

Article

# LAPLANCHE'S RECONSTRUCTION OF FREUD'S OTHER-CENTERED SUBJECT: THE ENIGMATIC SIGNIFIER AND ITS POLITICAL USES

**Jean Wyatt**

Los Angeles, CA, USA

Correspondence: Dr Jean Wyatt, English and Comparative Literary Studies Department, Occidental College, 1600 Campus Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90041, USA  
E-mail: jwyatt@oxy.edu

## Abstract

*This essay continues the exploration of Freud's "exigency and going-astray," as they are defined in Jean Laplanche's essay of that name, by tracing one major going-astray detected by Laplanche in Freud's thinking: Freud's erasure of his own radical discovery that the other is central to the self. In the process of restoring the Freudian model of the decentered self, Laplanche creates the theoretical category of the message, or the enigmatic signifier. I argue that Laplanche's model of the enigmatic signifier can be extended past childhood to illuminate the signifying processes of adult citizens forced to deal with enigmatic messages from the state. By way of example, I use the notion of the enigmatic signifier to analyze the US public's long-sustained patient acceptance of George W Bush's misleading rhetoric.*

## Keywords

other-centered self; going-astray; enigmatic signifier; unconscious; George W Bush; Jean Laplanche

*Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (2006) 11, 190–198.

doi:10.1057/palgrave.pcs.2100090

**T**aking up the notion of Freud's "exigency and going-astray" from Jean Laplanche's paper of that name, this essay traces one major going-astray: Freud's cover-up of his own discovery that the other is central to the self. Laplanche restores the Freudian model of a decentered



self, in part through creating an additional theoretical category, the enigmatic parental message.

Laplanche describes how Freud is compelled, as by an unconscious drive – an “exigency” – to avoid the radical consequences of his own discovery that the other is constitutive of the self. Again and again, Laplanche shows, Freud swerves away from the logical development of his own thesis that the subject is other-centered and finds a theoretical path back to the safer territory of the auto-centered self, self-enclosed and self-directed.

Laplanche returns to the moment (1897) when Freud abandoned the seduction theory – the theory that the cause of his patients’ hysteria was their childhood experience of sexual abuse. When he failed to find an instance of sexual abuse in the history of every patient, Freud moved from the seduction theory to the oedipal theory, which substituted for the actuality of parental seduction the child’s own fantasy of sex with the parent. As a result of that move from external reality to psychical reality, fantasy became the primary object of psychoanalysis. At about the same time (1905), Freud introduced infantile sexuality, theorizing libidinal development as a movement through prewired oral, anal and genital stages – that is, stages internal to the child’s organic development. Both theoretical moves posit an internal source for the subject’s sexuality; they are autocentric. Not that Laplanche follows Jeffrey Masson’s (1984) lead in accusing Freud of covering up the fact of parental sexual abuse or in reasserting the factual basis of Freud’s patients’ reports of incest (1984). Rather, Laplanche points out that Masson, in his insistence on restoring the truth status of literal sexual abuse, overlooks the rudimentary beginnings, in the seduction theory, of an important theoretical model of psychic causality (see Fletcher, 1999, p 4).

What Laplanche seeks to recover from Freud’s early work is the model of a subject decentered by the internal presence of an alien other: the internalized trace of the parental other is never fully assimilated but goes on working, like an alien agent within the self. He points out that Freud’s early texts are full of references to a “foreign body” within. For example, Freud explains hysteria thus:

We must presume that the psychical 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 *agens* that is still at work. (Freud, 1895, p 6; qtd in Laplanche, 1999, p 65)

Although ultimately Laplanche will focus not on trauma but on the ordinary experience of the child in relation to his or her adult caretakers, he finds Freud’s formulation here useful – for Freud is thinking of the unconscious itself “as an alien inside me, and even one put inside me by an alien” (1999, p 65).

After Freud gave up the seduction theory, he ceased to follow out the logical consequences of this line of inquiry: the notion of an alien other internal to the

subject surfaces only intermittently, to be erased by Freud's "exigency," by his drive to return to the notion of a self-contained and self-centered subject. For example, in the 1917 essay, "A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis," Freud writes:

In certain diseases...thoughts emerge suddenly without one knowing where they come from... These alien guests even seem to be more powerful than those that are at the ego's command. ...Or else impulses appear which seem like those of a stranger, so that the ego denies them; ...the ego says to itself: "This is an illness, a foreign invasion." (1917, pp 141–142)

Immediately Freud retrenches, making "psychoanalysis" itself the restorer of the comfortable status quo: "Psychoanalysis sets out to explain these uncanny disorders...until at length it can speak thus to the ego: 'Nothing has entered into you from without; a part of the activity of your own mind has been withdrawn from your knowledge and from the command of the will'" (p 142); and Freud recommends, "Turn your eyes inward, look into your own depths, learn first to know yourself" (p. 143). The directive here is to reabsorb the part of me that is split off, the part that rightfully belongs to an inclusive self. The disturbing presence of an alien agent at work inside is explained away.

What is at stake here is the nature of the unconscious: is the unconscious a part of myself, which with work can be reassimilated into my singular consciousness (as in Freud's notion of "the unconscious made conscious") – or is it truly other, continually pulling me off balance, implanting in me desires and motives foreign to my self-willed consciousness, forever alien and impossible to integrate?

Laplanche wants to argue for the alterity of the unconscious, and his argument rests on the prior idea that the other is primary in the constitution of the self.<sup>1</sup> *Der Andere*, the other person, has implanted in me *Das Andere*, the other within the self. As in Freud's original formulation, that other within "continues to operate...not indirectly, ...but as a directly relating cause" of the subject's psychic activity (1895, pp 6–7; qtd in Laplanche, 1999, p 65).

Laplanche recovers the radical nature of Freud's discovery by adding the category of the message. In the course of caring for the child, a parental figure addresses a message to the child that is freighted with sexual meanings: its sexual implications cannot be read – first because they are usually unconscious for the parent him/or herself and secondly because the child has not yet entered the world of adult sexuality. What you have in the ordinary childcare situation, Laplanche says, is "an encounter between an individual whose psycho-somatic structures are situated predominantly at the level of need, and signifiers emanating from an adult" which carry a sexual significance beyond the child's comprehension (1989, p 130). The parent is primarily focused on caring for the child, but since the parent's world is permeated by sexuality, there are inevitably moments when a sexual dimension informs the parent's words or gestures.

There is, emphatically, no intention of a literal seduction here – nor is there any overt sexual behavior. The parent’s attentions and his/her words are seductive only because they are opaque, only because “they convey something enigmatic” (1989, p. 128). The message addresses the child – and so it seems to require something of the child; yet it does not make a demand that the child can decipher. From the child’s point of view, it is a message *to* without being a message *about*.

Because the child senses that the message is related to the parent’s desire, and because the child is in a relation of dependency on the adult, it seems to him or her necessary to understand the parent’s words. But, because the child is not yet a participant in the world of adult sexuality, he or she finds it impossible to do so. The child is set an impossible task: it has to symbolize, it has to master, a message that it is not equipped to translate into the symbolic order, a message that it *cannot* master.

Here are some examples. A father towels off his four-year-old daughter after her bath while talking to her about what she did in preschool that day. He is taking care of her. But there is a sexual dimension in what he is saying and doing that the child senses but cannot interpret. Or, a second example: a business executive sometimes addresses his secretary as “Suzie” in the presence of his six-year-old daughter, who knows that the secretary’s name is not Suzie, but Barbara Holton. What confuses the child is not so much the misnaming as the oddness of her father’s manner when he pronounces “Suzie” – an elusive undertone of secret amusement or suppressed snickering pleasure that the little girl cannot read.

Because it seems vitally important to grasp the other’s meaning, a child in this situation does not puzzle over the message just once and let it go. Rather, the child uses all the signifying resources at its disposal to interpret the enigmatic message’s meaning. It may succeed in giving meaning to parts of the message, but inevitably it cannot interpret its sexual dimension correctly – because it lacks the knowledge to do so. After managing to translate parts of the message into representations or fantasies or infantile theories, the child is left with a residue that resists signification. That residue, that lump of uninterpretable signifiers, founds the unconscious.

It is, then, as a designified signifier that the parent’s message – or rather the untranslatable component of the parent’s message – constitutes the unconscious. It is productive there: it works on the ego from outside the ego, a “foreign body” that acts as the source-object of the drive. More particularly, it acts as the source of the sexual drive (Laplanche, 1999, pp 129–130). So one’s sexuality is always already pulled askew, deviated in the direction of the first other’s enigmatic signifier – which is itself derivative from the enigmatic signifier of his or her parent: thus comes into being unconscious intergenerational transmission. No wonder that sexuality takes so many diverse paths!

However, this is not a simple determinism: Laplanche contests Lacan’s global descriptions of the unconscious as “‘discourse of the Other’ [and of] the child as

‘symptom of the parents’” (1999, p 160), because such formulations ignore the child’s active part in processing the parent’s message. The child breaks down the message into parts by translating what it can into representations or fantasies, leaving the remainder of non-signifying signifiers that it cannot interpret to become the cornerstone of the unconscious. Even if one had access to the parental message itself, there would be no way to predict the outcome of the child’s translating process, and no way to predict what form the last intransigently unmetabolizable signifiers would take.

The child’s signifying process, as described by Laplanche, has implications for adult citizens’ processing of messages from the state. As Eric Santner points out, some aspects of the family situation are recapitulated at the level of the social, for every “social formation...is itself permeated by inconsistency and incompleteness, is itself punctuated by a lack by which we are, in some peculiar way, addressed, ‘ex-cited,’ and for which we are in some fashion responsible” (2005, pp 86–87). The adult citizen, like the child, is called upon to work on signifiers addressed to it by authority figures, signifiers that sometimes refuse to yield a coherent meaning.

For example, Laplanche’s theory of the enigmatic signifier can illuminate the American public’s long-enduring capacity to believe in President George W. Bush’s claims. Long after it had been shown that his statements did not match reality, long after it became evident that his various pronouncements contradicted both each other and reality, his credibility held among voters. It is not that Bush speaks enigmatically – far from it: he tends to use an absolutist rhetoric of black and white, good and evil. But his words contradict each other and the truth and thus defy semantic clarity – as in the series of non-sequiturs justifying the invasion of Iraq. The rationale for invading Iraq was, first, the purported connection between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda and the imminent threat from Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction. When these reasons proved unfounded, we were told that, no, we had to invade Iraq because Saddam Hussein was a bad man who killed his own people, so we had to liberate the Iraqis from him. Still later, the rationale became – and apparently remains – that it was our national mission to bring democracy to the Middle East. How is it that Americans were willing to tolerate these contradictions and continue to support Bush well into his second term of office?

Extending Laplanche’s family scenario to the political, I would say that because of our repeated failures to make meaning out of our parents’ signifiers, we are trained to respond to the failure of meaning in an authority figure not by condemning him but by making do with incoherence and trying to accommodate it. Through our first, most intimate relations with an other, we are trained to endure what Eric Santner calls “signifying stress.” We are always interpreting, and failing to interpret, always forced by necessity to make meaning of an authority figure’s words, yet failing to find therein a coherent meaning (2005, p 92). We have a seemingly infinite tolerance for signifiers that

do not make sense, especially if the signifiers come from a leader on whom we are dependent for protection, as we were once dependent on the parent. (And Bush's politics of fear reinforce the homologous structure by continually pressuring citizens to feel they need his protection, as if our very survival depended on Bush.)<sup>2</sup>

Further, it may be that Bush's rhetorical style, famous for its malapropisms and syntactic errors, attaches followers through its very lack of coherence. According to Laplanche, what engages the child's passionate interest, what attaches him or her, is not the meaningful content of a parent's words, but the gaps in coherence, the parts of a parent's speaking that fail to communicate. There are many parts of Bush's speech that do not work. He mispronounces words, he makes grammatical mistakes, he gets entangled in sentences and cannot extricate himself. The adult citizen at one time experienced gaps in discourse as profoundly attaching: it is the enigmatic, not-to-be-understood impasses in the parent's speech that rivet the child's attention and attach the child to the authority figure who is fumbling signifiers. That is because the moments of incoherence provide openings, however occluded, into the unconscious desire of the parent. And those momentary glimpses of the mysteries of parental desire are crucially important to the child because it *is* the parent speaking – it is the person on whom the child's emotional and even physical survival depends.

For Laplanche, the enigmatic parental message founds the unconscious. So it could be argued that the blunders and semantic gaps of Bush's speech appeal to the unconscious level of the listener, and moreover imitate the dialogic situation that constituted the listener's unconscious in the first place. On this account, the least compelling, the least attaching presentation would be one delivered in an articulate, logical and cogent manner.

Indeed, the contradictory responses of listeners to the 2004 presidential candidate debates seem to back up this assertion. Surveys conducted by New York newspapers on the day after each debate showed that a large majority of listeners thought that Kerry had won the debates hands down; but among the same group of respondents, the support for Bush for president did not decline but in fact increased (Orin and Morris, 2004, p 2). This makes sense, I am proposing, if we see the gaps and incoherencies in the president's discourse as a reprisal of the enigmas in the parent's speech that initially engaged the subject's signifying stress and the unconscious attachment that went along with it.

(As a side note, students of Bush's speeches before and after becoming president have pointed out a shift away from rhetorical clarity: as a Texas gubernatorial candidate and then as governor, they say, Bush's speaking style was lucid and compelling. James Fallows, who studied video-tapes of Bush's speeches during his time as Texas governor, in particular the gubernatorial candidate debate with Ann Richards, says that the Bush of ten years ago "was eloquent. He spoke quickly and easily. He rattled off complicated sentences and

brought them to the right grammatical conclusions...[he] looked and sounded smart and in control” and spoke with “offhand fluency” (2004, pp. 2–3). His bumbling style as president is a marked departure from his former rhetorical polish. There are three theories among students of Bush-speak to explain the marked change in his speaking mode. (1) Some think “there is some organic basis for the President’s peculiar mode of speech – a learning disability...or some other disorder” (2004, p. 8). (2) James Fallows’ own explanation for the change is that the issues facing Bush as governor were far less complex than the issues facing him as president: he could grasp the simpler state issues but cannot comprehend, negotiate or articulate the more complex issues at the national level. Or, (3) as president, Bush has deliberately adopted an inept, awkward, error-ridden speaking style (2004, p. 8). In view of the reasons I have given for the effectiveness of Bush’s later speaking style, the last hypothesis seems the most intriguing.

While Laplanche humbly claims only to be rehabilitating an occluded aspect of Freud’s thinking, I would add that his theory also revises, as it clarifies, Lacan’s influential model of subjectivity.<sup>3</sup> The notion of the “other in me” is important to Lacan’s thinking, changing shape over the course of his Seminars: it emerges first as *das Ding* (in Seminar VII) and finds its final form as the object *a* – the extimate object that is at once the core of the individual and fundamentally other (Seminars X and XI). Lacan maintains the mystery of the other at the heart of the subject by avoiding any detailed description of how this phantom remnant of the other, the object *a*, comes to occupy its privileged position in the unconscious; he asserts only that the acquisition of the object *a* is both passive and universal, an inevitable concomitant of the child’s entry into language and the symbolic order. The category of the message enables Laplanche both to pin down the source of this anomalous other at the heart of me – it is a parental signifier that fails to signify – and also to describe in detail the process whereby the final untranslatable designified signifier comes to inhabit – indeed to found – the subject’s unconscious. Likewise, Laplanche’s model clarifies in specific detail the operations of the other within and thereby provides a new perspective on Lacan’s account of the mediated nature of desire. Where Lacan leaves the workings of the internal object as the source of the subject’s desire at the level of suggestive formula ( $S/\langle \rangle a$ , the fundamental fantasy of desire), Laplanche’s model describes the process through which the signifier of parental sexuality comes to direct the unconscious course of the subject’s sexual drive: the enigmatic signifier carries something of the parent’s sexual desire; once transformed into the founding object of the subject’s unconscious, it exerts a constant stimulation, a forceful pull, on the subject’s sexual energies (1999, p 129) – so that “Man’s desire is the desire of the Other” (Lacan, 1978, p 38).

Despite his modest claims, Laplanche does more than show that Freud was at once “his own Copernicus [and] his own Ptolemy” (1999, p 60), decentering the

self and then covering up his own radical discovery through a return to the autocentric self of tradition. Laplanche's own contribution, the enigmatic signifier, revises both Freud and Lacan to present an original description, nuanced and complex, of the active workings of the other in the self.

### About the author

Jean Wyatt is professor of English and Comparative Literary Studies at Occidental College. Her book, *Risking Difference: Identification, Race and Community in Contemporary Fiction and Feminism* (SUNY Press 2004), deals with novels by contemporary American women writers and with race relations in feminist communities. Her most recent articles include "Toward Cross-Race Dialogue: Identification, Misrecognition and Difference in Feminist Multicultural Community," *Signs* 29/3 (Spring 2004) and "Jouissance and Desire in Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher*," *American Imago* 62/4 (Winter 2005).

### Notes

1 Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen (1993) also argues that the other is primary in the constitution of the Freudian subject, but unlike Laplanche he theorizes from a base in Freud's notion of primary identification – a totalizing identification that precedes language. Borch-Jacobsen assumes that the incorporation of the other founds the self, so that self and other are indistinguishably one at the outset: "the ego forms itself or is born in this devouring identification with the other" (1993, p 60). Laplanche, on the other hand, understands the other in the self as a linguistic trace: it is the enigmatic word of the parent that founds the unconscious and becomes the source-object of the drives.

2 My theory of US citizens' responses to signifiers that cannot be made to render meaning does not preclude the notion that Bush's words sometimes have great affective meaning for certain audiences. Speaking from the perspective of cognitive science, George Lakoff (2004) shows how certain keywords and metaphors used by Bush (and more generally by the right) persuade listeners by evoking cognitive frames that contain networks of entrenched meanings, including deeply cherished values. Although it is not mentioned by Lakoff, Bush's use of coded religious references in his speeches is a case in point: while these references usually escape non-churchgoers, Christian conservatives pick up on certain phrases like "wonder-working power," recognize their source in hymns, and understand that Bush is signaling that he is one of them (see Greene, 2003; Lawton, 2003).

3 Laplanche was Lacan's student: remarks and questions ascribed to Laplanche are scattered throughout Lacan's published Seminars. It could be argued that Laplanche's theory of the enigmatic signifier derives from a passage in Lacan's Seminar XI (1989), which links the child's curiosity about the parent's desire to gaps in the parent's discourse:

A lack is encountered by the subject in the Other, in the very intimation that the Other makes to him by his discourse. In the intervals of the discourse of the Other, there emerges in the experience of the child something that is radically [un]mappable, namely, He is saying this to me, but what does he want?... The desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject in that which does not work, in the lacks of the discourse of the Other and all the child's whys reveal...a Why are you telling me this? ever-resuscitated from its base, which is the enigma of the adult's desire (p. 214).



## References

- Borch-Jacobsen, M. (1993). *The Emotional Tie: Psychoanalysis, Mimesis, and Affect*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Fallows, J. (2004, July/August). When George meets John. *The Atlantic Monthly* 294.1. Retrieved from The Atlantic.com. <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/prem/200407/fallows>.
- Fletcher, J. (1999). Introduction: Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Other. In Laplanche J. *Essays on Otherness*. (Fletcher J. ed.) London: Routledge, pp. 1–51.
- Freud, S. (1895). *Studies on Hysteria*. In Strachey J. (ed.) *Standard Edition*, Vol. 2. London: Hogarth, pp. 1954–1973.
- Freud, S. (1905). *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. SE 7, 123–245.
- Freud, S. (1917). A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis. SE 17, 139–143.
- Greene, D. (2003, February 10). Bush turns increasingly to language of religion. *The Baltimore Sun*, Retrieved from Common Dreams News Center. <http://www.common-dreams.org/headlines03/0210-06.htm>.
- Lacan, J. (1978). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. (Sheridan A. trans.) New York: Norton.
- Lakoff, G. (2004). *Don't Think of an Elephant!*. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Laplanche, J. (1989). *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis* (David Macey, Trans.). London: Basil Blackwell.
- Laplanche, J. (1999). *Essays on Otherness* (Fletcher J. ed.) London: Routledge.
- Lawton, K. (2003, July). President Bush's religious rhetoric. *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. (From a PBS special, "President Bush's Religious Rhetoric," aired February 7, 2003.) <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week623/news.html>.
- Masson, J. (1984). *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.
- Orin, D. and Morris, V. (2004, October 1). Foes pound each other. *New York Post*, Late City Final, p. 2.
- Santner, E. (2005). Miracles Happen: Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Freud, and the Matter of the Neighbor. In Zizek S., Santner E. and Reinhard K. (eds.) *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.