

The enigmatic signifier and the decentred subject

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I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill . . .
It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was grey and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

'Anecdote of the Jar' by Wallace Stevens

Abstract: War, genocide, economic upheaval and terrorism have crushed belief in endlessly 'enlightened' progress. We more and more doubt the teleological nature of psychological events, including the activity of a Self or centre that guides the development of the subject. There is a growing view of a 'decentred' subject that develops in the face of an enigmatic Otherness. Jean Laplanche has created an extensive metapsychology describing this situation, emphasizing the original helplessness of an infant who is bathed in enigmatic messages from its very beginnings. These messages from the adult other are often sexualized, and are partly or largely unconscious to the sender. Laplanche calls this situation 'primal seduction'. The immature human cannot fully metabolize such adult messages, and through 'primal repression' they remain as the unconscious core of subjectivity. They disrupt psychological life, conveying a sense of signifying something to the subject. *What* they signify is an enigma, like finding a hieroglyph in the desert. The story of relationships and culture is the story of our repeated attempts to translate them, to respond to them. An analytic case illustrates these concepts as they appear in the transference, first as gaps and monsters, and then in the crucial and surprising appearance of transformative laughter. The vicissitudes of the clinical situation illustrate the vital importance of the enigmatic signifier in the development of the subject.

Key words: enigmatic signifier, enigmatic messages, decentred subject, laughter, primal repression, primal seduction, translation

General introduction

The view that everything should or can be understood or spoken into existence (Frosh 2006, p. 372), and that psychological life could be seen as a teleological

or evolutionary process, guided by a strong ego, dominated the early decades of analytic thought and practice. The hope of this modernist viewpoint was illustrated by Freud's dictum (1933, p. 112; Frosh 2006, p. 364):

to strengthen the ego, to make it more independent of the superego, to widen its field of perception and enlarge its organization, so that it can appropriate fresh portions of the id. *Where id was, there ego shall be: it is a work of culture, much like the draining of the Zuider Zee.*

(italics mine)

The human challenge was to tame the wildness of nature and put it to use. Everything could be known, classified, and utilized. This was the 'Enlightened' Western ethos (Frie & Orange 2009, pp. 3–6; Elliot 2001, pp. 10–11; Harvey 1990).

World wars, genocides, ecological threats, terrorism, and economic upheaval have put these ambitious and optimistic beliefs in doubt. Such spectacles of useless suffering disrupt our illusions of meaning and coherence, and to subsume it under the rubrics of a 'higher purpose' or 'telos' seems, at the least, callous (Baumann 1989; Edgar 2007; Levinas 2000, pp. 91–103).

This background has impacted analytic thought and practice. We now know that the communications of both analyst and patient are not 'pure', but are invariably influenced by unconscious elements (Ferro 2006, 2009). A postmodern ethos has emerged focusing upon an 'otherness' that cannot be finally understood or spoken (Levinas 2000). The 'subject' develops out of the ambiguous interface between enigma and our always-incomplete attempts at discursive understanding.

Within analytical psychology, this changed milieu has provoked re-thinking of archetypal theory and the question as to whether the self is 'found' or 'made' (Zinkin 1991/2008). The classical view of a Self or centre that guides development, and of archetypes as a priori structuring forms, has come into doubt. As a result, with varying degrees of success, there has been a multiplicity of efforts to reconsider Jung's ideas in the light of developmental theories, cognitive science, dynamic systems theory, neuroscience, and postmodern perspectives (Hauke 2000; Kugler 2005; Colman 2008; Hogenson 2009; Knox 2004, 2009). Giegerich has created a substantial and original work that is heavily influenced by Hegelian concepts (2004, 2007). Whatever its merits, this work has also not been accepted by all (Hillman 1994; Drob 2005).

In psychoanalytic theory, recastings of subjectivity have shifted away from Freud's 'Oedipal' structures and inborn 'drives', toward more ambiguous perspectives often termed 'pre-Oedipal' or 'pre-object relations', and from a Lacanian-inspired theory of the linguistification of the subject to a post-Lacanian theory of pre-verbal, imaginary significations (Anzieu 1989; Kristeva 1989; Castoriadis 1997; Elliot & Spezzano 2000; Fairfield, Layton & Stack 2002; Zizek 2004). However, as in analytical psychology, none of these speculations has been universally embraced. As Elliot (2005, pp. 25–26) describes the

contemporary situation: ‘these far-reaching investigations have raised afresh the question of human creation, the question of representation and fantasy, and the question of the imaginary constitution of the socio-symbolic world’.

One generally accepted premise that has emerged is that an isolated mind in which development occurs, or in which the self or subject is constructed out of pre-existing contents, is no longer tenable. The developing individual is immersed in an ocean of signification from the beginning, and subjectivity develops from that enigmatic matrix. And yet, the value of reflection and articulating experience—the process of the development of the human subject—remains central to the analytic ethos (Astrachan 2005). We are left with some challenging dilemmas. Jean Laplanche has fully engaged this formidable gap in psychoanalytic theorizing, and created a profound and thought-provoking metapsychology.

Laplanche and metapsychology

Laplanche: introduction

Laplanche navigates these circumstances by carefully tracing the lineaments of the enigmatic core of psychological life, emphasizing the role of the other in the development of subjectivity. The study of his ideas regarding the enigma of the other, as seen in the transference and in the discourse of analysis, provides a unique perspective that is invaluable in clinical work. One feels the excitement of an original, learned mind on a quest—whose perspective enlarges and enlivens one’s own.

Now in his eighties, Laplanche studied under Merleau-Ponty, starting his career as a phenomenological philosopher. He then became a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. Originally associated with Lacan, he later developed his own version of analytic theory and practice. In his university-based psychoanalytic school in Paris, the Association Psychanalytique de France or APF, work with analysts of any school was encouraged. At the time, this openness was unique in analytic institutes. While remaining part of the International Psychoanalytic Association he also made major changes, such as not adopting the training analyst hierarchy, in the organization of his institute (Laplanche 1991; Kritzman 2006, pp. 99–100).

His theories integrate psychoanalytic tradition with important trends in contemporary thought. While acknowledging the basic need to put experiences into words, he points out that our attempts are always incomplete because our efforts are limited by an enigmatic element stemming from an original helplessness and dependence upon an adult other—an other whose messages are partially enigmatic to both the child and the adult ‘sender’.

He refers to his view of the decentred self as a ‘Copernican Revolution’. According to Laplanche, we are born into a ‘Copernican’ world in which our ‘centre’ originally develops only in relation to an ‘other’, like the earth circling the sun. Later we become ‘Ptolemaic’, as the ego spins narcissistic illusions of

‘centrality’, ‘wholeness’ and self-sufficiency, defending against the ‘signifying stress’ of the other’s messages (Santner 2006, p. 33). The sun once again orbits the earth! That, according to Laplanche, is the view of ego psychology. Finally, through analysis or life experience we may return to the Copernican perspective, realizing that indeed we are decentred subjects, dependent on the enigmatic otherness of unconscious and ‘world’ in the Heideggerian sense (Laplanche 1999, pp. 52–84).

Primal repression is, for Laplanche, the very condition for the establishment of subjectivity. Freud first developed this idea in his early writings (1900, p. 603): ‘...in consequence of the belated appearance of the secondary processes, *the core of our being*, consisting of unconscious wishful impulses, *remains inaccessible to the understanding and inhibition of the unconscious*’. These memories and impulses are like *fixations*, estranged from later conscious recall and direction. However, they are ‘forgotten’ only in a literal sense; actually *they exert a powerful influence on all later mental events through their wishful force* (Freud 1915, pp. 141–158; Frank & Muslin 1967, pp. 59–61). Freud later replaced his idea of primal repression with a biologically-based ‘id’: an upwelling of *innate* drive forces that must be subdued and directed by a ‘secondary’ repression. This later form of repression, epitomized by the breakup occasioned by the Oedipal complex, subsequently became the main basis for Freud’s elaboration of psychic structure (Elliot 2005, p. 27; Laplanche 1999, pp. 18 & 86). For Laplanche, in contrast, an unconscious ‘otherness in me’ due to primal repression is responsible for a *gap* between self and other. ‘I am ‘other’ to ‘myself’. Subjectivity develops in the face of the otherness that one always already is (Elliot 2005, p. 27).¹

Laplanche is consistently critical of Freud’s increasingly biological orientation, as well as his tendency to reduce the present to the past. He views Klein as even more biased toward innateness, noting in her theories a kind of biological idealism (1999, p. 125). This leaves out the crucial importance of the other—particularly the parental other—as a source of messages. As a result the other becomes, ‘only ... an abstract protagonist of a scene or a support for projections ...’ (ibid, p. 159). In Laplanche’s estimation, Klein never asks the crucial question, ‘what does the *breast* want?’ (ibid, p. 126).

Laplanche adopts the term ‘enigmatic signifier’ from Lacan, but redefines it to mean the gestures, actions or words of the other—the enigmatic messages of the other—in the situation of what he calls ‘primal seduction’ (ibid, p. 12, n. 13). He was strongly influenced by Lacan, but disagrees with his view of the child as a ‘symptom of the parents’ (ibid, p. 160; p. 160, n. 15). In his opinion, that disregards the creative activity of the nascent subject, ‘the

¹ It is interesting to note the resemblance of Sartre’s observation about shame: ‘J’ai honte de moi devant autrui’ (Sartre 1943, p. 337). Or, ‘I am ashamed of myself before the Other’ (Sartre 1956, p. 289). It would be an interesting exercise to tie together shame experience and the enigmatic signifier. Shame indeed became very important in Lacan’s later thought (Copjec 2006).

break, the profound reshaping, which occurs . . . and which may be likened to a metabolism that breaks down food into its constituent parts and reassembles them into a completely different entity' (ibid, p. 160).

The presence of an enigmatic, destabilizing nucleus of experience provokes the development of an ego that seeks to 'bind' the over-stimulating inputs. These enigmatic elements have an ongoing, destabilizing effect on personal and cultural structures, and at the extreme may feel like 'black holes' (Hinton 2007). The unsayability of those things that are the gaps in our 'reality' may evoke a sense of loss and melancholy. However, they are also the basis of our freedom to re-translate or re-imagine them (Butler 2003 & 2005; Frosh 2006; Kristeva 1989; Žizek 2004, p. 78). These imaginative 're-translations' of the enigma create 'new situations' in a way that seems akin to what Jung called the *transcendent function* (Jung 1960, para. 167; Martin-Vallas 2005, pp. 289–90; Miller 2004, pp. 21–22).

Following Freud, Laplanche often employs a German word for the 'other,' *das Andere*, emphasizing the neutral article, the '*thing-ness*' that is inserted into the background of our experience (Laplanche 1999, p. 17).² It is always already there in its otherness, 'something that eludes phenomenal manifestation', and yet it is the opaque core around which our descriptions circulate (Critchley & Schürmann 2008, p. 135 ff.). Our ego, our thought and character, all emerge around it. The ego is born to 'manage' it (Caruth 2001, pp. 27–38). And yet we can never grasp it. It plagues us like an ongoing riddle, or as Lacan says, it is like finding a 'hieroglyph in the desert' (Lacan 1977, p. 194). Our subjectivity and what we call 'the unconscious' is indeed formed out of relation to this inevitable 'otherness' (Laplanche 1999, pp. 84–116).³

These elements that are the results of primal repression lose their capacity to signify any particular object or event, but retain an elemental aura of intentionality . . . they retain the capacity of '*signifying to*'. This often conjures a strange and uncanny feeling. From infancy we are confronted with the enigmatic question of what the other wants from us. To quote Lacan quoting Cazotte, the primal question is: *Chè Vuoi?* (*What do you want?*) (ibid, p. 147; Pluth 2007, pp. 69–72).

To quote Laplanche's mentor, Lacan (1981):

all the child's 'why's' reveal not so much an avidity for the reason of things, [but] a testing of the adult, a 'Why are you telling me this?' ever-resuscitated from its base, which is the enigma of the adult's desire.

² The masculine form, *der Andere*, would be used to refer to another *person*. These two forms actually illustrate two moments in the act of 'primal repression'. First, the message of the other *person* of inscription and implantation, followed by primal repression of the untranslatable elements of the 'message'. This untranslatable 'remainder' becomes *das Andere*, a *thing-like* 'enigmatic signifier'.

³ [Laplanche describes] this 'otherness' [using] a neologism in French—not just *étrangeté*, strangeness, foreignness, alienness, but *étrangèreté*, stranger-ness, foreign-ness . . . 'alien-ness' (Laplanche 1999, p. 47).

Lacan suggests the metaphors of the hieroglyph in the desert, or of cuneiform characters carved on a tablet of stone. In such cases the signifier may lose *what* it signifies, without thereby losing its power to signify *to*. (Laplanche 1989, pp. 44–5; Santner 2006, p. 34). For Laplanche, such enigmatic experiences lie at the core of the subject.

Primal seduction, primal repression and the enigmatic signifier

The vast discrepancy between the complex dimensions of adult communications and the unformed psyche of the child is at the core of ‘primal seduction’. Laplanche describes the interaction with the nursing mother as an example of what he terms ‘primal seduction’. He points out that the breast is an erotic organ, and the mother’s experiences and fantasies are far beyond the comprehension of the infant (Laplanche 1997). The mother often seductively speaks to her baby, perhaps caressing its naked body while meeting its needs (Rotmann 2002). Such interactions are largely unconscious. Empirical studies confirm that infantile sexuality is paradoxically the most unmirrored activity between infants and mothers (Stein 2007, p. 191; Fonagy 2008). Laplanche uses the term ‘seduction’ to include not only erotic fantasies, but also the broader meanings signified by the German noun *Reiz*, which conveys a sense of provocation, charm, allure and stimulation (Laplanche 1999, p. 227). Laplanche emphasizes that *such mother-child interactions are the usual state of things, not aberrations, not psychopathology*.

We usually think of repression as what Freud called ‘secondary repression’. This describes the activity of the psyche in putting aside experiences that might create anxiety. However, this secondary repression presupposes psychic structures that can judge and discriminate, that can evaluate experiences at some level and take protective actions. In Laplanche’s view, primal repression is much more significant in the development of the subject (Laplanche 1999, pp. 18 & 85–6; Kinston & Cohen 1986).

Experiencing such enigmas may create dread and anxiety, and the danger of psychic collapse (Stack 2005). The loss of a sense of intactness often results in deep grief and melancholy (Kristeva 1989). On the other hand if one can weather such gaps, transformation and renewal may emerge, with a renewed spaciousness and sense of play. We endlessly navigate and re-translate these enigmas throughout our lives, in our relationships, careers, and creative endeavors. In a related spirit Jung defined a living symbol as one that retains a disruptive element, an unknownness; otherwise, it is a dead symbol or sign (Jung 1971, para. 817).

The analytic process

Laplanche has well-developed ideas about the analytic process (Laplanche 1999, pp. 214–33). He sees the ‘offer’ of analysis as resembling the original ‘seduction’

of childhood, implying a sort of ‘promise’ to resolve the enigma. The analyst therefore tends to be seen as ‘the one supposed to know’. In order for the process to evolve it is crucial for the analyst to remain in touch with his/her own enigmatic core. By refusing to ‘know’—or, more accurately, being aware that he/she does not know—the analyst provides a ‘hollow’ in which the process can evolve.

In this basic ‘hollow’ two, usually intertwined, types of transference come to rest. One is the reproduction of forms of behaviour, relationships and childhood images. This is the *transfert en plein*, the ‘filled in’ transference. The other dimension of transference concerns elements in the relationship that have an enigmatic character. This latter is the *transfert en creux*, the ‘hollowed out’ transference. In practice these are usually mixed. The enigma is the means that enables ‘analysis’ to take place—the ‘lysis’ part of analysis.⁴ The impact of the enigma may create a kind of opening, a gap, a crack, a cleavage plane in the ordinary ‘filled in’ process of things. If not for the enigma, there would be no analytic work and no dismantling of old patterns (Laplanche 1989, p. 160; 1999, pp. 228–9).

Analysis may foster a kind of *opening up* that can be maintained and transferred to divergent fields of otherness and inspiration. This is very different from sublimation (Laplanche 1997, p. 663 & 2002b, p. 42; Kumar 2009, pp. 486–7). Laplanche calls this the ‘transference of the transference’, or ‘the transference to the enigma as such’. By this he implies ‘not some loss of being, but the possibility of being surprised, seized, traversed by the endless questioning of whoever comes to encounter us’ (Laplanche 2002b, p. 50).

Laplanche talks about ‘translation’ rather than interpretation. In his view interpretation implies knowledge of some factual situation. Much interpretation has the purpose of giving us a [falsely] comfortable sense of ‘re-cognition’: rediscovery of what we already know (Stack 2005, p. 69). We can retranslate the enigmatic core of what we are, but we never achieve the final, structural understanding that ‘interpretation’ implies. ‘Translation means that there is no factual situation . . . if something can be translated it’s already a message . . . you can only translate what has already been put in communication, or made as communication. That’s why I speak of translation rather than interpretation’ (Caruth 2001, p. 14).

He sees transference as a general phenomenon, not limited to analysis. The analytic method—the *lysis* aspect of analysis within the safety of the analytic situation—provides a unique and valuable human experience, but this experience is not generically unique to analysis. Intermittently, ‘windows in time’ present themselves for translation out of the situation of analysis and

⁴ Laplanche repeatedly makes a point about the analytic process as *Lösung*, or ‘dissolution’ (1999, pp. 252–3). It is the enigmatic signifier that makes ‘unbinding’ possible. The defensive ego tries to bind things into a whole. The enigma rescues the psyche from determinism through the ‘lysis’ of—often imprisoning—patterns (ibid, pp. 45, 49 & 252–3).

into cultural forms.⁵ Laplanche warns that the analyst's narcissism can block new translations by automatically interpreting such movements as resistance (Laplanche 1999, pp. 230–3).

For Laplanche, analysis ends not so much as a 'termination', but as a recognition of the deepened capacity for re-translation or 'transferring' life into different sites, different relationships. The end of analysis also involves a mourning that is not just about the loss of the object, but includes an awareness that all discourses remain unfinished. It belongs to the analysand to transfer this dimension to another place' (Laplanche 2002b, p. 50).⁶

Like the basic enigma, transference is never in essence 'resolved'. He says that theoretically, seen from this perspective, 'analysis is also interminable' (Laplanche 1989, p. 164; Rotmann 2002, p. 269).⁷ In a more poetic moment, Laplanche compares the analytic process to the task of Ulysses' wife Penelope in her daily unweaving in order that a new weaving may take place tomorrow—so that a new pattern in the fabric of life may appear (Laplanche 1999, pp. 250–4).⁸ In a similar sense analysis tends to dissolve old structures, in the hope that new patterns may be created that enable a fuller life.

Case history

The following case narrative illustrates elements of Laplanche's metapsychology such as primal seduction, thing-like enigmatic signifiers, and enigmatic sexuality as they developed in the transference and through the 'lysis' of analysis and life events. I thank my patient for allowing us to use his story to help us understand some important psychological processes.

Initial situation

Ralph was in his mid-fifties when I first saw him. In appearance, he was a carefully controlled, stocky man, well dressed in a casual fashion, with a slightly intellectual air. He had already interviewed two other analysts before we met, but found them both 'too cold and formal'. In contrast, he found me both 'warm and lively' and 'knowledgeable'. He had no previous experience of analytic therapy.

⁵ Laplanche uses the metaphor of a rocket launch and the 'windows in time' during which it would be possible to send a rocket to Saturn (1989, p. 164).

⁶ He describes this as another potential form of inspiration, which sounds similar to the views of Julia Kristeva on the relationship between melancholy and creativity (Kristeva 1989).

⁷ In this light, it would be interesting to revisit the disagreement between Tresan (2007) and Connolly (2007) regarding the meaning of time and length of analysis.

⁸ There is a certain similarity to Jung's depiction of the 'analytic' and the 'synthetic' aspects of the analytic process (Jung 1966, pp. 80–90).

Initially, he was somehow both reticent and confident in his manner. After a brief time, he suddenly broke into anguished sobs. Between flurries of deep emotion he began to tell me about his situation.

His wife of thirty years had died a year and a half before. They had had a 'companionable marriage', had raised three children, but he said that there had been minimal spontaneity or passion. However they had been profoundly connected in many ways, and he had deeply mourned her loss. He had been a successful biotechnologist, and had retired after selling his company a few years before. Since that time he had travelled a great deal, mostly alone and usually focused on philanthropic projects.

A few weeks before I saw him, he had suddenly become involved in a passionate love affair with a woman near his own age. It had been the most intense, abandoned sexual experience of his life.⁹ He insisted that they be together almost constantly because he couldn't bear any separation. 'All I think about is her!' he said. After a time she had apparently found the situation frightening and declared a moratorium, refusing to see him. He felt shattered and bereft, and was sleepless and extremely anxious, constantly beseeching her for some form of contact. Both she and his friends told him that he must seek therapy.

His first dream, reported at our second meeting:

I am in an oppressive, miserable prisoner-of-war camp or maybe a concentration camp, with some family and others. There has been a terrible event, and we are full of sorrow. Then someone or something enables us to tunnel out, to get out to a freer space.

He spoke tearfully of his grief, both for his wife and for the loss of his lover and the 'new life' he had experienced. Now these seemed like two catastrophes that had left him feeling sad and alone, and hopeless. He said that a sense of loss and desolation had haunted him his whole life. The surprisingly hopeful event in the dream indicated a positive transference, a shred of hope.

Despite his somewhat distant and reticent manner, I felt a sense of rapport. I said little, but was supportive in my demeanour. He seemed grateful to be able to have the safety and containment of the analytic frame, and continued to easily break down in tears, especially when he fell into a state of near-desperation from his longing to see his woman friend and his fear that he had lost her forever. My schedule was very crowded at that time, but I managed to fit him in three times a week. I regretted that we couldn't meet even more often because of the powerful emotional eruptions that periodically wracked him.

⁹ Helen Gediman has provided a related, fascinating study of the 'annihilation anxiety' associated with sexuality. Fantasies of death and longings for rebirth or immortality are often intimately connected (Gediman 1995).

Gaps

Early on during the first couple of years of analysis, an important theme appeared. One day he came into the room and sat down, staring at me very intently and silently. I felt a wave of powerful emotions, a kind of primordial awfulness impossible to capture in words. His face was contorted in indecipherable waves of expression, but he said nothing. Moved, puzzled, a bit frightened, I wondered what this inchoate mélange of emotions might be. Was it loss, longing, despair, deep anxiety, grief, and anger all bundled together? As came out in time, bits of all these emotions were indeed there, but I later discovered that there was something more. Now I think of this as the presence of the enigmatic signifier, the ‘thing’—*das Andere*. I was stunned, deeply moved, and somewhat bewildered. The sense of the uncanny was powerful, and evoked my own enigma in the form of a slight sense of panic, and a kind of psychic dizziness. I struggled to stay in touch with unknowing and not reactively close off the emotions.

After a tense couple of minutes—that felt much longer in subjective time—he gathered himself and began to speak about the vicissitudes of his thoughts and emotions regarding his lady friend. Still in a bit of shock from the intensity and ‘otherness’ of the emotions, I interrupted and remarked upon the abrupt turn back to the everyday. He said that he couldn’t stand to be in that place, and he really couldn’t say what ‘it’ was. We sat silently with that fact for a few minutes and then he continued on, remaining closer to the everyday. I had a sense that if I had pressed him there would have been a strong reactive, defensive closure, probably intellectual. I knew that this material was very deep, perhaps dangerous, and that it was crucial to patiently track and articulate its uncanny reality.

This became a theme that appeared intermittently during the first two years of analytic work. Perhaps once a week we would sit in extended silences of several minutes. Over time when I inquired about what he was experiencing, and increasingly at his own initiative, he began to tell me the bits and pieces of what was going on.

The most common topic was his very ‘cold’ mother. Dead many years, she had been a very attractive woman who always seemed emotionally removed. She was a CPA who practised part-time during most of her life. Never, in his memory, was she physically affectionate with him, although she took good instrumental care of him and his sister who was four years younger. He was told that he was breast-fed for only a brief period of time. There were, around his childhood home, photographs of her as a young, happy-looking, very pretty girl and young woman. ‘That was the mother I never knew, the one I always wanted to know. It was really weird—a total mystery—that the woman in the photos could be the same person I knew as my mother’. Sometimes he caught glimpses of that ‘other’ mother when he saw her at a party with professional friends of his father, but that was very rare.

His father was a gruff and rather distant scientist who provided little emotional support, and indeed often felt 'dangerous' as a result of mood swings and bursts of angry criticism. He tried to get Ralph to play sports, but Ralph was awkward and self-conscious and usually ended up with a sense of injury. He grew to fear sports and groups of rowdy children, and was generally terrified of personal interactions at school or at home. His outstanding intellect brought some sense of self-esteem in the form of good grades and awards, and with much effort he was able to form some relationships. He said that he would 'latch onto' a girl as a friend and do anything she wanted in order to maintain the connection. This pattern had persisted throughout his life, including his long marriage.

He slowly became able to articulate small, spontaneous bits of his experience of the gaps. Then one day some words suddenly tumbled forth from the core of his being. Staring at me angrily and accusingly, he burst out in a voice that trembled with emotion, 'I just couldn't figure out what you *wanted!*' The deep pain was caused by my unknown-ness, my enigmatic presence. I was indeed the *other*, the enigmatic other whom he could never seem to satisfy.

All his life Ralph had, often desperately, created different translations, different responses, firstly and most importantly to his mother and later to other women, hoping to find something that would be the key. After he was able to articulate some of this to me—and to himself—the gaps continued but were somewhat less fraught with emotion. He felt safer in the container. From this point his presence seemed steadier than before. It reflected, I think, a growing sense of reliable space for his subjectivity. I was 'other', but unlike his parents he could trust me to manage my own enigma. I demanded little from him, which left him free to play with his own translations.

Gradually, the sense of infatuation and loss abated, his anxiety decreased, and he began to enter more fully into his daily life.

Laughter intrudes

After about three years of fairly insightful, productive work we had lapsed into a sort of habit of discussing his past relationships. In contrast with the early dramatic process our work had become somewhat routine, a little deadened. In retrospect, I wonder whether I had been relieved that we had successfully navigated a very difficult period, and was reticent to rock the boat.

One day he came into the room and lapsed into a pained silence that felt very different than the silence of the 'gaps'. Then he suddenly gave me a piercing, angry look and burst out, 'What in the hell are we doing here?!' With little hesitation the words sprang from my lips, 'Fuck if I know!' I was totally startled by my own words, as was he. It was very tense for a moment, and time seemed strangely suspended. After this pause in some atemporal-seeming space, he flushed and I flushed, and we broke down in mutual peals of deep belly laughter.

Laughter, according to Bergson, ‘removes the mechanical from the living’ (Bergson 2005). In a similar vein, Bakhtin said that laughter ‘degrades’, in the sense of dissolving ‘monogonic’ structure and freeing the dialogical process (Bakhtin 1984, p. 21). Laughter shows that the ‘serious’ structures of things have no inevitability, no necessity (Critchley 2002). To speak in Laplanchean terms, we could say that laughter performs a kind of ‘unbinding’ function, as well as a deflation of the fantasy/longing that the analyst be ‘*the subject supposed to know*’—‘*le sujet supposé savoir*’ (Laplanche 1999, p. 49; italics in original).

The unbinding of structure on these levels, the transference shift and the related shift in subjective processes, both reflected and enabled a creative contact with the core human enigma, the enigmatic signifier in its creative aspects. Over-generalizing a bit, one could say that the experiences of the ‘gaps’ involved the terrifying aspect of the enigma. After repeatedly negotiating the passage through the gaps, a dimension of openness to the other appeared. This is what we shared. Our enigmas touched, opening a space for renewed life in our relationship, and a new spaciousness in his being as a subject. It seemed to involve a shift or partial re-creation of his subjectivity that one could call ‘the transcendent function’ (Hinton 1978).

Having weathered the earlier, tormenting transitions he had developed trust that neither he nor I would be destroyed by his disruptive anger. The result was a timeless moment between us, and a capacity to experience his core enigma as creative rather than merely as a terrifying and destructive gap. It seemed to make possible a mutual experience of the enigma, and an example of what Laplanche called the ‘hollowed out’ transference—the ‘*transfert en creux*’ (Laplanche 1999, pp. 50 & 111, 214n; Rotmann 2002, p. 274).¹⁰

This was an important turning point as there was much more flow in our relationship that in part resulted in a quiet humour. There was a subtle increase in his capacity for reflection. We never really ‘analysed’ the laughter and the accompanying emotions, but referred to it from time to time, usually in moments of intimacy, with a few words such as ‘that wild laugh we had together’. The experience did not fall into a distant, unconscious place but continued as a living process both between us and, as became increasingly clear, in his interactions with others.

A major dream

Following the above changes, things began to move along. He met a new woman and the relationship worked out well. It came across as dynamic and

¹⁰ Levinas describes a moment of ‘otherness’, a ‘subjection’ to otherness, which goes ‘all the way to the laughter that refuses language’ [jusqu’au rire qui refuse le langage]. That is, laughter can be a moment beyond words, an experience of the unsayable (Levinas 1998, p. 8; Wall 1999, p. 36). Wit or humour at their best touch on such dimensions, but are more clearly related to the realities of human culture and psychology. The deepest laughter just ‘takes us over’, takes us to a different space. It is sudden and unexpected, even a little ‘mad’.

multi-dimensional, with an intensely sexual component. About six months after the 'laughter' incident he had the following series of dreams:

It is a surreal landscape, like a jungly area in Central America where I've done volunteer work.¹¹ A young woman is walking along a trail on the side of a hill ahead of me, but suddenly disappears off to the side, like into a cave or something. I plunge ahead, wanting to find her or help her. There is a wall of dry board at the entrance to the cave . . . I break through it, looking for the woman. (Note: I immediately felt a different energy in the room; he had seldom been so directly aggressive in fact or in dreams.) There are claw marks on the wall and I know that there is an invisible monster there in the cave. I felt absolutely terrified!

At this point Ralph looked very apprehensive and somewhat anxiously went into some associations: the young woman reminded him of the photos that he had seen of his mother as a beautiful, happy young woman. 'That's the mother I never knew', he said.

Slowly and seriously he went over his lifelong feelings of loneliness and abandonment, and his ongoing terrors as a child—feelings that we had revisited many times. He had never been able to say what terrified him. It seemed uncanny and unknowable. The mere thought of it had made him feel paralysed and unable to think.

He continued:

Then I see some balls, and I think that I can distract the monster. I don't see it but I know it's there. It seems like I can do it: distract it.

Then it seems like the monster is different, like it has become playful. The whole mood becomes different.

He said excitedly that it was the first time he had ever been able to hold his own and act in the face of such feelings of terror whether in dreams or in everyday life, that he felt like he'd spent his whole life in activities and relationships to try and make things safe. The anxiety and terror had always been like an invisible presence that—whatever his successes—kept him on edge, vigilant, unable to play. Underneath, he had always felt lacking, like 'half a man'.

Due to his rich associations I said very little except for non-verbal acknowledgements. The associations were very much in tune with the earlier analytic process. These dreams seemed to summarize much of what had transpired during the course of analysis. He left the session smiling, seemingly enlivened, feeling very good about what had transpired. I shared in the good feeling and wondered whether, too, I was the enigmatic monster of the gaps with whom he could now play.

¹¹ For Ralph, these 'exotic' places had been full of 'enigmatic signifiers', as they have been for Westerners for many centuries (Said 1979).

Speculations

The analytic process had been precipitated by an intense and highly sexualized relationship, and then he had been ‘abandoned’, left alone in a ‘gap’ with an unbearable excess of emotion.¹² This desperate state of crisis, a threat to his very survival, forced Ralph to undertake a process that led to the awareness of his enigmatic core. The pursuit of the young woman in the dream, like all his lifelong pursuits, stemmed from a longing to find the—impossible—key to the enigmatic longings of his unhappy, somewhat schizoid, mother. He had come into being as a subject in his attempts to respond to her messages, to know what she ‘wanted’. This stimulated his subjective development, but the concretization of his fantasies, in particular relationships, had left him endlessly vulnerable to loss and the fear of falling into the ‘gap’. The result was an avoidant, deadened life.

Monsters tend to appear when unnameable emotions and experiences surface (Astrachan 2005; Connolly 2003; Kearney 2003). The analysis had begun from such a situation. We had faced this elemental state repeatedly, until he was finally able to laugh and play with me. A new and more meaningful re-translation of his subjectivity seemed accomplished. The enigma was now a source of not only ‘deconstructive’ terror but also playful creativity.

His intellectual prowess had given him some sense of control and efficacy, and through strong ego development he had been able to bind his terror, to bridge the gaps, alleviate the depression, and lead a life as a creative scientist and businessman, husband and father. In late midlife, with the aid of analysis, he had re-translated the enigmatic core of his subjectivity into an ongoing possibility of creative play, of fantasy and imagination—the essence of the transcendent function (Jung 1971, pp. 106–7; Miller 2004, pp. 46–7).

Heretofore in his life he had withdrawn at perceived slights or rejections. Any new interpersonal context had been fraught with hesitation and anxiety. Now this had shifted. He was still prone to similar emotions, but he was much more aware that these stemmed from him and not the other. As he said, ‘I knew that I projected all over the place before, but now I *really* know it and it doesn’t control me’.

Another aspect of this was the expansion of the ability to imagine the reality of others, including their unknowability, their own enigma. Such awareness ‘deconstructs’ the tendency to want to make the other a colony that fills one’s lack. In this vein, Ralph described much more capacity for intimacy, and said that he was generally happier than ever before.

¹² Ruth Stein has written a fascinating and wide-ranging discussion of the meaning of sexuality and excess. She sees such experiences of excess as frequently being manifestation of the ‘human longings to grasp the elusive, ineffable quality of the sexual other’, to bridge the gap between self and other (2008).

Last part of analysis

The remaining eighteen months of analysis had a different tone. Our relationship was more spontaneous and sometimes playful, and he continued to use the time productively. Ralph discussed his relationship with his new woman friend a great deal. The fluctuating issues with her were often at the foreground. He no longer became mired in long periods of defensive withdrawal from her. He felt it was the best relationship he had ever had.

A simple dream summarized his new situation:

Fish are jack-knifing in paroxysms in a pool—they think that they will die without a mate. Then a cell phone rings, and they get a message of some kind and swim peacefully.

(His association was that was how he felt as he began to get caught up in the old mood, of being abandoned to terror and nothingness if there was a gap in relationship.)

This illustrates Ralph's emerging reflective capacity in the face of 'gaps'. He could now recognize and re-translate what had been almost unbearable, inchoate emotion.

We mutually agreed that things were going well, and we set a date for ending. He brought me an interesting little object from his travels as a parting gift, and we both shed a tear at the last session.

Conclusions/Reflections

Laplanche rarely provides us with clinical material in his own writings because of his views regarding the intrinsically defensive nature of most clinical narratives. 'Histories' lend themselves to the fantasy that the present is 'caused' by the past (Laplanche 1999, p. 141). We must be careful, he says, because 'there can be *no linear causality* between the parental unconscious and discourse on the one hand and what the child does about these on the other' (ibid, p. 160).

However, the richness of his metapsychology does whet one's appetite for more examples that demonstrate that 'his structures have legs' (Copjec 2006). For instance, Charlie Chaplin's movie *City Lights* provides a scenario humorously illustrating Laplanche's concept of the enigmatic signifier. In the film, Charlie accidentally swallows a whistle, and it haunts him. He wants to fit into the 'sophisticated' life of the city, but the whistle sounds off erratically from his belly, disrupting his best efforts to be 'normal'. Such 'messages' are eternally disruptive, and yet they rescue us from becoming collective zombies, automated cultural products that are not capable of an ethical stance (Hinton 1978). This scene illustrates how we cannot get rid of the 'thing' that is, in part, us.

Some take Laplanche's emphasis on 'primal seduction' to indicate a pathologizing of mothers and infants (Solomon 2002, pp. 282–3). He endlessly emphasizes, however, that this 'seduction' is the normal course of events and not pathological. He sometimes uses the German term *Reiz* instead of 'seduction',

and this has a broader set of meanings such as allure, provocation, charm, stimulation, or sex appeal (Laplanche 1999, p. 227). However, it might be helpful if he were to discuss the growing capacities of the infant/child and how it can, increasingly, contribute to the dyadic interaction.

To think more broadly, a seductive ‘excess’ may be the basis, the ‘driver’, of personal, cultural and spiritual development (Stein 2008; Kumar 2009). Indeed, creative endeavours of all kinds tend to be filled with sexual imagery, and often entail a quest for the lost object (Kristeva 1989). One could regard the excess of enigmatic stimuli—excessive in terms of what the ego can assimilate—as an upsurge of desire that creates turbulence, but can create new openings in relationships and world. In Jonathan Lear’s terms (1998), we are born ‘overfull’, and what we do with this overfulness expresses the heart of who we become. The enigmatic messages that we meet in everyday life endlessly evoke our responses. To quote Laplanche (1999, p. 224): ‘the cultural [itself] is an address to another who is out of reach, to others “scattered in the future” as the poet says’, and he asks, ‘why does the Dichter Dicht—why does the poet poetize—except in response to an enigmatic other?’

One could, if so inclined, readily make connections with more philosophically speculative theories (Kumar 2009). The thought of Levinas is an outstanding example, especially when he refers to the enigmatic quality of subjectivity as deriving from a ‘trace of the infinite’ that cannot be reduced to personal—or even ontological—terms.

The concrete sense of seduction and enigma in its many dimensions makes Laplanche’s work distinctive. His work expands awareness of the enigmatic core of subjectivity . . . a core that is also, paradoxically, the source of our dignity and freedom.

TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

La guerre, le génocide, les bouleversements économiques et le terrorisme ont broyé la foi en un progrès « éclairé » et continu. Nous doutons de plus en plus de la nature téléologique des événements psychiques, jusques et y compris de l’activité d’un Soi ou d’un centre qui présiderait au développement d’un sujet. La conception d’un sujet « décentré » qui se déploie en se confrontant à une Altérité énigmatique est de plus en plus prégnante. Jean Laplanche a créé une vaste métapsychologie décrivant cette situation et mettant l’accent sur l’impuissance originelle du tout petit, immergé d’entrée de jeu dans un bain de messages énigmatiques. Ces messages de l’autre adulte sont souvent sexualisés et lui sont, partiellement ou totalement, inconsciemment adressés. Laplanche qualifie cette situation de « séduction généralisée ». L’humain immature n’a pas les moyens de métaboliser ces messages en provenance des adultes. En conséquence de quoi, ces contenus en viennent, à travers le « refoulement originaire », à former le noyau inconscient de la subjectivité. Ils désorganisent la vie psychique, véhiculant le sentiment de signifier quelque chose *au* sujet. Ce qu’ils signifient demeure une énigme, tout comme le serait la trouvaille d’un hiéroglyphe dans le désert. L’histoire des relations et de la culture est l’histoire de nos tentatives répétées de traduction et de réponse à ces énigmes. Un cas

clinique illustre ces concepts tels qu'ils apparaissent dans le transfert, tout d'abord sous forme de béances et de monstres puis sous forme de rire transformateur. Les vicissitudes de la situation clinique illustrent l'importance vitale du signifiant énigmatique dans le développement du sujet.

Krieg, Genozid, ökonomischer Umbruch und Terrorismus haben den Glauben an einen endlosen 'erleuchteten' Fortschritt zerstört. Mehr und mehr bezweifeln wir die teleologische Natur psychologischer Ereignisse einschließlich der Aktivitäten eines Selbst oder eines Zentrums, das die Entwicklung eines Subjektes leitet. Der Blick weitet sich auf 'dezentriertes' Subjekt das sich im Angesicht eines enigmatischen Anderen entwickelt. Jean Laplanche hat eine ausgedehnte Metapsychologie entwickelt, die diese Situation beschreibt, wobei die originäre Hilflosigkeit eines Kindes hervorgehoben wird, das vom aller ersten Anbeginn an in rätselvollen Botschaften gebadet wird. Diese vom erwachsenen Anderen ausgesandten Botschaften sind oft sexualisiert und dem Absender teilweise oder weitgehend unbewußt. Laplanche nennt diese Situation die 'primäre Verführung'. Der noch unreife Mensch kann diese Erwachsenenbotschaften nicht vollständig verstoffwechseln und durch 'primäre Unterdrückung' verbleiben sie als unbewußter Kern der Subjektivität. Sie zerreißen seelisches Leben dadurch, daß sie ein Gefühl von Bedeutungshaftigkeit *in* das Subjekt verfrachten. *Was* sie bedeuten ist so rätselhaft als fände man eine Hieroglyphe in der Wüste. Die Geschichte der Beziehungen und der Kultur ist die Geschichte unserer wiederholten Versuche sie zu übersetzen, auf sie zu antworten. Ein analytische Fall illustriert diese Konzepte bei ihrem Auftauchen in der Übertragung, zunächst als Lücken und Monster und dann in der entscheidenden und überraschenden Erscheinungsform des Lachens. Die Wechselfälle der klinischen Situation verdeutlichen die vitale Wichtigkeit des enigmatischen Bedeutungsträgers in der Entwicklung des Subjekts.

La guerra, i genocidi, gli sconvolgimenti economici e il terrorismo hanno distrutto la fede in un progresso 'illuminato' senza fine. Dubitiamo sempre più di una natura teleologica degli eventi psichici, comprese le attività di un Sé o di un centro che guida lo sviluppo di un soggetto. Cresce sempre più la visione di un soggetto decentrato che si sviluppa davanti a una enigmatica Alterità. Jean Laplanche ha costruito un'ampia metapsicologia che descrive tale situazione, e che enfatizza il senso di impotenza primitivo di un infante immerso fin dai primissimi tempi in messaggi enigmatici. Questi messaggi che provengono dall'altro adulto sono spesso sessualizzati e sono in parte o del tutto inconsci al mittente stesso. Laplanche chiama questa situazione 'seduzione primaria'. L'essere umano immaturo non può metabolizzare del tutto tali messaggi adulti e mediante una 'repressione primaria' questi restano come centro inconscio della soggettività. Essi distruggono la vita psicologica, conferendo un senso di qualcosa di significativo per il soggetto. Ciò che essi significano è un enigma, come trovare un geroglifico nel deserto.. La storia delle relazioni e della cultura è la storia dei nostri ripetuti tentativi di tradurli, di rispondere loro. Questi concetti vengono illustrati attraverso un caso clinico nelle modalità con cui essi comparvero nel transfert, dapprima come divari e mostruosità, e poi nella cruciale e sorprendente sembianza di una risata trasformativi. Le vicissitudini della situazione clinica illustrano la vitale importanza nello sviluppo di un soggetto del significato enigmatico.

La guerra, el genocidio, el trastorno y el terrorismo económicos han aplastado la creencia en el progreso indefinidamente 'culto'. Dudamos cada vez más de la naturaleza teleológica de acontecimientos psicológicos, inclusive de la actividad de un Ser o centro que indique el desarrollo de un sujeto. Hay una visión creciente de un sujeto 'descentrado' que se desarrolla ante una Alteridad enigmática. Jean Laplanche ha creado una metapsicología extensa que describe esta situación, acentuando la impotencia original de un niño inmerso en mensajes enigmáticos desde su comienzo. Estos mensajes del otro adulto otro son a menudo sexualizados, y son en parte o en gran parte inconscientes al emisor. Laplanche llama esta situación 'seducción primitiva'. El humano inmaduro no puede metabolizar tales mensajes adultos, y por medio de la 'represión primitiva' ellos se quedan en el centro inconsciente de la subjetividad. Ellos interrumpen la vida psicológica, transmitiendo un sentido significante al sujeto. *Qué* significan es un enigma, es como encontrar un jeroglífico en el desierto. El cuento de las relaciones y la cultura es el cuento de nuestras repetidas tentativas para traducirlos, para responderles. Un caso analítico ilustra estos conceptos tal como ellos parecen en la transferencia, primero como espacios vacíos y monstruos, y después en la apariencia crucial y sorprendente de risa de transformadora. Las vicisitudes de la situación clínica ilustran la importancia vital del significante enigmático en el desarrollo del sujeto.

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