Human, Also Human

BEN KAFKA

The world is already there for all of us, but we—baby, patient, artist, or critic—first believe we have created it. Such a belief persists . . .

—Juliet Mitchell, “Theory as an Object”¹

The first time you hear a patient’s unconscious, I mean really hear it in all of its immediacy and intimacy, there’s a shock—no matter how much Freud you’ve read, how much analysis you’ve had, how prepared you think you are. My first patient was an eleven-year-old boy. We met two or three times a week at his school, a middle school for bright children from poor, mostly black and brown families. There we were in one of our sessions, which were held in the principal’s office, the closest thing the overcrowded school had to a private space. I was listening to him explain how, in different countries, there are different gestures for “fuck you.” He was pretty clearly enjoying the opportunity to use the forbidden word and make the forbidden gesture in my presence. In the United States it’s the middle finger, he told me; then showed me. In China, it’s the index and pinkie fingers. He paused for a moment over this gesture, which had triggered an association: Spider-Man. My patient then began to spin one of those vivid, violent daydreams that took up most of our sessions for the year and a half we worked together: Spider-Man is in China, he tries to shoot his web, but the people think he’s gesturing “fuck you” at them. So they cut off his fingers. He tries to shoot the web from his mouth, so they cut off his mouth. He tries to shoot it from his butt—by now the patient was laughing hard—they cut off his butt. Defeated, Spider-Man returns home to find his mother. He gets into bed with her. She gets pregnant and has a baby. When Spider-Man realizes what’s happened, somebody—it’s not clear who—cuts out his eyes. Spider-Man dies.

It was all there: riddle, incest, castration, even self-blinding. Not for the first time in this treatment I suspected that somebody was putting me on, a reaction that mirrored the boy’s own struggles holding on to reality.

It is not easy to go back to being a scholar after an experience like that.

Especially if you were a scholar like I was at the time, trying to sketch what I rather smugly thought of as a super-sophisticated, hyper-materialist theory of bureaucracy. The project very much belonged to its place of origin, Stanford, and its moment, the turn of the millennium, when Bruno Latour was moving from the margins of our intellectual life—isn’t he that guy who wrote that book on Pasteur?—to the place he now occupies as the most influential living figure in what Hal Foster has called our “post-critical” era. Latour’s manifesto “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”—first delivered as a lecture at Stanford in 2003—was published in *Critical Inquiry* the following year and is now the journal’s second-most-cited article. This despite the fact that, no matter how many times I read it, the article still makes no sense. He seems upset that people like me treat some ideas as “fetishes”—mystified, ideological, overdetermined by unconscious processes—while treating other ideas—say, psychoanalysis or historical materialism—as basically true. Over and over, he asserts that this is contradictory. But where’s the contradiction? To believe that I’m right and you’re wrong because I know more than you do may be irritating, it may be arrogant, it may, in certain circumstances, be andro-, ethno-, or anthropocentric, but it’s not contradictory.

For postcritical theorists, psychoanalysis is the Bastille, the Winter Palace, Tiananmen and Tahrir Squares—that is to say, a site whose value is simultaneously strategic and symbolic. In Latour’s latest book, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, for example, he refers to it as the “voluble mumbo-jumbo of psychology,” tossing in a couple of very approximate citations from Freud that don’t say anything like what I think he thinks they say—citations that Catherine Porter, generally a very fine translator, didn’t even bother to check against the *Standard Edition*. “How can one not be stunned by such a lack of self-understanding?” Latour asks, after kinda-sorta quoting Freud (p. 188). But had he studied Freud even a bit more carefully he might not have been so stunned. As Freud taught us, this lack of self-understanding is a basic human trait. It’s what distinguishes us from other animals, not to mention vegetables, minerals, and computers. Not because we lack self-understanding while computers possess it; it’s that computers no more lack self-understanding than women lack penises. And to believe otherwise is, yes, fetishism.

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In retrospect, my own turn away from the new materialisms was triggered by an interpretation posed by my analyst. By then I was on the tenure track, but instead of finishing my book, I was struggling with the insurance company, which I was trying to persuade to pay for my already very-low-fee treatment. In practice this

meant calling toll-free numbers (a terrible term—what takes a greater toll on us than toll-free numbers?) and arguing politely but firmly about the latest “explanation of benefits”—yet another misnomer, since these letters invariably neither explain nor benefit. I would argue and argue until the agent on the other end of the phone fell into a kind of helpless silence, which was also, of course, a very powerful silence. “I’m not sure what else to say, sir, that’s just how it works,” she would tell me. And that was that.

“Well, what did you expect?” my analyst asked one day. In years of work together it might have been the most significant interpretation she ever made. There I was, in my early thirties, working on a book about bureaucracy and its contradictions while teaching courses with titles like “Special Topics in Critical Theory.” I had no illusions about late capitalism, except, alas, its lateness. And I was perfectly aware of the place of analysis in the contemporary hierarchy of mental-health treatments: They would have paid for pills, no problem. Intellectually I knew perfectly well that I was not going to win my battle with the insurance company. Yet I continued to go to the sessions, fill out the claim forms, make the phone calls. Really, what was I expecting? And from whom was I expecting it?

It would be interesting to do a careful study of the language of “expectations” in Freud’s writings. Interesting and time-consuming: The term and its cognates are everywhere, especially in the correspondence, although it never quite emerges as a topic or concept (unlike, say, in Husserlian phenomenology or Jaussian literary theory, where expectations play a crucial role). The closest Freud came to actually theorizing expectations is in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, where he cites Kant’s dictum, in the Third Critique, that the comic is “an expectation that has turned to nothing.” “If I am expecting to catch a ball which is being thrown to me,” he writes, “I put my body into tensions which will enable it to meet the impact of the ball; and, should the ball when it is caught turn out to be too light, my superfluous movements make me comic to the spectators.”4 The comic emerges when expectations make contact with the unexpected. Of course, it’s much funnier when this happens to Freud than, say, to me.

Freud also cites Pavlov in this context, for the only time in his published work. He doesn’t seem to understand Pavlov’s experiment very well, but the point he uses it to make is nevertheless a crucial one: Expectations are also a form of excitement. Part of what makes them so exciting is that, even as we form them, we never quite know what to expect. Expectations have a way of leaving us terribly exposed, because they depend on the world’s cooperation in a way that many other fantasies—say, dreams—do not. Dreams represent wishes fulfilled. Expectations represent wishes that might or might not be fulfilled; they are fantasies plus suspense.

All of this was missing from the manuscript I was writing at the time, despite the fact that the archives on which it was based were full of fantasies, despite the fact that it was my own fantasies that had brought me to the archives in the first place. Indeed, every archive, every cultural artifact—including that greatest and most tragic cultural artifact of all, nature—is cleaved—held together, but also torn apart—by fantasies of one sort or another. In my enthusiasm over the powers of nonhuman objects I had somehow neglected the foibles of human ones. It was a quote from Barbara Johnson that helped set things right: “The more I thought about the asymptotic relation between things and persons, the more I realized that the problem is not, as it seems, a desire to treat things as persons, but a difficulty in being sure we treat persons as persons.”

Psychoanalysis tells the story of how a tiny, helpless infant—which, if you’ve ever seen one, is really not very different from any other newborn mammal—becomes a person, a person who is not only unlike other mammals but also unlike other people. This is both the empirical and ethical foundation of the analytic worldview, and it is as radical today as it was a century ago, maybe even more so. Psychiatry seeks out similarities. Ms. A comes into a psychiatrist’s office, Mr. B comes into a psychiatrist’s office, and as different as they are, they receive an ICD-10 code like F33.1, “Major Depressive Disorder-Recurrent-Moderate,” or F33.2, “Major Depressive Disorder-Recurrent-Severe Without Psychotic Features,” and a prescription for an SSRI or an SNRI. Sometimes they will even begin to feel better. By contrast, psychoanalysis, like pataphysics—coincidentally or not, both words appear for the first time in 1896—is a science of the particular. Ms. A comes into my office telling me she’s depressed, Mr. B comes into my office telling me he’s depressed, and although it would seem that they are the same—indeed, they both complain of sleeplessness or listlessness or hopelessness—they nevertheless came to these superficially similar symptoms in individual ways.

Psychoanalysis offers several different ways of understanding this story, each with a slightly different emphasis. For Freud the key was sexuality. Klein added aggression. Winnicott added playing. Lacan added speaking. Bion added thinking. Different emphases, with different technical implications, but fundamentally a shared fascination with individual development based on a movement between the internal and external world. An exchange of bodily materials, first and foremost—the mother’s milk, the baby’s feces. But also an exchange of messages—the mother’s gaze, her caress; the baby’s cry, or smile. Here again, it’s useful to think of


expectations, which, as we know, are never only our own but formed, even before birth, through exposure to our environments, both human and nonhuman. The question, which psychoanalysis is uniquely positioned to consider and occasionally even to answer, is how their expectations become part of who we are: the processes of identification, internalization, and interpellation.

I worry about the rush to embrace models of knowing and being that are either hostile to such dynamics or, increasingly, ignorant of them. It is as if theorists were unable to expand their understanding of nonhuman objects without simultaneously narrowing their understanding of human ones—when they are not simply erasing the difference altogether. Consider N. Katherine Hayles’s *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*, which is in some ways quite a compelling book, and in other ways quite a mystifying one. I assume the allusion in the title to *The Political Unconscious* is, well, conscious. Three decades later, and here we are: Althusser replaced by Deleuze, Greimas by Latour, and Lacan by Antonio Damasio.7

“It is fashionable nowadays to talk about a human/nonhuman binary, often in discourses that want to emphasize the agency and importance of nonhuman species and material forces,” Hayles writes early in her book. “To my mind, there is something weird about this binary. On one side are some seven billion individuals, members of the Homo sapiens species; on the other side sits everything else on the planet, including all the other species in the world, and all the objects ranging from rocks to clouds.”8 In the absence of an alternative binary proposed by the rocks or clouds themselves, Hayles offers her own: “cognizers versus noncognizers.” Among the former she counts “humans and all other biological life forms, as well as many technical systems”; among the latter, “material processes and inanimate objects” (p. 30).

From one perspective, of course, this distinction is a whole lot weirder than the one it is meant to replace. It is not at all self-evident that humans, other organisms, and technical systems all “cognize,” let alone that they do so in comparable ways. Much of the book—and it is well worth reading for this reason—is devoted to making this case. Invoking Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, Hayles defines cognition as a “process that interprets information within contexts that connect it with meaning” (p. 22). This function, in turn, is linked to a capacity to “exercise choice and make decisions” (p. 31). She then goes on to argue, drawing on secondary literature from fields ranging from plant biology to neuroscience to the economics of high-frequency trading, that cognition in this sense—not only calculation but the making of meaning—is indeed shared across multiple, otherwise dissimilar, objects. To be clear, not everything cognizes: Hayles distinguishes her

7. Though I would point out that her Damasio is not quite the same as the Damasio who has published such articles as “Neuroscience and Psychoanalysis: A Natural Alliance,” *The Psychoanalytic Review* 99, no. 4 (2012), pp. 591–94.
position from the “panpsychism” of somebody like Jane Bennett. But the number of things that do is nevertheless quite expansive: the office worker, the office computer, and the office plant are all said to possess this capacity. Together they form “cognitive assemblages.” Altogether they constitute a “planetary cognitive ecology.”

One problem for this argument—and Hayles is well aware of it—is that we are accustomed to thinking of cognition as a property of consciousness, which, even if possessed by some other animals—an ongoing debate within and between multiple disciplines—is not generally attributed to technical objects except when they make us really angry. This leads us to the next important part of her argument: The kind of cognition she means is not conscious but nonconscious. In humans, nonconscious cognition takes place at the neuronal level, inaccessible to consciousness but nevertheless powerfully influencing it. In other life forms, and technical objects, it emerges from other substrates. What this new concept accomplishes, in Hayles’s view, is a radical displacement of consciousness, one not so dissimilar from Freud’s discovery of the unconscious in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, in Hayles’s view, her discovery is even more radical than Freud’s, in that it extends beyond the merely human to embrace all other participants in the planetary cognitive ecology.

I am tempted to say, let a hundred flowers bloom—especially if they can cognize. Just because Tom McCarthy claims that he wrote his novel as an allegorical retelling of Beyond the Pleasure Principle does not mean that Hayles should be prevented from arguing that it is really about neurological impairment. But it is not as simple as that. Writing about this sort of theorizing in Artnet, Andrew Cole has argued that it represents a thinly disguised form of commodity fetishism. By inserting all the world’s objects into chains of equivalence, it effectively reproduces capitalism’s subsumption of use value by exchange value. Indeed, reading Hayles’s book, and books like it, I cannot help but wonder if we are being shown the world not as it is but as capitalism wants it to be, a world where “nonconscious cognizing” has replaced all other possibilities for thought or action, from the Bloomberg terminals of Manhattan Island to the bulldozers of Saadiyat Island.

This way of theorizing is also fetishistic in the psychoanalytic sense, that is to say, based on the disavowal of difference, in this case the difference between the human and the nonhuman. It’s not that Hayles can’t see the difference; she can, and tells us so at multiple points in her book. It’s that she can’t hold on to what she has seen for more than a paragraph or two before diverting her vision back onto an idea whose main function is to obliterate the difference that she has just glimpsed. In one moment that I found particularly symptomatic, she discusses the case of a US Air Force drone operator named Brandon Bryant, who had been diagnosed with post-traumatic-stress disorder. “Granted that drone pilots suffer far less harm than those they kill or maim,” she writes, “the fact that some of them

experience real ‘moral injury’ can be understood as one of the contributions human emotions make to cognitive assemblages—something unique to biological life-forms that has no real equivalence in technical systems” (p. 140). The difference between humans and nonhumans is simultaneously avowed (humans are not like technical systems because we have feelings) and disavowed (these feelings, it turns out, are “unique” to all “biological life-forms”). As in sexual fetishism, this operation, which takes place over and over again, ultimately serves a single, overriding purpose: to keep the intellectual excitement going.

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For several years I nursed the hope—was nursed by the hope, nursed myself on the hope—that my clinical work would allow me to return to my scholarship with some sort of sparkling insight into problems of interpretation; that I would be able to look at texts, images, objects, or events in radically new ways. The reality has been much less exciting but much more satisfying. I have little, maybe even nothing new to offer, only an ever-increasing admiration for the remarkable contributions that scholars past and present have made to thinking psychoanalytically about theoretical problems, cultural artifacts, and historical processes. At the same time, I have an ever-increasing impatience with colleagues and students who seem to have internalized the pressure to be constantly innovating, a dynamic that is perhaps less Oedipal than neoliberal, or perhaps a point—a sore point—where the two forces converge.  

Like so many analysts before me, I entered clinical training expecting that the work of interpretation would consist mainly of identifying the more or less unconscious impulses behind the patient’s free associations. A patient would tell me about a dream in which he gets into bed with his mother, impregnates her, has his fingers cut off, and ends up blind, and I would slowly, gently, but firmly interpret the Oedipal wish, the castration anxiety to which it gave rise, and the way in which we all blind ourselves to this scene through the act of repression. Not bad for a day’s work.

But in this context, at least, Haeckel was right: Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. The analyst’s individual development seems to repeat the development of the profession as a whole. Because while I may have been expecting to make clever interpretations about unconscious content, playing Freud to Dora, the fact is that this is only the smallest part of what I—what we—do, as Freud realized after Dora walked out on him. The discovery of the transference, the relationship between analysand and analyst in which all the intensity of the former’s psychic life, and no small part of the latter’s, is reactivated, marked the emergence of psychoanalysis into clinical maturity. Freud thought he was helping Dora grow up; in reality, she forced him to. “It is easy to learn how to interpret dreams, to extract from the patient’s associations his unconscious thoughts and memories, and to practice sim-

10. A dynamic, I would add, for which the students are largely blameless.
ilar explanatory arts,” he writes in the postscript to the case, reflecting on the reasons for its failure. “Transference is the one thing the presence of which has to be detected almost without assistance and with only the slightest clues to go upon.”

In its initial theorization, transference was understood to be a repetition, in the present, of an interpersonal relationship from the past: I relate to my analyst as if she were my mother. As theory and technique evolved, this understanding was considerably expanded to include what Klein, in a 1952 paper, called the “total situation.” The issue became less about how patients related to the person of the analyst than how they tended to reenact, in every aspect of the analysis, experiences from early life. This discovery was accompanied by another, also credited to Klein: the mechanism of projective identification, through which patients exert subtle but powerful pressure to bring the analyst, and the analysis, into conformity with their more or less unconscious expectations. Over the last few decades, the trend has been away from an understanding of transference as a passive experiencing of the analysis toward one that emphasizes the patient’s active, if unconscious, shaping of it. The work of interpretation is the work of making these processes conscious in the here-and-now of the analysis. Telling a patient that, as a young child, he wanted to murder his mother and marry his father will give rise to either knowing laughter or polite incomprehension. Telling a patient that, at this very moment, he is trying to murder or marry you—or pull you into wanting to murder or marry him—brings an immediacy to the treatment; that is, if it’s true, and if the patient is prepared to hear it.

The distinction between interpretation and description that has become such a contentious one in the humanities—Hayles discusses it at some length—makes very little sense from a psychoanalytic perspective, even as psychoanalysis is often presumed to be the model for all other forms of “deep” interpretation. Transference interpretations are descriptions: They describe what is transpiring between the analysand and analyst at that exact moment. Through such descriptions the patient becomes able to reflect on his or her love and hatred in new ways. The deepest interpretations, the ones that have the largest impact on a patient’s life, tend to be the ones that stay closest to the surface. “What did you expect?” my analyst asked. What I expected, I realized, was to get my analysis for free. By keeping money out of it, I could preserve the fantasy that ours was a relationship based purely on love. And so long as I could maintain that fantasy, the hatred inside me, including whatever hatred I may have been feeling toward her, would never have to be examined. Instead it got enacted, on a semi-regular basis, with anonymous insurance agents.


Or, to put it another way, it got enacted within a “cognitive assemblage,” including not just insurance agents but paperwork, telephones, terminals, servers, databases, actuarial algorithms, medical-review panels, my employer’s human-resources department, state and federal insurance regulations, and so on. The transference object was in triplicate: my analyst, my analysis as such, and a whole constellation of other actors both human and nonhuman. This latter constellation is also a transference object—a “total situation”—in which early experiences of love and hatred are reactivated in the present. Our relationships to these situations are always governed by unconscious processes—processes that can be studied, understood, and, under certain conditions, transformed.

After all, the task is not only to interpret—or describe—the world. The psychoanalyst Harold Searles puts it well: “My clinical experience, as well as my personal experience, suggests that to the extent to which an individual is unable to respond to other human beings in his adult life on their own terms, free from transference distortions in his relatedness to these other persons, he is to that extent unable also to respond to his current nonhuman environment in its own right.”

Searles, an analyst at Chestnut Lodge, an asylum in Rockville, Maryland, that was, at mid-century, one of the most progressive such institutions in the country, noticed that nonhuman objects played a central role in the transferences of his schizophrenic patients. Some patients experienced him as nonhuman: “How long ago did they install you at Chestnut Lodge—eight years? I didn’t know the Univacs had been invented that long ago!” (p. 421). Others experienced themselves this way, and acted accordingly in their relationship with him. He describes one thirty-one-year-old paranoid-schizophrenic woman, for example, whose core delusion was that “I’m a machine … I have no control over myself.” She was convinced that a sinus operation at age seven, the removal of a benign tumor in her breast at age fourteen, and an appendectomy at age nineteen had all served as pretexts for “them” to install complex metal machinery in her body. In line with this delusion, she comported herself robotically, keeping her face expressionless, her tone flat, her phraseology fixed. When, in the second year of treatment, she began to cry, she attributed it to “them” releasing poison gas in the room. Self, other, environment: “All these were experienced by her as being equally unmanageable, inanimate objects” (p. 192).

Such delusions do not only afflict schizophrenics. At times all of us experience our nonhuman environment as unfathomable and undifferentiated. A photocopier breaks down and we find ourselves thrown into a deeply regressed state in which infantile feelings of helplessness, confusion, rage, and persecution overwhelm us. In moments like these, the boundaries between human and nonhuman collapse into something terribly inhuman: It’s out to get me, it’s doing this on purpose, and so on. We become, if only for a moment, like Searles’s patients, unable

to maintain even this most basic distinction. In fact the analyst is not a computer, the patient is not a robot, and the photocopier is not out to get us: It simply hasn’t been serviced properly following the latest round of budget cuts by the dean. The promise of psychoanalysis is that it can restore our capacity to respond to all of these objects—human and nonhuman alike—in their own right.

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All matter lives. All lives matter. We are at risk of losing our commitment to specificity. “BEYOND SEXISM, RACISM, SPECIESISM, WE ARE ALL THE SAME,” writes Timothy Morton on his blog. No, we’re not. Not even close. And we’re not doing anyone, or anything, any favors by pretending that we are. Theory seems to have entered a manic phase. Not manic in the psychiatric sense, but in the sense that Klein gave the term: a denial of psychic reality, an idealization of self and object, a feeling of triumph, a sense of omnipotence. Theories of something become theories of everything; experts in something become experts in everything. “My whole body is a penis!” a friend’s three-year-old son recently announced excitedly. “Everyone’s whole body is a penis!” If it’s all the same, then he can know it all. And to know it all is to feel very powerful indeed. So much depends on his capacity to relinquish this position, to overcome the anxiety that it defends against, and to learn to respond to others in their own right.

“I trained as a psychoanalyst undoubtedly for personal reasons,” Juliet Mitchell has written, “but deliberately because I could not see how I could continue my interest if I did not have the material base—the clinical work—from which the theories arose” (p. 28). It has been nearly a decade since I first sat down with the boy with the Spider-Man fantasy. Like Mitchell, I had entered training for both personal and theoretical reasons only to discover that the distinction itself was not tenable. As she has argued, our relationship to theory is also determined by the transference. To theorize is to be cast back to our earliest attempts to make sense of the world around us, and to reexperience whatever feelings of love and hate those attempts aroused in us. There is, after all, a reason we take our theories so personally. Whatever else we may be—actants, nonconscious cognizers, apostles of posthumanism, psychoanalysts—we are also human.