



ISSN 2472 2472

Jean Laplanche's *Après-Coup* - Problématiques VI

Published 2017, New York: The Unconscious in Translation

Owen Hewitson¹

This collection, comprising Laplanche's lecture series of 1989-1990, traces the evolution of a single term in Freud's work – *Nachträglichkeit*. *Après-coup* is the sixth in the series of *Problématiques*, Laplanche's long-running course that began in 1970. It was delivered two years after the publication of his major late work, 1987's *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, into which Laplanche distilled his five previous *Problématiques* (Laplanche, 1987).

Taken as a whole, the series cannot help but invite comparisons to the Seminar series of Jacques Lacan. Both men worked at the same time, in the same city, and in the same format of year-long public lectures. Lacan was Laplanche's analyst, Laplanche his student. Indeed, it was actually Lacan who, in his "Rome Discourse" of 1953, first reappraised the term *Nachträglichkeit* (Lacan, 2006, p. 213). Laplanche gives him fair credit for this, though when compared to the long article devoted to the term in 1967's magisterial *The Language of Psychoanalysis* – a work for which Laplanche is most famous in the English-speaking world – the reader might consider Lacan's treatment somewhat scant (Laplanche & Pontalis, 2004). Both men's project is by their own accounts the same: a re-reading of Freud. Lacan's is perhaps the more 'creative' re-reading, but Laplanche's certainly the more honest, both to the totality of Freud's thought and to the problems it confronts. Laplanche describes his project as a "*faire travailler* la pensée freudienne" – an expression that House wisely translates as "making Freud work" rather than "putting Freudian thought to work", so as to capture "every sense of the word", as Laplanche intended (p. 4)² to the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* Laplanche devotes just such a *faire travailler*.

In dealing with this concept Laplanche showcases two themes that are central to his entire work. Firstly, translation. Nothing shows Laplanche's attentiveness to translation better than his study of *Nachträglichkeit*. Strachey's choice of "deferred action" as the English equivalent (at the behest of Jones) has one important consequence for Laplanche – it points the arrow of time in only one direction, forwards. This gives us the sense that Freud envisaged a progressive movement, from Event 1 to Event 2, whereby the second event is strictly determined by the first: 'the terrorist planted the bomb, and ten minutes later the bomb went off' (p. 26). As "deferred action", *Nachträglichkeit* becomes a theory of consequence, but "such a theory is never at work in Freud" (p. 26). Any translation of *Nachträglichkeit* that is loyal to the sense in which Freud used it needs to retain a reference to retroactivity; that the arrow of time also points backwards in a regressive movement: 'the bridge collapsed, and the engineer understood his mistake in building it'. Whilst the French *après-coup* seems to reflect both these movements, it lacks the substantive Laplanche's proposed English translation adds: *afterwardsness* (p. 26).

Indeed, a concern for specific terminological problems in translating Freud runs throughout Laplanche's work. Everywhere, detail is vital. We see this in the most mammoth of tasks he undertakes, like his life-long

¹ Middlesex University, LacanOnline.com

² All page numbers not accompanied by information regarding author and publication date refer to the book that is being reviewed.

project of translating Freud's Complete Works into French, or his exhaustive 1967 encyclopedia of psychoanalysis (dismissively brushed off as "scholastic" by Lacan). We also see it in the work he does on the smallest pockets of Freud (witness his lengthy commentary on terms such as *Anlehnung* and *Wahrnehmungszeichen*, both of which are revisited in this volume).

But for Laplanche translation is also a concept in itself. A work of translation constitutes what Dominique Scarfone has called the Fundamental Anthropological Situation of the human being (Scarfone, 2013) when the early infant is faced with enigmatic, inadvertently sexualized messages from the other. Laplanche calls this situation 'seduction', but the term takes on a much wider gamut in his work than it did for Freud. In *New Foundations*, written immediately prior to the delivery of *Après-coup*, he had proposed a General Theory of Seduction to describe this fundamental situation, a label that – with echoes of Einstein – would separate it from Freud's abandoned 'special' theory of seduction which had hypothecated a situation of sexual abuse by the adult as the determinant of neurosis. If we were to summarize this volume, it might be by saying that it presents "a translational model of *après-coup* and, more generally, a translational model of the theory of seduction and even a translational model of the constitution of the human being" (p. 154, emphasis in original). Humans are translation-making machines, for Laplanche. Their fundamental situation is one characterized by "a demand to translate the message of the other", and it is the enigma in these messages which has the effect of seduction (p.154). To translate is therefore to interpret, and interpretation as a concept is also later generalized by Laplanche, its place located between hermeneutics and determinism (Laplanche, 1992).

The second central theme of Laplanche's work is time. With whatever term we choose to use – "deferred action", "*après-coup*", "retroactivity", "belatedness", or "afterwardsness" – the question is still one of time. Laplanche makes clear that the questions that preoccupied Freud are those that would preoccupy anyone trying to untangle the strands of their personal narrative. If we have two events in someone's life, two moments, does one determine the other? If so, why is this event more important than any other? How do we separate the event from the memory of the event, fact from fantasy? These are Laplanche's concerns in *Après-coup* as well. "The theory of seduction is itself a thought about time", he says in the very first session. "It is, as I will explain, a translational theory of time" (p. 8, emphasis in the original). Frustrated by the perpetual slippage to notions such as "resignification" of one's own history, or "retroactive fantasizing" (p. 147), Laplanche wants to remind us of the nuance he claims Freud had forgotten about his own theory from the 1890s: that the arrow of time points in two directions. After a thorough demonstration of this effect from the case histories of Emma, and an entirely new treatment of the Wolf Man, by the very last session he has delivered his promised explanation: "There is no mental process that captures the double movement better than translation, the indivisible double movement of "being carried forward" and "referring back". The "being carried forward" is nothing other than what I designate as a "fundamental to-be translated": a demand to translate the message of the other." (p. 154).

Après-coup is accompanied at the volume's end by two shorter papers – 'Time and the Other', and 'Temporality and Translation' – which bookend the lecture series historically but in their titles alone testify to Laplanche's ongoing theoretical interest in these two areas.

To examine how Laplanche's argument progresses, it is interesting to note that when people think of *Nachträglichkeit* they think of the case of Emma. If this classical example is by now a bit well-worn, for Laplanche it is just one of several texts from the pre-1900 Freud that are worth reconsidering. The case, from the Project of 1895 (Freud, 1895/1950), is raised if only to situate the seduction theory as a model of trauma split between two moments (p. 40). But it is the letter to Fleiss dated December 6th, 1896 that holds greater interest for Laplanche (Freud, 1896/1950). It is there that Freud presents a theory of the stratification of memory traces, and it is there that Laplanche spots the model of translation he will later go on to develop

himself (p. 46). When we come to Freud's announcement of the abandonment of the seduction theory, in what Laplanche baptizes the 'Equinox letter' (Freud, 1897/1950), Laplanche notes a lifelong hallmark of Freud's intellectual fidelity in his determination to establish the fact of the event. If the first event – a sexual seduction of the child by the adult, for instance – does not exist, Freud thought his whole theory collapses (p. 73). When almost a century later Masson was to criticize Freud for this abandonment he does so from the same basis (Masson, 2003). Masson is only interested in the fact of seduction; Laplanche reconsiders the term itself and what might constitute a 'seduction'. After a brief discussion of the Screen Memories paper from 1899 (p. 106) (a broader discussion of which is taken up by Laplanche scholar John Fletcher) (Fletcher, 2013), Laplanche turns to the Interpretation of Dreams. There, only a short anecdote Freud offers to illustrate the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* is considered, but it is an example Laplanche returns to frequently elsewhere in his work on this term. "A young man who was a great admirer of feminine beauty was talking once – so the story went – of the good-looking wet-nurse who had suckled him when he was a baby: "I'm sorry," he remarked, "that I didn't make a better use of my opportunity"" (Freud, 1900, pp. 204-205). The nuance in this tale is that the arrow of time points both forward and backwards. It can be read as an example of how the past determines the present (the child is already sexualized, and the adult looks back wistfully at this), or how the present reinterprets the past (the child is not already sexualized, but the adult sexualizes the scene). (p. 105). But a major part of the latter half of *Après-coup* is reserved for a discussion of the Wolf Man case (Freud, 1918). Far from dying out with the abandonment of the seduction theory, Laplanche notes that Freud's account of the case contains no less than fifteen references to *Nachträglichkeit* (p. 111).

So why is this case – rather than the more celebrated case of Emma – of such importance to Laplanche? Like a message that sleeps for years and then demands understanding or translation *après-coup*, the re-emergence of *Nachträglichkeit* at this point marks the split between Freud and Jung, and the coming to prominence of what we might call *Ur-* concepts in Freud's thought: primal fantasies, primal scenes, primal repression, and the primal father.

At the time he was writing the Wolf Man's case, Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* was competing with another term advanced by Jung which appeared to account for the same problem: *Zurückphantasieren*. This translates as something like 'retroactive fantasising', a 'regressive resignification' in the present onto the past. Although Freud used this term himself initially, he dismisses it as nothing new when Jung started to grant it prominence. For Laplanche, the two terms are certainly not equivalent, and he points to the Wolf Man case to show the reasons Freud never condensed a theory of *Nachträglichkeit* into *Zurückphantasieren* (p. 137; pp. 144-145).

Freud's almost stubborn insistence to locate the point of the primal scene in the Wolf Man's history is born of his meticulous devotion to find a place for every fact. Every element of the dream's recitation has to have a place. But rather than being content with a "brick-by-brick" reconstruction that would allow us to read Freud's account of the case as one gigantic *Zurückphantasieren* (pp. 116-117), Freud's insistence on establishing in fact the determinative scene demonstrates a desire to keep the arrow of time pointing forwards, rather than allowing the Jungian inversion. With a nice analogy, Laplanche explains the difference between *Nachträglichkeit* and *Zurückphantasieren* as like completing a jigsaw puzzle versus painting an image with a broad brush (p. 127). With a jigsaw puzzle, we not only have to find a place for each little piece in the whole puzzle but also ensure that, when we do, the entire resulting picture is still comprehensible. Faced with a choice between fantasy and reality, Freud will always come down on the side of reality. "He will have it all figured out. He will have the last piece", Laplanche says. "As long as Freud does not have all the pieces of the original scene, he remains unsatisfied" (p. 127). This is why Freud never bought into Jung's term completely (p. 134).

But what happens when the facts do not have a place, or where there are gaps? Laplanche points to instances where Freud reaches outside the jigsaw puzzle (pp. 133-134). How can we explain the threat of castration if the Wolf Man had no opportunity to develop a belief that women could be castrated? He must have witnessed coitus a tergo, Freud supposes. Did he ever actually see his parents in the act? Maybe it was the animals on the estate he saw doing it that way, Freud assumes (pp. 138-139). But then comes the crucial concept that Freud reaches for to differentiate his theory from Jung's: phylogenesis, under the guise of primal phantasies (p. 138). "We can see how powerfully Freud's phylogenetic hypotheses are determined by the abandonment of the theory of seduction", Laplanche contends. "It is absolutely necessary to find a real starting point, which can serve as the support for all later developments, for the "drives"... for primal fantasies" (p. 74). Showing this steadfast fidelity to fact-over-fantasy, Laplanche quotes the last words of Totem and Taboo: "In the beginning was the deed". (Freud, 1913, p. 161).

Freud relieves himself of the need to find a scene of parental coitus in the case of the Wolf Man in two moves. First by appealing to what, he thinks, must be a common experience in the life of all neurotics, part of "the regular store in the - conscious or unconscious - treasury of their memories" (Freud, 1918, p. 59). Second, by hypothecating that this stock is actually universal, inherited, and has a prehistoric provenance (p. 139). This results in the extraordinary claim that "Wherever experiences fail to fit in with the hereditary schema, they become remodelled in the imagination" (Freud, 1918, p. 119). Whatever we may think of this claim we see that, in a sense, Freud re-learns the lesson of his work from the 1890s – that the scene he so laboriously tried to reconstruct does not really matter (pp. 143-144).

Laplanche identifies three missteps in the progression of Freud's work on *Nachträglichkeit* (p. 153; pp. 75-76). First, Freud is a prisoner of the arrow of time. He effectively forgets the complexity of his original thesis of the 1890s, so evident in the Screen Memories paper. Instead, his ceaseless quest for the 'original' or 'primal' event leads him to the assumption of phylogenesis in opposition to Jung's *Zurückphantasieren*.

Second, Freud misses the importance of the transmission of an 'enigmatic message' from the other. It would have helped Freud because "If we introduce the notion of the message of the other into the Wolf Man", Laplanche argues, "It considerably diminishes the importance of the discussion of "material reality" of the scene." (p. 155). To return to the anecdote that Freud was so fond of quoting to explain *Nachträglichkeit*, he simply overlooks the possibility that it is the desire of the wet nurse herself (rather than the point at which the child is sexualized) that could offer a way to synthesize the quandary presented when the arrow of time points both forward and back. Laplanche is not talking here about the desire of the Lacanian big Other but a very specific other: the wet nurse has her own sexual desire and mingles this with her experience of breastfeeding the child. In the same manner, what Freud misses in the search for the Wolf Man's 'primal scene' is the sexuality of the parents. For him, this simply does not constitute a message that "takes into account the (sexual) unconscious of the sender of the message" (p. 152).

There is one crucial turning point in Freud's early work where he has the chance to correct this oversight, Laplanche thinks. In the letter of 6th December, 1896 (Freud, 1896/1950) Freud introduces a 'translational' model of repression on the basis of the recognition that trauma always needs two separate moments in time, an echo from a past event in the present (p. 122). But he does not advance this concept. This constitutes the third misstep. Laplanche's General Theory of Seduction resumes from this point however, adding a theory of the 'to-be-translated' that Freud lacked. Seduction operates via the transmission of insinuations, of which neither the adult nor the child are aware, but which are intuited by the child despite remaining enigmatic. They constitute the traumata of seduction, kick-starting the child's own questioning process, of which the ego is the eventual heir.

Sadly, in the very first lecture of *Après-coup* Laplanche notes that the work both he and Lacan had done on re-reading Freud has had not “the slightest influence on the international development of psychoanalytic thought” (p. 12), or on the way Freud has been understood. In the very last lecture there is also a comment, added in 2005, to the effect that “the sleep of very few clinicians or theoreticians has been troubled” by the originality of *Nachträglichkeit* (p. 147). In this respect, “It is not completely false to say that the “return to Freud” is a French return”, he suggests (p. 12). With this new English translation however Jonathan House has offered an admirable way to prolong and progress the evolution of this important cornerstone of psychoanalytic thought.

References

- Fletcher, J. (2013). *Freud and the Scene of Trauma*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Freud, S. (1899). Screen Memories. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, (Vol. 3, pp. 301-323). Vintage, Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1900). The Interpretation of Dreams. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, (Vol. 4). Vintage, Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1913 [1912-1913]). Totem and Taboo. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, (Vol. 13, pp. ix-165). Vintage, Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1918). From the History of an Infantile Neurosis. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, (Vol. 17, pp. 3-125). Vintage, Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1914).
- Freud, S. (1950). Letter 52 (December 6, 1896). In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, (Vol. 1, pp. 233-240). Vintage, Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1896).
- Freud, S. (1950). Letter 69 (September 21, 1897). In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, (Vol. 1, pp. 259-261). Vintage, Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1897).
- Freud, S. (1950). Project for a Scientific Psychology. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, (Vol. 1). Vintage, Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1895).
- Lacan, J. (2006). *Ecrits* (B. Fink, Trans.). New York and London: Norton and Company.
- Laplanche, J. (2017). *Après-coup* (J. House & L. Thurston, Trans.). New York: The Unconscious in Translation.
- Laplanche, J. (1992). Interpretation between determinism and hermeneutics: a restatement of the problem. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 73(3), 429-445. Retrieved September 14th, 2017 from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/1399277>.
- Laplanche, J. (1987). *Nouveaux fondements pour la psychanalyse*. Paris: Press Universitaires de France.
- Laplanche, J. and Pontalis, J.-B. (2004). *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac.
- Masson, J. (2003). *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory*. London: Ballantine Books.
- Scarfone, D. (2013). A brief introduction to the work of Jean Laplanche. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 94(3), 545-566. Retrieved September 14th, 2017 from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1745-8315.12063/full>.