

HOW THE WORLD BECOMES BIGGER; IMPLANTATION, INTROMISSION, AND THE APRÈS-COUP: DISCUSSION OF HOUSE

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Jonathan House's conceptually rigorous paper offers us an entry point through which psychoanalysts can think through further, as psychoanalysts, about the seam between the psychic and the social. I will be focusing on some of the ideas House has clearly articulated for our benefit, with special attention to his unique contribution as to how the concept of après-coup is inextricably linked to processes of translation. House points to Laplanche's distinction between implantation and intromission; implantation, he tells us, involves "enigmatic representations [that] are malleable, polysemic, open to multiple and even contradictory translations" (p. 22). Intromission, on the other hand, involves the parent jamming specific meanings into the child, "impos[ing] a specific meaning" (p. 22), which consequently results in these "not [being] available for translation and repression" (p. 22). Using these distinctions and the work to which House puts them, I will suggest that the workings of the après-coup can help move us beyond the notion that implantations and intromissions belong to a stable conceptual grid with clearly delineated borders to suggest that these borders can become porous under some temporalizations, and, also, that both of them are conditions that earn their coherence from their historical situatedness. More specifically, House's work enables us to examine how the operation of the après-coup re-inscribes some implantations to render them traumatic. What was originally experienced as—or may have been described as—an implantation may, retroactively, be best understood, and experienced by the subject, as an intromission. To make these points, I'll build on House's example in working with textual translation, and *The Odyssey* in particular. Further, I will draw on examples from the #MeToo movement and my clinical experience to highlight some of the implications of what House's work makes possible in our thinking as analysts who live and work under particular sociopolitical conditions.

Translations: How, when, and by whom

The important question, it seems to me, is not whether a culture without restraints is possible or even desirable but whether the system of

constraints in which a society functions leaves individuals the liberty to transform the system ... a system of constraint becomes truly intolerable when the individuals who are affected by it don't have the means of modifying it. This can happen when such a system becomes intangible as a result of its being considered ... a[n] imperative ... restrictions have to be within the reach of those affected by them.

(Foucault, 1982/1983, p. 16/7)

Written nearly 3,000 years ago, Homer's *The Odyssey* has been translated into English over 60 times. Yet, only one of those is by a female scholar, Dr. Emily Wilson, a classicist at U Penn. Published in 2017, her text has been hailed as a "new cultural landmark" (Higgins, 2017), and as "scraping away all the centuries of verbal and ideological buildup" (Quinn, 2017). For reasons that will become clear shortly, I want to focus on Wilson's description of her struggle in translating one of the most notoriously difficult lines. In Homer's very first portrayal of his protagonist, Odysseus is described as an *άνδρας πολύτροπος*. The word *άνδρας*, in Greek, means 'man' while *πολύτροπος* is a composite word that has yielded almost as many translations as there are versions of *The Odyssey* itself,

Chapman starts things off ... with "many a way/Wound with his wisdom"; John Ogilby counters with the terser "prudent"; ... [t] here's Alexander Pope's "for wisdom's various arts renown'd"; ... H.F. Cary's "crafty"; ... Theodore Buckley's "full of resources"; Henry Alford's "much-versed"; ... George Palmer's "adventurous"; William Morris's "shifty"; ... Francis Caulfeild's "restless"; Robert Hiller's "clever"; ... Richmond Lattimore's "of many ways"; ... Albert Cook's "of many turns"; Walter Shewring's "of wide-ranging spirit"; ... Robert Fagles's "of twists and turns"; all the way to Stanley Lombardo's "cunning."

(Mason, 2017)

A considerable portion of Wilson's 2017 *NY Times* interview is dedicated to what I think of as one of her most original ideas (Mason, 2017). "It is entirely defensible," she explains, "to translate the word *πολύτροπος* as 'straying,' and *άνδρας* not as man—as all previous male translators have done—but as 'husband' (since, in fact, *άνδρας* in Greek does also mean 'husband')." Pause for a minute to take this in: what would it mean

if the recounting of Odysseus' long journey back to Ithaca were to start out with Homer appealing to the muse to help him tell the story not of a warrior, but of a straying husband? This would, no doubt, frame the remainder of this epic poem in an entirely different way². When I first encountered Wilson's proposition of translating *ἀνδρας πολύτροπος* as "straying husband," I was stunned. I was born and raised in Greece; *The Odyssey* was part of the elementary school curriculum and I have read the text in ancient and in modern Greek a few times. Yet, while I know full well that in my native tongue *ἀνδρας* can mean husband just as frequently as it means man, the notion of Odysseus being first introduced to the reader as a husband—a man, that is, defined by his relationship to a woman, and a straying husband at that, had absolutely never crossed my mind. Even in reading Wilson's interview, I had to stop several times to take this in. But is this really what Homer meant, you may wonder? Wilson's translation, the *Chicago Review of Books* opines, stretches. But not beyond what is permissible (Brady, 2018). How is it, I want to ask, that it has taken more than 60 translations for such a radical translational possibility to become at all thinkable? Concretely speaking, the actual words are there in the text—this is akin to House's description of the workings of deferred action—but their particular inflection issues from Wilson's desire in the present—and this is akin to House's description of the workings of retrospective modification. Together, the two make up the *après-coup*. But we would be remiss if we stopped our query here, since that does not account for why it is only a woman, a feminist and an immigrant woman at that, who was able to conceive of this particular translational possibility. Put differently, what can this accumulated history of translational scotoma add to our thinking about the relationship between re-translation, *après-coup*, and trauma? A lot, I think, and I will now return to Laplanche's work and House's original paper to be clearer about what I am trying to say.

The crafting of translation

For Laplanche, as House eloquently explains in his paper, routine acts of parental caretaking are parasitized by the parent's sexual unconscious which inflects all communications with a surcharge for which the infant is unprepared. Implanted on the level of the psychophysiological skin, this surcharge becomes an irritant that demands attention. The infant is driven

to make sense of this irritant but cannot interpret it veridically because enigmatic messages are, to begin with, unconscious to the parent him/herself (Laplanche, 1987). These messages get partly translated, helping build the ego; the untranslated remainder becomes repressed, forming the unconscious. In some instances, however, messages are not implanted but intromitted. They are, that is, delivered contentful and with an interdiction to the child to translate them in any way other than that dictated by the parent. The child, thus, cannot actively take them up to translate freely in her own improvisational way as is the case with an implantation; intromission “puts into the interior an element *resistant to all metabolism*” (Laplanche, 1999, p. 136, emphasis added). But how are translations fashioned in the first place?

The infant, Laplanche tells us, translates enigmatic messages by formatting them through the existing meaning-making templates made available to her by the parent. What are these templates? The parent conveys to the child in subtle but varied ways, most of them embodied, the surrounding culture’s myths, stories, and symbols. These, in turn, become the media through which the unelaborated state of the infantile sexual can come to be invested with meaning (Laplanche, 2005). It seems to me that it is only a short step from Laplanche’s assertion to argue that, since the adult (and her sexual unconscious) exist in a sociopolitical world, the translational codes she can make available to the child for translation, will by definition and necessarily be constrained by the range of myths, stories, and symbols that explicitly and implicitly order social life. Put differently, it is only the portion of the unconscious that can hook itself onto the mythosymbolic narratives widely circulating in culture, that can develop escape velocity to make it out of the inchoate so that it may be churned into some rudimentary form of meaning and, eventually, become a building block of the ego. While some creativity and improvisation are at play in the crafting of translations (Laplanche, 2006), the range of materials that we can use to translate are furnished for us by the outside, that is by our parents. In that sense, they are ‘found objects’ (*objets trouvés*; Saketopoulo, 2017), nominated for this function by the culture’s existing and dominant ideologies. Laplanche comes close to this when he posits that, say, the Oedipus complex is part of the infant’s self-theorizing rather than an internally derived, phylogenetically transmitted fantasy (1987). The next logical step is to conclude that nothing can exit the recesses of the unconscious if it does not hitch a ride on forms that *already exist*.

To better flesh out the implications of this sequence, I will turn to the work of Piera Aulagnier. Aulagnier (1975) proposed that the primal, raw material of the infant's early life, at the time before the I has yet even become a differentiated I, gets formatted into usable units of experience through the parent's discourse. For Aulagnier, discourse is not language per se; the term refers to the aggregate effects of how the social is structured and, in turn, structures us. Through the effects of the constant background stream of affect, acts, and words, the parent responds and names experience to and *for* the infant, and in so doing formats the amorphousness of the infant's experience, giving it a shape. Of course, all of this is inflected by the parent's own sexual unconscious, early history, and psychic conflicts; but what I am trying to emphasize here is that the parent is not an independent or sovereign agent. The parent is her/himself subject to and answerable to external regimes of organized meanings over which she/he has little control and by which she/he is saturated.

As such, the development of representations and, thus, the building of the ego is, by definition, a reproduction of the social: because of how it is constituted, representational experience stays within the contours of the discursive since it can only be midwived into meaning by becoming formatted along the contours of what is already socially intelligible because, again, socially intelligible tools are, definitionally, the only translational possibilities that the parent can make available to the child. Aulagnier described this process as a primary violence that is exerted on the child by the parent. The word 'violence' may feel troubling and can be misleading, so let me explain what Aulagnier means. Aulagnier is not referring to physical violence; nor is she referring to explicit prohibition or an oppressive force (that is, *primary violence* is not akin to Laplanche's notion of intromission). What I understand her to mean by *violence* has to do with how the interpretative funnel that the parent provides, and through which the infant's world can take shape. That funnel is by nature restricted, and, thus, restrictive. Primary violence is best understood as placing a constraint on the most elemental level of human becoming insofar as it delimits, ahead of time, how something will become represented in the first place. It is important to emphasize that primary violence is indispensable and constitutive; its mediation is necessary if the child is going to be able to forge meaning at all.

Translations, therefore, arise from within this necessarily limited array of existing discursive frameworks that order the larger social world. That

means that ways of being that have not yet entered the social and/or those which are not yet solidified in the cultural imaginary cannot become possible translational avenues. And, conversely, that a culture's most dominant meaning-making templates will more readily and widely lend themselves to becoming translational vessels. Therefore, for instance, since patriarchy, procreative heterogeneity, and binary gender are the most intelligible, socially sanctioned, and institutionally supported forms of sex and gender systems in Western culture, it should come as no surprise that they are the translational frameworks most plainly on offer.

The subject compresses all meaning into already existing shapes and if you are thinking that that's limiting, you are exactly right; there is no way around this. There is no social world without discourse or one existing outside myths or symbols. If even for a moment, and only as a thought experiment, we tried to imagine a society without such constraining structures, we would have to conclude that a social realm of this kind would actually be catastrophic. Not only would it not provide greater freedom in forging translations but, on the contrary, it would incapacitate the child since it would deprive her of any tools whatsoever with which to translate the press of the infantile sexual. The meaning-making kit of culture is all we have.

Meaning-making goes astray

Or, to immediately contradict myself, it is all we have *until we have something else*. What do I mean by that? If Wilson is able to formulate a translation of Odysseus as a straying husband, it is not because she has single-handedly been able to see what the rest of us have not. The story is a bit more complex. Her undeniable intellect and her considerable erudition are not in and of themselves sufficient. These attributes and her intellect have synergized, in this particular cultural moment, with certain discursive shifts that enable women to think with more degrees of freedom about the oppressions of patriarchy. It is this that permits Wilson, who is a feminist scholar, to escape the gravitational pull of Odysseus as a warrior to be able to deliver him to us as, also, a straying husband. It is under the auspices of such slowly accruing cultural shifts that a different set of translational forms become possible at all. New translational codes make the world bigger. The world becomes bigger every time a human society stretches to make room for more, and it becomes bigger every time it pushes against

the limits of established categories. Why? On the simpler, more superficial level, because it makes room for people whose experience is not granted recognition and who have been toiling under the burdens of being unseen. But most importantly, as House's work on the *après-coup* of translation enables us to see, it becomes bigger because any expansion of the mytho-symbolic means that the materials through which enigma can be translated can become more varied, furnishing the subject with more possibilities for becoming. Even this expansiveness, of course, will still always be constrained since new translational tools will exert their own primary and delimiting violence, and as such, more expansion can always be possible. There is no 'final destination' for a translation; becoming also means becoming again³, and this is, in fact, one of the most beautiful aspects of our humanity, not to mention one of the most potentially productive dimensions of the analytic work.

Such cultural shifts, however, are not just enabling of new selves; in the *après-coup*, they can also become traumatic because they can, retroactively, re-inscribe what had been originally registered as an implantation, rewriting it into an intromission. Here's what I mean: consider an atypically gendered subject for whom the proliferation of transgender discourses enables new translations of their gender experience, which subsequently permits them to start thinking of themselves as being transgender (as opposed to, say, an effeminate gay man or woman). This new translation can retroactively render the original implantation of the infantile sexual into gender, into an intromissive injunction: that is, where gender had initially offered a translational avenue of which the subject could avail itself (Laplanche, 2011), what was in real time an offering of translational tools may be revealed, in the *après-coup*, to have been subtended by binary injunctions: in other words yes, gender constituted a translational tool but only insofar as it followed the male/female binary. Some trans subjects may, thus, only retroactively come to experience the initial mandate that they arrange themselves into a neat male/female classificatory divide as traumatic. This is different than saying that the experience was traumatic all along and only became possible to register as such when a trans person came to realize that transgender life and embodiment may be viable possibilities; to say that it was traumatic all along would be a misunderstanding of *après-coup* as something that was already there, waiting to be discovered. What distinguishes the workings of the *après-coup* in this instance is that the injunction to normative gender may *become traumatic*

after discursive shifts of gender as multiple have occurred. That is, it can become traumatic only after—and because of—the encounter with enlarged possibilities afforded by new translational codes around gender. Why? Because that revisitation can in the present, and considered through the lens of today's translational possibilities, restage the original implantation as an interdiction to translate gender as anything *but* binary and fixed. I am using the example of gender as an illustration to my larger point, which is this: for some subjects, cultural shifts can, in the après-coup, spin implantation into the orbit of intromission.

The scrambled temporality of the après-coup means that it is not until after cultural shifts permit the emergence of novel translational possibilities that the restrictiveness that had been affected by primary violence may come to be experienced as violent in the first place—therefore becoming traumatic after the fact. Said differently, cultural changes create translational funnels with wider translational possibilities (e.g., multiple genders rather than two, etc.) that could not have been furnished or imagined by the parent, because of the parent's cultural and historical situatedness. These new funnels can then, in turn, be taken up by the subject to translate anew, resulting in entirely different psychic positions which may render the original ones traumatic.

When culture surrenders a tight hold over reality to open up to new alternatives, primary violence, the necessary constriction that give the subject to the world, and which permits the I to move out of the primal and to start becoming, can come to be experienced in its full constrictive effects. Implantation and intromission, therefore, do not only concern the intervention of the other (the adult) on the child as Laplanche has been explicit on; they are, also, refracted through the interventions of culture and of cultural change. In other words, by considering the workings of the après-coup on translation that House has offered us, we can begin to think about implantations and intromissions as earning their coherence from their particular situatedness. We can start thinking about them, that is, as being, to some degree, historically contingent. This is not to minimize all of what we already know about how the adult implants enigmas or pressures an intromission upon a child; it is merely to say that critical to their psychic density is, also, their historical contingency.

To make what I mean by historical contingency clearer, and to close my comments, let me use an example that pertains to the #MeToo movement.⁴ Imagine you are a woman in the 1990s. Or, to be more precise for

the purposes of this thought experiment, imagine that you are the kind of person who identifies as—or is interpellated in terms of—the gender, class, ability, and racial background such that you could be the potential beneficiary of the cultural shifts that in 2018 will make the scenarios I describe below possible. That leaves a lot of people out, but stay with me as I try to make a point that ultimately, albeit in different ways, applies to most. Your male boss flirts with you. You try to navigate the fine line between not injuring his frail ego, keeping your job or at least not risking that raise or promotion, and not ending up intruded upon or, worse, naked. Your boss touches you flirtatiously; you discretely telegraph your unease. Maybe you were clear, maybe you were not, maybe you should have been clearer, maybe he should have been less dense, maybe he was not that dense but did not really give a damn. At the end of the day, it's more or less fine—you didn't love the experience, you felt uncomfortable, but you kept your job and, besides, you have known all along that women have to deal with this stuff all the time, that men will try to get what they can, your mother told you 'how men are' since you were a little girl, who are you to think you'd be spared such advances? But, fast forward to 2018, and in *this* particular moment in time for some women and in certain parts of the world, such behavior is no longer just ok. (Some) men are getting called out, held accountable, and your boss' actions would, perhaps, nowadays get him fired. What's different? What's different is that in the 1990s that behavior was 'men being men' while today that behavior is understood as abusive and violent. What's different is that the world has changed. Does it matter? Isn't your experience the same anyway? No, it's not. In fact, as one article after another shows up in your Facebook newsfeed informing you of this or another male executive brought down by such invasive gestures, you are finding yourself feeling more and more upset (this is the excitation of the second inscription that Freud described occurs in the second scene of the *après-coup* that activates the memory of the first). You find that your boss' behavior which, at the time, felt uncomfortable and annoying, now, that is, in the *après-coup*, is gathering speed and is beginning to feel upsetting. Your close friend reminds you that at the time, you didn't seem that disturbed—why are you getting so worked up now? The events have, after all, not changed. You know your friend is right, and you feel embarrassed and a tinge of conflicted shame. The truth is that you knew then that you could have reported your boss and you knew it was kind of illegal, and at the end of the day, you didn't really do anything

about it. But, of course, what you also knew, and what all women knew, and what men did as well, was that nothing would come of it and you knew that other women also went through it, and who are you after all to think you deserved better than them? It was, in some sense, your fate as a woman to endure these intrusions. *This* is what has changed; with this cultural shift around how we are coming to see these kinds of behaviors, a new translational possibility has emerged. Then it was ‘men being men’; today it is ‘male violence’; today, (again, only in some parts of the world) you as a woman perhaps no longer have to take it. This, of course, continues to be mediated by your subject positionality; race, class, educational level, etc., all affect what is deemed credible reporting. But my point is that in the après-coup, that original moment of your boss touching you has now become traumatic when it may not have been so in real time.

Psychic trauma, as House has explained in laying out Freud’s thinking, requires two times. From the time of original inscription and the time of its revisitation, your experience with your boss is becoming traumatic because of the particular situatedness of that moment *then in the present moment now*. For Freud, what intervened between the first inscription and the second was puberty. The child, with instinctual sexuality newly at her disposal, is returned to the original scene to which she now has a ‘sexual reaction’ that she didn’t have before. But it’s more than just puberty that can intervene between these two events. “When we speak of a sexual reaction,” Laplanche writes, “we are evoking not only the possibility of new physiological reactions but, in correlate, the existence of sexual ideas” (1970, p. 39). It is these new sexual ideas that make up the discursive shifts powered by #MeToo that can offer new translational possibilities and, in turn, rewrite your uncomfortable experience into a traumatic one. And you are now able to do that because, in being able to craft this new translation, you are also able to look back and note that the ‘men will be men’ norm that left you then ‘free’ with the choice to translate what was done to you and how you wanted to go about dealing with it, now, in retrospect, is revealed to have been an intromission all along—a message that you, as woman, had to take it from the man.

The insights House has offered us in deepening our understanding of the relationship between translation and the après-coup are momentous. Their implications are far-reaching, and by no means limited to what I have begun to explore here. We should all be looking forward to tracking how they will be taken up by other analytic scholars and to the innovative analytic theorizing they can ignite in our field.

Notes

- 1 Adapted from Robert Fagles's prose translation; Modern Library.
- 2 Notably, while Wilson says, in the same interview, that such a rendering is "a viable translation," she ultimately hesitates to select it. Her hesitation issues precisely from the fact that "it would give an entirely different perspective" and an entirely different setup for the poem.
- 3 The ties to Deleuze are obvious, but cannot be explored here.
- 4 See Saketopoulou, 2018, for a more in-depth exploration of this.

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