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Spiritual Misery and the Absence of Experience
Towards a Political and Poetic Psychoanalysis

In Memoriam Jonathan Lear

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Abstract
These fragments sketch an understanding of psychoanalysis as an inherently political and poetic praxis. The commodification of psychotherapy on social media, alongside efforts to defend it from this commodification through a sterile scientism, are read as parallel symptoms of a deeper spiritual and ethical malaise: the modern loss of the capacity to form genuine experiences with the other. In response, the text argues for reclaiming psychoanalysis as a public-facing, socially engaged practice, one that resists alienation by fostering transformative experiences and generating new "categories of meaning." The "poetic" dimension (poiesis) names psychoanalysis's capacity to bring forth the new through eros, the body, affect, play, and language, opening possibilities for freedom in both personal and collective life.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis; philosophy; political; intersubjectivity; scientism; commodification; alienation; experience; poiesis; eros; transformative thinking; public clinic; aesthetics; field theory.

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1

Mental health has increasingly become a trending subject, particularly on social media. Critics describe this as the 'media-ification' of psychotherapy, where identity politics and cultural notions of wokeness often intertwine, linking the therapeutic with socio-political concerns. This is frequently packaged as a kind of niche commodity to social media users. Such a trend raises worries about the dilution of psychotherapeutic practice and the erosion of professional expertise.

A common reaction among traditional or more conservative psychotherapists to this problematic alliance between *therapy*, *social media*, and the *political* is the belief that the core problem (by no means the only one) lies in introducing a socio-political dimension into therapy, both in its practice and in its intended audience. While this argument is applied to general psychotherapy (whatever that means), I will focus here on psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

This mainstream argument holds not only that socio-political concerns have no place in the clinic, but also that their inclusion undermines the goals of a "serious," *individual-focused* psychotherapy. Therapy, some critics say, should focus only on the assumption of individual responsibility for one's suffering rather than understanding it as deeply intertwined with political, historical, or social forces. Acknowledging suffering of social origin (what Frantz Fanon termed *sociogenesis*) is thought of as being almost bound up with a disavowal of the individual's involvement in their own psychic pain, situating blame instead within social or historical realities.

From this perspective, the conclusion seems to be that, in order to counteract the 'media-ification' of psychotherapy (which dilutes, perverts, and deskills it), the latter must be framed as empirically grounded in the manner of the natural sciences, its legitimacy secured by "scientific theories" of technique and by specialized skills directed exclusively toward the intrapsychic dimension of suffering.[1] This way of thinking seems to assume that there is an *inherent* link between psychotherapy understood as a solely individual process devoid of a built-in socio-political dimension; empirical science (some contemporary version of *positivism*); and clinical technique. I call this the "psychotherapy-must-be-scientific" stance.

[1] This is part of an ongoing tension in the mental health field, particularly in the United States, that emerges from efforts to legitimize psychotherapy (more recently, psychoanalysis and other forms of depth therapies) by framing them as objective, empirically driven, or evidence-based disciplines akin to the "natural sciences." The version of science that some American scientifically driven psychotherapists/psychologists invoke tends to rely on an outdated model (rooted in a certain naïve epistemological realism) that assumes data can be objectively collected from an external world without influencing it, disregarding that the act of observation inevitably alters what is being observed.

2

In the fragments that follow, I will suggest that contrary to the "psychotherapy-must-be-scientific" stance, psychoanalytic psychotherapy inseparably weaves together the socio-political sphere; individual *singularity*; a stance outside scientific frameworks; and rigorous skills that sustain it as a form of *praxis.*

While it is often true that the so-called "social media therapy woke kids" frequently fail to understand the ways in which the suffering subject is implicated in their own psychic pain (often appearing instead to solely blame the social and historical environment, particularly when discussing oppressed groups of peoples), this does not mean that psychotherapy (or at least psychoanalytic psychotherapy) is not also concerned with the *sociogenesis* of psychic pain. Psychoanalysis seeks to understand how socio-political, economic and historical forces, and power structures, affect each subject in a singular way, and how each individual also becomes uniquely involved with and symbolically engaged in them as an embodied being.

I share the concerns raised in social worker and psychotherapist Darragh Sheehan's essay *"*The Therapist as 'Good-Enough' Commodity: From Holding to Selling*"*, which critiques the commodification of psychotherapy under the pressures of consumerist media culture, lifestyle capitalism, and diluted identity politics. But contrary to the "psychotherapy-must-be-scientific" stance, I agree with Sheehan that the political potential of psychoanalytic praxis *precisely offers a way of resisting these same forces*.[2] This idea will also guide my reflections here.

3

A word on method and context:

method:

This is a series of fragmentary reflections shaped by psychoanalytic thinking and by philosophical ideas inflected by my experience as a psychoanalyst. These are not intended as

[2] Anti-establishment psychotherapies have long existed within the 'West,' approaches that were political because they required rigorous engagement with radical theoretical texts, clinical and political *praxis*, personal analysis, and deep, sustained engagement and experience with human and social suffering. These psychotherapies were critical of systems of power that shape subjectivity. Think, for example, of François Tosquelles, Félix Guattari, and Frantz Fanon, who were skilled psychiatrists besides being social and political activists. Psychotherapy can be both political and rigorously practiced.

an argument, but rather as thoughts that help me frame (or provide a sketch of) psychoanalysis as a *political and poetic praxis*.

Philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear said that psychoanalysis is one of the ways in which philosophy becomes concrete. This means that ethical, political, epistemological, aesthetic, and ontological questions, which are traditionally the domain of philosophy, are not abstractions within psychoanalytic praxis. Instead, they arise as embodied problems that the analysand *singularly* confronts in response to their suffering (individual and of social origin), explored *in relation* to the *alterity* of the analyst.

An instance of this is that, although both academic philosophy and psychoanalysis involve interpretation, a crucial difference is that philosophical texts (the main object of interpretation of academic philosophy), unlike real people (whom psychoanalysts interpret), do not respond to our interpretations. Texts don't laugh or cry or yell because of our words and also our silences; they don't *literally* say: "no, you've got it all wrong!", or "you really hurt my feelings when you said that", or "I felt seen and real through your words", or "aren't you going to say anything?" This difference is a reminder of how philosophical ideas remain alive, fertile, and relevant only when they are grounded in human processes and relations with the other, in intersubjectivity, what Merleau-Ponty called the *lived world* of experience: what makes my "attitude towards him [be] an attitude towards a soul", and not an "*opinion* that he has soul", to borrow Wittgenstein's phrasing. This is a lesson that psychoanalysis teaches philosophy.[3]

<u>context</u>:

I see a world in crisis, marked by an infinity of burdens which include material and spiritual misery and a fading capacity to create and share genuine experiences with others. Psychoanalytic praxis, both inside and outside the consulting room, has something valuable to offer in this context. As psychoanalytic and political theorist Carolyn Laubender says in their book *The Political Clinic*, it can serve as a laboratory of *experiencing*, exploring and imagining

[3] The philosopher Stanley Cavell says that psychoanalysis and philosophy have yet to acknowledge a mutual intimacy they have resisted for years. Analysts are well aware of the perils and ecstasies of intimacy, the stuff that the narcissism of small differences is made of; a closeness that creates in us the need to establish differences as a way of preserving a sense of separateness, thus making us take pride of the small things that set us apart. But Cavell reminds us that "philosophy begins with, say, in the Socratic ambition, and may at any time encounter, an aspiration toward the therapeutic, a sense of itself as guiding the soul, or self, from self-imprisonment toward the light or the instinct of freedom." In this sense, he says that philosophy must recognize psychoanalysis and the "Freudian event" as part of its history. On the other hand, on strictly psychoanalytic grounds, analysts should mistrust Freud's too frequent denial that psychoanalysis is philosophy (the doctor doth protest too much, methinks.) In this sense, Cavell says that psychoanalytic practices are "sites of philosophy."

new forms of relations with the *other* in connection to systems and structures that shape sexuality, community, race, class, nationhood, identity, sexuality, democracy, power, and more –something I link to the psychoanalytic understanding of ethical life.

However, I am not claiming that imagining and practicing new forms of relating to the other within the psychoanalytic encounter necessarily entails (substantial) changes to socio-economic and political systems and realities that lie at the root of the suffering of so many individuals. Psychoanalysts Ricky Levitt and Christie Offenbacher, in their essay "The Regression in Psychoanalysis's 'Social Turn'", make this point when discussing psychoanalysts who focus on the social dimension of analysis: "...no amount of psychological analysis can be expected to address the causes of social problems that lie upstream of the symptoms that analysts encounter." They continue: "...psychoanalysis can and often does promote greater capacity for civic engagement; it is meaningful, important, and good enough as a practice which works through debilitating suffering and promotes facility with alienating symptoms." I read "alienating" here in both the psychological and political senses of the word "alienation." But they also add—and I agree—that making psychoanalysis, traditionally an "elite concierge service," publicly available must be a priority to socially or politically minded *practicing* psychoanalysts. The authors suggest that this "could start with a vision of state funding for public clinics, or a plan to secure roles for analysts in the most heavily trafficked and emotionally acute sites of social life: schools, hospitals, and social service agencies." Although the psychoanalytic clinic has an inherent and fundamental political dimension in its process and its potential effects, such as promoting greater civic engagement and fostering freedom by working through the societal forces that suppress human aliveness, this potential cannot be fully realized until psychoanalysis becomes part of the public sphere, part of the life of the city.

There is a valuable experience that the psychoanalytic process offers to the understanding of political and ethical life. The psychoanalytic encounter is a space where the intersections of *general* structures and histories with *particular* subjective structures and histories can be explored, revealing their *singular* expression in each subject and their distinctive form of suffering in the world. It is a setting that allows access, from *within* the structure of individual suffering, to the *open totality or unbounded whole of a world in crisis*; in this sense, symptoms, for example, may serve as entry points to the understanding of systems of power. The Stoics, St. Augustine, and Emerson, to name only a few philosophers, were no strangers to this idea: that the most individual (the most intimate) can be the most universal. This, perhaps, corresponds to what Hegel described as the *concrete universal*, or what Adorno,

in talking about the essay (isn't psychoanalysis an essay?), calls eternalizing the contingent.

4

The "psychotherapy-must-be-scientific" stance retreats into often outdated models (rooted in a certain naïve epistemological realism) of objectivity and scientific neutrality that assume data can be objectively collected from an external world without influencing it, disregarding that the act of observation and how it inevitably alters what is being observed. It functions as an avoidance strategy which allows practitioners to ignore the *normative* dimension of their own clinical practice, as if psychotherapy could ever truly be neutral: *apolitical*.

This avoidance also disregards the distinct epistemological stance of particularly psychoanalysis. Instead of forcing psychoanalysis into an empirically reductive framework, if we want to explore the possibility of psychoanalysis-as-science, we might consider a more appropriate model: a science of unconscious subjectivity. Imposing the norms of natural science obscures the intersubjective, socio-cultural, and political dimensions fundamental to its theory and *praxis*. These dimensions are essential to its aim of understanding the subjectivity of each patient and how culture and history are singularly crystallized in a psyche/soma.

Aristotle said that science concerns only the general, not the particular. Yet psychoanalysis challenges us to envision a science that operates at the intersection of the general and the particular in the study of its 'object': *subjective singularity*; that is, what makes a subject unique. Psychoanalysis invites us to ask: how can there be a science of what is *exceptional*? How can there be knowledge of singularity –that which is without equal, comparison, precedent–when knowledge, by definition, presupposes inclusion within a general category of comparable things? This is a task far more complex and compelling, intellectually and experientially, than the "psychotherapy-must-be-scientific" stance's idea of science allows for. And even then, the question remains: should psychoanalysis be regarded as a science at all, or as something different altogether?

5

Subjectivity is not an "object" in the way that natural sciences study objects. Unlike a rock, for example, we are not self-enclosed. Subjectivity is what renders us self-interpreting animals, to use Jonathan Lear's expression: open, shifting, self-generative (*poetic*), and embedded in a field of meaning and relation. It arises through an intersubjective matrix that can only be

understood from within, by participating in, and by being transformed by, the very process we are attempting to grasp. In psychoanalysis, the subjectivity of the other is not external to our own; it is consubstantial with it. The analytic process enacts this mutual implication: of self and other, theory and world, psyche and culture.

Within the domain of intersubjectivity, subjectivity is not an impediment to the understanding of its "objects"; it is, rather, the very condition for their meaningful appearance. Understanding is not created in isolation but is constituted through the relational field in which selves encounter one another, not merely as private beings, but as participants in a shared structure of sense-making. The public and private meanings that arise in this field do so through complex forms of interaction, conflict, and negotiation.

This intersubjective process, however, is not merely a contingent meeting of perspectives. As philosopher Jonathan Lear argued, beneath our empirical engagements with the world and others lies a deeper structure: the transcendental "we": a horizon of intelligibility that makes mutual understanding possible for us. This "we" is not a sociological group nor a cultural consensus, but the condition for any claim to meaning, truth, or normativity. It is the space we implicitly invoke whenever we assert, judge, or even misunderstand; a shared grammar that transcends the individual while also enabling subjectivity itself.

6

Critics of this intersubjective conception (particularly within psychoanalysis) sometimes dismiss it as a "postmodern" error, invoking postmodernism in a manner that is often outdated and, frankly, uninformed. They mistake the constitutive role of intersubjectivity in how the world and others appear to us for a descent into relativism. They charge that such a view collapses reality into 'mere' construction, as contingent as culinary preference. Yet this critique misses the point that acknowledging the constitutive role of the subject does not negate external reality or the psychic reality of the analysand (the other) but situates them within the intersubjective conditions that give it form.

Reality is not reduced to taste; rather, it is co-constituted through the horizon opened by the transcendental "we": a space where objectivity is never merely there but is always *ours.* Psychoanalysis involves the experience and exploration of the transcendental "we" that precedes and in-forms the individual "I" of the analysand. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, the "transcendental" in the expression refers to the constitutive *field* of pre-subjective or pre-individual bodily, linguistic, social, cultural, economic, political, and historical *relations and*

interactions with *others.* These interconnections are infinite in their complexity and scope and constitute the very ground of possibility for the individual's emergence and formation. At the same time, psychoanalysis delves into the *singular* position of the analysand's subjectivity within, in relation to, and shaped by, this structural and structuring transcendental "we."

For psychoanalysis, symptoms, for example, reflect a spectrum of deeply rooted relations through which individual subjectivity *struggles with, against, and within* the intersubjective world that enables and shapes it: importantly through conflicts, but also through processes of recognition and misrecognition, care and neglect, absence and presence, rivalry and solidarity, dialectical tension and impossible negotiation, and an infinity of others, intertwined in shifting patterns. The "talking cure" is possible because analyst and analysand are immersed in a *shared pre*-symbolic and *pre*-subjective field that precedes them both. The analytic field is created by what constitutes intersubjectivity from *beneath.* It is a field of meaning, but also of practices, norms, unformulated forms of sociability and morality, gestures, objects, affects, desires, beliefs, inchoate voices of history, the unsayable or not yet said, expectations, values, expressions of all kinds, and so on, that shape their encounter. This is what Wittgenstein calls the *imponderables of language*, and philosopher Víctor J. Krebs calls the *subtle body of language.* Analyst and analysand are unconsciously *attuned* to shared pre-individual and pre-reflexive linguistic patterns, and to socio-political forms of interaction which constitute what Wittgenstein calls the "weave of our lives". Language is public and social; therefore, psychoanalysis is too.

7

Psychoanalyst Giuseppe Civitarese says: "What in philosophy is tantamount to asserting with force, once and for all, that the *I* is a *We*, and the *We* is an *I* (Hegel, 1807), in psychoanalysis becomes equated with conceiving of the analytic situation no longer as made up of two isolated monads exchanging things, albeit unconsciously, but, as Lacan puts it, as a place where the *Ego* is the *Other*."

8

From its inception, psychoanalytic theory and practice have been deeply intertwined with the social. The various psychic malaises and symptoms people suffer (as noted in fragment 6) are, for psychoanalysis since Freud, the outcome of irresolvable tensions between subjective life

and the broader social order; hence: *civilization and its discontents*. For example, if we follow Freud's structural model, the ego emerges through layers of identifications with social others; the superego is the result of the internalization/introjection of cultural norms, prohibitions, discourses, and values; and even the body and its drives are shaped and traversed by social practices and discourses.

Freud elaborated these dynamics extensively in his theoretical and clinical writings, and they were reworked and reimagined through the long and complex history of encounters between psychoanalysis, social theory, critical theory, and activism. Psychoanalysis has also been socially engaged at a practical level since its beginnings, exemplified by Freud's establishment of free clinics grounded in a broader social mission.

Those who today advocate for a reintroduction of the socio-political into psychoanalysis (what has been termed the "social turn in psychoanalysis" in the United States) often overlook that this connection is far from new, as if reinventing the wheel. Conversely, the original, intimate entanglement between the social and psychoanalysis is frequently ignored by those who, in reacting to the commodification of therapy, retreat into a sterile scientism.

Scientism is the belief that science is the only legitimate way (or the model) to produce knowledge or understand reality. This mindset tends to reduce complex human experiences to quantifiable data, ignoring meaning, context, and subjectivity. From the perspective of scientism, a theory of subjectivity is often conceived as being unaffected by subjectivity itself, as well as by history and culture.[4]

But such detachment is anything but neutral. Any framework that isolates theory and practice from their socio-cultural conditions is already political, typically in conservative or even reactionary ways. It begins with the private individual and only then moves toward the public sphere of the social, thereby epistemologically and ontologically reversing the true emergence of subjectivity: from the public to the private. What I call *scientistic therapeutic individualism* is aligned with the political and economic individualism characteristic of capitalist liberalism: the notion that the individual (the private) is the primary unit from which social reality (the public) is then derived. (A more detailed examination of the relationship between the two lies beyond the scope of this discussion.)

[4] Skepticism toward scientism is important because it pushes back against reductionism and recognizes the complexity of human experience beyond mere data or biological explanations. However, sometimes this critique can become misdirected when it turns into a blanket rejection of science or empirical inquiry altogether, rather than a nuanced understanding of its limits.

9

Psychoanalysis has not been innocent. It has its own history of claims to socio-political neutrality in both its theory and practice. It is a claim that is blatantly contradicted by its history of misogyny, homophobia, alignment with psychiatric and institutional norms, and its theories of "normal" human development, which are presented as universal but are actually culturally and historically contingent.

Even the goals of various psychoanalytic approaches (coping with reality, adaptation, dispelling troublesome identifications, taking responsibility for one's desire, developing the capacity to play, analyzing defense, achieving psychic integration, strengthening the ego, learning from experience, traversing the fantasy, recognizing one's structural lack, etc.) are never neutral. They always reflect societal values that are diverse and historically fluid. These goals are embedded in social and political assumptions about "the good life", "life with the other", "health", and ultimately what it means to be human; these assumptions inevitably shape transference and countertransference. Asking what psychotherapy is for, or what it aims to achieve, or how it works, is inherently to ask the enduring ethical/philosophical question: *how should one live?* Psychoanalysis further asks: how should one live within (or given) the constitutive intersubjective field: both with the other, in relation to the other within oneself (the unconscious), and in terms of one's position within the structure of the transcendental "we"?

10

Acknowledging the political dimension of psychoanalysis does not imply that it should become a form of proselytism dictating how individuals should live their personal or political lives. In my view (and I am not pretending that it is neutral or apolitical), psychoanalysis should instead serve as a *transformative* (in psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion's sense) intersubjective experience, inherently cultural and socio-political in nature.[5] I believe that psychoanalysis is a form of *social praxis* which calls for a flexible, *heuristic, and conjectural* approach that echoes the Goethean line Freud cherished when speaking of psychoanalysis: "All theory, dear friend, is gray, but the golden tree of life springs ever green." Human life, and particularly its unconscious dimension, is more abundant than any *fixed* theory would ever be able to capture.

This is why I propose viewing psychoanalysis as a form of what I would call a *heuristic*

[5] I discuss this more in depth in my essay "The Political Potentiality of the Psychoanalytic Process."

conjectural thinking and praxis, in which analysts *oscillate* between a practical exploratory know-how *and* provisional speculative hypotheses that may fluidly take the form of models, new grammars or narratives, metaphors, and other ways of speaking about, and imagining, psychic structure, the workings of the mind, and of the intersubjective analytic field. Psychoanalytic hypotheses and practices are both periodically reassessed in light of the golden tree of life and experience with the other. They are re-evaluated to see if they illuminate or misguide our understanding, and to explore or discern their potential to foster *transformative thinking*. This is perhaps also a way of imagining *an-other* philosophy for our times.

11

Psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden says that transformative thinking in psychoanalysis, which doesn't always happen but establishes a horizon towards which to move in concert with the analysand, "involves recognizing the limitations of the categories of meaning currently thought to be the only categories of meaning (e.g. obey the law or break the law), and, in their place, creating fundamentally new categories –a radically different way of organizing experience– that had been unimaginable up to the point." This is why, as I said a few sections ago, psychoanalysis works at the level of the transcendental "we" that structures our subjective experience of the world and the ways we act in it. Ogden continues: "It is this striving towards transformative thinking that makes psychoanalysis a *subversive* [my emphasis] activity inherently undermining of the gestalt (the silent, self-determining terms) of the intrapsychic, the interpersonal, and the *social cultures* [my emphasis again] in which patient and analyst live." Can those "silent, self-determining terms" that shape the "gestalt of the intrapsychic" be understood as a description of alienation, the force that renders certain possibilities unimaginable within our social world? Might the transformative thinking embodied in psychoanalytic *praxis* confront these internalized structures of alienation, open the way to think and act otherwise, help make the unimaginable imaginable? Could this horizon mark a politically subversive project inscribed in psychoanalysis since its very beginnings?

12

What Odgen calls transformative thinking consistently aims to promote *human freedom* from the forces of alienation. Freedom, by definition, is both an ethical and a political concept. As such, psychodynamic psychotherapy cannot separate individual psychic pain from social forces

and power dynamics which make people suffer. It is a stance that resists this polarization and acknowledges that understanding emotional pain often requires seeing how personal experience and systemic realities intertwine. Our work must occur in the *liminal* and *dynamic* space between inner and outer life (a useful concept could be psychoanalyst Hans Loewald's notion of the *interpsychic*). When psychodynamic theory fails to integrate these dimensions, it risks irrelevance nowadays, even as it continues to be shaped by the very world it fails to acknowledge.

13

For Aristotle, *praxis* is the sphere of ethical action and the unfolding of our relations with the *other* (figured in psychoanalysis through the analyst and the analytic field) within the *polis*, that is, the political community and public life. In the analytic field, the relationship is not confined to that with the *analyst as other.* It also encompasses others represented by the multiplicity of internal "object" relations (the ways in which we internalize or recreate or relationships with others) that emerge in the transference–countertransference matrix, as well as the others constitutive of our usage of language. Every form of speech is a speech *act* that presupposes ano*ther*. As Freud observed, contemporary language is but a diminished remnant of a time when words were magic; that's why an insult from another can feel like a physical blow.

We must therefore recognize that the analytic situation is not simply a reflection of the socio-political world but a part of it (we often forget this inside the privacy of our consulting rooms), permeated and constituted by collective narratives, discourses, and power relations that are en-*acted* and require exploration. The transference–countertransference matrix, therefore, involves not only the vertical dimension of individual history but also the horizontal dimension of collective history.

In the psychoanalytic process, *praxis* activates forms of exploration and *experiencing* through which the analysand, precisely because they are in relation to an *other* (the analyst, who also represents the wider community), encounters the unconscious as a force that profoundly shapes ethical life in the sense previously described. Hence, Ogden invites psychoanalysts not only to keep in mind during a session the question, "What does this unconsciously mean?", but also to ask themselves, "What is happening *now* between us?" (that we are not aware of or that remains inarticulate or yet unspeakable). The presence of the other is indispensable, for as Ogden, interpreting Bion, reminds us: "two minds are required for

someone to think their most disturbing thoughts." The psychoanalytic encounter thus has, as Ogden reminds us, a pragmatic dimension, insofar as articulating disturbing unconscious thoughts influences how one relates to others (what is happening *now* between us?). This is inseparable from the ethical dimension of psychoanalysis discussed earlier.

14

By its very nature, the unconscious dimension of experience with the other and the other within ourselves, resists full theorization (and full integration within our ethical life), for it is precisely what we cannot or do not wish to know, or what remains unformulated. As Adam Phillips reminds us, to be an "expert" on the unconscious is a contradiction in terms. Just as it is a contradiction to think that we can be experts of our lives (psychoanalysis should help us dispel this fantasy).

This does not mean, however, that with sustained and unhurried practice psychoanalysts cannot find ways to engage, or become acquainted, with the unconscious. As Bion and other psychoanalysts have observed, this process involves not only cultivating a variety of forms of unconscious perception, negative capability, awareness, reverie, (free floating) attention and understanding, but also learning to sit with and tolerate *not-knowing*: discovering within that space new, creative forms of receptiveness and expression that reach and move the analysand and foster transformation. We must also learn that our overly rigid commitments to theory can themselves become resistances, defenses against not-knowing, and thus against the very practice of analysis, which is about establishing contact with what is unknown to both analysand and analyst (we could call this an "ethics of opacity", following writer and poet Édouard Glissant's ideas). Such rigidity not only obstructs analytic openness or hospitality but also interferes with the possibility of genuine human contact with the other.

15

I have been trying to propose alternative responses to the problems inherent in the media-commodification of psychotherapy; specifically, alternatives to the "psychotherapy-must-be-scientific" stance. In this context, let me return to the concerns that originally motivated my fragments, and further develop my proposals.

I share a critique of social media therapy, particularly when the language of social justice is co-opted into branding for superficial, commodified offerings. *However, I propose to*

read this phenomenon as a symptom rather than merely a failing.

One interpretation of this symptom is that it is a response to the failure of psychotherapists, including psychoanalysts (not all, but many), in the United States, to situate their theories and, above all, their praxis within the socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions of the violence of contemporary life. In doing so, they have lost touch with the contemporary ways in which the world continues to be broken, how ill societies make individuals ill, and how the commodification of life under liberal capitalism alienates us from the human and social vitality that makes life worth living.

16

We, the critics, all live in the same world as the "social media therapists", many of whom belong to the younger generations. We are shaped by the same forces, the same economies, the same platforms, the same metrics of validation. We, the critics, are not outside this system: we track the reach of our critiques through likes, views, and engagement data.

This is not a matter of individual hypocrisy; it expresses a broader cultural condition. I want to think that the critics (from a wide political spectrum), many of us whom are older, more experienced psychotherapists (but also psychiatrists, psychoanalysts—from different orientations—, philosophers, social, political and media critics, academics, what used to be called "intellectuals") intuit that the "social media kids," despite enacting all kinds of performative contradictions in their critique of capitalism, might nonetheless express nuggets of truth that critics are excluded from (or exclude themselves from). And we might feel a certain (as they say) FOMO, a certain fear of becoming irrelevant, especially those belonging to older generations of mental health professionals and the *intelligentsia* who are more established in the comfort of their knowledge (but doesn't positioning yourself as the one who knows always spring from a fear of not knowing?), and their middle- or upper-middle-class lives and jobs (along with the anxieties associated with the potential loss of these social positions).

17

Our reactions, like the trends we critique, are symptoms of a shared malaise. Many young media therapists and influencers who promote their practice through the language of identity and social justice are, perhaps unconsciously, grasping something crucial, a kind of cultural and psychological truth. Yet the work of this generation is often lacking in critical depth, historical

grounding/context, and self-reflection. This new generation of psychotherapists, shaped by social media, reflects contemporary realities and anxieties in their responses. Here are some of them:

- the necessity of situating emotional suffering within political life in a world in crisis with ever growing social and economic disparities;
- the call to reorganize and rethink training institutions and universities in which they may no longer have faith;
- the financial necessity of branding and marketing themselves as effectively as possible simply to make a living;
- the attempt to reclaim a sense of agency in a hopeless world where they (and we) often feel powerless;
- the pursuit of individual visibility that is many times sought through identity ("why identity?", it is essential to ask ourselves with critical curiosity and honesty), in a world structured to attack uniqueness and difference, erasing otherness through the narcissistic tentacles of hegemonic power structures: the status quo, ideology, the "norm" (this erasure also occurs when we people are reduced to numbers, statistics, percentages, and algorithms);
- the longing for community in a culture that fosters individualism and isolation ("the individual is the erosion of community", says philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy);
- the demand to recognize how the virtual has reshaped the world, subjectivity, relationships, and the clinic in ways older generations cannot grasp, and therefore often resist;
- the need for younger psychotherapists to construct professional discourse and language as a way of legitimizing their identity in a precarious economy, set against the wider crisis of the professions and the impoverishment of public discourse from academia, the media, politics, and traditional institutions;
- and the fact that, as the younger eyes of humanity, they are witnessing for the first time the world revealed in real time as a *Totality* that is collapsing and being destroyed; and as such, the fact that they are left grappling with a profound sense of helplessness, hopelessness, and despair.
- etc.

In short, they are expressing and enacting the forces of *alienation* from the vitality of the self,

from real others, from the unconscious, and from the world as home.

18

If we, as critics from past and not so past generations, fail to recognize some reflection of ourselves in the anxieties of these younger generations, our engagement with them risks becoming detached and marked many times by arrogance and sarcasm; a stance that speaks from above rather than alongside. For critical engagement (which is essential) to be meaningful, transformative, thought-provoking, or even shattering of illusions, it must strive to remain close to the experiences of younger (social media) therapists, rather than spoken from the pedestals of our authority, assumed wisdom, and the position of the Lacanian *sujet supposé savoir* (subject presumed to know). Only in this way can we engage them not just critically but with curiosity, and share our experience, skills, and knowledge with generosity. This is essential in creating social movements based on solidarity beyond the narcissism of identities and identity-making.

19

I invite us (critics and psychotherapists of earlier generations) to read these anxieties as interpretations of our own blind spots, resistances, and failures.

The work of the "social media kids" may feel performative or shallow, but perhaps it is we who struggle to articulate what they are enacting: a broken world that demands new forms of therapeutic *praxis* and meaning-making, forms that remain connected to the political realm in what is increasingly perceived as a fragmented world.

And it is precisely through social media (the very system that commodifies and distorts their message) that the world's brokenness is exposed, in real time, for the first time in history, both to them and to us critics. They are enacting something that is not quite therapy and not quite politics, something that maybe we haven't yet found the language for. Perhaps our task is not just to critique from a distance, but to help give voice to what is being said, however clumsily from our perspective, and engage with them, through these new, messy forms of *public* experience.

I believe that psychoanalysis as an institution, a *praxis,* and a critical discourse in the U.S. has failed in this endeavor by retreating into private spaces such as the consulting room, its training institutes, and the treatment thought of as something solely pertaining to the

"individual." It has also failed (with some notable exceptions) in analyzing the ways in which social media and virtuality have changed our psychic relationship to the world and how this has effects on the practice of psychotherapy and what it means.

Institutionalized psychoanalysis in the U.S. has, broadly speaking, failed to address the realities and anxieties mentioned in the previous list and, furthermore, make it part of institutional *praxis* (there are, of course, many exceptions, but which confirm the rule).

20

Psychoanalysis must be part of the public sphere or perish. Psychoanalysis must be a public service.

21

We live in modern capitalist societies that have lost faith in the transformative power of language, desire, eros, play, uncertainty: in short, *experience*. As philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes: "today we know that the destruction of experience no longer necessitates a catastrophe, that humdrum daily life in any city will suffice. For modern man's average day contains virtually nothing that can be translated into experience." This erosion marks a profound spiritual and ethical impoverishment of our lives.

The *pressure* and *need* to justify (which I tactically support) depth therapies to insurers, institutions, and society at large (through data, outcomes, and statistics) is a symptom of the deep impoverishment of our ethical and spiritual imagination and experience. Scientism, allied with liberal capitalism, reduces experience to data, alienating us from communal vitality. This reductionist logic privatizes life itself and disavows the transformative and therapeutic potential embedded in everyday human relatedness, especially in the conversations and encounters on which psychoanalysis is founded.

22

Both the commodification of mental health through social media and the insistence that psychoanalysis be strictly scientific are symptoms of a deeper spiritual and ethical misery. A political psychoanalysis must dare to confront this and offer alternatives, creating robust experiences in a world devoid of them.

23

This was always the heart of psychoanalysis, true to its anarchic origins, muted in the United States. Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, criticizing scientism: "People nowadays think that scientists exist to instruct them, poets, musicians, etc., to give them pleasure. The idea that they have something to teach them—that does not occur to them." In cultures shaped by scientism and capitalism, we forget, as philosopher Stanley Cavell put it, that our primary relation to the world is not one of knowing. Freud himself claimed everything he said had already been said by the poets. Psychoanalysis must challenge the ethical and spiritual poverty of scientism and capitalism by reminding us that our relation to the world is *poetic* and *aesthetic*: that is, belonging to the senses, sensitivity, lived experience, the body, play, affect, sensations, dreams, and creation. And this is not and should not be divorced from *praxis*. It is through *praxis* that our creative powers emerge and are tested with the other.

24

The term "poetic" originates from the ancient Greek *poiesis*, which refers to the process of *bringing forth* something new into being, something that previously did not exist. Psychoanalysis generates poetic events that lead to unexpected (psychic) changes: the emergence of the new. *Psychoanalysis is poetic, not productive.*

This is one way of thinking about a poetic unconscious that subverts established meanings, narratives, and norms. In this sense, the poetic unconscious is political: it opens a space for new ways of living together, new ways of creating experience.

Experience is:

- the enigmatic dimension of what happens between us, an engagement with what could riddle us;
- the struggle, and task, of arriving at the present, that moving place we never fully reach;
- an embeddedness in the fold of the world's flesh (which passes through the body and the social);
- a place to listen to the murmurs of the collective soul;
- a way of reclaiming unlived life by dream-thinking it (using Bion's, Ferro's, and Ogden's ideas);
- the inverse of what Ogden calls "omnipotent thinking": a restless urge to bend the world

to desire's shape, and thus a mind left unable to listen to all that lies beyond its will;

- (…)

25

Eros is the vehicle of the poetic, of *poiesis.*

Eros, or the erotic, is a linking *ur-force* that resists, from the ground up, oppressive attempts to foreclose new forms of psychic and social reality. It is the force of the *open*.

Eros, or the erotic, allows us to think about a politics of affects, of the underground, relatable to dreams, fantasy, unconscious communication, an originary aliveness that Donald Winnicott calls "creativity."

26

If there is to be a *social turn* in American psychoanalysis, it should also imply an aesthetic and *poetic turn* —one that develops through a dialectical, mutually enriching relationship with *praxis*.

27

Psychoanalyst Antonino Ferro says: "Bion's psychoanalytic theory (likewise those of Meltzer, Ferro, Ogden, etc.) can be termed "aesthetic" because it puts emotions/sensations, the *aesthesis*, at the center of thought, in that it is a radically intersubjective or social form of knowledge of reality."

The aesthetic and the intersubjective/social are unified in essence.

28

The non-directive approach in psychoanalysis through *free association* creates a space where unconscious material can surface without being forced or steered. In contrast to directive or 'solution-oriented' therapies, as well as the current forms of commodified *validate-all* 'social media therapy', it resists the temptation to impose structure, outcomes, cures, *and positivity*. This allows fragments of truth, desire, and vitality to break through repression and socially conditioned defenses. Perhaps these fragments can prefigure new forms of *social free*

association.

29

We don't need to (and cannot) claim to change the world from our consulting rooms (but, anyway, how do we change the world?). What we can do is let the world into them, and we can step out into the public world, offering something back. At its best, psychoanalysis has always been a project of freedom: ethical, political, and subversive. Its enduring potential lies in this commitment to liberation: not apart from the world, but within it: in the encounter with the other.