

## **“Interpreting (with) Freud”**

### **Laplanche, Hoffmann and the Copernican Birth of Unconscious Drives**

It is certainly straightforward to repudiate Sigmund Freud: the oft oscillating thoughts in his theories can confound those who attempt to interpret his theoretical meta-narrative. Jean Laplanche however, deviates from this well-trodden post-Freudian path, and appraising Freud through Laplanche’s work permits us to map the shift regarding a central tenet of psychoanalysis: the unconscious drives. Starting with Freud’s metapsychology of 1917 and his so-called “Copernican Revolution”, this paper will re-assert the paradigms formulated at the earliest stages of psychoanalysis, which saw Freud grapple with, and then repudiate, his seduction theory in the letter to Wilhelm Fliess of 21<sup>st</sup> September 1897. Freud’s drive to find a solution saw him form a new theory around his “universal event in early childhood”; initially introduced in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), his revised metapsychology of the unconscious drives was born: more importantly, despite developing this model in subsequent work, Freud’s theoretical foundations will obstinately settle on these drives being born *within*.

In his re-centering of Freud’s “Copernican Revolution”, Laplanche aligns *the other* with the Copernican repositioning of the sun at the center of the solar system in the sixteenth-century, and Freud’s psycho-sexual paradigm with Ptolemy’s geocentric model, which saw earth at the center of the cosmos. Setting up these foundations enables a critique of Freud’s metapsychology, albeit through the crucial requirement of interpreting *with* Freud. In following this simultaneous braid of “discovery” and “going-astray”, Laplanche thus offers Copernican structures to revise Freud’s reliance on Ptolemaic infantile sexuality, a framework I will apply to E. T. A. Hoffmann’s 1818 novella *Mademoiselle de Scudery*. In doing so, Hoffmann’s murderous René Cardillac, a seemingly central character terrifying the Parisian streets, is

acutely de-centered; as Laplanche repositioned *the other* of psychoanalytic discourse, I propose to distinctively reposition the enigmatic *otherness* of the jewels in Hoffmann's novella, re-centering them as the mysterious, yet controlling, *internal other*.

Written in 1917, "A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-analysis" sees Freud retrace his own theory, noting historically that there have been three blows to humanity's self-importance. First, *cosmologically*: in the earliest narratives of cosmology, man believed in Ptolemy's geocentric model, where earth was the center of the universe. However, Copernicus's heliocentrism would destroy this illusion, declaring not only that "earth was much smaller than the sun", but also that it "moved around th[e sun's] celestial body". Second, the *biological* blow of Darwinism: shattering delusions of human supremacy and arrogance, this discovery was crucial in removing the distance man had previously attempted to put between himself and the animal kingdom. Lastly, and for Freud most striking, the *psychological* blow: that "the ego is not master in its own house"; that unconscious drives cannot be eliminated, and develop simultaneously with the ego. These blows all represent acts of de-centering: *cosmologically*, man's dwelling is not central to the universe; *biologically*, man's status as the central, dominant species on earth is nothing more than an evolutionary stage of human development; and *psychologically*, the ego is not the center of the human subject, instead being uncontrollably provoked by unconscious drives.

In "The Unfinished Copernican Revolution" of 1992, Laplanche both returns to and revises Freud, illustrating his paradigm first through a cosmic metaphor. What is of interest to Laplanche is the geocentric schema of Ptolemy, though ultimately centered on falsity, remained "the Bible of astronomy for fourteen centuries"; for Laplanche, the geocentric model consequently became the result of theoretical "[o]verload [and] baggage", full of

“supplementary *ad hoc* hypothesis” and “unexplained detail”. A heliocentric model of the cosmos however, does not simply solve the problem; a Copernican paradigm instead “opens onto vaster consequences”. In Laplanche’s metaphor therefore, these cosmic discoveries actually open up the question of centering, where excentricity is key; rather than attempting to locate a universal center, one must in fact concentrate on local centers, absent centers and centers being everywhere. In other words, Laplanche proposes the heliocentric model Freud borrows for his metapsychological paper of 1917 is not heliocentrist at all; it is in fact a form of *excentric heliocentrism*.

While Freud appears wedded to the “Copernican Revolution” of psychoanalysis, Laplanche instead epigrammatically states: “...if Freud is his own Copernicus, he is also his own Ptolemy”. To comprehend, we must consider the earliest narrative in Freud’s metapsychology: the simultaneously Copernican discovery of trauma, the unconscious and the effect of the seductive *other*, and the Ptolemaic “going-astray” of both his repudiation, and his move toward a general theory of infantile sexuality. Consider the “Preliminary Communication” to *Studies on Hysteria*, where Freud and Breuer posit the causality of trauma and the hysterical neuroses:

We must presume rather that the psychological trauma – or more precisely the memory of the trauma – acts like a *foreign body* which long after its *entry* must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work.

As the emphasis shows, “foreign body” and “entry” here validate what Laplanche terms “alienness”; that the unconscious is “put inside by an alien”. Laplanche then quotes from “A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-analysis”, noting the linguistic similarity in Freud’s description of unconscious drives:

These *alien* guests even seem to be more powerful than those ... at the ego’s command ... The ego says to itself: ‘This is an illness, a *foreign invasion*’.

The resemblance is striking, yet Freud continues to diminish the *otherness* in his theory; in a poetic monologue to the ego, he proclaims “Nothing has entered into you from *without*”, indicating therefore everything resides *within*. Freudian thought continues to reject “alien-ness”: “[t]urn your eyes inward, look into your own depths, learn first to know yourself”. As though his repudiatory letter to Fliess of September 1897 is being reiterated two decades on, no sooner has Freud discovered, he has almost immediately been led-astray.

Laplanche’s *primal situation* is the Copernican paradigm formulated to de-center Freud’s “universal event in early childhood”. The protagonists in the *primal situation* are the seductive adult and the seduced child: however, this is not the seduction of Freud’s specialised theory; instead, it resides in the enigmatic seduction of messages from the adult, who has a developed sexual unconscious, and the new-born child, who lacks such an entity. Laplanche indicates the evidence for an adult’s unconscious and developed sexuality can be located in “bungled actions”, suggesting there must be “something unconscious”:

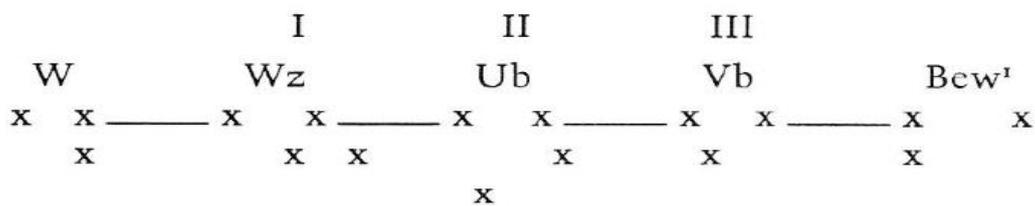
In the primal situation we have ... a child whose ability to adapt is real but limited, weak and waiting to be perverted, and a deviant adult ... [furthermore] given that the child lives on in the adult, an adult faced with a child is ... [likely] to perform bungled actions ... because he is involved in a relationship with his other self, with the other he once was. The child in front of him brings out the child within him.

Importantly, when Laplanche describes the adult as “deviant”, he is referring to the repressed infantile material called into being during primal seduction: it is awoken by *the other*, or the “other [the adult] once was”; accordingly, the adult’s deviancy only pertains to sexual norms.

Laplanche turns then to the “messages” between adult and child in the *primal situation*, which he terms “the enigmatic signifier”: “... [when] an adult proffers to a child verbal, non-verbal

and even behavioural signifiers which are pregnant with unconscious sexual significations”. While Laplanche is undoubtedly renouncing Lacan’s “the unconscious is structured like a language” in suggesting signifiers can be also non-verbal or behavioural, he is equally borrowing from Lacan, particularly his concept of a “de-signified signifier”, or the important distinction between “a signifier *of* and a signifier *to*”, where a signifier can “signify *to* without its addressee necessarily knowing what *it* signifies”. In other words, the power of the signifier is the demand it places on the child; that is, the child knows it is being addressed (it is being signified *to*), but does not comprehend the message (the signifier *of*), rendering it enigmatic.

It is what the child does with the “enigmatic signifier” that is crucial. In returning to a critical letter Freud wrote to Wilhelm Fliess on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1896, Laplanche recalls a schema which still has “programmatic value”.



Given the schema in Figure 1.1 was produced a mere nine months prior to the repudiation of his seduction theory, Freud’s reliance on the Ptolemaic is highlighted by Laplanche in two ways: first, Freud leaves the *W* (*perception*) column blank; second, there is the issue of “indication” (*Wz*), and how “perception alone could supply [these] indications”. In other words, Laplanche argues for the Copernican dimension in Freud’s original model; rather than the Ptolemaic suggestion that unconscious indications and perceptions occur spontaneously *within*, there must be both a “first indication of perception” and a “first inscription in the psychical apparatus” that originate *without*, addressed to the subject by *the other*.

Laplanche's birth of the unconscious effectively becomes the blank first column of Freud's 1896 schema, and he demonstrates the enigmatic signifier through initially borrowing a Lacanian arithmetical equation.

$$\frac{S1}{s} \times \frac{S2}{S1}$$

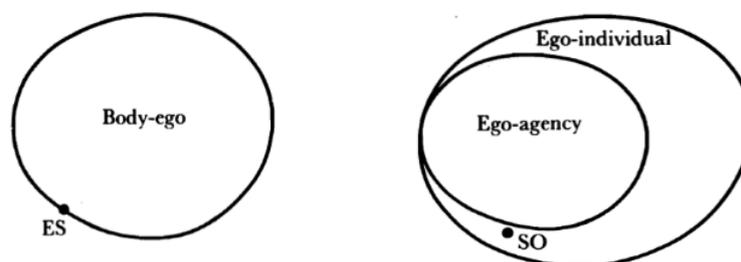
Laplanche here demonstrates the importance of *the other* in the child's translation process: the small *s* continues to represent the signified, but in developing Lacan, S1 now becomes the "enigmatic signifier" and is "more or less inaccessible". Furthermore, because the infant is immediately a "self-translating" organism and that these messages are sexually significant, it suggests enigmatic residue is being processed from the very beginning.

Laplanche labels this process "metabolisation" in a revised theory of *primal repression*. Freud argued that *primal repression* "consists in the psychological ... representative of the instinct being denied entrance into the conscious"; in other words, the ego initially refuses translation of the excessively sexual content in the drives. Once again, the Ptolemaic is dominant: the inherent unconscious drives are refused control by the internally conscious ego. Laplanche instead argues primal repression occurs during the "metabolisation" process, and due to the child's constant attempts at self-translation, the above formula will multiply:

$$\frac{\frac{S2}{s}}{\frac{S1}{S1}}$$

Despite what is shown being unmathematical, this revised schema is crucial. The enigmatic signifier (S1) is metabolised and processed by the ever-translating infant; however, due to lacking any form of developed sexuality, the infant cannot process the sexual significations latent within the message. Consequently, the enigmatic within *the other's* message falls below the bar of repression; there, it remains, initially dormant, but gradually forming itself with subsequent metabolisations. Laplanche argues this is the birth of the child's unconscious: rather than Freud's theory that the source is Ptolemaic and based initially on satisfying the self-preservative instinctual functions, Laplanche instead announces the source-object is the fragments of the deviant adult's discourse: the de-signified signifier; the repressed, untranslatable metabola in *the other's* initial messages.

In turning to the location of the enigmatic signifier, Laplanche once again returns to Freud's "double braid" of innovation and going-astray. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud posits a highly suggestive theory: "[t]he ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is the projection of a surface". In this moment, Freud's Ptolemaic exigency – in which the ego is formed by way of inward projection – supplies Laplanche with an opportunity to further develop his Copernican framework.



In Figure 1.4, on the left is the ego in its most primitive form; there is no difference between the ego-as-an-agency and that of the whole being. On the right is the result of metabolisation: the enigmatic signifier embeds into the individual's periphery, but in the process of the infant

metabolising the enigmatic signifier, the enigmatic signifier *becomes* the source-object (SO); importantly, external to the ego-agency, but embedded within the ego-individual. In his short essay “Implantation, Intromission”, Laplanche refers to the processes demonstrated as “implantation”; the “common, everyday, normal” ways in which messages are embedded within the periphery of the subject’s ego, which allow for “active translation and repression” to occur. In other words, the birth of the unconscious drives is not an endogenous, Ptolemaic event; instead he works within a Copernican framework: the unconscious sexual drives are formed from the enigmatic residue of *the internal other*.

In moments of theoretical crisis, Freud often turned to literature: most notably his readings of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* when working through the difficult abandonment of his seduction theory. While he did not explicitly write about E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *Mademoiselle de Scudery* – published in 1818 – the elaborate tale serves as an expedient illustration of Laplanche’s revised Copernican framework for the birth of unconscious drives.

After its explosive opening scene, Hoffmann centers his novella through a series of elaborate narrative frames, that finally rest on master-jeweller René Cardillac. Bennett argues Cardillac commits his crimes through a “blind obedience to an obscure impulse”, evoking the Freudian unconscious located in his theory of infantile sexuality; that the impulses the master-jeweller is impelled to follow are so obscure they must come from *within*. A Ptolemaic reading of the narrative is indeed credible enough. Despite the elaborate narrative framework, the novella ostensibly orbits around its *primal scene*, in which Cardillac recounts a memory of his mother being seduced by a Spanish cavalier. In this suggestive structural center, Cardillac refers to an “*inborn* urge, [... which] burst forth and grew mightily”, implying the need to first thief from,

and then murder, those who purchased his work must have their origins *within*. Furthermore, geocentric descriptions subtly appear in Cardillac's explosive fragment: first, Cardillac himself is a one-month foetus when his mother is seduced, suggesting his structural centrality to the scene; second, Hoffmann repeatedly evokes a Ptolemaic matrix in the text: "[d]eep *inside* of me there grew a desire to murder"; "[d]ark thoughts arose *within* me". Mirroring the wider issues at stake, Hoffmann here juxtaposes structural and linguistic centrality; the narrative architecture which envelopes Cardillac's account parallels the linguistic milieu of his "inborn urge", doubly suggesting the birth of his unconscious drives reside very much *within*.

Ellis rightly notes however, it is not Cardillac who speaks in this scene; it is "Hoffmann's narrator giv[ing] us Olivier's account of Cardillac's account of the story given him by unspecified persons ... of what happened to Cardillac's mother before his birth". By first de-centering the narratology of the scene, a Copernican reading of the novella becomes possible; indeed, Hoffmann opens the section which Cardillac recounts: "Wise men often speak of the strange impressions which afflict pregnant women, and of the strange influence these *impressions from outside* can have on the child". The question therefore resides in who supplies these *impressions*; perhaps a way of re-phrasing to open a new discursive space is: *what* is the seductive presence in the novella, supplying these impressions from *outside*?

In Laplanche's *primal situation*, *the other* is a subject with an unconscious and a developed sexuality, who transmits a signifying object to the infant; therefore, if we speculate that *the other* is not necessarily a character in Hoffmann's tale, a signifying object which transmits *the other's* desires quickly presents itself: the jewels. *Mademoiselle de Scudery* may be named after its aging detective figure, and the novella's structure may well appear to center on the

murderous Cardillac, but it is the jewels which drive the plot. These jewels, secretly transported in the darkness of the Parisian night, are certainly suggestive of sexual desire:

...there were many who, entangled in some amorous intrigue, crept to their mistress in the night, often bearing a [jewel]; but often too, the lover failed to reach the house where he anticipated enjoyment.

Plotz rightly argues that the secretive circulation of jewels within a narrative is indicative of being unable to contain their significations, as the jewel transforms the space surrounding it into one of “sexual vulnerability”. This reminds us of the helpless child in Laplanche’s *primal situation*, who also is vulnerable to the latent sexual content of *the other’s* discourse. Furthermore, the final words in the novella only serve to add to the allusively sexual significations of the jewels:

Many who appeared on Cardillac’s list presented themselves to [d’Andilly] and, to their no small surprise, received back the jewels that had been stolen from them. What was left fell to the treasury of the church of St Eustace.

“What was left” is significant: it is no coincidence the final act de-sexualises the jewels, assigning them to the sex-less location of “St Eustace”. As a consequence, the latent residue of what sexuality remained within the unconscious *other* is crucially sublimated, no longer able to seduce the sexually vulnerable.

Given the sexual signification the jewels harbour, a *primal scene* which appeared Ptolemaic now takes on an entirely Copernican dimension. First, consider the mother’s “longing, fiery glances” and her “grasp[ing of] the beautiful chain”; in other words, she is seduced by the jewels, or by *the deviant other* of Hoffmann’s text. Due to the fact Cardillac claims the moment “got into [him]”, I would argue his “inborn urge” actually came from *without*; from the

strangeness which resides in the sexual signification latent in the cavalier's beautiful jewelled necklace. Furthermore, the highly vulnerable nature of Cardillac's position in the scene (being a one-month foetus) means he cannot suppress the originary urges of his mother. Cardillac indeed continues to claim "[o]nly [real gems] enticed [him]"; therefore, the alien-ness of the enigmatic significations the jewels carry creates Cardillac's unconscious drives. Due to the enigmatic signifier in Hoffmann's tale being so potently latent with desire for both sex and death – that is, his mother's sexual longing and the cavalier's strange end to his life – the jewel metabolises into *the internal other*, repressed and embedded within Cardillac's ego-individual in the form of a monstrous hybrid. Crucially, the enigmatic signifier is formed *externally* in a Copernican framework, transmitted by *the other*; it then gradually metabolises *internally*, as each jewel Cardillac crafts himself or catches glimpse of unconsciously drives him towards behaviour of the most immoral nature.

Freud declared in 1917 "the ego is not master in its own house", yet he still provided his house with a universal "center": the drives of his Ptolemaic unconscious. Laplanche instead de-centers Freud's theoretical dependence on the Ptolemaic by asserting there is in fact "no center"; like the earth orbiting the sun in the solar system, and the solar system itself orbiting other cosmic matter, the human psyche initially orbits its own "local center": *the other*, or more specifically, the deviant adult in the *primal situation*. In interpreting *with* Freud, Laplanche affirms, like Hoffmann before him, that, at the beginning of our psychical life, there is a crucially Copernican dimension: the unconscious drives do not develop spontaneously from *within*; the process starts *without*, before embedding and metabolising *within* as the highly individualistic and naturally enigmatic *internal other*.