

Structured Like Culture: Laplanche on the Translation of Parental Enigma

Avgi SAKETOPOULOU

In his 1915 essay “On the Unconscious”, Freud, among other things, was working to articulate the structural relationship between the systems conscious, preconscious, and unconscious, and to delineate the mechanisms through which one system became porous to the other with respect to content. It was in that paper that he first distinguished between *thing-presentations*, which he described as unmediated, visually encoded cathexes of memory traces, and *word-presentations*, which he understood as linking the very sound wave of a word to the cathexis of a memory trace, that is, to a thing-presentation. Thing-presentations are, therefore, a matter of the system unconscious whereas word-presentations concern the system preconscious-conscious: “[t]he conscious presentation comprises the presentation of the thing plus the presentation of the word belonging to it, while the unconscious presentation is the presentation of the thing alone” (1915/1957, p.201).

Freud’s central preoccupation with accounting for how material travels from one psychic register to another led him to wonder about what process an unconscious trace must undergo as it migrates to the territory of consciousness. His primary question was as follows: when an unconscious inscription becomes conscious, does the material that was originally outside consciousness endure a change of state (what came to be known as the *functional hypothesis*) or does it achieve a second inscription (which has come to be referred to as the *topographical hypothesis*) upon reaching its destination? The implication of the topographical explication is that a second inscription would imply that the same psychic event is now inscribed twice: once in its original iteration as thing-presentation, as well as a newly installed one which pairs it with a word so that it may live in conscious life.

Lacan approached this question by insisting on the durable presence of the original unconscious inscription. Though the original trace is never at the subject’s linguistic disposal, its very inscription psychically follows the grammar of language. Consider, for example, a hysterical symptom of a hand paralysis that cannot be accounted for by organic factors. The paralytic symptom, Lacan would point out, follows not the musculature and innervation of the body but its linguistic delimitation. As such, the hand paralyzes at the wrist (where the word *hand* ends and the word *arm* begins), rather than in accordance to the particular muscle and neuronal pathways that govern its operation.

While Laplanche followed Freud in the notion that the unconscious is made up of cathected memory traces (thing-representations) he differed from Lacan in that he did not see the unconscious as following in its constitution the ordinance of language but saw it, rather, as structure-less. Laplanche insisted on a drive, the state of which is pure and not constituted *through* signifiers but which, rather, arises out of the infant’s failure to translate and affix signification (in the form of fantasy) onto parental enigma. By the time a subject finds herself in the territory of signifiers, the drive is *manifesting* as already fixated, running through the mesh of the system preconscious/conscious. Repression, thus, allows the subject to be anchored in the symbolic order rather than to toil under the aegis of the drive, whose nature is peripatetic, unwieldy, and promiscuous as to object. Therefore for Laplanche the unconscious, rather than structured *like* language is, in fact, *the enabling condition for language*. The subject’s move from primary to secondary process is the work of binding (of psychic energy, of drive representatives, and of meaning) to confer a certain kind of stability.

For Laplanche the language of the unconscious is a circulation of thing-presentations in a way that is comparable, as he writes in his 1960 essay coauthored with Leclaire, only to the vertiginous layer of language that is used by poets. Every encounter with the unconscious that can be apperceived is always already refracted through the preconscious. Consciousness, as Matte-Blanco has written, just “does not have enough dimensions to contain [the unconscious]: in a similar way one cannot pour water into a jug in a painting because this jug has only two dimensions and to receive the water it would need three” (1980, p.45). The unconscious thus reaches us in forms that are always already mediated and structured and it has the appearance of linguistic form because, to develop escape velocity and make it into the preconscious, it has to already have been compressed into recognizable (or bits of recognizable) form.

As Laplanche further developed his ideas regarding the Fundamental Anthropological Situation and the universality of the parent’s enigmatic seduction (1987), he came to see the classical view of repression as less significant, though he never entirely abandoned it. Repression as the aggregate of inscriptions that have lost their links to signifiers became less central in his thinking. The unconscious that came to interest him was less a storehouse of preexisting,

albeit disguised, meanings (Scarfone, 1997/2015). His new proposition was that through the attachment relationship between infant and caretaker, the former is not only the recipient of acts of care that meet survival and instinctual needs but is also and inevitably exposed to the parent’s sexual unconscious. The parent’s unconscious unremittingly compromises her communications to her infant, introducing a perturbation on the level of the psyche-soma. The asymmetrical relationship between caretaker and infant exposes the infant to the parent’s own strangeness to herself, introducing messages the infant will inevitably be unable to translate. To *translate* here does not refer to an act of decoding, but more of generating meaning or a fantasy to explicate to oneself the parent’s enigma. Laplanche described this perturbation as “a thorn in the flesh of the ego” (1987, p.129); it provokes an irritation that implants itself in the subject. The child is impelled to make sense of this irritant through translating the enigmatic message; that which cannot be translated sediments and, through primal repression, forms the subject’s sexual unconscious. The unconscious thereby constituted is thus not comprised of content and of signifiers but is of a different order ontologically speaking.

The ego gets formed from the very attempt to cope with the strangeness of the other by translating enigma. The success of this process is not contingent on the accuracy of the interpretation of the parent’s enigmatic message, since, we should remember, it is unconscious *to the parent*. How do we translate enigma then? To do so, Laplanche argues, we borrow existing cultural forms, from the mytho-historical and that which is transmitted through the family and culture. So anything that can be fished out of the unconscious to be brought into analytic discourse is always already nominated by existing cultural forms and through what is socially and culturally intelligible. Laplanche spoke about gender as a product of culture nominated in the effort to cull the untameability of the infantile sexual. I propose that other concepts too that culture uses (and abuses) to order the world—like sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, class, and so on—are all mediums taken up in the effort to translate the sexual unconscious. This helps explain perhaps why so many of these concepts feel hard to pin down, why they resist language and tend to crumble and betray their unstable foundations when examined closely.

From that angle we might think of the Oedipal crisis as trying to bind, bring order to, and tidy up the sexual. The classical resolution of the Oedipus complex and the subject's finding her appropriate gendered position in the heterosexual matrix used to be thought of as a developmental achievement, but we are now coming to see it more and more as the scar tissue left behind by "solutions" that coil too tightly around cultural notions of the good life (Ahmed, 2010; Dimen, 2001; Goldner, 2003) and of normativity. These cultural spells as Guralnik calls them, give language and the appearance of linguistic structure to psychic material, but it is important to remember that they precede the subject. As

found objects that the unconscious employs to forge its translations of parental enigma they become threaded through the manifestations of the unconscious. So while they appear to reflect the structure of the unconscious as Lacan might have it, I see them from a Laplancheian perspective more as revealing to us how heavily and persistently they lend form to the instinct to translation. ■

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