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Copernicus: The Decentering of the Human Being

The fate of the word 'revolution' is linked in a curious manner to the name of Copernicus. Only the properly astronomical or geometrical meaning of the term existed in his time, and his treatise De revolutionibus orbium caelestium, published in 1543, discusses the cyclical and essentially repetitive motion of the heavenly spheres.\(^1\)

The 'revolutionary' aspect of these 'revolutions' is therefore not yet reflected in the terminology, and it is not until sixteen years later, in 1559, that Amyot began to set in motion the evolution of the term with his immortal translations of Plutarch – an illustration, among so many others, of the creative role of translators in the evolution of language. The change in meaning is, moreover, a progressive one: for Amyot, 'revolution' admittedly indicates an abrupt transformation – although one which is still predetermined, signalled in advance by 'various heavenly signs'.\(^2\) I do not have at my disposal sufficient documentation to trace in detail this metabolization of the word. Whatever its course, by the time of Kant, more than two hundred years later, our modern term 'revolution'\(^3\) is well established. In 1787, in the second Preface to The

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Critique of Pure Reason, it seems that scientific and political revolutions go hand in hand: the thought of Copernicus constitutes a 'sudden revolution in natural science'. But at the price of what misunderstanding is Kant to take it up as a model for his own philosophy? We shall return to this later.

It is well known that the revolution of Copernicus in astronomy is invoked by Freud as the first humiliating blow, the first narcissistic wound inflicted on mankind by science. It is worth looking in more detail at what it consists of, without for the time being considering its relation to psychoanalysis.

The history of astronomy, which is known to go back to earliest antiquity (the Assyrians, the Babylonians and then the Greeks) is anything but linear as far as its major problem is concerned, which can be stated as follows: we observe movements of circular appearance in the universe – but what finally turns around what?

The opposition between Ptolemy and Copernicus, geocentrism and heliocentrism is a simple, pedagogical one; but let us remember that a revolution is never as revolutionary as it thinks – it has its forerunners in the past, and what it offers as a new opening also carries with it possibilities for potential relapses. Throughout the centuries, even the millennia, of astronomical theories, what ultimately emerges is the confrontation and alternation of two lines of thought – the one Ptolemaic, the other Copernican (or so called) – with equally remarkable thinkers on both sides. Ptolemy, who lived in the second century A.D., was only the culmination of a long, double tradition going back at least to the fourth or fifth century B.C.; with the philosophers (the Pythagoreans, Plato and Aristotle) on one side, and on the other scholars closer to observation – astronomers, geographers and mathematicians. Eudoxes of Cnidus (408-355 B.C.), who was the first to reconstruct the movements of the stars on the basis of their circular motion; Autolycus (fourth century B.C.), Hipparchus of Nicea (second century B.C.), to whom we owe the first great catalogue of stars, and finally Ptolemy himself (138–180 A.D.), who proposed his 'great synthesis' (ΜΕΓΑΛΗ ΣΥΝΤΟΝΙΣΗ).\(^4\)

As for the Copernican lineage, it is well known that this was to continue its illustrious descent through Galileo, Kepler, Newton – then beyond – in the Einsteinian revolution. What is not generally known is that it goes back explicitly to the third century B.C., to the astonishing Aristarchus of Samos, whose works Copernicus knew. Of these we still have the Treatise on the Sizes and

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1 The work was published just after Copernicus’ death, no doubt as a precaution – better to risk an auto-da-fé for his book than for himself.


3 In German, Revolution. It is true that Kant did not invent the expression 'Copernican revolution' and moreover that Freud does not use it. From whom does it come?

4 Which in the Arabic tradition will be given the syncretic name of Al-mageste.
Distances of the Sun and the Moon, in which he has the daring to work out these measurements, in some cases with a surprising accuracy, due to observation and to innovative trigonometric calculations. But above all we know him as the first to propose a heliocentric system, thus incurring— even then, in the Greek world— the accusation of impiety. What is at stake in this Copernican revolution (which should therefore really be termed Aristarchan)? Here, a distinction might be made between the astronomical level and the philosophico-anthropological level.

From the point of view of astronomy, the aim is to explain the trajectories of the different heavenly bodies in relation to the earth. I leave to one side a number of issues which, though important, are nonetheless outside the Copernican shift of perspective. For instance, the privilege accorded to circular movement will not be questioned by Copernicus. Similarly, the rotundity of the earth, which was accepted in antiquity from the fourth century B.C. onwards. Not even the earth’s rotation on its own axis, the cause of the alternation of day and night, is at issue. This last hypothesis, attributed to Heraclitus, is in itself nothing but a change of co-ordinates vis-à-vis something shown by everyday observation: the unchanging rotation of the astral sphere in relation to the earth. Without going into details, we can note that the main obstacle to the notion of a simple rotation of the sphere said to be ‘fixed’ (let’s say, the totality of distant stars) is the movement of different heavenly bodies—the sun, the moon, finally the ‘planets’— in relation to that sphere. Above all, this is because the movements of these wandering, straying stars in the end defy all straightforward explanation in a system where the earth remains the centre of reference.

The foremost issue in the whole of astronomy, up to and including the Ptolemaic synthesis, is thus located on the path of an initial going-astray. Starting out from a basic hypothesis which is false, it becomes a question of finding— of inventing— ‘those regular and ordered movements which must be assumed in order to save [i.e. take account of] the appearances observed in the movement of the planets’. 8

Since the multiplication of ‘spheres’ centering on the earth is hardly enough to account for the movements of the sun and moon, a whole series of accidental movements must be called upon— movements which are always circular but displaced from the center, then displaced in relation to one another: ‘excentrics’, ‘epicycles’, ‘deferents’, etc. All these are highly mathematical hypotheses which mobilize the ingenuity, even the genius, of astronomers up to the Ptolemaic summation which will remain the Bible of astronomy for fourteen centuries. Given its complexity, it is almost impossible to add anything further to it. It is a system in which each unexplained detail, far from bringing the whole in question, was made the object of a supplementary ad hoc hypothesis. Overload, blockage— one thinks of what became of Freudian metapsychology at a certain level of complication, when it began to fill out certain inadequacies with new concepts, without bothering to determine whether they were congruent with the whole or whether it was not rather the whole which should have been reconstructed. 9

What is at stake in what we neatly term ‘the Copernican revolution’ is a question of ‘centering’ which at the outset seems limited to a change of astronomical center (from the earth to the sun) but which actually opens onto far vaster consequences.

The immediate result of heliocentrism, the perspective adopted by Copernicus, is an immense simplification (at least, a potential one). The idea which seems banal to us today, that the earth is a planet in orbit like the others around the sun, does not make things simpler straight away: the circularity of the orbits means that a certain number of accidental hypotheses, epicycles and others, have to be retained. The way is open, however, to further progress towards unification; not only simplifications, but also an indefinite number of improvements: the system is no longer ‘stuffed’; not only the physical closure of the world but also an epistemological closure has been surpassed.

The immensity or even infinity of the universe is a consequence of

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5 Plato is even supposed to have allowed this hypothesis, a sign that it was not deemed impious.
6 One cannot ignore the fact that the wandering stars, πλανίτες ωστέρες [planetes asteres], derive their name from the verb πλανάω [planao], which means ‘to lead astray, to seduce’ and which is notably used in this sense in the Bible, to describe ‘seduction’ by God or by Christ (John VII, 47).
7 [Fourvoiement: literally, ‘wandering off the path’, hence ‘straying into error’. To maintain the conceptual status of the metaphor— as a consistent term in Laplanche’s theoretical vocabulary— it is translated throughout as ‘going-astray’. Translators note.]
9 Is it possible to load the Freudian vessel with all this supplementary excess baggage— Kleinian positions, foreclosure, false self or omnipotent self, transitional space, etc., etc.— without the whole thing capsizing? Is there no place for moving from local questions to a re-problematization of the whole?
heliocentric theory — and was already perceived as such from the time of
Aristarchus. This started with the following objection: if the earth was in
motion and therefore, constantly changing its point of view, the positions of the
‘fixed’ stars in relation to one another, the ‘constellations’, would have to
undergo modifications and deformations . . . which does not occur. This leads
to two possible conclusions: either the Aristarchan-Copernican theory is false . . .
or else the stars are at a distance from us incommeasurable with the
internal distances of the solar system. The specific idea of heliocentrism was
thus only the first step: the Copernican revolution, to some extent, opened up
the possibility of the absence of a center. In a world of quasi-infinite distances it
becomes absurd to persist in trying to preserve one star among others — the sun
or solar system — as center.

If the ‘center’ of the world can be everywhere, it follows correlative that
‘its circumference is nowhere’. A decentered and infinite world — this double
affirmation led, as surely in the time of Aristarchus as in the Renaissance, to
the accusation of impiety. If man is no longer at the center of the universe, not only
are all cosmogonies and creation myths contradicted, but all the pantheons
forged in the image of man or centered on man are thereby devalorized.

But doubtless there are deeper roots to humanity's clinging to the Ptolemaic
vision. When Freud speaks of narcissistic wounding in this connection, he is
referring to the humiliation of man as flesh and blood, as an empirical individual.
But one must go further: it is not only that man in his concrete existence is
humbled to find himself nowhere, in the midst of the immensity of the
universe; the Copernican revolution is perhaps still more radical in that it
suggests that man, even as subject of knowledge, is not the central reference-
point of what he knows. No more than they orbit around him do the stars

10 The formula ‘a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is
nowhere’ is attributed to Hermes Trismegistus as an expression of divine infinity. It is
again as a definition of God that it is quoted by Nicholas Mulerius (Müller, Muller or
Muler of Bruges) in 1617, in his edition of Copernicus' Révolutions. Pascal, in his
famous 'Pensée' on 'the two infinities' (Pensées I, Paris: Cluny, 1938, p. 112) takes up
exactly the same terms but profoundly alters the meaning because he no longer applies
them to God but to the 'infinite vastness of things'. Between Mulerius and Pascal, the
Copernican revolution has had a double effect: it is accepted that the world is both
decentered and infinite but these propositions are no longer deemed impious. The
infinite universe is no longer in competition with divine infinity, which for Pascal is of
another order.

11 Our difficulties in accepting, other than in a purely abstract way, the theory of
relativity or quantum theory, are doubtless reactions to the same epistemological
decentering.

1929/85, pp. 22–3.

13 Even if the anthropological interpretation of Kant cannot be so easily rejected.
empirical and the transcendental, and do so in diametrically opposed ways. Let us take Husserl first — the later Husserl whom the thought of Merleau-Ponty invokes as an authority. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), the latter was already quoting a text by Husserl of 1934, whose title alone is an entire programme: *Umsturz der kopernikanischen Lehre: die Erde als Ur-Arche bewegt sich nicht;* which can be translated, 'Subversion of Copernican doctrine: the Earth, as primal Ark, does not move'. Here, as will be the case for Merleau-Ponty, it is clearly a matter of re-introducing the human being as the habitat, the 'Ark' he shares with the animals, into the 'constitutive ego'. It is an astonishing text, since despite some hesitations and numerous obscurities, it attacks the Copernican revolution on its own ground, even claiming to recenter it. For the 'apodictic ego', which thus again becomes Ptolemaic, is at once the constitutive subject and the contingent subject of flesh and blood whose feet are on that Earth.

This shows us that the stakes of the Copernican revolution — its acceptance or rejection — ultimately go beyond the simple technical domain of astronomical science.

My second testimony on this point comes from a certain N. Y. Marr. Today his name is forgotten, but in his own day it enjoyed a grim renown. He was a Russian linguist (1864–1934) who lived before the 1917 revolution, then radicalized his ideas under the revolution and at the beginning of Stalinism, in what was called 'the new theory of language'. He became a sort of Lyssenko of linguistics: 'Marrism' became synonymous with Marxist linguistics and anyone who did not show absolute allegiance to it found himself persecuted, forced to perform self-critiques and sometimes physically eliminated. The Marrists were given total support by Stalin until 1950, at which point the tyrant himself, reflecting that this was all leading to extravagant conclusions (some even thought them deranged), liquidated Marrism (and possibly several 'Marrists' as well) by announcing the following revelation, truly as simplistic as what it was attacking: 'language is not a superstructure; language has no class character'.16

Marrism argued, then, that language is a class phenomenon and that its early stages can be specified according to the type of class-society: aristocratic societies/languages, followed by bourgeois societies/languages, and finally 'proletarian-speak', which is the most important for our thesis. For 'proletarian-speak' is 'science-speak', in that the classless society must correspond to the advent of a 'newspeak', a kind of esperanto — but far more ambitious than that (which itself, moreover, had its devotees both before and after the revolution). How is this connected with our problem? In so far as the Copernican revolution, which is scientific, 'science-think', has not yet entered into language, which has remained bourgeois, petit bourgeois or capitalist. Thus, the peasant who says that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west is actually a *kulak*, a bourgeois speaking the ideological language of pre-Copernican science. The man of the classless society, disencumbered of ideology, must by contrast invent a language in which to speak truthfully according to science, that is, in which one might manage to express directly, through some kind of *decentering of language itself*, that it is not the sun which circles the earth but the earth which turns on its axis and also circles the sun, and so on.

With these two extreme positions, that of the late Husserl and that of the Marrists, equally foolish as they may be, we encounter perhaps a testimony both to the fundamental nature of the Copernican revolution and to the impossibility of sustaining its radicality consistently and to the end. We shall have to return to this at the close of our journey.

14 [The German word *Arche* means Ark (as in Noah's Ark) but it may also allude to the Greek *arche* meaning the cause, origin or beginning. Husserl's text is to be found in English as 'Foundation of Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature', trans. Fred Kersten, reprinted in *Husserl: Shorter Works*, eds Peter McCormick and Frederick A. Elliston, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, p. 222. The editors report: 'The following descriptive comment was written on the envelope [of the manuscript]: “Overthrow of the Copernican theory in the usual interpretation of a worldview. The original ark, the earth, does not move!” (p. 231). Editor's note.]

15 ['We must not forget the pregiveness and constitution belonging to the apodictic Ego or to *me*, *to us*, as the source of all actual and possible sense of being . . .', *Husserl: Shorter Works*, ibid., p. 230 [Laplanche's italics].

16 Cf. Stalin, 1950, 'On the question of Marxism in linguistics'. In the entire post-Marrist Stalinist era, Soviet commentary on Stalin's text was limited to repeating that language is not a superstructure. This, Stalin's only text on linguistics, had not only theoretical consequences: it posed the problem of national languages in the Soviet empire, and the taking-up of positions on the question of linguistic unification was even more important in practice than Lyssenkoism. Even Lacan quotes Stalin: at last, he comments not without irony, Stalin came along and decreed that language is not a superstructure! (*Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, London: Tavistock, 1977, pp. 125, 176).
It is well known that on several occasions Freud compared the discovery of psychoanalysis to the Copernican revolution, and saw in them two major affronts to human narcissism. I will not directly engage with these texts, which deserve a careful reading and possibly an uncompromising critique. Let us say at the outset that my vision of Freud’s ‘Copernican’ revolution coincides only partly with what he says about it himself at the time.

Indeed, if Freud is his own Copernicus, he is also his own Ptolemy. The revolution in astronomy lasted nearly two millennia, with some intuitions of the truth almost from the start, but also with an initial going-astray. In psychoanalysis everything, essentially, is produced by a single man — simultaneously: the discovery, affirmed at a very early stage, and which is jointly (and for me indissociably) that of the unconscious and that of seduction — and the going-astray, the wrong path taken each time there was a return to a theory of self-centering, or even self-begetting.

It is only in a schematic way that one might wish to date Freud’s ‘Ptolemaic’ going-astray from the famous letter of the 1897 equinox or turning-point, where the abandonment of the seduction theory is solemnly announced. In Freud, one should speak, at almost every period, of an alternation between Ptolemaism and resurgences of the Copernican, other-centered vision. Resurgences and re-affirmations which are often deepenings: thus it is that seduction, although theoretically denied its foundational value, continues to pursue a secret pathway, an underground development, even under the reign of minant Ptolemaism — both in Freud’s work and in some of his contemporary disciples. Similarly, there are some major re-affirmations of other-centeredness, the most powerful of which is without doubt the adoption of Groddeck’s id as an agency which lives us more than we live it. But it is also true that this re-affirmation is at least ambiguous, as the movement eventually ends up recentering the subject on the id — as that which is in him from the beginning and around which, so to speak, he grows.

However, just as the Copernican line continues well after 1897, it is also true that Freudian Ptolemaism is already present at the moment when the seduction theory finds its strongest affirmation. This is particularly shown by the very construction of ‘A Project for a Scientific Psychology’ (1950a [1895]). The second section, ‘The psychopathology of hysteria’, broadly develops the idea of an exogenous origin of the unconscious, while the other two sections, III and above all I, are explicitly ‘Ptolemaic’ in inspiration: they aim to reconstruct the apparatus according to a sort of hierarchy, beginning with the Ψ level conceived as unconscious and primary, onto which are grafted the problems of ‘consciousness’, of ‘quality’, or even simply of survival. The formula ‘everything conscious was previously unconscious’, which will infect the whole of meta-psychology, is present here from the outset, alongside the thesis of a repressed unconscious, but without being articulated with it.

In this double history of innovation and going-astray — a sort of braid in which at times one strand of the plait lies uppermost, at times the other — one should also take account of the enrichment due to numerous discoveries derived from analytic experience, and which must be placed either in the Copernican line or, more often, in the Ptolemaic system; thus the discovery of narcissism, of the repetition compulsion, the foregrounding of aggressive phenomena, etc.

All these discoveries, products of an enlargement of the field of experience — and one could list others — have to be integrated into a doctrine which, partly or totally, has effaced the initial revolution. Hence, exactly as in the Ptolemaic system, the trick is to integrate the new at the cost of supplementary complications, adventitious hypotheses designed to save appearances: the famous ‘epicycles’ of ancient astronomy.

There are two facets to the Freudian revolution in the radical decentering it offers. The first is classical: the discovery of the unconscious, in so far as it is


20 The foremost example of one of these ‘epicycles’, these ad hoc pseudo-concepts, is the death drive. I have tried to show with increasing precision its value in restoring the balance of the Freudian system, its significance as a re-affirmation of something of the order of sexuality in its most savage dimension. What is completely remarkable is that in a system which has itself returned to the tame, the domesticated, to self-centering, to a biologization of the drive — the re-affirmation of what Freud calls himself the ‘demonic’ can only find a place in a totally distorted framework, in the form of an instinct itself biological.
precisely not our center, as it is an 'excentric' center; the other facet, the seduction theory, is hidden but indispensable to the first for it maintains the unconscious in its alien-ness.21

Das Andere, the other thing in us: this is the unconscious as it is discovered before 1897 and as it will re-emerge at numerous points in Freud's work, including the 1915 text 'The Unconscious' (1915e). It is what Leclaire and I tried to delineate in our article of 1966, under the banner of a 'realism of the unconscious'.22

I can only list some points, all of which are equally essential, in support of this alien-ness.

First, to take things in their proper order, the question of method. For one should never stop stressing that what distinguishes this hitherto inaccessible domain is a new method, a method of discovery and exploration. The domain of the unconscious is inseparable from the approach to it, something which already effects a break with all conceptions of a so-called 'pre-Freudian unconscious', which get stuck precisely on the question of method, either by simply positing the unconscious or by trying to divine it with some kind of soothsaying. The method is one of association and cross-referencing, a deconstruction, and only at the horizon of this dissolution no point-for-point correspondence, however, no analogy or similitude between the behavioural or conscious discursive sequence from which the associations start and the fragment of an unconscious sequence which can be outlined through cross-references. So much so that any method of a hermeneutic order

21 [étrangereté: 'strangerness' translated as 'alien-ness']. Laplanche's description of the unconscious is a neologism connecting the other thing in us, Das Andere, back to Der Andere, the other person (l'étranger, the stranger/foreigner) who takes part in the seduction scene. The English 'strange' has a subjective dimension that is relative and reducible. Strangeness is in the eye of the beholder: the 'stranger' can become over time familiar, whereas 'alien' denotes an irreducible strangeness, the result of an external origin. While the foreigner may lose his effect of 'strangeness' over time, he never becomes a 'native' but remains a 'resident alien' however 'naturalised'. The hyphenated form 'alien-ness' allows the reader to hear the noun in Laplanche's neologism — étrangereté — and distinguishes it from the usual abstraction 'alienness' — étrangé. Editor's note.


— the direct transposition or translation of one discourse into another, be that second discourse Jungian, Kleinian, Lacanian or even Freudian23 — is ruled out. Ultimately, the reciprocal implication of method and object consists in the fact that the former is not only adapted to the latter but oriented, magnetically attracted by it.

The second point, also leading to the notion of 'a realism of the unconscious' (which seems to me still as important as ever), is that the object searched for acts not only on the method but also in everyday life. This is what Freud calls the dynamic unconscious, and Leclaire and I stressed the fact that this activity implies that the unconscious cannot be a mere hermeneutic copy of the conscious.

In other words, just as due to the pathways of its discovery the unconscious is in no sense the analogue of conscious discourse, so in the formation of the symptom the latter is not a mere translation of the unconscious. Leclaire and I laid stress on the notion of compromise: it is with the same coefficient of reality that conscious tendencies, on the one hand, and those deriving from the unconscious, on the other, mingle and are mixed together in compromise-formations.

The third point at which the Freudian unconscious reveals its specificity is in its obedience to its own laws, which are named at a very early stage as the primary process: and the description of which dates from the Fliess correspondence, Studies on Hysteria (1895d) and 'A Project for a Scientific Psychology' (1950a [1895]). I will not dwell on these laws here.

Fourth, in the period before 1897 and for a long time afterwards, the unconscious will be considered as essentially the result of repression. In a text like that of 1915, there is still hardly room for a primordial unconscious which would not be generated by repression. Before 1897, one cannot even say that the repressed is the drive, for Freud practically does without the notion of drive until 1905. To state things in a lapidary formula, one could say that from a certain point in Freud's thought the unconscious will arise from the drive, then the drive from the somatic, but that before 1897 it is the drive which arises from the unconscious.24

23 A large part of current interpretive practice constitutes a fall back into hermeneutic illusions. See Jean Laplanche, 'Psychoanalysis as Anti-hermeneutics', Radical Philosophy, no. 79, Sept./Oct. 1996.

24 I am fond of quoting a passage from the Fliess correspondence (1895) (Draft N). It consists of two paragraphs whose headings are translated into French as pulsions ('Drives') and 'Relation between drives and fantasies'. But in the German
Significance of this is not merely contingent - why, after all, is sexuality accorded a primacy over, say, the alimentary or the need for security? Because the primacy of sexuality opens directly onto the question of the other, and in the case of the child, onto the 'psychical other' which is the unconscious: on the one hand, Freud's sharp vision of its alien-ness and, on the other, the fragility of that vision.

In the 'Preliminary Communication' of Studies on Hysteria the problem of the symptom's mode of causation is posed once it has been established that it is related to trauma. Two kinds of causality could be envisaged a priori: one historical, the other atemporal. From the first point of view, one could think that 'the trauma merely acts like an agent provocateur in releasing the symptom, which thereafter leads an independent existence' (SE II, pp. 6-7). Now, the experience of cathartic treatment, in that it concerns not history but actualized scenes and affects, requires an entirely different conception of causality: the cause is only effective because it is present; it is a foreign body which is actually at work:

Freud goes on to invite us to invert the proposition cessante causa, cessat effectus (thus: permanente causa, permanet effectus) in order to conclude from these observations that the determining process continues to operate in some way or other for years - not indirectly, through a chain of intermediate causal links, but as a directly releasing cause... Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences.

But before we go on to the human other, I must stress two points concerning the other thing, the 'psychical other' which is the unconscious: on the one hand, Freud's sharp vision of its alien-ness and, on the other, the fragility of that vision.

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26 [Strachey translates this as 'the other part of the mind', The Ego and the Id, SE XIX, p. 213. Editor's note.]
supposed to put the psychoanalytic discovery on the same footing as that of Copernicus, give it the same status as a blow to human egocentrism: ‘A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis’ (1917a, *SE* XVII). For a careful reading of this text clearly shows, beyond an assertion on principle of the heteronomy of the human being, a continual pressure to return to self-centeredness.

‘Man feels himself to be supreme within his own mind’ - a first statement; but in reality psychoanalytic observation reveals that ‘the ego is not master in its own house’. And here the word ‘alien’ or ‘foreign’ [Ger. *fremd*) recurs with insistence, at almost every line:

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 [Impulse] 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’. (*SE* XVII, pp. 141-2)

This ‘alien-ness’, however, falls victim to two attempts at reduction. The first comes from psychiatry, but is based on weak arguments, being content to ‘shrug its shoulders and say: degeneracy, hereditary disposition, constitutional inferiority!’ By contrast, the second plan for the re-assimilation of the alien - that of psychoanalysis - is a good deal more radical: ‘Psychoanalysis sets out to explain any [unheimlich] 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 your will”’ (p. 142).

Thus the very movement of psychoanalysis would be to deny the alien-ness of the unconscious by offering to reduce it, both in theory and in the practice of treatment. This is the conclusion of the long *prosopopoeia* psychoanalysis addresses to the ego: ‘Turn your eyes inward, look into your own depths, learn first to know yourself’ (p. 143). In other words: you do not recognize that which in reality is clearly yourself. It is your own inner core that you fail to recognize; and the unconscious will reveal itself finally as ‘something in the depths of man’.[30] The result is that the text even ends with a reference to Schopenhauer, which goes completely against what I have often stressed - namely, that to search for forerunners of the Freudian unconscious in the unconscious of the nineteenth century is to take a wrong path; but this assertion of dubious paternity takes place only to the extent that Freud himself denies the originality of his own discovery:

It was not psycho-analysis, however, let us hasten to add, which first took this step. There are famous philosophers who may be cited as forerunners - above all the great thinker Schopenhauer, whose unconscious ‘Will’ is equivalent to the mental instincts [Triebe] of psycho-analysis.

(pp. 143-4)

So that Freud reaches the point of conceding that ‘the sole privilege’ of psychoanalysis is to have given a clinical demonstration of Schopenhauer’s theses and that the resistance to those theses is nothing but a by-product of the aversion produced by ‘the great name of the philosopher’! Which goes to show that from the moment that the unconscious is reduced from its alien-ness to what one could call, along with theologians and those of a certain faith, an *intimior intimo meo* ['something more inward than my inwardness'] - we can only observe a return to centering: there is something in me which I’ve split off from, denied, but which I must re-assimilate. Certainly, the ego is not master of its own house, but it is, after all, at home there nonetheless.

One could endlessly demonstrate how the domestication of the unconscious never ceases to operate in Freudian thought, and this with regard to each of the foremost aspects of its alien-ness. So it is in the case of the primary process and in that of memory.

With the so-called ‘primary’ process Freud discovers a sort of lawfulness which escapes the rationality of our preconscious-conscious thinking. But to ‘escape’ could mean one of two things here: either that it has been withdrawn from that rationality, or that the primary process was never subjected to it in the first place, being more originary than it.

The very term ‘primary’ brings an entire theory with it. We unfailingly think of the primary as being there before the secondary, both in time - the secondary comes to exist after the primary - and also in priority, the structure of the secondary presupposing the primary as its foundation. Conversely, the idea of regression encompasses not only ‘temporal’

regression, in other words a return to a time before the subject’s existence – but ‘topographical’ regression (regression to the system from which the excitation derives, the unconscious) as well as so-called ‘formal’ regression, the return to that lower level of organization which is the primary process, less structured than the ‘secondary’ process. But the notion of the ‘primary’, like that of ‘regression’, implies that these three aspects merge into one: that which is least organized and from which excitation arises is also the most archaic.

Freud sometimes paid homage to Hughlings Jackson, ‘the great Jackson’, who put forward the idea of a hierarchy of forms, and reciprocally, of a regression, a coming-apart or dissolution of the highest forms into the lower forms which preceded them. Freud takes up this conception of Jackson’s not only, of course, in respect of aphasia, but also in the theory of dreams. What comes undone is what has been most recently acquired; what is uppermost dissolves, allowing what was there before it to appear; what is uncovered is therefore the most primitive. The Jacksonian notion of an organizational progression or regression thus forms part of that line of Freudian thought in which may be situated, along with chapter 7 of The Interpretation of Dreams (1900a) and the first part of ‘A Project for a Scientific Psychology’ (1895), a text exemplary in its going-astray: the ‘Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning’ of 1911.

The essential architectonics of the last two texts can be stated relatively simply. There is ‘in the beginning’ a purely associative mode of functioning in the organism, characterized by the fact that energy circulates in the system unhindered, and equally that it must be evacuated without hindrance, reaching the exit from the system as rapidly as possible – thus, a purely ‘primary’ mode of functioning dominated, Freud tells us, by the ‘pleasure principle’. Then a secondary, regulated mode of functioning would appear, in which the energy is finally stabilized along certain pathways, allowing accumulation, reserve, inhibition and adaptive behaviour subject to the ‘reality principle’. This reality principle, under the name Not des Lebens (‘the needs of life’), far from being present at the beginning of the Project, is introduced at a certain point – so that it must be admitted that at the beginning we are given a description of an organism which would be as yet... non-living. It is only secondarily that the need for a reserve of energy (which would deal with excitations in accordance with the reality principle) is introduced. Constancy of level and homeostasis, although they characterize the vital function itself, would thus be introduced only secondarily into what should have been, supposedly from the beginning, an organism.

The term ‘primary’ is thus responsible for much of the damage, such as the genetic, hierarchical or constructivist model, wrought by the founder of psychoanalysis. The attempt to account, with so-called psychoanalytic concepts, for the whole of vital functioning – or even, simply the whole of psychological functioning – continually risks capsizing our boat. What must be affirmed is the following: if the primary is the unconscious, and the unconscious is the repressed, then this ‘primary’ has ‘become primary’, so to speak. It is neither prior nor primitive, but a sort of ‘reduced state’ caused by something else – so that the Jacksonian model of a construction through increasing complexity is misleading if applied to psychoanalysis.

But even more pernicious than the notion of the primary – because it makes a greater appeal to personal experience – would be the apparently indisputable idea of repressed memory; would be, that is, if it were not brought into connection with that of ‘reminiscence’. If the unconscious consists of memories which have been unable to lodge in the ego because they are irreconcilable with it, the fact remains that a memory, even if repressed, is historically my memory. If it is to become mine again, as it is nothing but a part of me from which, at some moment, I have been forced to separate, what could be more natural? Moreover, if the repressed is never

32 This model, which I call constructivist – from the simpler to the more complex, from the primary to the secondary – is fortunately opposed by the following fact (and this is where the situation turns around): the ‘primary’ level can in no sense be taken as a biological stage, describing something true in respect of a living organism. It is biologically unthinkable that the living being could pass through a first stage in which it was a mechanical system open to all the winds, seeking nothing but to empty itself completely of its energy. On the contrary, the living being immediately ‘defines’ itself (delimits itself conceptually and in reality) by the existence of a specific level. Luckily, this first section of ‘A Project for a Scientific Psychology’ is fictional, so that it can be saved, if some of its hints are put to a different use. It is rightly interpreted as a model not of the living being but of the process occurring in a preliminary living being from the moment when an unconscious comes to exist.
I.

anything but part of my stock of memories, the task of psychoanalysis, which
is to do away with repression and suppress the unconscious, has rightly no
limit: since it was already myself, there is no reason why it should not
become, one day or another, me again!

Another way of putting the same thing would be to say: 'the unconscious
is pathological'. In so far as what is at issue is a part of my ego from which
I have separated through my own fault — through feeble-mindedness,
weakness or defence — the pathological should properly give way to the
normal, and the memory be fully re-assimilated. The only unconscious is a
pathological one, or rather, the process which creates the unconscious is
pathological. Hence, as reciprocal corollary, the delusion or mad hope of
once more rendering all of the unconscious conscious. All will finally be
revealed: once the memory because of which you fell ill has been re-
assimilated, you will be ill no longer . . . and you will have an unconscious
no more.

It is in 'the letter of the equinox' that one sees this very clearly emerging (a
posteriori since Freud renounces it): an unbounded ambition to suppress or
totally master the unconscious. Thus the disillusion, which is nothing but the
reverse side of an illusion: 'if one thus sees that the unconscious never over-
comes the resistance of the conscious, the expectation that in the treatment the
opposite is bound to happen, to the point where the unconscious is completely
tamed by the conscious, also diminishes'.

In sum, the central question can be put as follows: how is it that the
unconscious can consist of that which is repressed, and yet despite this be
inexhaustible — be capable, that is, of endlessly slipping away from our grasp?
Thus the about-turn of this letter (of 21/9/1897). First of all, in the negative:
if the unconscious cannot be completely re-assimilated, this is because it is not
made up of memories; unconscious fantasy is not simply the memory of lived
scenes. To which I say, 'bravo!' We are not dealing with memory, so let us look
elsewhere. From this point onwards, however, Freud finds himself compelled
to put forth a positive double hypothesis on the nature of unconscious fantasy,
to which all his work will never cease being indebted: under the banner of


The External Other: Cause and Guarantee of the Internal Other

We have reached the point which I consider is the essence of the Copernican
revolution begun by Freud; the decentering, in reality, is double: the other
thing (das Anderes) that is the unconscious is only maintained in its radical alterity
by the other person (der Andere): in brief, by seduction. When the alterity of
the other person is blurred, when it is reintegrated in the form of my fantasy of
the other, of my 'fantasy of seduction', then the alterity of the unconscious is
put at risk. Whence the question, formulated on another level: what is it that

34 The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess: 1887—1904, ed. Jeffrey
Moussaieff Masson, op. cit. (p. 265.)

35 'It seems once again arguable that only later experiences give the impetus to
fantasies, which [then] hark back to childhood . . .'; ibid., p. 265.

36 '. . . and with this the factor of a hereditary disposition regains a sphere of
influence from which I had made it my task to dislodge it — in the interests of
illuminating neurosis', ibid., p. 265. This separation of afterwardness [l'après-coup]
into simple retrospective illusion, on the one hand, and an effect of hereditary
disposition on the other is a constant of psychoanalytic thinking. Alongside Jung and
Freud himself, an author such as Viderman does not escape it: having given the greatest
possible space to invention relating to the past, he finally declares that this creation of
the past is not so free as all that, oriented as it is by 'primal fantasies'.

37 At the same time, this does not mean that the unconscious is simply the other
implanted in me. For in between the primary intervention of the other and the creation
of the other thing in me, there occurs a process called repression — an extremely
complex process comprising at least two stages in mutual interaction, and leading to
a veritable dislocation/reconfiguration of (explicit and implicit-enigmatic) experiential
elements. Metabolization and the 'translation' point of view are the essence of the
prevents the theory of seduction from ‘maintaining’ its affirmation of the 
primacy of external alien-ness? What, if not an imprecise grasp of this 
discovery’s dimensions, and, let us not hesitate to add, of its philosophical 
dimension. How can the problem of ‘the existence of the other person’ not be 
completely overturned as soon as that other person is considered as primary in 
my own constitution – a primacy not only postulated by theory but implicated 
and experienced in the transference? 38

The other person is the other of seduction, the adult who seduces the child. 
Now, from the moment when he formulates the seduction hypothesis and for a

38 Cf. ‘Transference: its Provocation by the Analyst’ in this volume, pp. 214–33. We 
hold back from exploring this question of the other from a philosophical point of view. Let 
us simply note that:

1) In philosophical thinking, the problem of the other person has on the whole been 
related to that of the existence of the external world; that is, ultimately, to the theory 
of knowledge. The various categories – solipsism, idealism, realism – include the existence 
of the human other within that of the objective world, as simply one of its specific cases. It 
is not until Husserl and Merleau-Ponty that the existence of others is made the object of an 
independent reflection. Here again, it must be said that this problematic remains 
derivative in relation to analyses deemed to be indispensable preliminaries: the constitu­
tion of a common objective and cultural world, the description of the irreducible 
experience of the body and the ‘flesh’ (Merleau-Ponty, the later Husserl). The existence of 
the other thus remains subordinate, in the history of reason, to that of ‘the world’ (the 
Fifth Meditation comes . . . fifth; ‘The other and the human world’ is a fairly short sub­
chapter of the second part of the Phenomenology of Perception entitled ‘The Perceived 
World’).

2) In his explicitly philosophical statements, Freud does not depart from this, the 
incursion of the problem of the human other within that of the external world. He 
concerns the latter he takes up alternate positions that are ultimately without con­
Française de Philosophie, janvier-mai, 1955 [Freud, 1930]; GW Nachträgeband, p. 671), and 
a more or less simplified Kantianism – ‘do not neglect the subjective conditioning of our 
perception and do not take our perception to be identical with the unknowable percept’ 
(‘The Unconscious’, 1915e, SE XIV, p. 161ff).

3) In the practice of his theory, Freud gives in more than once to the temptation to 
reconstruct from an endogenous source the relation of the living being to reality, out 
of the play of innate drives: something we describe as both a monadological project and an 
instant of biological idealism. In this sense his position could be called pre-phenomeno­
logical, not only in relation to Husserl but to what ethology and the notion of Umwelt 
owe to phenomenology.

4) Freud never develops the possibilities implicit in the seduction theory, such as we 
ote notes in the following pages: the reversal of the problem of access to the other into 
that of the priority of the other.

long time afterwards, Freud vacillates between two equally inadequate posi­
tions. On one side, what could be termed a subectivist, ‘internal’ conception – 
reducing the other to the subject’s perception of the other (possibly to the trace 
of that perception, or, when the notion of memory has been criticized, to the 
imagination of this perception of the other). Nothing in this approach allows 
the other any place other than in the depths of my subjectivity. And then 
alongside this, from time to time, a philosophically more naive gesture, 
consisting in . . . going to look for the other in the neighbouring room. Since 
the other is always speaking to me from the neighbouring room, at a given 
moment I go and see if he is really there. In the concrete situation of the 
treatment, Freud allows himself to make suggestions, as if to locate the other 
behind the patient’s words: go and ask your servant or your mother; look in the 
family archives to see whether such-and-such a person was alive when you were 
a child, whether it is possible you could remember so-and-so. 49 Or even – and 
again this persists until very late – Freud actually goes himself to look directly 
in the neighbour-room for some real trace of the other; for after all, one can 
ever rely on investigations undertaken by the patient. 40

Both of these positions – that of pure and simple subjectivism as well as the 
‘go and look over there’ attitude – share the same presupposition: that the 
other never manifests himself except in the subjective representation of brute 
reality. Can one reproach Freud, though, for lacking something which would 
have prevented the reduction of the other to the subjectivity of its recipient, 
something which would have guaranteed its alien-ness?

What maintains the alien-ness of the other? Can one affirm here, with Lacan, 
the priority of language? If, for my part, I speak rather of a ‘message’, this is for 
at least two well-defined reasons: first, the message can just as easily be non­
verbal as verbal; for the baby it is principally non-verbal. Second, emphasizing 
‘language’ effaces the alterity of the other in favour of trans-individual struc­
tures. To explain this category of the message I have often stressed the expression 
Freud uses to describe the primal data offered to the infant: i.e. that part of its 
experience which it has to master straight away, to order, to ‘translate’, so as to 
assimilate it to its own system. The term used in a letter to Fliess (6 December
could choose the translation 'perceptual signs', conferring on it a far more complete view of the phenomenon. One might say that Freud does not go infant to the extent that they allow it to discern something extra, to get a more complete view of the phenomenon. One might say that Freud does not go beyond the relation we here denote with the term 'index' - something in a purely extrinsic relation to its Signified, and which possibly acquire the force of signs and this is because, isolated by the sender, they are addressed to the subject.

The absence of any notion of the message can be felt cruelly at numerous points in Freud; for a moment I will dwell on one of these - what he calls 'the experience of satisfaction' (Befriedigungserlebnis). This is first described in Part One of 'A Project for a Scientific Psychology' - whose 'Ptolemaic' dimension will be confirmed by what I am about to say - and then in The Interpretation of Dreams. Elsewhere, The Language of Psychoanalysis gives a clear outline of what is at stake here: the birth of the Wunsch, let's say the birth of the wish, which is of the human order, out of need and its satisfaction, which are of the vital order. For need aims, precisely, at its own appeasement (befriedigen = to appease, to pacify); it is a question of a tension defined as such by an energetic system tending towards stability. This model of need, which is not necessarily obsolete in physiology, provides the concrete biological base on which sexual desire is constituted.

The first moment is indicated as the infant's Hilflosigkeit, in other words its incapacity to help itself, its 'helplessness'. Unable to provide on its own for its needs, the nursing organism is faced with an unbearable build-up of tension, comparable to the rising level of a reservoir, to which it can respond in only two ways: either by letting the reservoir overflow (an action Freud considers 'non-specific', inadequate because it does not prevent the reservoir from remaining full); or, alternatively, in a 'specific' way, in a series of actions which allow the tension to be discharged for a certain period.

What characterizes helplessness is precisely the infant's inability to undertake for itself the action which could empty the reservoir in a lasting way. All it can do is cry, and its cries are themselves, moreover, nothing but the purely mechanical expression of a non-specific overflowing. It is the cries which arouse 'foreign aid', the mother's activity, which first of all consists of the offering of nourishment.

41 Letter to Fliess (6/12/1896, ibid.). [Masson translates this as 'indications of perception'. Translator's note.]
42 Here I use the term index in Pierce's sense, to designate a relation of contiguity, possibly of mechanical causality, or even of a part to the whole, between the representation and the object. Smoke is an index of fire in the above three senses. Similarly one can use the term 'icon' to designate representation by analogy. As for the terms 'symbol' or 'sign', Pierce's definition is but one among hundreds.
43 Certainly an index can 'signal'; but there is all the difference between the smoke of a forest-fire kindled by lightning and that of a fire intended by Robinson Crusoe to signal his presence.
44 It is the absence of 'message' which splits the notion of afterwardness into the inadequate and contradictory categories of deferred action and retroactive interpretation. I have discussed this in my seminar course of 1989-90, under the title 'La Nachtrigkeit dans l'après-coup' (forthcoming). See 'Notes on Afterwardness' in this volume, pp. 260-5.
47 The model of excretion right up to the example of the 'lavatory flush' - the accumulation of anal or urinary products, sudden discharge leaving the system in peace for a time - is perceptible here.
48 The child's cries, according to Freud, are not a call for help. They are simple indices, in Pierce's sense. They only become messages, calls for help, through the subjective interpretation of the mother.
49 Nahrungsetzfuhr is transcribed by the editors, who nonetheless take the trouble to alert us that they have here corrected what must have been a slip of Freud's, who wrote Nahrungsetzfuhr, meaning the 'insertion' or even the 'stuffing in' of food. The alien one, the mother, stuffs the breast into the child, or at least inserts it. If it is a question of a slip here, it directly follows the profound sense I give to the seduction theory: the introjection of something into the child.
What then follows is a specific sequence of satisfaction: a series of acts of feeding, leading to a prolonged relaxation. But just as important as this, according to Freud, are the mnemonic traces, the inscribed images, of which there are three kinds: the memory of satisfaction and two sorts of sign — signs linked to the object (an image of the food) and internal images which correspond to a memory of the feeding sequence. At this point it is worth pausing over the description in The Interpretation of Dreams:

A hungry baby screams or kicks helplessly. But the situation remains unaltered, for the excitation arising from an internal source is not due to a force producing a momentary impact but to one which is in continuous operation. A change can only come about if . . . (through outside help) an experience of satisfaction can be achieved which puts an end to the internal stimulus [here is the turning-point: we move to the level of representation]. An essential component of this experience of satisfaction is a particular perception (that of nourishment, in our example) the mnemonic trace of which remains associated thenceforward with the memory-trace of the excitation produced by the need. As a result of the link that has thus been established, next time the need arises a psychical impulse will at once emerge which will seek to re-cathexis the mnemonic image of the perception and to re-evoke the perception itself, that is to say, to re-establish the situation of the original satisfaction. An impulse of this kind is what we call a wish; the re-appearance of the perception is the fulfilment of the wish. The wish, whose 'genesis' we are given in this description, is the wish for food, nothing more. If we allow that the sexual is more than a simple transposition of the alimentary into representation or hallucination, it is clear that this Freudian alchemy, this attempt to make the base metal of the alimentary give birth to the gold of sexuality, has failed. Likewise, if Freud had described here a physiological experience of a sexual nature, it would in turn have been reproduced as a sexual wish.

It is important to take account of what is missing in the 'experience of satisfaction', for this is a model unceasingly invoked by psychoanalysts who pay no heed to its inability to produce anything at all.

First, concerning 'foreign aid', let us stress that it is found only at the initial stage of the process. The introduction of food simply triggers off the whole activity. Thereafter, the entire mode of functioning is solipsistic. There is no longer any trace of the alien in what is to take place, either in the object or in the aim of the drive. The object whose perception is reproduced is food; likewise, it is the sequence of alimentary consumption — ingestion, digestion — which recurs in the remembered scenario of the wish. 'hallucinating' are conceived as simply different degrees of investment; something which moreover runs into the graveness objections, raised but not resolved in 1915 in 'A Metapsychological Supplement to the Theory of Dreams' (1917d [1915], SE XIV).

If he sensed his failure to make the sexual rabbit emerge from the alimentary hat, Freud seems to suggest, in the Project (op. cit., note 45), a sort of relation between the two, no longer of emergence but of analogy: from alimentary satisfaction, the genesis of a wish for food, from sexual satisfaction, a sexual wish. This is the sense of several passages where he attempts to place feeding and sexuality in parallel (cf. 'the great needs': hunger, respiration, sexuality). In the context of the experience of satisfaction, he offers as two possible situations: 'the offer (Zufuhr) of food, the proximity of the sexual object'. A pity — or luckily — that Freud's 'slip' here effaces the parallelism: the 'insertion (Einfuhr) of food' replaces feeding itself in a sexual context, that of the adult who 'stuffs' something in. Cf. above, note 49.

50 These are not Freud's terms, but those of animal psychology and of psychophysiology.
51 What Freud calls Bewegungsbild, the kinaesthetic image of muscular movements involved in feeding. This aspect is neglected in The Interpretation of Dreams.
52 GW III, p. 571, SE V, pp. 565–6 [Laplanche's comments in square brackets]. One sees the point at which the Wunsch is linked to presentation: the wish is the reinvestment ['re-cathexis' in Strachey's English] of the presentation, to the extent that it could be said that in a certain way the satisfaction of the wish and the wish are one and the same thing: the wish, situated in fantasy, is already the (so-called 'hallucinatory') satisfaction of the wish. The 'wishing', the 'accomplishment' of the wish and the
There are two aspects here, which are in the end identical. On the one hand, the exclusion of the adult from the sequence which follows; and on the other, the sampling by the nursling of purely objective perceptual indices, which are simply the representation without discrepancy of certain elements of the situation. So that, in the end, what is missing from all this is a sign, something that 'signals'. A sign offered to the infant by the adult, delimited by the adult in the situation before the infant itself finishes the process of sampling. It is thus, and only thus, that one can conceive the intervention of sexuality in the experience of satisfaction. Here, obviously, I am going well beyond Freud. It is the adult who brings the breast, and not the milk, into the foreground – and does so due to her own desire, conscious and above all unconscious. For the breast is not only an organ for feeding children but a sexual organ, something which is utterly overlooked by Freud and has been since Freud. Not a single text, not even a single remark of Freud’s takes account of the fact that the female breast is excitable, not only in feeding, but simply in the woman’s sexual life.

I have once again been discussing the archaic experience of breast-feeding; but what is called the ‘primal scene’ lends itself to analogous criticism. Whenever primal scenes are observed or discussed, two worlds without communication divide, so to speak: on one side, parental behaviour, the experience and content of which are by definition beyond the subject’s grasp; and on the other, the side of the child, a traumatic spectacle, more often glimpsed or guessed than seen, suggested by a mere allusion (animal coitus) which the child must then fill out, interpret, symbolize. My point is that between these two worlds something is missing: the supposition (which should have occurred to a psychoanalyst!) that showing sexual intercourse is never simply an objective fact, and that even the letting-see on the part of the parents is always in a sense a making-see, an exhibition. But Freud is never to suspect giving-to-see on the part of the parents. There is not only the reality of the primal scene only has its impact because it bears a message, a giving-to-see or a spectacle, this message and the inventiveness shown by its authors, the very same interstellar journeys – well on the way to being made a reality from the time of this text, 1934 – raised a different, more exciting and more genuinely philosophical problem: how to send across interstellar space a message which would signify my intention to communicate – and this beyond any sharing of codes with the possible recipient. Thus, on 3 March 1972, the rocket Pioneer 10 carried with it a ‘message in a bottle’, a message which ‘aimed to communicate certain data on the spatio-temporal origins of the builders of the spaceship, and their nature’. Yet whatever the fabric of this message and the inventiveness shown by its authors, all the difference remains: if we place ourselves on the side of the receiver – between, on the one hand, finding a rocket and detecting in its construction the indices of the presence of intelligent beings and, on the other, receiving signifiers which, without presupposing any shared code or interpretive rule, testify to the intention to communicate and, perhaps, to conscious and even unconscious reasons for such an intention.

To address someone with no shared interpretive system, in a mainly extra-verbal manner: such is the function of adult messages, of those signifiers which I claim are simultaneously and indissociably enigmatic and sexual, in so
far as they are not transparent to themselves, but compromised by the adult’s
relation to their own unconscious, by unconscious sexual fantasies set in motion
by his relation to the child.

Internal alien-ness maintained, held in place by external alien-ness; external
alien-ness, in turn, held in place by the enigmatic relation of the other to his
own internal alien - such would be my conclusion concerning the decentering
revolution I have proposed here in continuation of the Freudian discovery. It
remains for us to show in what respect it is unfinished and what is the nature –
contingent or ineluctable - of that unfinishedness.

How can we doubt that Freud was capable of going - and could have gone -
father than he did, in so far as that is precisely the ambition of our undertakings? With regard to the reasons for his blockage and then his going-astray, I
have put forward on several occasions partial explanations - explanations which,
moreover, are correlated: the centering on pathology, whence the rejection of a normal unconscious; the inadequate elaboration of the translation
theory; and, above all, the absence of the category of the message as a third
reality ranking alongside material and psychological reality. Here, I shall lay
stress on another factor, which directly concerns the opposition between
centering and decentering, by going back to Freud’s assumptions regarding
the three ‘humiliating blows’ inflicted on man by science.

I have, indeed, provisionally neglected to mention that Freud places between
the Copernican and the psychoanalytic humiliations the wound inflicted on our
pride by the evolutionary discoveries ascribed to Charles Darwin, his
collaborators and precursors. Man, believing himself to be of divine origin,
an alien in the animal kingdom, learns from science that ‘he himself is of animal
descent’. Now, this place accorded to evolutionism and a so-called biological
humiliation, alongside the decenterings introduced by Copernicus and Freud,
seems to me both ambiguous and dangerous. Ambiguous - for is to reconnect
man to his biological, animal lineage truly to decenter and humiliate him? Once
the first few cries of outrage provoked by the notion that man ‘descends from
the ape’ have died down, are we not thereby assured a much firmer basis? The
family tree, which more than one has striven to reconstruct, now goes

60 I am convinced that there is a kind of perception specific to the category of the
message, and to that of the enigmatic message, so that a phenomenological ‘eidetics’ -
à la Merleau-Ponty - of both would be possible.
61 'A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis' (1917a), SE XVII. The opposition
between Lamarck and Darwin is not relevant to the ‘humiliation’ in question.

back beyond Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, beyond Adam, to take in the history of
all life to the point where the term ‘phylogenesis’, once restricted to the origin
of a single species, ends up encompassing the entire evolution of life, of which
the human species is the last link in the chain. Solidly in place, firmly centered
on the animal pyramid, man does not fail to consider himself its culmination,
the blossom of the family tree: a doctrine like Teilhard de Chardin’s has clearly
wiped away the so-called humiliation of evolutionism.

Wrongly placed by Freud alongside the revolutions of decentering, the
doctrine of evolution in fact recents man among living things; what is
more, it is drawn on dangerously by Freud to jeopardize the essence of the
psychoanalytic discovery. The invocation of phylogenesis, of the hereditary
nature of drives and even of scenarios and fantasies, comes to the fore every
time psychoanalytic decentering recedes from view. This is clearly what underlies the very text which Freud believes to affirm the ‘psychological humiliation’
of man. ‘Enter into yourself’ and you will see that ‘nothing alien has entered
you’: these repressed, alien sexual drives are ultimately nothing but the
expression of somatic forces, on which the evolution of the species – and
beyond that, of life itself – has left its indelible imprint.

The Constant Threat of Narcissistic Closure

To show that one can go further than Freud, that one can sustain more effectively
than him the ‘Copernican’ aspect of his discovery, is the most important dimen-
sion of what we have named the ‘new foundations’ for psychoanalysis. This
would be an inadequate claim if it simply referred Freud back to his mistakes,
his blindness or even the inadequacy of the conceptual tools at his disposal. The
exposition of a going-astray, as I understand it, goes beyond a mere refutation
of error, or even the explication of its contingent causes. A more radical view of
causality must be ventured to reveal how, in Freud the theoretician, the going-
astray is accompanied by a sort of connivance with the object; in other words, a
covering-up of truth inherent in the very object to which thought conforms.

The closing-in-on-itself of the Freudian psychical system, its monadological
character, which results in the idea of an ‘apparatus of the soul’, would be
radically linked to the closing-in-on-itself of the human being in the very process
of its constitution. I have put forward - in a formulation which jokingly echoes
Haeckel’s law, according to which ontogenesis reproduces phylogenesis - a sort
of ‘Laplanche’s law’ which would claim: ‘theoretico-genesis’ reproduces
ontogenesis. Without wishing thus to propose a universal law, subject to a
falsification test of a Popperian variety, I can only note that in the evolution of Freudian theory one finds more than once a parallel with the development of the human individual. I have previously been able to show this concerning the successive theories of the drive, or, again, that of pansexualism.

Keeping in mind this parallel between individual ontogenesis and the theory which accounts for it, one must ask the question: can the psychoanalytic Copernican revolution be finished? The Copernican revolution of Copernicus in astronomy miscarried, as we have glimpsed, in what Marr attempted: we cannot reform our language, and with it our perception and our inner sense, to the extent of giving everyday expression in a ‘Copernican’ language to the movement of the sun, moon and stars. The narcissistic wound inflicted by science is defeated by our narcissistic centeredness as living bodies. For the human psyche, things are a little different. Narcissism remains the key to the problem, but it is caught up in the very evolution of the object of knowledge: one cannot say that the object of astronomy, the universe, is either Copernican or Ptolemaic – or again, first Ptolemaic and then Copernican. On the other hand, one is entitled to claim that the Ptolemaism of the human psyche, its narcissistic recentering, follows upon a ‘Copernican’ stage as its presupposition, in which the nursling child is caught up in the orbit of the other and has a passive relation to its messages. Furthermore, the moment of narcissistic closure – the constitution of the ego as an agency – corresponds in the sequence of primary repression to the constitution of the internal other, the unconscious. On the side of theory, Freud’s endless Ptolemaic relapses – his way of continually taking the point of view of the subject in interpersonal matters and of the ego in intrapersonal ones – is nothing but a parallel to the ineluctable narcissistic closure of the apparatus of the soul.

If the human being closes in on itself at a very early stage, and if theory too is ceaselessly impelled, as if by some internal force of attraction, to close in on itself – what is the point in maintaining the opening which is introduced by the general theory of seduction? Is it meaningless to envisage ‘seduction theory-speak’, just as it was with Marr, in the case of ‘Copernican-speak’?

Such an admission of defeat, of the inevitable closure of theory onto the subject, would only be definitive if psychoanalysis were nothing but a theory confronted with an object. But, as Freud always maintained, psychoanalysis is first of all a method, one from which the psychoanalytic situation is of course inseparable. To which we add that this situation repeats the originary situation of the human being; as such it is at once both Ptolemaic and Copernican. Copernican, in that it finds its immediate centre of gravity in the other: both in the observation of the fundamental rule, which aims to make visible the gravitational pull exerted by the sun and stars of the unconscious, the obscure way it drags the apparent coherence of our discourse into its orbit, as well as in the transference.

Psychoanalytic treatment itself, however, does not escape an endless recentering: the ego is tirelessly at work in it, striving to re-order the ‘recuperated’ elements of the unconscious.

Wo Es war, soll ich werden.

The maxim is at root Ptolemaic, even if one allows that the Ich in question is not simply the narcissistic ego, in the narrow sense given it in the second topography. But the theory of seduction imposes the reverse or complementary maxim: Wo Es war, wird (soll? muss?) immer noch Anderes sein. There where there was I, there will be always and already the other. The permanence of the unconscious, the primacy of the address of the other – one of the functions of analysis is to uphold these truths, and it is the duty of the analyst to guarantee them the respect which is their due.

Translated by Luke Thurston

62 This was clearly seen by Freud, who prefaced his discussion of the three humiliations with a long exploration of narcissism. However, the conception of narcissism as a state acquired in development, which appeared in ‘On Narcissism: an Introduction’ (1914c), has definitively disappeared in this text, giving way to narcissism as a primal biological state.