

Freud's Invisible Chiasmus, or You Can't Judge a Book by Its Cover

Jane Gallop

On the bookjacket of the English translation of Jean Laplanche's *Vie et Mort en psychanalyse* appears the Greek letter *chi*. By paying attention to this most visible, most superficial, and most extrinsic of signs, we find that it represents a certain "return of the repressed": a return of something that is invisible in Laplanche's text, and perhaps beyond that something that, although absent, haunts the text about which Laplanche is writing, Freud's "Project for a Scientific Psychology." This "find," although theoretically predictable, nonetheless operates as an uncanny effect, and opens for us the question of the relation between theory and practice at the intersection of visible language and psychoanalysis.

I need to begin this text with a statement of my discomfort, of my fear that I am simply doing something trendy, lots of flash and little substance. "Visible language" is one of the newest line of fashions from Paris. To combine that line with another recent Parisian trend – French Freud – is, I am sure, to make matters worse. The texts I work with are predictable (Jean Laplanche's *Vie et mort en psychanalyse*,¹ Freud's "Project for a Scientific Psychology"²); the style of reading and writing I pursue recognizable to anyone who peruses the literary equivalents of *Vogue*; the inspiration in the work of Jeffrey Mehlman and Tom Conley is all too incestuous, all too *heimlich* (of course incest is the resurgence of the *unheimlich* in the home, in the family, but there *is* a major and a minor mode of incest).

Now, this same question of fashion appears problematic in *Vie et mort en psychanalyse*. Laplanche's text exhibits a certain self-consciousness about intellectual fashions on at least two occasions. Actually, the problem with fashion is not very noticeable in the French edition of Laplanche's book, but becomes more visible in Mehlman's translation of it (from which we derive our quotations), because of the translator's introduction. Yet it is worthwhile to remember that the author of the original is already writing somewhat as a translator, a translator of Freud, that the problem of translation is not contingent on Mehlman's project, but already involved in Laplanche's effort. That

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our problematic should become visible in the American translation of a French text seems all too appropriate to our concern, which is, the vicissitudes of French intellectual trends in America.

In his introduction, Mehlman writes that the thesis of Laplanche's book is that "Freud's theory of repression, the heart of his discovery, was itself constantly and necessarily threatened with being repressed" (p. ix). Mehlman, suddenly cognizant of his audience's resistance, continues: "Now that statement might strike a skeptical Anglo-American reader as the sheerest Parisian extravagance were it not for the precision of the analyses in this book" (p. ix). It is Mehlman's phrase, "sheerest Parisian extravagance," conjuring up images of some exotic, diaphanous evening gown, that evokes, for me, the *haute couture* Paris can represent for America.

Mehlman recognizes Anglo-American skepticism and parries the anticipated accusation of facile fashion by reference to the "precision of the analyses." I tend to agree. When one searches for some assurance that one's trendy work is not facile, the greatest and perhaps only assurance is in the care, the precision, the meticulousness with which the work is done. Any work which can be understood, any work which can be used at all, can be placed in some tradition and is thus, in its broad outlines, predictable. What remains to surprise is the detail, the precise and specific analyses, the little "finds" that crystallize trends – those little "finds" that in French are called "*trouvailles*."

It is to the letter of the text we must look for its originality, its precision, its work. This attention to the letter of the text, which we call "visible language," is a method for gathering such *trouvailles*. As a generality, as a structure, it is predictable and repetitive: there *will be* witty and appropriate *trouvailles*, found where one least expects them, in marginal places, which then become exactly where one most expects them. But in its specificity, each "find" is a surprise, a treasure. This differentiation between theoretical predictability and practical surprise resembles the problem, already alluded to, of distinguishing between a major and a minor mode of incest. Anyone acquainted with Freudian theory will expect everyone to have an Oedipal complex, expect everyone to be structured by unconscious incest fantasies. That is the minor, domesticated mode of incest – incest where it is "supposed to be." But even the most informed Freudian will inevitably be radically unsettled upon the discovery (the *trouvaille*) of some specific erratic effect of incestuous desire acted out in her own life. The major mode of incest is this: its uncanny insistence where it is not expected.

The rather tenuous link I've made between *trouvailles* and incest can be strengthened by a look at the theory of discoveries, of "finds" in

Laplanche's book. Laplanche uses the word "trouvaille" at the end of the first chapter where he states: "a *trouvaille* is always a *retrouvaille* (refinding, "rediscovery," translates Mehlman) of something else" (p. 22). My own "find" is that when Laplanche uses the word "trouvaille" he places it "clearly" in an Oedipal context. The entire first chapter of *Vie et mort* is an attempt to show that when the child passes out of "primary narcissism" and into object relations (the Oedipal moment), he is merely re-finding an original object, in this case mother's milk. The original object is non-sexual. The new object, the sexual object (the "find") – mother's breast and then mother herself – is a displaced substitute by contiguity, a metonym, for the original object. Sexuality, for Laplanche, is in the slight displacement, the movement of metonymy between the lost object and the contiguous re-found object. Now, what is so predictable about a "find" (what is so repetitive about sexuality) is that the "find" is never something new, but always a re-finding, a repetition. But also what is so surprising is that what is "found" is something displaced from what was lost: that is why the "trouvaille" is always where it is not expected, always marginal.

In my introductory remarks I used the words *heimlich* and *unheimlich* to talk about incest. *Unheimlich*, uncanny, is the word Freud uses, in the essay that is now very fashionable, to talk about the *retrouvaille*, the re-finding, the return of something lost there where it is not expected, where it is displaced, what we conventionally refer to as "the return of the repressed."³ That word "uncanny" returns, slightly displaced into adverbial form, at the end of Mehlman's introduction to Laplanche, where he writes: "it is not the least aspect of this work to provoke in the reader the disquieting sense that . . . the principal thrust of Freud's theory may have been uncannily lost in translation" (p. x).

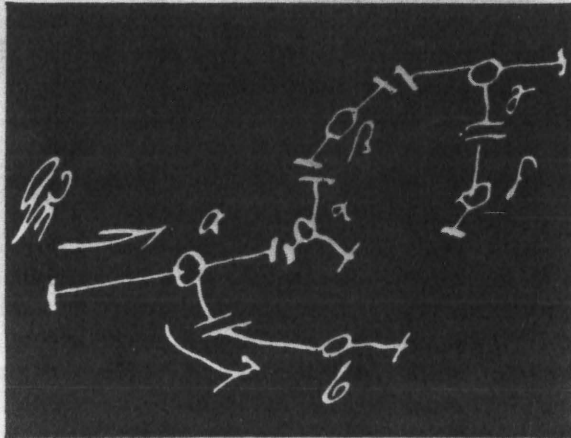
I will not belabor the obvious excitement of any sentence which combines the words "exhilarating," "provoke," "disquieting," and "thrust." Instead my surprise, my excitement arises from Mehlman's haunting phrase "uncannily lost." From post-structuralist French Freud, I expect "uncanny" to be linked with a *refinding*, a *retrouvaille*, a return, as it is in Freud's "The Uncanny." What is uncanny about Mehlman's sentence is that the word "uncanny" has been displaced onto the contiguous moment of loss, rather than the moment of rediscovery. Now having our expectations unseated seems at once good and disquieting, for the movement of the "uncanny," which is to say "the repressed," is such that the re-finding is experienced as an unsettling, a displeasure, a loss: loss of certainty, loss of stability, loss of self-possession.

This "find" which is a loss (but also, and this is disquieting on another

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Figure 1: Design by Sigmund Freud.

er level, also an exhilarating gain for anyone who theorizes about the uncanny, about visible language), this *trouvaille* which is a loss occurs in translation. Thus one could say about translation that the something that is "lost in translation" is "uncannily lost" – which is to say that it will turn up somewhere else, displaced, where least expected (which here in this context is where it is most expected). The *trouvailles* that I have to show you all manifest this uncanniness by which a translation is the site of a return of something, specifically a letter, which is lost in the original.

Translation is not just Mehlman's project, nor even just Laplanche's, but is used within Laplanche's text in another important, less marginal, less external context. Laplanche's book is a careful analysis of certain ambiguous terms in Freud's work. Laplanche shows that their ambiguity responds to the slipperiness of the thing Freud is trying to conceptualize, that the ambiguity of the concepts is an ambiguity of the things themselves. In the first chapter he distinguishes the instinct – a biological, vital function – from the drive. And in his discussion of the two close terms instinct and drive, the notion of translation reappears: first of all in reference to the translations of Freud that have not represented the fact that he uses two terms – *Trieb* and *Instinkt*, translating both as "instinct"; and secondly, in a discussion of the drive itself, the notion of translation appears. He writes: "[the source of a drive] is an unknown but theoretically knowable somatic process, a kind of biological *x*, whose psychical translation would in fact be the drive" (p. 12). The drive, which, according to Laplanche, is always sexual, is a "translation" of a "source," of some original, which is not sexual. Thus the drive, sexuality, libido, manifests itself as a "translation." No wonder it is "exhilarating" when something is "lost in translation." But what is specifically interesting is that the drive is the translation of "a kind of X," that is, of a letter, visible language if you like.

"A kind of X" turns up again later in Laplanche's book, in the third chapter, during his exposition of Freud's "Project for a Scientific Psychology." In explaining that difficult, dry, scientific text Laplanche begins with an introduction of the two basic concepts in Freud's system: neurones and quantity. Laplanche writes: "Each neurone corresponds to a bifurcation, with one entry path and two exit paths, a scheme most simply represented by the form "Y" (p. 55). So the letter Y, taken as a visual form, represents the neurone. It is then not surprising that Laplanche goes on to say of the other basic concept that "this pure quantity. . . is always designated as a kind of hypothetical X" (p. 55). If one element is "most simply represented by the form Y," it is convenient, simple, conventional to designate the other as an "X". Yet

Life
AND
Death
IN
Psycho-
analysis
Jean
Laplanche

TRANSLATED
AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
JEFFREY MEHLMAN

Figure 2: Design by Susan Bishop.

what is not so simple is the fact that, contrary to what Laplanche implies, Freud in the "Project" did *not* represent quantity by an "x," but used another letter, in fact two other letters, one of which is very mysterious indeed. The "kind of X" that Laplanche refers to is his own addition to Freud, and constitutes an ignoring of the literal letter of Freud's text, despite Laplanche's proud protestation that "we have systematically undertaken to enter into the complex labyrinth of the text, submitting to its 'technicality' in the offensiveness of its detail" (p. 31).

A large part of the "offensive detail" of Freud's "Project for a Scientific Psychology" consists in the various abbreviations and symbols in the text, particularly all the letters, both German and Greek. It is wholly predictable that *Visible Language* should include a paper on the "Project," for this text includes so many letters that Freud in a letter to his friend Fliess refers to it as "the alphabet." In Jacques Derrida's "Freud and the Scene of Writing," the "Project" is a fundamental text, although Derrida is not interested in the strange letters themselves.⁴ Derrida's reading of Freud's visible language is translated by Mehlman in the issue of *Yale French Studies* he edits called *French Freud*. The cover of that issue includes a diagram from the "Project," which might seem appropriate on the cover of his translation of Laplanche's book where the diagram appears and is discussed, rather than on the cover of *Yale French Studies* in which it is not discussed (Figure 1). This diagram includes lots of letters, among which is the single most puzzling letter-symbol of the "Project." When the diagram appears in Laplanche's book it is simplified, and the mysterious letter-symbol is absent. Laplanche submits to all the offensive details of the "Project" except for the most disturbing, most unreasonable one of all. And although this offensive symbol is visible on the cover of Mehlman's *French Freud*, he does nothing in his translation to remedy Laplanche's various elisions of it.

We are made aware of this puzzling notation by James Strachey, the editor of the Standard Edition, in his translator's introduction to the "Project": "Last of all among these alphabetic signs come Q and its mysterious companion Q̇." Both of them undoubtedly stand for 'quantity.' But why this difference between them, and above all, why the Greek *eta* with the smooth breathing. . . . Evidently the reader must be left to find his own solution for this enigma, and we therefore scrupulously follow the manuscript in printing 'Q' or 'Q̇' or 'quantity.'"⁵

I am not here to propose a solution to Strachey's enigma. But I can trace its vicissitudes. Laplanche suppresses the mysterious "Q̇" from

his book. When he finally does come, in the last chapter, to mention the two signs for quantity, he prints them as Q and "Qn," which Mehlman faithfully repeats in his translation. A small "n" looks a lot like a small "eta," and so rather quietly a mystery becomes invisible.

But, if, as Mehlman puts it, something that is "lost in translation" is "uncannily lost," I would like to suggest that the enigma in the "original," which is lost in both Laplanche's and Mehlman's translations might also be found, displaced and uncannily visible, in their double translation.

Laplanche operates this displacement by referring to quantity as "a kind of X." In the place of Q and Q η Laplanche gives us "a kind of X." We find that "X" not only in the text but in what is at once the most obvious and the most marginal of places, not merely in the translation of a translation, but worse (better) yet, on the book jacket – on that contingent, detachable, extrinsic surface. Rather than the diagram of the cover of *French Freud*, which includes Q η , on the bookjacket of Mehlman's translation of Laplanche is the Greek letter chi, writ large, the sole decoration on a jacket that otherwise includes only the pertinent information (Figure 2). A chi is a kind of 'X', not phonetically, but visually. The sound of our "X" was represented in Greek by the letter "Xsi," but the chi is visually recognizable as "a kind of X."

Now, to base a reading on a jacket decoration of a translation seems, in Mehlman's words, "the sheerest Parisian extravagance." It is most likely that neither Laplanche nor Mehlman is the author of that letter. Quite likely the author is Susan Bishop who gets credit for "jacket design." Although it seems at once too far-fetched and too predictable that I should owe my reading of an important and serious book to a designer of jackets, I will now analyze the "chi" embroidered on the jacket of Jean Laplanche's *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*.

The last chapter of *Life and Death* ends thus: "If we place face to face the terms constituting the constant pairs of opposites in Freud's thought, the genealogy takes the form of a strange chiasmus whose enigma we, as Freud's successors, are beginning to decipher" (p. 124). Strachey's enigma – Q η – may be lost by Laplanche, but the latter has found another in the shape of a strange chiasmus, some kind of x. Laplanche finds that what is called Eros in Freud's last version of drive theory is not the same as what is called sexuality in the earlier versions. Eros is opposed to the death drive; the death drive, on the other hand, "is the very soul, the constitutive principle of libidinal circulation" (p. 124). Laplanche's strange discovery, his *trouaille*, is that in Freud's theory sexuality has switched sides of the opposition. It is precisely there where it is not expected to be. This is the final chiasmus La-

planche finds, the only one called by that rhetorical name, but over and over the movement of the book is one of crossings and inversions among pairs of terms. Certainly this book is itself a translation of "a kind of x."

Now, the rhetorical term for such an "X" is "chiasmus," meaning "an inversion of the second of two parallel structures." It comes from the Greek *chiasmus*, meaning "Marked with the letter chi." And to complete the picture, Mehlman's translation with its jacket design makes the book as a whole into a graphic chiasmus, marks it with a chi.

As anyone following our "uncanny" argument might expect, Laplanche's chiasmus, his brilliant and original contribution to an understanding of Freud, the chi he adds to Freud's "alphabet," his great *trouvaille*, like any *trouvaille*, is but a *refinding* of something that was already, in a way, present in the original, in Freud's "Project."

Freud frequently refers to the "Project," which he never titled, as the " $\phi\psi\omega$," always in that order. Commenting on these three Greek letters, Strachey writes: "Here is a plausible theory. . . . Freud had started with two 'systems' of neurones, which, for fairly obvious reasons, he named ϕ and ψ ."⁶ The reasons are not quite so obvious. One guesses that the ϕ is for *physis* and the ψ for *psyche*, but a reading of Freud's text makes any such simple attribution problematic. Strachey continues: "[Freud] then found that he required a symbol for a third system of neurones, concerned with perceptions. Now . . . another Greek letter would be appropriate – like the other two, perhaps, from the end of the Greek alphabet."⁷ The "perhaps," thrown in so casually, marks the phrase as real speculation, at the edges of Strachey's scruples as merely a meticulous translator and editor. This very modest flight of fancy intersects with our own. ϕ , ψ , and Ω are three of the last four letters of the Greek alphabet: those last four letters in order are ϕ , χ , ψ , and Ω . If one imagines, as Strachey does, Freud conjuring up the end of the Greek alphabet in his search for symbols, one can only speculate that Freud considered and did not choose the χ . Regardless of Freud's consciousness, the group of letters, always appearing in alphabetic order – ϕ , ψ , Ω – bear with them a contiguous, absent "chi," which does not become visible until Mehlman's translation of Laplanche sports Susan Bishop's uncanny letter jacket in 1976.

If the drive is a translation of "a kind of X," if the repressed returns in the uncanny *trouvaille*, then the "find" of something displaced from but contiguous with the original, lost, offensive details of Freud's alphabet, this exercise in visible language, is a momentary "find" of the repressed, the momentary discovery, which *must be made over and over and always where it is not expected*, the momentary discovery of psychoanalysis.

1. Jean Laplanche, *Vie et mort en psychanalyse* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970), trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
2. Sigmund Freud, "Project for a Scientific Psychology," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), I, 283-95, henceforth: *S.E.*
3. Freud, *S.E.*, XVII, 217-53.
4. Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Yale French Studies*, No. 48 (1972), pp. 73-117.
5. "Project," p. 289.
6. "Project," pp. 288-89.
7. "Project," p. 289.