

Transference & Text: Variations in the New Psychic Economy

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The phenomenon of transference is not a mere artifact of the analytic scene, but an essential imposition that defines a certain organization of social life. Although this is not at all without complexities, the general formula itself is quite ordinary: transference emerges when knowledge, invested in the field of the big Other, is attributed to a particular individual. We might call this knowledge an agitator, since, in the rapport it sustains, it also compels; transference is an integral framework by which the subject comes into sense and encounters signification—anticipating an act, dialecticizing the position of being subject.

It occurs to me that, in order to speak today in miniature about the possibility of transference mediated by text and its modern variations, there is a particular imperative to aim at this topic from the analyst's discourse—in other words, from the seat of my own experience, and not exclusively from the domain of theory.

But with my personal testimony in abeyance, theory *can* help us to understand how the conditions of transference are, today, modulated differently: there is less of a subject-supposed-to-know in the Other, and more of a *something*-supposed-to-know—in other words, we are more inclined to seek *information*—which is available to us at the tap of a screen, without the need to negotiate with another subject—than we are to seek *someone* who might possess a kind of knowledge. In order to account for the consequences of this new modality of experience, we must take stock of a few mutations in the whole of the psychic system.

Charles Melman's proposal of a *new psychic economy*, a development in psychoanalytic theory which accounts for modern phenomena of the subject—whether clinically or socially—exposes a dramatic shift: the subject of this new psychic economy is largely disenfranchised from the particular defiles of the phallic vector—which supports a social bond predicated on renunciation in common—and, instead, takes up the limitless immediacy of object jouissance—an onanistic jouissance offered to him as a salve for lack itself—in its stead.

This object jouissance is pacifying: it doesn't offer the same friction, the same space of agitation constitutive of desire that we recognize in Freud's or Lacan's work: a desire that squeezes the subject with a tension that impels him to ek-sist. Maybe too simply, we can say that object jouissance abolishes the very risk of subjectivity itself.

But there are other aspects to this object jouissance that reconfigure not only the subject, but the social proper: if the subject's jouissance does not depend on renunciation, thereby necessitating a signifying substitute in its stead, by what means can the subject come to terms with a world beyond himself? Beyond mere sensation? Otherwise said, how can he encounter a world of the immaterial—a world of signification and knowledge? This is the same dimension of

the signifier, of course, where the analytic cure—supported by transference—is supposed to find its bearings.

But this substitution is more than an exchange for the signifier: its very operation is contingent also on the investment of *knowledge* in the location of the Other. The position that the analyst has to take up—namely, that he knows something, something that the subject is missing—depends on an interpolation of knowledge into this field. But what are we able to say about this dynamic when the value of knowledge itself is reduced to the materiality of the information it conveys? By what means, in this new psychic economy, can the transference relation establish itself, especially in the world of LLMs and artificial intelligence, mechanical hegemony of the information age?

I think that a bit of self-disclosure can help us approach something structural. If I say without reservation that I believe Melman's work holds a lamp to the feelings, decisions, and phenomenal conditions of my personal life, as well as to the lives of my peers that I witness from outside the pulpit of subjectivity, you will know I am speaking about an obvious transference.

Inflamed by this desire to understand my experience through one who could give it voice, I had taken drastic steps—subjective risks—in order to read Melman's material and attend his lectures: all of this was work which was not available in my native tongue. In the course of these efforts, I used the arduous task of translating Melman's work into English in order to refine my understanding of the French language. Three in the morning—nine AM in Paris—became a regular setting on my alarm clock. Endless nights with translation software, then a French-English dictionary, a French-French dictionary, my notepad, and the seminar of Charles Melman stretched on—and continue to stretch on—into the early hours of the morning.

But there are curiosities about such a powerful transference investment—what does it mean for the subject to engage in this way, and through these mediators, with a text today? How is this relationship with text structured—is it a one-way street, or does it truly aim at the subject behind the written word? How is this kind of transference sustained or even made possible in this new psychic economy, exactly?

I think we can most fruitfully approach these largely theoretical questions best by two interesting observations from the reality of my experience.

The first, that Charles Melman and I do not even share a tongue, let alone a common socio-cultural context. His work, which, barring a few years in which I was fortunate enough to attend his seminars over Zoom, was and is presented to me exclusively in the form of a text: a text that, at the time I took it up, I could not read unassisted. We will return to this, but I think it speaks to an important structural dimension which constitutes being subject—the dimension in which transference invests itself in the taking up of an act, a wager of one's subjectivity; namely, the decisive risk of interpretation.

The second, that the exact kind of person about whom Melman describes with his *new psychic economy* thesis—that is, myself—was, in a sense, restored to participate in a structure aimed at phallic jouissance instead of at objectal jouissance. By what structural channels does something like this happen? Furthermore, if the phallic vector as a regulator in the Other field—in other words, the machinery that supports the transferential position of a subject-supposed-to-know—has endured a certain diminishing, how can it reappear so forcefully? Is this a resurrection of some anachronistic psychic structure, or is this rapport now sought by a different circuit?

In the interest of motivating this experience in the direction of psychoanalytic transmission, I will begin by addressing the latter question first.

One of the more extraordinary claims of Melman's *new psychic economy* contends with what he explains as the structural failure of "great texts" as nodal points in the organization of the social field. These texts—whether they are cultural staples of Western literature or religious literature like the Bible itself—offered the subject a scaffold for his articulation of phenomenal sense, dispensed essential ethical and moral imperatives, and generated a basis of symbolic communion across social, political, and epistemological latitudes. Thus, these texts gave body to the field of the signifier in its social capacity by establishing general consistencies in the symbolic apparatus: for the occidental population, certain vectors of the signifying chain acted as mile markers for a big Other in common, a location where it became possible to truly take up a position of knowledge.

But, despite the failure of these texts that once established "a radical and permanent transference," texts that Melman tells us were "capable of holding our hand, and, at the same time, helping us to stand upright" (2002, pg. 144), there remains a different kind of textual relationship in its place today: the textual relation between the subject and the machine, the algorithm. This is a particularly strange relationship, since, in a way, it embodies the scientific ideal of 'objective knowledge:' wisdom is delivered straight from *the* body of information, uninhabited by any subject. In other words, the phallic vector—"the great organizer of our entire psychic order" (2002, pg. 43), as Melman puts it—seems to find itself deferred, displaced in a field where it no longer operates according to knowledge that would be attached to a subject, but, instead, according to the consistency of information derived from the site of so-called objective reality. But this is not a transference relationship: it is nothing more than a testimony to a structural mechanism that persists *despite* transference.

That said, plenty of individuals fall in love with *ChatGPT*—an object that is really nothing at all *but* text—and are plunged truly into despair if they are unable to access it, by dint of a missed payment or some errant technical failure. This love is, again, not evidence of a transference relationship. It does, however, remind us that transference remains possible, or maybe even inevitable, in the conditions brought to bear on the subject of the new psychic economy. It also demonstrates the power of text as a conduit for the transference relation—even without a subject at whom to aim, Cupid's arrow fires by these straits nevertheless. What I am trying to say is that,

even in the midst of profound changes in the organization of psychic and social life, certain circuits remain, only to be employed to different ends.

But if no subject is elected to this privileged place where the transference relation used to find its aim, how then might we come to explain avenues by which an authentic transference, a transference to another subject, persists?

I would like to return to one of the curiosities of my own experience that I alluded to earlier: that Melman and I do not even share the same language. In fact, the first text I was able to read of Melman's work was *L'homme sans gravité*, which I deciphered one paragraph at a time, using pitiful translation tools on my iPhone, in the dark ages before generative AI. Despite these broken translations, the transference relationship developed the same: from the margins that revealed sense, I knew that this person—a person from a different generation, from a different country, whose speech I could not understand—knew something, and could reveal something to me about my experience.

So by what yoke did I find myself engaged in this transference relationship? I think we can explain this by way of the question I posed about the subject of the new psychic economy and the potential to transform his *jouissance*: it is thanks to a particular object that I was implicated in this transference—an object of knowledge, namely, the work of Jacques Lacan. Despite my incompatibilities with the spoken language of Charles Melman, we shared a certain object language: as such, the bridge to develop a transference—a bridge reinforced by the very structure of the textual relation—became inevitable.

Although mediated by the buffer of technologies which enabled me to access Melman's work, the *jouissance* at stake was not that of limitless, unvectorized sensation—in other words, that which would be entirely objectal—but, instead, aimed at a dimension of *knowledge* imposed on the subject and not the objective interlocutor. In other words, despite the supports by which this knowledge was pursued, a dialectic was established, precisely due to the necessity of subjective interpretation, an interpretation contingent on knowledge, and therefore, on the terrain of an Other invested with knowledge. Said differently, because these machine translations did not *know* Lacan, they could not sufficiently articulate or generate sense of Melman's ideas: this is the dimension in which, structurally framed by conditions of the new psychic economy, an imperative for the subject emerged—a place of subjective risk.

Thus, under these modern conditions of *being* that manifest novel consistencies of the subject, we can begin to tune our ears to the ways in which the psychic system maintains fundamental aspects of its constitution—not as anachronisms of the unconscious we know from yesterday, but as contingencies of this unconscious as it appears today in the new psychic economy. The decisive role of technology in our lives as a mediator for these subjective experiences ought not to be discounted, but, instead, considered in tandem with the dialectics they might support, and, structurally, as potential facilitators of the transference relation. Although the value of knowledge and its transmission through the symbolic are, without a doubt, challenged today, it is clear that its structural pathways—in the form of a text, for instance—still exist, and, if occasion for the subject arises, can be monopolized in the service of the transference relation.

But these observations remain less than definitive, and, to me, point, instead, towards an ethical question: despite the ease with which these confusing variations—those that we can say define the new psychic economy—can lead us to lament for the future of psychoanalysis, how are we going to take up these challenges in the service of the individual who suffers, and of the social that conditions the terms of this suffering?