that Lacan’s *après-coup* operation undermines the scientificity and ultimately the seriousness of psychoanalysis.

Laplanche would have been more convincing had he said that psychoanalysis is not scientific in the Popperian sense but is rather a kind of historiography, that it is based on historical reconstructions (note that for Popper historiography is not a science as it does not necessarily construct theories). The comparison Freud often makes between psychoanalysis and archeology ought to have pushed Laplanche in this direction.

In fact, even if Lacan does not say so explicitly, *après-coup* reveals that every analytical reconstruction is left suspended on a fundamental uncertainty: with my analysand, have I, the analyst, reconstructed original experiences of the subject, or have I constructed them today, projecting them onto a history that ipso facto assumes the form of a myth? This is the uncertainty, or conditionality, that exists in every future perfect. I can say “...I will have studied well” only after having somehow made the premise “If I pass the exam, then...” I don’t know whether I studied well in the past, or whether I’m studying well now: only the future will tell me what I really did or am doing. The future perfect futurizes the present, it problematizes it, dis-identifies it. But if the sense of today or yesterday will only be given tomorrow, psychoanalysis is no longer founded on solid bases. Rather than say “like everyone I have had my Oedipus”, I should say “If I go into analysis, I will have had my Oedipus”. If, as Freud says, the Wolf Man falls into a childhood neurosis after the age of four because an experience reactivates itself *après coup* and is revealed to be traumatic, Freud’s entire reconstruction is left suspended on the reality of this scene, of which the dream and the neurosis are supposedly the *après-coup*. And we can’t get away by saying that the scene was only imaginary and not witnessed: because even just imagining a scene at a certain age is an event, which has its historical reality. Thoughts too are datable. The choice between reality and imagination, on which Laplanche insists so much, is a false dilemma: what counts is not whether the scene was actually seen or just fantasized, *what counts is whether there was a scene* at one point. In other words, the dream of the wolves and the childhood neurosis – and later the adult neurosis – are an *after* the coup, but without a *before*, the *après-* has no *avant-coup*. The entire interpretative system is threatened with becoming like Magritte’s Castle of the Pyrenees: the castle is firmly set in solid rock, but the rock rests on nothing.

Après-coup – insofar as it is always suspended between hermeneutics, history and magic – is a mine Laplanche had to defuse, not by ignoring the problem – as most analysts had done until then – but by riding the Lacanian tiger. Taking on *après-coup* as a fundamental notion of analysis. But at the condition of finding for it the safest ground possible. Even a swamp, if necessary – the swamp of “the enigmatic message from adults” – but a base in any case, not the void. In this way *après-coup* ceases to be the enigma of psychoanalysis and is reduced to being an enigma we could call common, or rather universal, the enigma that what adults do and say represents for us infants. *The ground has been found*: the adult unconscious and the primacy of the other. This primacy should therefore be taken not only as a coming before, but also as a being a source, an *arché*, as the ancient Greeks would have called it. *Après coup*, the mine of *après-coup* is no longer a threat. In this way Laplanche fixes the rift

between construction and reconstruction that besets every analytic utterance. For Laplanche, by interpreting the analyst and the analysand certainly construct, but their construction has something of the reconstructive as a backdrop: the reconstruction of the original message from the adults. Every analytic construction re-constructs, constructs again, something that had already been constructed on the basis of an “other” speech, and hence finds its support *outside the subject*. The honor of psychoanalysis is safe.

Instead, I believe psychoanalysis should be upset. It works, in our culture, even if it is *not founded*. Like the Castle of the Pyrenees, we can feel comfortable inside it even though we know it’s hanging in the void. The concept of *après-coup* is fundamental precisely because that of which *après-coup* is an *after* refers back to a *before* that remains suspended, an *x*, an unknown element. The paradox of *après-coup* is that at the beginning there’s an after, never a *prima-cy*. It’s an after without a before. It doesn’t lead us to the primacy of the other, but at the *primacy of the after*. Let’s try to see this in the case of the Wolf Man. What’s striking about the dream of the wolves is that it consists of an opening onto a scene, but the scene that the subject sees is other subjects, the wolves, watching. It’s as if in the theatre, when the curtain goes up, we saw not actors on the stage but another audience looking at us. An *unheimlich*, uncanny, unveiling. But which is the scene both audiences should be watching?

The gaze watches the watcher. The watchers are the white wolves, i.e. not the object of horror they could represent – wolves that jump on me, for example – but eyes watching me. *I* the watcher become the scene, perhaps one of horror, for the other’s gaze, which is the mirror of my own. Freud reduces this horror to a sex scene, which of course would be something enigmatic for a young child. But the enigma is even more radical: the dream *signifies* that there is an important dramatic scene to watch, but it doesn’t *show* it. And this perhaps not due to repression, because the scene is too perturbing, but to the fact that, particularly in childhood, we are confronted with scenes that we can’t watch, with unthinkable things, which however do appear. This scene, rather than an event outside the subject, could be the event that the subject himself is *before* seeing himself. A pure *Erlebnis*, a way the subject feels that has no name and cannot be described, and that for this very reason strikes us as *unheimlich*.

The real enigma in every psychoanalytical reconstruction is not whether we reach realities or primary fantasies, but of *which experience* a memory or fantasy is an elaboration of. In other words, we are always in *après-coup*, always in the conditionality of the future perfect. Laplanche would have us believe that there’s an absolute, original, first time: the time when the adult “seduces” the child by saying and doing things that this child finds equivocal. But this seduction scene, provided we can reconstruct it, is also in turn something constructed *après coup*.

Laplanche’s Oedipus

These Laplanche seminars should be read not only as a set of statements or utterances on *après-coup*, but also as enunciations. In the sense in which philosophy distinguishes between ‘statement’ (*énoncé*) and ‘enunciation’ (*énonciation*), i.e., between what words say and what is said in relation to who utters those words and where and when. In other words, these seminars should be read non with reference to the man Laplanche – who is not in question here – but with reference to Laplanche’s

operation, to what he somehow wanted to say by writing about après-coup, i.e., what this seminar/text reveals to us... après coup, over 25 years after it was held. Now, we've already talked about the enunciatinal dimension of Laplanche's utterances, which can be *translated* (using the word so dear to Laplanche) in the following terms: "Lacan attempted to upset psychoanalysis, with the risk of making it lose any scientific credibility. Instead, I shall show you how useful this mine is in order to refound, to give new foundations, to psychoanalysis: *the foundation is the seductive word or act of the other*. We can carry on working without worrying too much about any problems".

There is, however, another enunciatinal sense in Laplanche's utterances. All his works lack any references to his own clinical practice. All his writings are basically exegeses of Freud's texts, taking into account the exegeses of others. We should ask ourselves what this lack of clinical references could *reveal*. We can venture to say: in a certain sense Freud's text – obviously not Freud the man – is the only real great clinical case Laplanche has ever handled. Can a text be a "clinical case"? Yes, if we take a Laplanchean perspective. In fact, his theory of the unconscious consists of this: that all human beings question themselves about a primary enigmatic text pronounced by an adult and 'translate' in their own way the speech and actions of this adult. And it's no coincidence that his conclusion is that unconscious activity is a translating activity, as Laplanche dedicated such a large part of his active life to "translating" Freud and psychoanalysis; he translated the French standard edition of Freud's works and with Pontalis he compiled a *Language of Psychoanalysis* (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988), i.e., translations/definitions of fundamental psychoanalytic concepts. Laplanche seems "seduced" by Freud the father through an *Opus* that – as Laplanche untiringly tries to show – is deeply enigmatic. Laplanche has spent a lifetime questioning himself on the Freud enigma, hence the title of his seminar, *problématiques*.

For Laplanche every human being from the very beginning asks "What does the other want of me? What does the other want to say to me?" And he also seems to have asked himself: "What did Freud want to say (to me)?" Laplanche's interminable exegesis of Freud and of *written* psychoanalysis repeats, though on another level, the interminable interpretation every human makes of the original parental word/act. And it is evident that Laplanche has always been seduced by this Freudian enigma: his generalized theory of seduction repeats itself, expresses and expands itself, in his response as someone seduced by the Freudian text. His rehabilitation of the original theory of seduction is a set of statements (*énoncés*) that refers back to an enunciation (*énonciation*): Laplanche seems to have always wanted to tell us how seduced he was by the word of "father" Freud, precisely insofar as this word has always represented an enigma to him.

But Laplanche is unfaithful to this restoration of the text's enigma: he places all his bets on the solution of the enigma, in the same way as Oedipus solved the enigma of the Sphinx. In other words, Laplanche thinks he can get rid of the Sphinx, even if only elliptically, by saying that the true sense of the Freudian enigma is that everyone has to elaborate an original enigma. But in this way the original enigma itself is solved: every child, every subject, must understand *the sexual* that exists in the adult message. They must understand that they have been seduced. The Sphinx may die. In this way psychoanalysis is freed from the Freudian plague.

Author's Biographical Note

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