

THE *APRÈS-COUP*

Over time, later on, we realise that the question of *nachträglich - après-coup* - is one of the central knots of psychoanalysis. And one - both in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis - that is hard to untangle. The *après-coup* is one of the symptoms of psychoanalysis, a point in which it reveals itself, and at the same time suffers itself.

I do not have time here to analyse what was said about *après-coup* by the two French authors who gave to this concept all its importance: Jacques Lacan and Jean Laplanche. I will say that Laplanche's suggestion - to translate Freudian *Nachträglichkeit* as 'afterwardness' - was not successful, because now even anglophone students use the French word *après-coup*, which is, in fact, quite untranslatable in English.

Roughly speaking, we can say that we have today three ways to interpret this concept, which Lacan was the first to isolate it as a single and consistent concept. Consider one example given by Freud, his patient Emma. This girl as an adult suffers from a phobia of entering shops. This is connected to a scene from when she was twelve, which Freud calls Scene I: She went into a shop to buy something, saw the two male shop assistants laughing together, and rushed out in some kind of fright. In this connection, it was possible to elicit the idea that the two men had been laughing at her clothes. But later she would remember a previous scene (what Freud would call Scene II). On two occasions when she was a child of eight, she had gone into a shop to buy some sweets, and the shopkeeper had grabbed at her genitals through her clothes. In spite of the first experience, she

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had gone to the shop a second time, after which she never went back. According to Freud, in order to form a symptom or even just a trauma - in this case, the phobia of shops - a subject must have at least two similar experiences. One way of considering this idea of 'two times', which is generally attributed to the first authors writing in English, was to consider *nachträglich* as a 'time bomb': in other words, the first scene, the childhood scene, produces a traumatic effect - but not until years later, when the girl becomes a woman, something Laplanche considers deterministic positivism.

A second way is interpreting *après-coup* in hermeneutic terms, according to which the second experience is a re-signification of the first one. This is similar to what Jung thought, that in a certain way the first scene was a sort of retro-phantasy. According to this hermeneutical interpretation, the meaning reverses the arrow of time: the later experience changes the meaning of earlier experiences.

A third way, more complex, was proposed by Laplanche. He supposes a first scene, an original event he calls 'of seduction,' not in the sense that the adult literally seduces the child, but in the sense that the adult expresses to the child something the latter finds enigmatic, something the child needs to 'reconstruct,' or, as Laplanche says, 'translate.' The adult will recognize this enigmatic something *après coup* as 'sexual.' The child will have to translate into his or her own language something 'sexual' in the adult. Laplanche's theory - of the *primacy of the other* - has rightly been put into relation with the so-called 'relational' trend. For example, in any case, *après-coup* refers us back to a sort of original message that makes the other (the adult) and the subject (the child) confront each other; an enigmatic message that the subject will have to process in future, syncopated, times.

Laplanche's theory does not convince me. And I tried to demonstrate why in the paper I submitted for this conference, where I say that deep down, Laplanche grasped the explosive power that the concept of *après-coup* involves at the very moment Lacan isolated it as a specific concept. For example, signalling the Freudian *après-coup* gave an uncanny or embarrassing sense to this notion. But what is uncanny and embarrassing is the fact that the *après-coup* gives substance to a '*coup*' that would not exist without this *après-coup*. The game is becoming dangerous. In fact, we could avoid the alternative between deterministic causality and hermeneutic re-signification by describing *après-*

coup as a form of magic or miracle. This is a road some are ready to take. In other words, the 'before' is caused by the 'after'; the after is the cause of the before. We can change the past starting from the present - not in the dull sense of re-signifying the past starting from the present, but in the sense that we can miraculously correct and change the past. But then we are completely in the domain of science fiction.

There is, however, another way of conceiving the inversion of the arrow of time: seeing *nachträglich* as a process thanks to which the sense of a later event gives an earlier event a causal power. But the opposite is also possible: in the two Emma scenes, Scene I (the later one) acts as the cause of a phobia thanks to the sense of Scene II (the earlier one). The *hysteron proteron* form that Freud adopts - the fact that it represents as earlier what comes later - then expresses the following: there is a causal primacy of the later scene, in the sense that its sense makes an earlier scene the aetiology of later symptoms. Now, this retroaction of the present on past is only possible in a human world.

Let us imagine a connection of this type. A subject crosses a bridge. Then he reads that the area has a high seismic risk and that years earlier that same bridge had collapsed, but the information does not particularly trouble him. Years later he sees a house collapse because of an earthquake, and later he develops a phobia for... bridges. He can no longer cross them for fear that they will collapse. It's an imaginary clinical case, but a plausible one. What happens here? Let's leave out any symbolic interpretations of the phobia. What counts is that the first experience of crossing the bridge only becomes the cause of a phobia through the sense that the later event gives to the former: collapsing. A previous Event I becomes a cause thanks to a sense given *après coup* by Event II.

Indeed, the concept of *après-coup* is fundamental precisely because that of which *après-coup* is an 'after' which refers back to a 'before' that remains suspended, an *x*, an unknown element. The paradox of *après-coup* is that at the beginning there is an after, never a primacy. It is an after often without a before. It does not lead us to the primacy of the other, but at the 'primacy of the after'.

The real enigma in every psychoanalytical reconstruction is not whether we reach realities or primary fantasies, but of which experience a memory or fantasy is an elaboration of. In other

words, we are always in *après-coup*, always in the conditionality of the future perfect. An example of future perfect: 'If I'll pass my exam, I will have studied very well'. Laplanche would have us believe that there is an absolute, original, first time: the time when the adult 'seduces' the child by saying and doing things that this child finds equivocal. But this seduction scene, provided we can reconstruct it, is also, in turn, something constructed *après coup*. The *après-coup* is the way in which psychoanalysis is confronted with its hardest and most controversial challenge: the way it knots together the causes and the meanings, the explanation and the understanding of human vicissitudes.

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