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To know or not to know: the uses of transference in PhD supervision

Abstract:

Drawing on my personal experience of supervision, this paper demonstrates how crucial an analysis of transference may be to the outcome of PhD projects in the discipline of writing in particular.

Taken in its specificity, the term ‘transference’ applies strictly to analytic treatment. However, both Freud and Lacan have, in their own ways, pointed to its wider implications for understanding human interactions in the field of pedagogy. Freud’s definition of transference as a ‘displacement from one idea to another’ led Lacan to reconceptualise it in terms of the three registers of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real with reference to the role of ‘the subject supposed to know’ (Freud 1900: 562; Lacan 1977 [1964]: 232). Further, over the last twenty years, writing teachers have vigorously discussed the implications of both Freudian and Lacanian models.

This paper is in two parts. First, focusing on the Lacanian model, it demonstrates how an analysis of transference between candidate and supervisor may be instrumental to the success of PhD candidatures in writing. Second, it offers three supervision case-studies where transference was particularly problematic in order to identify factors that are critical to the positive outcome of the supervisory relationship, and hence the successful completion of doctorates.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

doctoral supervision—transference—creative writing

(I had wanted to begin slowly. A seed cracking next to my ear, slowly. My head sinking deeper into the pillow, mimicking any pressing tone of voice.) The world on the other side of the pillow was flesh. I would never come to the point. Words empty these standings without you three feet away, I remarked inkily, drowning my fingers in ink – Carla Harryman, *Animal instincts*.

For over twenty years, teachers of writing have explored the possible synergies between psychoanalysis and pedagogy (McGee 1987; Murphy 1989; Berman 1994; Bishop 1993; Bracher 1999a, 1999b, 2006). Patrick McGee and Ann Murphy have highlighted the similarities between teaching writing and being in analysis (McGee 1987: 667-78; Murphy 1989: 175-85). Jeffrey Berman has written at length about the beneficial effects of a psychoanalytically inflected pedagogy on academic performance as well as wellbeing of writing students. Mark Bracher has explored these benefits further in *The writing cure: psychoanalysis, composition, and the aims of education*, where he argued that ‘anyone interested in either of these fields or in the educational, personal, or social benefits that either practice can provide will benefit from exploring the intersection between the two’ (Bracher 1999a: 1). His *Radical pedagogy: identity, generativity, and social transformation* further defined the social benefits of a psychoanalytically inflected pedagogy (Bracher 2006).

Most of us who teach writing and who supervise doctorates in an academic institution are acutely aware of how easily we assume that flagrant examples of ‘poor writing’, ‘lack of sense’ or indeed ‘writer’s block’ can be fixed by a simple application of logic. However, speech and cognition in essence are not wholly rational. Rather, speech and cognition express a subjectivity that is multiple and conflicted in many ways (Grant 2005; Green 2005). Subjectivity is essentially an irrational, conflicted and defensive structure that works against rationality. Pedagogues, and society in general, may want us to be rational, but the application of logic to the production of discourse is never a simple affair. One thing that I have learned from supervising higher degree students in creative writing is that acts of attention are always deflected in multiple directions that attenuate any logic that might correct ‘bad discourse’. While rationality and coherence may serve human ends by helping us to communicate with each other, these are not produced by simple demand or by learning logical rules. Coherence and rationality may also develop, paradoxically, by responding to the irrational that interrupts discourse (Bracher 1999a). Similarly, control in writing does not necessarily come through policing discourse with logic but through integrating unconscious desire with the self – by learning to listen to, and integrate what *Id* says. This integration of desire with self is vital to the progress of creative writing students. If the supervisor’s role is crucial to this progress, so is the *position* she adopts. As I show later in this paper, an analysis of transference may help supervisors adopt a suitable position that privileges the Symbolic dimension of language. The use of a psychoanalytic term to denote the student’s relationship to her supervisor is justified by the peculiar character of this relationship. As in analysis, the student’s affective reactions may be exceptionally intense. This is because ‘transference love’ has its origin in the ‘love of knowledge’ (Freud 1915; Lacan 1975[1953-54], 1991 [1960-61]).

Encountering singular subjects in higher education

My first interview in 1995 with an MA student who had just graduated with first class honours was a startling, albeit transforming, experience. Though a brilliant writer of prose and fiction whose portfolio I had enjoyed reading, this student did not speak of her writing but of writer's block, insecurity and mental illness. This made me aware that I needed to scrutinise my own practice as a supervisor. As my experience grew, and focused increasingly on PhD students, so did the challenges brought by candidates from various backgrounds: overseas students with poor English, mature-aged students going back to study, disabled students, students who were proud of calling themselves delinquent, students with serious drug addictions, terminally ill students, psychotic students for whom specific words were lethal weapons, Indigenous students, incarcerated students and suicidal students whose writing was a lifeline. What struck me, however, was that at some point in their candidature so many of these students felt alone, insecure or emotionally fragile, and this had an impact on the kind of relationship they sought to establish with me. This, in turn, made me realise that I needed to devise strategies that would enhance some kind of emotional objectivity in my practice of supervision.

Inspired by the lessons of psychoanalysis, I gradually focused on a supervisory practice based on a philosophy of ethical desire. This philosophy discards Freudian models of a simple repressed subjectivity in favour of the Lacanian subject, to allow for an examination of multiple aspects of subjectivity (Symbolic, Imaginary, Real) – all of which struggle for expression in any extended discourse. It draws on Lacan's famous critique of the discourse of the university as well as on the work of Shoshana Felman and Mark Bracher while, at the same time, inscribing itself within the discourse of the institution (Lacan 2006 [1957], 2007 [1969-70]; Felman 1982, 1987; Bracher 1999a, 1999b, 2006). As Felman rightly points out, 'Lacan's relationship with pedagogy has itself been oversimplified' (1987: 71). Indeed, if Lacan blamed narrow-minded pedagogues in 1957 for reducing teaching to a 'functional apprenticeship', he also warned higher education students in 1968 that, whether they want it or not, they were subjected to a master discourse (Lacan 2006 [1957]: 371, 2007 [1969-70]: 147-48). Bracher's teaching philosophy exploits this seeming paradox in a 'radical' approach grounded on respect for difference that aims at social inclusion (Bracher 2006).

Responding to Bracher, my own practice mobilises the power of the candidate-supervisor relationship as a pedagogical tool to enhance student self-confidence, performance, social inclusion and peer recognition. Far from claiming to offer a supervision paradigm that fits all, I contend that analysing transference may help supervisors understand better the mechanisms and relationships that they engage when promoting verbalisation. Moreover, I wish to stress that an analysis of transference starts with the supervisor's self-knowledge. This is in fact critical to establishing a relationship with PhD candidates which is grounded in the Symbolic and to enabling identification with their work, rather than with the supervisor's person or values, 'great writers' or peers (Hecq 2009).

Transference: for the love of knowledge

The term ‘transference’ first occurred in *The interpretation of dreams* to elucidate the displacement of affect from one idea to another (Freud 1900: 562). As the priority given to ‘idea’ over ‘affect’ indicates, Freud already inferred that what he later called ‘transference-love’ (Freud 1915: 168) was captured by a network of signifiers. Similarly, for Lacan, transference is bound up with the order of the signifier, that is, that which represents the subject for another signifier. In this sense, it is beyond inter-subjectivity as meaning the relationship between two people. A failure to recognise this beyond inter-subjective dimension of transference reduces it to the observable emotional expressions and interactions between two people, that is, phenomena which are presumed to take place in a dual relationship that excludes the Symbolic dimension of language. One can see how hazardous this could be, not only in analysis, but also, as in the case-studies below, in the most intense of all teacher-student relationships – PhD supervision – particularly as transference is triggered by some ‘supposed knowledge’ (Lacan 1991 [1960-61]: 212).

The phrase ‘subject supposed to know’ is introduced by Lacan in his seminar on identification in order to designate the illusion of a self-consciousness which is transparent to itself in the act of knowing (Lacan 1961-62: 15 Nov. 61). This illusion, which is born in what Lacan calls the mirror stage, is put into question by psychoanalysis. The whole project of psychoanalysis demonstrates that knowledge cannot be located in any particular subject but is, in fact, beyond inter-subjectivity. Lacan takes up the phrase again in his definition of transference as the attribution of knowledge to a subject: ‘as soon as the subject who is supposed to know exists somewhere there is transference’ (Lacan 1977 [1964]: 232). This definition emphasises that it is the analysand’s supposition of a subject who knows, that initiates the analytic process. The subject supposed to know comes in as third party, as it were, between the analyst and the analysand, yet is not the person of the analyst. What the analysand does not know is ‘what he *supposes* to his unconscious and “transfers” by means of this supposition to his analyst’ (Silvestre 1987: 132).

This conception of transference is of particular interest for supervisors. First, it highlights that the phenomenon of transference is brought into being by the Symbolic, predicated as it is on the *love of knowledge* (Lacan 1975[1953-54], 1991 [1960-61]). Second, as soon as there is transference, a strong Imaginary component comes into play. This component enhances not only love hate-relationships, but also power disparities between people. If this is true of the analytic relation, it is compounded in the supervisory situation where the degree of disparity is heightened by the supervisor’s subjection to the discourse of the university. Power relations induced by transference have been shown to be intensified by the mode of pedagogy at hand (Bracher 2006; Owler 1999). Whereas a pedagogy that encourages students’ identification with their supervisors or their master signifiers enhances the erotic dimension of transference, a pedagogy that encourages students’ identification with their own work enhances the Symbolic integration of desire with self (Bracher 1990a: 12, 1999b: 136; Felman 1982: 31).

To complicate matters, however, the subject supposed to know is not always working in supervisory relationships. This is the case, for instance, when the candidate is a psychotic, or even a drug addict. Psychotics notoriously have no knowledge to elaborate because their knowledge is already constituted. They do not request a subject supposed to know, but rather a witness, for as Colette Soler puts it, ‘the subject supposed to know drives the psychotic crazy’ (Soler 1982: 10 Nov. 1982). In such cases, transference operates on a purely Imaginary axis, encouraging narcissistic identifications of a purely erotic nature that often give rise to anxiety. I am particularly thinking of situations in which a candidate’s creative work plays the role of *suppléance*, that is, a supplement that fends off the onset of psychosis – as it arguably did for Joyce (Lacan 2005 [1975-76]: 87). In such situations, the supervisor is in the position of ‘all knowing subject’, alternately revered object and hated rival. This means that there is no plea for knowledge on the part of the candidate, but an omnipotent demand of an Imaginary order addressed to the supervisor as either all knowing master or mere witness. Consider, for example, the case of a PhD student who was particularly resistant to any comment I made on his artefact, yet expected to be spoon-fed when came the time to conceptualise, design and execute his exegesis.

The absence of a subject supposed to know is problematic for several reasons. First, where does one go, given the existing and often mandated yet fraught conditions of PhD supervision in an academic institution? In particular, what ethical choice is there for both candidate and supervisor, since a PhD ought to be a contribution to knowledge endorsed by the discourse of the university, a view not necessarily shared by a candidate who may be seeking mere recognition for the sake of ontological grounding? Second, what are the ontological implications for the candidate? For, as Barnacle demonstrates, a PhD is also an ontological journey (Barnacle 2005). Third, what are the nature, function and purpose of writing in this type of encounter?

Bearing these questions in mind, I will discuss three cases where an analysis of transference alerted me, as supervisor, to two factors that are critical to a successful supervision: the importance of establishing and maintaining the supremacy of the Symbolic over the Imaginary, and of making room for the subject supposed to know. The three candidates whose stories I invoke were all full-time students in creative writing. The chosen dissertation for each consisted of an autobiographical novel accompanied by an exegesis. In compliance with ethical considerations, the candidates have been fictionalised and details altered so as to erase clues that might identify them.

From texts full of holes to pots

My first PhD student: a young ebullient woman who took a break from her studies after completing a brilliant MA. She has transferred from an interstate university after quarrelling with her supervisor. She wants to write about the mother-daughter relationship and has requested me as supervisor because of my interest in psychoanalysis. She likes Kristeva and Cixous, but not Lacan: ‘he is so gay’, in her terms. We meet once a month. I set well-defined tasks for her: bibliography, literature

searches based on keywords, short texts, book reviews and a concept map, for she has what she identifies as ‘writer’s block’. Our meetings always go over the set one hour. She has googled me, has read some of my papers and wants to read my books. I tell her that this is not a good idea. I find it difficult to keep the conversation on track. I soon find out about her intrusive and ferocious mother. I find out about psychological problems, other health problems and financial problems. I hear about drug and alcohol addiction. She talks incessantly yet complains of her ‘loss of voice’. The tasks I set for her are ‘too much’. ‘I have no strength’, she often says. The tasks pile up indiscriminately, a metonymic line which empties her of any vitality, for her life ‘sucks’. The short texts and literature reviews she writes are ‘full of holes’. Her purse has been stolen and therefore she is without a library card. I lend her books. She is increasingly angry with me. She asks for my home phone number. She misses a supervision session. She rings me at home to apologise. We reschedule. She rings me again to cancel and reschedule. ‘I deserve nothing and I do nothing to deserve it’, she screams, storming out of my office at the next meeting. I email her a summary of what she has achieved so far and explain that, as per policy, we have to write her annual progress review together. She informs me that she wishes to change supervisor. Nothing personal. She rings me to make a time to return my books. At this last meeting she comes in speaking on her mobile. She is admonishing her mother for not giving her space. She gives me a thank you card: a photograph of a clay pot she made when she first started her PhD studies. I later hear that she felt intimidated by my knowledge.

As we have seen, transference is a love based on the supposition of knowledge. The clay pot may be viewed not only as the image of creation, but also as the representation of the birth of transference to the work, as the production of a void which opens up the operation of representation. In this sense, it is a preliminary to the Symbolic representation that writing is. Had I realised that the potter with writer’s block had assigned to me the position of all-knowing subject, I could have asked myself at the start of the supervision process how I could produce an empty space that would have anchored her desire in the Symbolic register, an empty space that would have allowed her to introduce the possibility of a change in her erratic monologue and constitute perhaps a salutary opening to her autobiographical novel. The sentence ‘I deserve nothing’, which is complemented by ‘I have no strength’, functions as a master signifier that repeats itself in a metonymic chain, a signifier that buries knowledge embodied in the object-waste, and reveals the absence of a know-how with language (Lacan 1975 [1972-73]: 125) – hence her inability to know what to do with her hypotheses. She does not know what to do with truth, for she has ‘unsubscribed from the unconscious’ (Lacan 2005 [1975-76]: 166). Undoubtedly, anger or hate are self-destructive impulses. Jacques-Alain Miller sees anger as an effect of *objet a* (that dark object of desire) and establishes a relation between *objet a* and the insult as a signifier that tries to say what cannot be said (Miller 1986-87: 12 Nov. 86). Here, the circuit between insult and object closes upon itself, as if the potter with writer’s block were insulting herself by means of the sentence ‘I deserve nothing’. This insult is rejected on the Symbolic level (writer’s block) and returns in the Real of the body (substance abuse and psychological problems). The supervisor

occupies the position of witness to her eradication (the texts full of holes, the lost voice). However, in the last encounter, the supervisor becomes the witness of the student's art (the photo of the clay pot). Had I been in the role of analyst rather than that of supervisor, I would have been satisfied with this outcome, for the candidate obviously wanted to do a PhD for the wrong reasons and turned out to identify instead with her art. She has, indeed, moved to another state and is now a successful potter. More importantly, she is 'clean'. The pot is a supplementary creation in the world introducing the void and at the same time the possibility of filling it up. However, as a supervisor subjected to the discourse of the university, my responsibility was to see this candidate to the end of her candidature. I should have introduced the void in the Symbolic, rather than encouraged her identification with, and rivalry towards, my own person. In her eyes, I knew too much – particularly about her addiction. I should have been able to move the candidate from her Imaginary fixation onto the Symbolic dimension of language.

The text as ego

He is particularly erudite. He has read Freud and Lacan. Joyce is his hero. He wants to write a novel, but is 'too anxious to put pen to paper'. His father puts him 'down' for wanting to be a novelist. His sister is a professional editor who does not understand anything about literature. It is, in his words, 'Literature with a Capital L' that we are talking about. He respects me as an academic, but does not think much about my creative works. 'That's perfect', I say, upon which he tells me that he finds me attractive.

Having learned from my mistakes, my concern is to know how to avoid the Scylla of persecution and the Charybdis of erotomania, and consequently what place I have to occupy to allow this candidate to overcome his anxiety, and write. I suggest that although he is doing a PhD by artefact and exegesis he might like to begin in more classical fashion, that is, with a bibliography and research question. The idea is to provide a Symbolic safety net. At our next meeting, he hands in a copious bibliography. I comment upon the recurring themes and say that Jung and Lacan do not sit particularly well together. He shrugs, and says that he thinks I have a personal dislike for him. He adds that I make him feel 'catatonic'. I am shocked and wonder how to avoid cutting our meeting short, and perhaps even compromising the whole candidature. I suspect that he is attempting to install me in the place of the (undivided and persecutory) Other of *jouissance*. I refuse this place and try opening a Symbolic system in which the subject of speech can be lodged: I ask why he wants to write a novel. He says that 'it's a matter of life or death'. I observe that this sounds serious and that I think he'd best get on with it. I add that I do not know enough about his style to know whether I can continue to supervise him, and I request that he start writing then and there, for he has a forty-five minutes credit. He sits down and starts writing in long hand. When the forty-five minutes has elapsed, I tell him that I have another appointment and he should leave, and resume writing at home. The next day he phones to tell me that he has written a whole chapter. He is 'kind of hypnotised'. I remark that he obviously does not need me. He laughs. I suggest that since he lives so

far away from the campus we ought to have ‘distance supervision’ while he is busy writing his novel. He agrees, adding that he feels elated. The first draft of the novel is completed in less than five months. When he comes to see me again to ‘drop off’ the novel, he asks for my home phone number because I am often ‘out of office’. I decline, pointing out that the university provides us with voice mail. He laughs and says that I am the best therapist. I ignore this, but remember it when he hands me the whole thesis two years later. ‘Before I was hanging over chaos. Now a thick layer of glass exists between the chaos and me’, he says. Undeniably, writing has functioned therapeutically for him. In fact, I would argue that with this student, writing has played the role of *suppléance*. As with Joyce, whom he so admired, writing has played the part of the ego (Lacan 2005 [1975-76]: 143). This candidate has taught me that it is possible to handle a difficult situation on the condition that one hears what *Id* is saying. My concern was to avoid the place of enjoying and persecuting Other in the Imaginary dimension by pretending not to know while firmly establishing the supervisory relationship in the Symbolic.

The tripping text

I inherit a student from one of my colleagues who is on sabbatical. She is a student from overseas with a double-barrel name who considers the conjunction of our fates to be an ‘accident’. She is reserved to the point of being rigid, which makes me anxious. We are not exactly getting on and I wonder how to connect with her. I find our supervision sessions exhausting. She is reluctant to make eye contact and it is difficult to extract words from her. This third supervision is not going well: she is stuck with her novel and can’t stand the way Australians keep ‘mutilating’ her name. I make a joke at the expense of Australians in her native language, which, to my surprise, seems to loosen her tongue. She speaks about why it is she might be stuck. She speaks about her father a great deal. The following day, she sends me a series of emails in quick succession. She is elated to be writing again. But, as her last message points out, she is bothered by the presence of her father ‘as if he was there’ (he has been dead a long time, though). He speaks to her, impersonating a famous actor, saying ‘things that are beside the point’. In my reply, I ask if she often hears voices while writing. She answers in the negative and adds that the voice is advising her to take a break, ‘which makes sense’ because when she got up from her work station to make a cup of tea she tripped over twice and hurt her knee badly. I am concerned that writing may be triggering off a psychotic episode, an event of the body, but silent, as when Lacan speaks of pre-psychosis in his discussion of Schreber before his outbreak (Lacan, 2006 [1951]). The first time, she writes, she ‘let herself fall’. The second time, she could ‘hardly get up again’. I ask if she felt supported by the voice before falling. The next email says that the soothing voice had become threatening.

For a psychosis to be triggered, the Name-of-the-father needs to be foreclosed, that is, never having attained the Symbolic place of the Other. It is thus called into Symbolic opposition to the subject’s own private use of language, as it were. But how can the Name-of-the-father be called by the subject to the only place in which it could have reached her and in which it has never been? Simply by a Real father, not necessarily

by the subject's own father, but by One-father (Lacan 2006 [1951]: 481). One always finds at the moment of outbreak a dramatic conjunction in which One-father comes to be situated in a third position in some relation based on the Imaginary dyad other-specular other. This couple, of which Lacan gives some examples, is not necessarily constituted by two people. In this case, the Imaginary dyad consists of student and text, with the One-father as text-in-the-making, which produces the enigmatic signifier 'break'. This signifier harks back to nothing. It falls on the writer and interrupts the Imaginary axis. I think I know what to do. I ring her and tell her that she needs a break, hoping to re-anchor her in the Symbolic. I advise her to ring a university counsellor. We meet again one month later. She tells me how the university counsellor rang her psychiatrist, how he summoned her to his rooms, and how she arrived at the hospital in a frightful state of anxiety – 'at the limit of suicide'. The voice persecuted her for about a week. Then she started writing her novel in her mind. I nod. 'So', I say, 'after this well-deserved break, where are you ready to resume writing?' We are ready to resume our contract.

I did little for this candidate other than listen and soothe her *jouissance* by signifying that she had the right to take a break from her writing. Her delusion needed to be deposited somewhere safe. She knew that she could come back to her PhD. Writing her autobiographical novel then led her to elaborate a delusional metaphor which, moreover, was later published by a commercial publisher. A reflection upon transference (in particular, the massive anxiety I was experiencing) alerted me to the fact that in this case the subject supposed to know did not function. The candidate was not interested in interrogating a subject supposed to know, but rather had faith in a knowing undivided subject. She came with a constituted knowledge, and asked for a witness to her certitude. As in the previous case, here also, writing acted as *suppléance*.

In conclusion: to know or not to know?

It is of critical importance that supervisors be aware of the ways in which transference affects them, in order to be able to make ethical decisions that take into account both candidates' requests and institutional requirements. Although a psychoanalytically inflected approach to supervision is only one of many possible approaches, it may be helpful if one has the knowledge or experience necessary to make decisions based on its evolving theories. Nonetheless, it might even be handy to supervisors who are suspicious of this approach in the face of difficulties posed by candidates for whom the subject supposed to know does not function.

It is particularly important to recognise the presence of anxiety, erotic overtures and intrusive practices that are indexes of the Imaginary register, for these may impede the successful progress of a PhD candidature. With some candidates one merely needs to sustain a signifying process that is enhanced by forms of knowledge. With others, one must open a signifying gap to enhance the writing process itself. With yet others, one must re-establish the broken links of the signifying chain first. I hope to have highlighted the complexities of transference and the possible fortunes of the subject

supposed to know in doctoral supervision. After all, writing always entails the construction of an elaborated delusional metaphor. Ethically speaking, whether this construction is preliminary, as in the first case, or essential, as in the second and third cases, is of little importance, provided a *suppléance*, a substitute for the Name-of-the-father, is put into place and maintained in the Symbolic. The challenge, of course, is to do this and also to comply with the discourse of the university.

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