

## Laplanche, an introduction by Dominique Scarfone

**Avgi Saketopoulou**

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Laplanche, an introduction by Dominique Scarfone**, translated by D. Bonnigal-Katz, New York, *The Unconscious in Translation*, 2015, 144 pp., \$49.50, ISBN: 978-1-942254-03-4

In what we have come to know as his emblematic erudite and lucid style, Scarfone has offered us a remarkable introduction to Laplanche's ideas and, most critically, to his way of thinking. This is no small gift. Scarfone's text is excellent in its explication of Laplanche's complicated and radical ideas. Laplanche's contributions to analytic theory—which have long been known to French audiences but are only more recently becoming more widely available to Anglophone analysts through Jonathan House's press *The Unconscious in Translation*—have far-reaching implications for psychoanalytic metapsychology and for clinical technique. But Scarfone's most important offering to us in this volume is the particular way in which he has written it; it is a text that provides an immersive experience into what it feels like to be working intellectually not only with Laplanche's ideas but more precisely with *his method of using ideas psychoanalytically*, which for Scarfone constitutes Laplanche's most critical bequest. This book, therefore, accomplishes much more than a solid introduction to this major analytic figure. It exposes its reader to a way of reading texts and of applying Laplanche's method of thinking of psychic movement as following not the linear order of repetition but that of an elliptical turn, a spiral (a point to which I'll return) in the clinical domain as well as in our very process of theory building.

To the uninitiated, Laplanche poses two sets of challenges: First, as an extremely close reader of Freud he requires of his own reader a close familiarity with Freudian thought and scholarship. For those not as studied in Freud, it demands a staunch commitment to close reading alongside Laplanche's; this can feel arduous and demanding to readers not accustomed to his meticulous and close dissection of texts. Second, and perhaps more critical, is that Laplanche's thinking, which is unfurled in this book with unusual tenacity and clarity, insists on a decentering of the ego in a way that is both entirely and expectably Freudian but which is also, as Laplanche shows, progressively undercut by Freud himself. Laplanche's particular and insistent focus on a decentered ego as well as on an unconscious that is unknowable not due to repression *but in its very constitution* is incredibly challenging. It is tempting, thus, in what might be an almost Piagetian move of assimilation, to defensively manage the difficulty this poses for us as human beings, as analysts, and as readers of theory by seeking to incorporate Laplancheian thought into our pre-existing ideas. For example, new (and sometimes more seasoned) readers of Laplanche may dilute the shocking implications of his insights, producing misreads that stray far from Laplanche's own ideas.<sup>1</sup>

In this brief but rich introduction, Scarfone mostly follows Laplanche's trajectory from *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (1970/1976) to *New Foundations in Psychoanalysis* (1987/1989) to elaborate basic Laplancheian ideas (the enigmatic signifier, the source object of the drive, the sexual) and to gesture toward others (e.g. *après coup*) while he omits altogether some others (e.g. his work on the mythosymbolic). This is a necessary and wise choice because it permits him to track thoroughly Laplanche's basic thinking and to show us in depth how he arrives at his theoretical formulations. As such the text is well suited for the neophyte, who is supplied with the full array of tools necessary for grappling with Laplanche. And it also

<sup>1</sup>One such common and widespread misread is to interpret the enigmatic signifier as pertaining to an unconscious transmission of a kernel of content from parent to infant.

proffers to the more seasoned reader of Laplanche a systematic and thorough layering that promises to enrich one's understanding of Laplanche's larger project.

Scarfone breaks down Laplanche's major contributions into three interrelated spheres: First is Laplanche's method of reading Freud, which involves submitting Freud's texts to their very own methodology. Laplanche's way of reading Freud reveals gaps, inconsistencies, and impasses in the latter's theorizing that then drive Freud, according to Laplanche, to metapsychological twists (e.g. the introduction of the death drive, the positing of primary narcissism) that undermine his most radical ideas about the unconscious. These parapraxes, as Laplanche reads them, issue from the tremendous difficulty we have as human beings in genuinely believing (as opposed to theorizing) the unconscious as the extraordinarily alien entity it is posited to be. Scarfone guides us through the ways in which Laplanche's thinking slips into these very knots, to use Scarfone's phrase, so as to reopen the questions they originally posed and offer new possibilities for understanding psychic life. Following on Scarfone's emphasis on method, the second focus of this introduction is Laplanche's original contribution to the centrality of translation in the constitution of the human psyche. The third pivots around the combination of the first—Laplanche's method and his views on translation—to walk the reader through how Laplanche came to conceptualize his *Generalized Theory of Seduction* as a universal condition of the human subject. His work pulls seduction away from its previous status as episodic act<sup>2</sup> and yokes it to interpersonal psychic impact. It becomes divorced, that is, from the question of factuality and of veridical incidence as it was posited in Freud's seduction theory becoming instead part of what Laplanche has called our shared *fundamental anthropological situation*.

## Reading Freud

In his seminal text, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, the work that culminated in his theorizing an ontological distinction between the vital order and the sexual, Laplanche grappled with the Freudian theory of *leaning on* (*Anlehnung*). In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud (1905) proposed that breastfeeding, originating elementally as a nutritive function and as self-preservative activity, is oriented towards an object that is not important in and of itself other than in the instrumental function it serves in the infant's survival. With the loss of the object of need (milk) upon weaning, comes the metonymic transfer to the breast as the object that delivers milk and that now comes to acquire an independent psychic existence. This transforms the breast, which up to this point had been instinctually based and nutritively organized, into the site of satisfaction for the oral drive. The breast/mucus membrane (mouth) co-excitation converts the mouth from a mere feeding zone to an organ of erotogenic pleasure, a pleasure that will eventually become *autoerotic* when the infant substitutes the breast for her own thumb. For Freud, thus, the sexual starts out by "leaning on" the instinctual function of self-preservation and only subsequently peels off to become autonomous before it will, eventually, take an external object.

Scarfone notes that the assumption of an object-less state at birth has raised significant dissent among analytic theorists. He identifies two key difficulties. For Laplanche, this Freudian sequence poses a logical problem insofar as it conflates the object of function (milk) with the object of pleasure (breast). That is, the object that the infant is set to recover "is not the lost object but its substitute by displacement" (Laplanche 1997, p. 19, Scarfone's translation). In other words, the lost object (milk) and the object that the infant tries to recover in fantasy (breast, the object of original displacement) are different to begin with, but end up being

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<sup>2</sup>As Scarfone makes clear, Laplanche does not deny the reality of actual sexual violations in childhood; rather, he provides a more extensive basis along which the psychic impact of such intrusions can be further understood.

treated isomorphically. Laplanche reasoned that if the real object of the instinct, the object of function, is milk but through autoerotic regression the object of the sexual drive is the breast, then the search for substitution of the breast installs an original duplicity in the theory: one can never recover the original object since the object that is sought is not the object lost. The implication is that the sexual sphere derives from, but is never fully and entirely differentiated from, the instinctual/self-preservative. Looked at from another angle, so to speak, if what turns the self-preservative into sexuality is co-excitation, then the two spheres are never entirely independent. Secondly, this linear description (nutritive first, sexual second) fails to consider that the person theorizing this continuity is an adult already immersed in a sexual world. This means that the subject looking to account for this trajectory in retro time is already compromised by her own sexual unconscious. As such, the continuity between the sexual and the self-preservative may be more of an artifact of the adult's point of temporal observation, who can definitionally speak only through her own repressed sexual. These problems force Laplanche to re-examine the theory of "leaning on" and specifically to wonder how a sexual order that is to be more powerful than a self-preservative originates from the latter.

### Seduction: Fact, fantasy, imagination

As we know, Freud's original seduction theory proposed that hysterical symptoms could be accounted for by the incidence of, and through the recollection of, childhood sexual abuse suffered at the hands of adults. Equally well known is Freud's retraction of his seduction theory (for which he has been severely critiqued, Masson [1984]) to substitute it with what is now credited as the discovery of unconscious fantasy. For Laplanche, this revision introduced an insurmountable distance between factuality and hysterical fantasy, a distance that was methodologically objectionable because it effectively trimmed fantasy down to imagined fact. The "facts" under consideration here as Laplanche emphasized, were best understood not as veridical in terms of historical accuracy, but true insofar as psychic life is concerned. The fact that traumatic events occur in two times—the time of original inscription, which installs an "internal foreign body," and the subsequent time which through *Nachträglichkeit* rewrites the original scene to render it traumatic—introduces a "relation of indeterminacy" (Scarfone 2015, p. 25). This indeterminate relation reformulates the unconscious from being a mere storehouse of memories into a dynamic agency that rewrites and remembers, reapoints meanings and re-distributes affects.

In thinking about parental seduction, Laplanche challenged us to think beyond the material facticity and precise temporality of how parental care activates the body, thus turning some of its parts into erogenous zones, as Freud had asserted in the *Three Essays*. He pushed us as well to think beyond how episodic adult seduction prematurely introduces sexuality. He proposed we move instead into considering how the most expectable and ordinary acts of care are always already infiltrated— "compromised," to use his phrase—by the adult's sexual unconscious in ways that are inevitably and inescapably registered by the infant. These enigmatic transmissions become installed in the infant, a process Laplanche called implantation. Through this theoretical move, Laplanche finds an intermediate space between the notion that parental care innocently and without sexual undercurrent inflects and forms erotogeneity and the particular and singularly traumatic event of perverse adult seduction. The ever-present and inevitable saturation of parental acts with the adult's sexual unconscious, thus, undoes the somewhat facile distinction between the externality of fact and the precise interiority of fantasy. I'll have more to say about this shortly but for the moment, I note that it nominates the intervention of the other as an intermediate space between something that has indeed occurred (the implantation of enigma) and something to be psychically manufactured (its unrelenting un-knowability demands of the child as we shall see the creation of meaning).

Scarfone draws out for us a significant implication in this theoretical advance. For Freud, the sexual as the repressed is always in conflict with the ego; it plays “a leading role in the modality of the attack” (p. 28) by the drive. This situates conflict between the self-preservative and the sexual sphere. From this angle, the ego is understood primarily in terms of its inhibiting function, its charge being to eliminate the excess that arises from states of internal excitation. It is, then, but a short step to construe the ego as the agent that seeks to stabilize against the onslaught of primary process. The ego, therefore, is conceptualized as aiming to bind and to bind specifically in a way that protects the self from overwhelm and overstimulation. Enter narcissism, a quiescent libidinal investment, the concept that per Laplanche’s reading Freud (1914) introduces in order to posit an ego that is self-reliant, that exists as if in a closed system and which promises to salvage the dehiscence of the self-preservative function.

Freud’s turn to narcissism is critical in Laplanche’s theorizing. This turn, Laplanche believes, is the precise metapsychological moment where Freud finds it necessary to devise the concept of *Eros* so that narcissistic libido can become fused with the more itinerant sexual. The pleasure principle now pertains to gratification, and the pleasures of *jouissance* are relegated outside the order of *Eros*. With the positing of a tamer, more docile sexual comes the need, however, to account for the more unruly, the more “demonic” as Laplanche calls them, aspects of sexuality. This is what necessitates Freud’s introduction of the notion of the death drive, which will help set up a clearer delineation that verges almost on an opposition between the more domesticated and the more archaic aspects of the sexual. It is to avoid this problem that Laplanche prefers to speak of *sexual life drives* and *sexual death drives*. In doing so he seeks to accentuate that it is the economical regime rather than the presence of the life-preservative order per se that forms the basis of their difference: the sexual life drive works to bind, to bring together while the sexual death drive works to unbind, to take apart. It is important to highlight that for Laplanche, the work of unbinding is not necessarily the work of destructiveness; like analytic listening, unbinding is how previous, bound and translated elements come undone, where they become unfurled, a process which can then open up possibilities for their recoherence and for their becoming re-organized anew. On the level of theory building, this kind of unfurling is critical to psychoanalysis remaining enlivened and vibrant; psychoanalytic theories that operate too much under the aegis of binding can morph into rigid ideological structures that permit no room for revisiting old dictums and that suffocate analytic creativity. For Laplanche it is the work of unbinding, not the work of binding, that is *par excellence* the work of analytic theorizing and the crucible of clinical psychoanalysis.

Clinically speaking, it is tempting to think of unbinding in terms of a regressive or some other such psychic process that trades in repetition. As Scarfone emphasizes, however, that would be a misreading: for Laplanche unbinding is not a return to but an undoing of existing structures (translations) to make room for the new and for novelty. Scarfone, in fact, proceeds to show us how in *New Foundations in Psychoanalysis* Laplanche reworks the theory of seduction, in his characteristic way of thinking of returns not as repetitions but as re-workings, in the hopes of revisiting and retracing the primal. Space does not permit me here to explicate why Laplanche finds objectionable the usual forms to which psychoanalysis resorts (biological, phylogenetic, mechanical, and linguistic) to locate the primal. Suffice it to say that, as Scarfone explains with great clarity, Laplanche regards all these as representational vehicles of the primal rather than true approaches to the primal. There is, he argues, no direct path-line to the primal or to the sexual and as such, the conditions underlying the advent of unconscious life are not chronological. We take recourse to chronology, in fact, and in so doing collapse the psychoanalytic into the developmental, as a way of grounding ourselves when we are confronted with the elusive temporality of non-linear time.

## Generalized seduction

How does Laplanche, however, move forward from his critique of there being too much truth in the original seduction theory and too little truth in the elaboration of hysterical fantasy? For him, the original and asymmetrical parent–child situation is subject to the ever irreducible binary of big/small (Harris 2017). During ordinary acts of adaptational care, the adult’s sexual unconscious layers bodily encounters, the gaze and sounds issued from parent to infant. The infant is exposed to this intricate message, a message that is compromised by the parent’s sexual unconscious and is, therefore, also unknown to the parent herself. What gets transmitted here is not the parent’s unconscious, as Scarfone cautions us; what gets implanted onto the infant’s psychological apparatus is not content. What gets conveyed is a meaning that is “unknown to itself” (p. 53), a meaning that reveals to the child the existence of a parental unconscious.<sup>3</sup>

The disparity between adult and child, or to use Scarfone’s term, the child’s inexorable state of unpreparedness (2018), requires of the child an attempt to make meaning (in other words, to generate a fantasy) (Scarfone, 2016) out of what has radiated out towards her. Yet, not all of these communications can or will be translated.<sup>4</sup> Those that do will form part of the conscious/preconscious memory system. Those that cannot be translated will form a residue which, in turn, becomes repressed<sup>5</sup> forming the sexual which, for Laplanche, is isomorphic with the unconscious. It is this primal repression, then, that inaugurates a topographical differentiation between conscious/preconscious and the unconscious. And it is through this emergence of the sexual, that the very process of psychic structuralization becomes instituted.

It is important to note that for Laplanche, untranslatable material creates a *demand for psychic work*: it pushes for translation. Demand for work, Freud’s very definition of the drive, is what led Laplanche to describe the other whose implantations create the need for this type of work (the parent in the case of the infant) as the *source object of the drive*. Thus conceptualized, the sexual drive thus becomes an inseparable part of the other’s very strangeness and alienness, of his/her fundamental un-knowability. And it is this that separates quite radically Laplanche’s theory from a notion of leaning on, where the sexual is metonymically derived from the vital order or adaptational needs. The object of the drive is not there to be recovered (since it was unconscious in the first place) and as such, absence and loss are built into this model from the beginning. This is what Laplanche called the *hollow*, the object that “induced excitation is ... always already lost” (p. 58).

## The analyst’s refusal and the offer of analysis

The hollow acquires prime importance in the analytic situation and, specifically, in the transference. For Laplanche, the analyst’s task largely revolves around creating an ecosystem that will permit the emergence in the analysis of the drive-related sexual. To do so, the analyst refuses to engage the patient on the adaptational level, not to deny gratification of the patient’s wishes

<sup>3</sup>Laplanche reads Freud’s Letter 52 to Fliess as having approximated but quickly abandoned his own conviction in the linguistic-translational aspect of repression.

<sup>4</sup>Devoted to the precise meaning of Laplanche’s ideas, Scarfone helpfully clarifies that the term “translation” may be misunderstood to imply that there is a right transcription that can be reached and a multitude of erroneous other. In Laplanche’s model, there is no right/wrong translation since the message to be “translated” carries meanings unconscious to the parent herself, meanings that are not “hiding” a memory that can be unearthed but that originate in the parent’s sexual unconscious and so on. Further, the infantile sexual that always dwells in the adult is summoned by acts of caring for a child; this aroused infantile sexual in the adult is itself by nature of its derivation deviant.

<sup>5</sup>It bears repeating that *the translational model of repression* is not the motivated placement of represented content out of consciousness, but pertains to the eviction of material that is not and cannot be “known” and that *the subject fails to translate*.

(an approach that would draw from a conflict model that treats the ego as the guarantor of the sexual not running amok), but as a way of opening up space for the enigmatic dimension to unfold in the analytic space. The very act of the analyst offering the patient an analysis introduces the fact of the analyst's own desire, a desire the contents and contours of which are unknown and indecipherable to the patient. The analyst's offer acts to mobilize a reopening of the original enigmatic message, setting in motion a rekindling of the primal. In contrast to the *filled-in* transference, which is the more often encountered displacement and re-living of prior relationships onto the person of the analyst, the *hollowed-out* transference has the potential to revive the infantile sexual and its enigmatic roots.

The generalized theory of seduction posits that the adult's compromised message is *seductive* because it is enigmatic not only to the child but to the parent as well. And it is certainly traumatic insofar as it loads the child with messages she cannot possibly understand, process, or appreciate. But it is also what furnishes us with our human potential for the sexual (as opposed to the reproductive sexual function) and where the subject's unconscious life originates. In this way, as Scarfone writes, Laplanche was able to release "seduction from [being a] relation to events, however inescapable they may be, in order to formulate a *theory of seduction*" (p. 52). This primal seduction does not attempt to replace other theories of seduction; rather, it offers a foundation upon which other seductive acts (innocent parental seductions as described in the *Three Essays* or malignant sexual violations as posited in Freud's *Seduction Theory*) can be understood as becoming embedded within an already quite complex network of affects and experiences.

## Astronomical metaphors

Having taken us on this challenging yet highly satisfying theoretical journey, Scarfone, in true Laplancheian spirit, concludes his introduction where he started: looping back to the astronomical metaphor. He starts with a sunset. The fact that we, humans, still refer to it as the sun setting when post-Copernicus we well know that it is the earth that revolves around the sun and not the reverse, brings into sharp focus how narcissistically averse we are to recognizing primacy outside our very own selves. Just as we attempt to situate the sun in our orbit, we attempt to fashion the other's messages into versions that accommodate our ego, an attempt to re-locate ourselves in the center, to distance ourselves from the other's primacy. Yet in Laplanche's model, even this narcissistically driven relocation proves insufficient. Even the other in ourselves does not have a clear and locatable center on which we can rely or which can be recovered. Enigma lies in the soul of our being: it is irrecoverable, always alien, always other.

## Scarfone's Laplanche

As we have seen, Laplanche's methodology was to revisit Freudian texts and to subject them to Freud's own method; to discern theoretical gaps and impasses and to regard them as symptoms that required careful dissecting and further theorizing. The particular attention paid to this methodology, however, is Scarfone's specific contribution to our reading of Laplanche. Other knowledgeable writers on Laplanche, like Calich and Hinz (2005), Fletcher (2007), Van Haute and Geyskens (2001), and Van Haute and Westerink (2016) also attend with beauty and rigor to Laplanche's ideas. But Scarfone's fastidious focus on Laplanche's method and his own reading of Laplanche's reading of Freud as itself being a "reopening as well as a re-statement" (1997/2015, p. 6) offers more than merely an opportunity for new ideas. True to Laplanche's commitment of there not being a "true" meaning to parental unconscious transmissions—for Laplanche, remember, these transmissions become vexing nodes



that require translations—Scarfone approaches Laplanche with respect, but not with hagiographic reverence. He is looking for openings and does not prey on vulnerabilities but uses them rather for furthering theory.


It is this intimate yet flexible relationship to Laplanche's mind that Scarfone has mined to develop ideas on memory, repetition, and recollection in new and refreshing directions. Drawing on Laplanche's insistence that unbinding does not return the subject to the same coordinates but rather moves through a helicoid motion, Scarfone (2011) has offered us an original and exceptional elaboration of how repetition is always repetition with a difference, the novelties and productive possibilities of which can easily be missed when we treat repetition as "a downgraded form of remembering." Similarly, his most recent work on psychic temporality, inspired by Laplanche but much further elaborated conceptually (2015), shows us that psychic time is scrambled, that the past is a category that has no ontological independence but which that has to be psychically instituted in the present and, perhaps, in the analytic future. We await with great excitement Scarfone's further writings on Laplanche, and to benefiting from how he continues to develop Laplanche's original contributions.

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Avgi Saketopoulou

New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis, USA

 avgisaketopoulou@gmail.com

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