Pedagogy and Clinical Knowledge: 
Some Psychoanalytic Observations on Losing and Refinding Significance 

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We are surprised in reading Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis’ dictionary entry on trauma by how close it comes to describing the movements of ordinary learning. They present trauma as posing three psychical problems: it is an event within one’s life characterized by intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the force of its aftereffects. Freud, too, must have been surprised when he came to refine this concept over his long career, wavering between emphasis on outside events and external causes and on internal events and their power of condensation, substitution, and displacement. What Freud came to was how psychical reality structures and is then structured by a compulsion to repeat the trauma. Both conceptualizations raise interesting dilemmas for symbolization because of trauma’s untimely time but also due to a constitutive feature of learning. Something happened, but something did not happen. Learning and trauma work as deferred action, sliding between external and internal events, eluding yet marking both. The actual event and its phantasmagoric reception vie for the same space; yet, in having to do so, trying to symbolize, so traumatized, becomes the conflict. This intensity opens our psychoanalytic discussion: when thinking about trauma and learning, we wonder where they come from and where they go. We suggest that for understanding the uses of and defenses against knowledge in teaching and learning, this must be left as an open question.

For now, we begin with our reasons for reconsidering, through a clinical theory of learning, the psychical dilemmas that trauma invokes. First, the qualities of trauma and the qualities of learning converge. There
is a breakdown of defenses, helplessness comes to the fore, and knowledge is felt as a force without being secured by meaning and understanding. But this means there is something ordinary and everyday about both. Second, significant learning entails a dual action: new knowledge becomes entangled in the force of old phantasies of learning events, rendering both as a problem of transference and so of interpretation. Simply put, learning is not the other side of trauma, but trauma’s constitutive and belated character.

If trauma is the incapacity to respond adequately to a traumatic perception, a central question that trauma studies poses to pedagogy is how we can think about perceiving, receiving, and reconciling knowledge in teaching and learning. In conceptualizing the experience of learning through theories of trauma, we ask: What makes knowledge difficult in teaching and learning and how can these difficulties be narrated and learned from? Whereas the first question may seem to reside in the content of knowledge, the second foregrounds the experience of encountering the self through the otherness of knowledge. Moreover, if the first question takes its inspiration from psychoanalytic theories of trauma, the second returns these theories to the more ordinary realm of trying to know one’s narrative acts through the psychical dynamics that animate learning and resistance. A further question can now be raised: what happens to the subject of knowledge when difficulties become both an obstacle to and the means for an encounter with the unexpected? Britzman has termed these events “difficult knowledge,” a concept originally meant to signify the relations between representations of social trauma in curriculum and the individual’s encounters with them in pedagogy (Lost). While clearly there is and should be “difficult knowledge” in the curriculum, the sense we develop in this paper is made dynamic and intimate: “difficult knowledge” as a concept for understanding the shadowy internal world of phantasy and its object relations.

Initially, we considered the problem of “difficult knowledge” through Shoshana Felman’s provocative discussion on crisis and education (“Education”), and we used her theory of trauma as a metaphor for affecting pedagogy (Pitt and Britzman). Indeed, Felman’s discussion is an inquiry into the similarities between breakdowns of meaning in testimonies of historical trauma and encounters with them in university classrooms. We grappled with Felman’s hauntingly insistent questions that opened her self study and in doing so became magnetized by the imagery of education as crisis:
Is there a relation between crisis and the very enterprise of education? To put the question even more audaciously and sharply: Is there a relation between trauma and pedagogy? In a post-traumatic century, a century that has survived unthinkable historical catastrophes, is there anything that we have learned or that we should learn about education, that we did not know before? Can trauma instruct pedagogy, and can pedagogy shed light on the mystery of trauma? Can the task of teaching be instructed by clinical experience, and can the clinical experience be instructed, on the other hand, by the task of teaching? (1)

Others, too, have worked with these key questions. David Krell, for example, asks whether trauma can learn from philosophy. For us, the productivity is not so much in how trauma theory can enliven fields of thought, although it certainly has done that. Rather, our present inquiry emerges from how questions that can only begin to be formulated after the breakdowns of meaning, self, and society, regardless of disciplinary boundaries, animate and threaten the very concept of learning.

Reading Clinically
In our early reading of Felman, what we could not know then was that there remains in the questions she raised a stubborn kernel of trauma and also a theory of clinical knowledge. Just as Freud raised the question of outside cause and the internal workings of trauma, we have learned to ask: How does one tell the difference between responses to traumatic knowledge that defend against the effects of that knowledge and responses that are symptomatic of the breakdown or failure of those defenses? This difficult question is where clinical knowledge begins, for this knowledge depends upon an openness to the twists and turns of indeterminacy. In her discussion of Melanie Klein’s clinical writing, Juliet Mitchell suggests the terms under which such knowledge is made:

Being a good clinician is not the same as being a good theoretician, but being good at identifying with what one observes in order to follow what is going on in something other than oneself and then describing it constitutes an intermediary level of conceptualization. . . . Klein identifies and describes what intuitive identification and clinical observation are about: areas of confusion, fusion, lack of boundaries, of communicating without the differential structures of speech. (29)

Even when there is speech, what would it mean to listen for “areas of confusion, fusion, [and] lack of boundaries”? How then can we think about
what occurs when we try to respond to a text, an event, or the other? Can we say that the history of one’s own learning is caught, recapitulated, and refined in the presence of trying to learn? These questions, dependent as they are on suspending a sociology of trauma, represent our conceptual shift from learning about the qualities of trauma to an inquiry into the traumatic within learning itself, a traumatic perhaps hinted at by Felman when she wonders what it means for trauma to instruct pedagogy.

Our initial attraction to Felman’s opening question—namely, whether trauma can instruct pedagogy—was its audaciousness, its interest in linking the unconscious of history to the unconscious of pedagogy and its insistent hope that from the breakdown of meaning significance shall be returned in a pedagogical relationship. Indeed, this view begins in cultural dynamics of ignorance and forgetting as a defense against knowledge, the idea that trauma is a defense against knowledge. However, in our first reading of Felman’s questions, we felt she invoked an outside we know so well: the enterprise of education, as institution, as credentialization, as socialization and, so, of repetition and acting out. It is an enterprise, so the reasoning goes, that has failed both to prevent the repetition of historical catastrophes and to sustain occasions for learning from the ruins of history. It is an enterprise that cannot transform its own imaginary. And yet, this depiction of an obdurate institution of education as the sole obstacle to learning may not be adequate for two reasons. There is, first of all, a particularly thorny quality to learning itself. Moreover, swinging between idealizations of and subsequent disappointments in education may serve to obscure the question of how the enterprise of education always bears the symptomatic traces of the breakdown of a culture’s defenses and a learner’s efforts in trying to know.

Many have noted this paradox of learning. Julia Kristeva, for example, terms the Twentieth Century, “Our Psychoanalytic Century” (Klein). Ours is a century of unprecedented interest in interiority, a century of testimony and trauma, of witnessing and memorialization, of genocide and human rights, of literacy and self, of the unconscious and the indirection of its narration. Its age is contradictory, and elsewhere Kristeva has described this time as both radical—“one of education and information”—and, as normalizing, to the extent that one risks becoming, precisely due to education and information, a patrimonial subject (Revolt 19). This is a peculiar helplessness where we are, “armed for discourse with only a remote control” (29). It can seem as if we have many options but no choices at all.
While new forms of helplessness lead us to the depressed subject, Elizabeth Roudinesco, in her defense of psychoanalysis, views society itself as depressive. Her analysis returns us to the failure of the defense when she observes how managed health care renders the talking cure irrelevant, too slow, without cost effectiveness. Moustafa Safouan considers a more intimate refusal that comes before and is animated by the depressed society. When asked in his seminar, "What is the drive at work in censorship?" He replied, "Allergy to truth" (41). Where there is "allergy to truth," there may be education, but it will be education without significance, a melancholic structure of splitting and nagging loss, of testing and accountability. Even to notice these dynamics, however, suggests there is more to the story of learning than its breakdown in educational betrayal. Again, when we first worked with Felman's discussion of crises in education, we, too, were trying to link the unconscious of history to the unconscious of pedagogy. Yet, as trauma touches upon and animates the limits of pedagogy, what can be said to be lost when the loss is all that is felt?

To think the problem of loss, we came to see the more audacious of Felman's questions as those that open the potential relation between teaching and clinical experience. The qualities of clinical knowledge made from clinical experience are central to psychoanalytic thinking, where the clinical case does not illustrate theory but is itself a form of theory and where exploring the pathological, or the exaggerated and rough edges of experience, becomes a model for thinking more typically about everyday breakdowns in meaning. Clinical knowledge condenses two relations, best characterized by de Certeau's discussion of the gap of historiography: "the relation between the 'meaning' which has become an object, and the 'meaning' which today allows it to be understood as such" (34). That is, clinical knowledge is both an object and a means to affect its own qualities of experience and understanding; it is not something to be applied to another but rather a mode of relationality, a third space that allows the self and other their respective depth, surprise, aliveness, and difference. Clinical knowledge is not an apparatus but the thinking of it.

In psychoanalytic writing, the case usually is a study of the analyst's practices with the analysand. We are privy to the analyst's frustrations, cul de sacs, and countertransference. Readers enter a small, dramatic world qualified by the surprising ways an interpretation can be theoretically right and practically wrong, and where free association can narrate intimate breakdowns. What is represented, then, is not the subject but an
unusual relation and dialogue between people. One learns what slow work it is to change one’s perceptions, but also, due to the transference—or the ways in which conflicts are recollected, repeated, and worked through—one can observe the difficulty, at the level of language, of influencing and being influenced. One learns how difficult it is to tolerate, from different sides, the problem of having to learn.

As we think about our work with Felman’s essay in our seminars, we now appreciate how difficult it is for our students to consider her writing as clinical knowledge. However sophisticated they may be as learners and knowers, their sense of pedagogy resides stubbornly in a view of the teacher as making conscious decisions, even if these decisions result in unanticipated and, indeed, unnoticed consequences. Just as clinical experience testifies to the breakdowns of meaning, so, too, do Felman’s opening questions establish the identity of education as one of crisis; indeed, she argues there can be no significant learning without crisis. It is where Felman speculates on the difficult and different work of the teacher—indeed the asymmetrical difference between student and teacher—that meaning breaks down in our seminars. Writes Felman, “Looking back at the experience of that class, I therefore think that my job as teacher, paradoxical as it may sound, was that of creating in the class the highest state of crisis that it could withstand, without ‘driving the students crazy’—without compromising the students’ bounds” (53). Here, the usual story of educational betrayal takes a personal twist. Our students seem to resent Felman’s sense of the teacher’s job and the teacher’s difference from the students. Their interpretation of this claim may be provoked by their prior investments in and present resentments toward the teacher’s authority. The illusion they both disclaim and occupy is that the teacher is capable of instilling fragmentation—which is to say, even bringing the crisis to the class—then, the teacher can also recognize the crisis when it arrives and so reintegrate the authority of meaning.

Students captured the chaos of these events by terming them “pedagogical meltdowns.” This phantasy—one that we have seen operate in our seminars on Felman’s essay—has many positions: the teacher has and is the blow torch, the students imagine the position of the teacher as both sadistic and the one-presumed-to-know, and the students must take back the blow torch to make the teacher’s pedagogy melt. A pedagogical meltdown is also a metaphor for getting rid of the catastrophe of the pedagogical. What is experienced as a meltdown is both a refusal of and a witness to the idea of pedagogy as a relation. Phantasies are the denial and so the defense against this relation, but they are also the emotional
material for its enactment. Where Felman insists that it is the work of pedagogy to create crisis, our students' response to her insistence suggests that crisis may never be far from the scene of pedagogy.

We ask students to read Felman's essay, which describes her work with university students' engagements with literature and autobiographical narratives of profound social trauma, for the articulate story she tells about the dynamics of losing and finding meaning and for her capacity to think psychoanalytically about teaching and learning. For students reading Felman's essay, however, something unanticipated can be unleashed. Our students identify with Felman's students and in solidarity turn against the teacher who is in the room with them. But in this fantasized grammar of anxiety, there is one more turn where the suffering one feels becomes suffering one cannot avoid inflicting upon others. The anxiety students experience might be expressed like this: "Just as you are destroying your students, my students will be destroyed." Here then is the play between being persecuted and having to persecute and, too, a return of a primal catastrophe.

There is, in pedagogical meltdowns, profound distress, hopelessness, and helplessness made from feelings of misunderstanding and being misunderstood. Even one's own autobiography of learning, one's own history, feels useless. There is a breakdown of preassigned meanings, a loss of mastery, and an incapacity, on the part of both teachers and students, to respond adequately. An aspect of trauma studies useful in describing the current breakdown is made by Cathy Caruth when she terms trauma as an "unclaimed experience" and, paradoxically, an opening toward a rethinking, "permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not" (11). What makes trauma traumatic then, is the loss of understanding and the anticipation of an event that has no history and so no adequate symbolization. And yet, history is aroused, not as an archive but as a potential space. The tension is that where there was no understanding, there history shall become, but its becoming will be marked by the very dilemma it seeks to overcome. Loss, it turns out, has an afterlife; its force is carried by and sustained in negation, repression, and repetition. Our depiction depends upon the distinctions Freud invoked when he tied the knot of understanding to the resistance to cure, where, paradoxically, the resistance is a strange and aggressive form of knowledge. Narrative, in general, and free association in particular, will suffer from recursiveness and the future anterior. Freud posed this slow process as one of remembering, repeating, and working through. "We learnt," Freud writes in his discussion of the journey of symptoms, "that the
patient repeats instead of remembering, and repeats under the conditions of resistance" (151).

While we have described something of the ferment that "unclaimed experience" also provokes, there is, for us, a prior dilemma—namely, how do we understand primary experiences such as our susceptibility to traumatic perceptions? And what theory of learning is at stake in these crises? Is it also the case that where not understanding occurs, there learning shall be aroused? Significantly, should the problem of not learning, of not having an experience, and even of the hatred of reality be included under the sign of trying to learn? Indeed, one difficulty of the popularity of trauma and testimonial studies in education is that it seems to serve a reality principle, a cautionary explanation for crisis in the classroom. And yet, to return to an earlier scene, there remain thorny psychoanalytic questions. From where does emptiness come? And how is history made from nothing?

When trauma is only conceptualized as a "wound" inflicted by the outside, or as experienced through ordinary conscious time, the very tension of the status of interiority and object relations (and, so, of the problem of how psychological significance is made from the ruins of learning) becomes irrelevant. While an argument can be made that the evacuation of psychical reality is one symptom of traumatic perception, many analysts have noted, following Freud's famous shift in treatment from suggestion to free association, that pointing out the resistance does not cure the resistance. Indeed, something more happens in this contest. André Green places the tension within the qualities of repression:

> What in conscious thought corresponds to a negativity of refusal refers in the conception of the unconscious to a silent claim, i.e., repression in the first topographical model and the ego's unconscious defenses in the second. . . . Repression, says Freud, exists between flight and condemnation. . . . The situation gets worse when Freud has to deal with the méconnaissance of the patient who is deaf and blind to the analyst's interpretation of his defenses. In this case it is not resistance which is an obstacle but resistance to becoming aware of resistance. (Work 43)

Repression is a defense and its wavering between "flight and condemnation" is one we observe when our students begin discussing the Felman essay. Some become angry at Felman. Others mistake Felman's narrative for the events themselves and then blame Felman for misrepresentation. They wish to hear directly from the students in her seminar. They resent
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her depiction of the students as speechless and as in need of the teacher’s authority. Even though our students identify with Felman’s students, they do not occupy the same position, and it is the difference between them that allows us to catch sight of the crisis of learning, a crisis we have come to understand to be not created by the teacher but to be something undergone in the presence of the teacher. Where Felman draws our attention to the similarities between the crises of history as borne by testimony and the crises of psychoanalysis as borne by the unconscious and its suffering, our scene of reading her essay with our students is caught up in a crisis of the present in learning and pedagogy.

This “other” crisis crystallizes in our seminar when Felman describes her pedagogical task as one of returning students to significance, what we will explore later in this paper as symbolization. Felman’s students, in addition to reading literary testimonies, viewed a videotaped testimony of a woman who had survived the Holocaust, and their distress became manifest in a contradictory aftermath of the class during which the videotape was screened. The initial response was one of silence, but Felman soon learned of events occurring outside the class. Her students wanted to talk about the session, but they “did not quite know what to say” (48). They talked to each other and to anyone who would listen about what had happened to them, but they also worried that their talk did not matter, that their response could not be of significance in the face of the horror and suffering that the testimony described. Felman consulted with Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst and coauthor of the book in which this essay appears, and reports that “we concluded that what was called for was for me to reassume authority as the teacher of the class, and bring the students back into significance” (48). Felman’s characterization of the breach as one of faltering significance reminds us of Kristeva’s inquiry into signifiance as a capacity for creating unity among representation of feeling states, of language, and of thought (Sense). When Felman asks her students to speak to their distress by writing about what they were experiencing, we interpret the gesture toward significance as a move invested fully with the risks as well as the pleasures of signifiance. Our students, however, hear a demand that Felman’s students move out of their direct experience and (too quickly, too abruptly) into the indirection of language. They collapse the teacher’s authority with the authority of language. The teacher’s demand is felt as imposition but also as a trespass. This strange constellation, where boundaries disappear and are redrawn and where there seems to be nothing at all to learn is, nevertheless, transposed onto another scene: our students believe that education’s crises are meant for other
students, and they may want to learn how to bring the crisis to their classroom.

**Other Historical Obstacles**

Green’s insight into the pull between flight and condemnation and Kristeva’s characterization of *significance* allow us to speculate on a further problem: it is difficult to know when we are confronting an obstacle to learning and when we are making an obstacle to narrating learning (see Pitt and Britzman). Indeed, it is our claim that what makes for the difficulty of narrating one’s learning is not the traumatic content of history and the gaps such content create for understanding. Rather, there is what Donald Winnicott has paradoxically called a “benign trauma” within the psychical work of trying to learn from experience (135). He created this term to account for a phenomenon he encountered in his practice when a response to an event seemed so inappropriate and mistaken that it could be used as a way of acknowledging an earlier traumatic event. This is the phantasy of the transference, and it is our contention that such phantasy also characterizes learning. While the analytic setting is different from the classroom, if the teacher can pay attention to the student, part of what can be witnessed is the student’s biography of learning. That is, learning is a history of making relations and a narrative of this history (Pitt).

Felman’s questions consider the relation between trauma and pedagogy and between the scene of analysis and the classroom, but the dynamic movements within these relations can be neither predicted nor intended. This is so because in psychoanalysis, the historical is, as Green suggests, “a very difficult notion to handle” (“Experience” 2). Green imagines six difficulties, all of which can be subsumed under the question of phantasy. History for the psyche is made up of a combination of reality and phantasy, of avowal and disavowal, of condition and promise, of memory and forgetting. In Green’s terms, the historical is a combination of “what has happened, what has not happened, what could have happened, what has happened to someone else but not to me, what could not have happened, and finally, . . . a statement that one would not have even dreamed of as a representation of what really happened” (2–3). We think this elasticity is a good characterization of what learning is for the psyche and why learning is also an unlearning.

Caruth suggests that history is aroused by the ruins of not understanding. For Green, history is also a history of desire and so, even if aroused, the veracity of history will always be a question. Green suggests something of the ways the world of object relations “dematerializes” the external
world and so makes something unusual from that which is on offer. We borrow the concept of dematerialization from Leo Bersoni's introduction to Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, where the former writes, "Psychoanalysis does not deny the world's existence, but it does document the procedures by which the mind dematerializes the world, absorbs it into a history of fantasy-representations" (xxi). History, again, is a problem, and for Green the work of establishing history for the psyche is indeed difficult. A difficulty that now belongs to a clinical knowledge of learning concerns trying to understand and accept the status and reach of phantasy as the material for knowing reality (see Britzman, *After-Education*). Another dimension consists of a mistiming, the psychoanalytic deferral: one learns before one understands, and this quality of learning "too early" means that knowledge must pass through and be marked by both the learner's anxiety and wishes. In many contemporary university classrooms, attention to the dynamics of deferred action is counterintuitive. This is so because the notion of knowledge that is most valued in learning from traumatic historical events concerns conscious awareness of historical facts previously denied or ignored. Indeed, part of what is so startling about Felman's intervention is the acknowledgment of the difficulty of the encounter. There is a concomitance of an overwhelming urge to talk with the loss of language. She describes an enactment of trauma that subverts any notion of a simple transition from denial to acceptance and then on to knowledge.

The idea that we are allergic to the truth, to return to Safouan's claim, agitates the imperative to remember but may elude awareness of the self who remembers. This is another side of unclaimed experience. To not notice the potential of what Winnicott calls "benign trauma" is to remain in the paradox of not learning. Elsewhere, Felman (*Jacques*) has characterized resistance to knowing as "ignorance" but Green (*Work*) has now re-inflected such resistance as "resistance to becoming aware of resistance" (43). Here, knowledge is awareness of the resistance made through the work of creating emotional significance, of trying to know another reality, and of expanding the boundaries of phantasy and so of reality. To encounter this understanding of learning, we turn to clinical experience of Winnicott, who wrote of the fear of breakdown, to Wilfrid Bion, who describes the difficulty of learning from experience, and to Marion Milner, whose work on symbolization and illusion helps us conceptualize learning and teaching as an object relation. Can curiosity into the ways in which emotional significance is constructed, delayed, and resisted be of use in how we understand learning?
Three Models for Learning and Interpretation

Winnicott, Bion, and Milner have left us rich and evocative descriptions of some obstacles to learning that they witnessed in their analytic practices. We selected a few of their ideas because of their shared interest in symbolization and thinking, two dynamics that belong to the work of learning. Symbolization is not the same as representation in that what is symbolized is a relation rather than an object. This is akin to Kristeva’s significance. Green suggests that to symbolize a representation requires a double action: one makes a unity between two things and includes in the new representation its earlier history of their disunity. Symbolization is both a relation and a theory of the origins of relationality. Green’s other way of thinking about symbolization is as a conception: “To conceive is here to form a concept as well as to imagine a gap between the two states of separation and reunification” (Thirdness 47–48). The reach of the symbolization is in its inclusion of negativity: symbolization enables us to think about that which inhibits as well as that which conveys meaning.

While there is overlap among the three thinkers—they are, after all, object relations psychoanalysts—we treat them separately so that their different idioms (Bollas) might be discerned and appreciated. We follow Bion’s observation, as reported by Milner, that, while one can get by with a single theory, the many models generated by a theory can and should be enjoyed (“Winnicott”). Models, on this view, do not cancel each other out but enrich and enliven each other as well as the phenomena they embrace. We read our students’ response to Felman’s essay through each of the three lenses in an interpretive mood of opening rather than settling meaning, something that our theorists have helped us to appreciate as an antidote to “the allergy to the truth” (Safouan).

For Winnicott, knowledge can be a defense against experience. Here, we want to signal what happens when new knowledge gets caught in the clash between previous and present events. The problem is not the repetition of the failure of an adequate response to an event that then represents a crisis. In Felman, for example, one encounters knowledge and one is struck a blow. In Winnicott, one refuses the encounter with knowledge because one worries that the knowledge will devastate. This is an anticipatory and preemptive move. Winnicott distinguishes between a past traumatic event and the devastating effects of fear toward an experience that happened in the past but that, due to the immaturity of the ego, remains unintegrated as experience. Heformulatesa paradox to identify the qualities of this non-experience: “The patient needs to ‘remember’ this but it is not possible to remember something that has not
yet happened, and this thing of the past has not happened yet because the
patient was not there for it to happen to” (92). In terms of teaching and
learning in the classroom, a comparable paradox would be the stalling of
learning because nothing is imagined to be there to be learned. This sort
of emptiness is characterized by an absence of longing or curiosity;
instead, feelings of not being addressed serve to insulate against the
encounter with knowledge.

There is some overlapping ground between an experience that is
traumatic and a trauma not yet experienced in that both characterize the
incapacity to integrate something of the self into experience. What is
missing from a traumatic experience is signification adequate to the
experience, but what Winnicott’s patients are missing is the experience
itself and the relief of having survived its devastating effects. In Winnicott’s
view, anticipation is a defense against the frustrations of development.
Winnicott identifies several primitive agonies that have already been
experienced but could not be worked through because they came too
early. Elaborate defenses are mounted against the force of these primitive
agonies that are lived as compulsive attractions to the fears. Winnicott
names three force fields that simultaneously draw the patient toward the
missed experience and serve as barriers to an actual encounter: the fear
of death, emptiness, and non-experience. These defenses against a “queer
kind of truth, that what is not yet experienced did nevertheless happen in
the past” make use of knowledge to defend against learning (91). And yet,
for Winnicott, “the basis of all learning (as well as eating) is emptiness. But
if the emptiness was not experienced as such at the beginning, then it turns
up as a state that is feared, yet compulsively sought after” (95). Whether
new knowledge shakes one’s confidence against one’s innermost vulnera-
bles, the outcome is a conflicted engagement with knowledge and
defense, described so well by Green.

Bion’s clinical work also explores the dilemma of why knowledge
becomes such a significant site of anxiety. The problem, as Bion put it, is
one of not being receptive to new ideas that will in fact affect all that
preceeded the new thought. The defense is also manifested in not having
“confidence in a representation” or in the capacity for ideas to also contain
emotional states and generate further generalizations or abstractions
(Experience 50). This is the complex Bion characterizes as “not learning
from experience.” He refers to this refusal of difference with the symbol
“minus K” where the “K” represents knowledge made from the accept-
tance of psychical reality and the work of symbolization invoked there. For
Bion, knowledge is knowledge of phantasy, of emotional significance, and
the acceptance of the unconscious. So there will always be a gap in knowledge, an unknown truth that must be tolerated. Knowledge must still be constructed from the capacity to reality test, from the ability to distinguish the symbol from the object, and from the interest in thinking about thoughts. Without this interest, all that is left is what Bion calls "thoughts awaiting thinkers." The thought is the apparatus; thinking links this structure to emotional significance. This is perhaps why Bion will view thinking paradoxically as "an experimental way of acting" and as a means of "restraining action" ("Personalities" 63, 66). All of these experiences, which Bion groups under the sign of learning, are also sources of persecutory frustration. Bion considers the persecutory side: "If the learner is intolerant of the essential frustration of learning he indulges phantasies of omniscience and a belief in a state where things are known" (65). It is not a far cry to suggest—and, indeed, this is Bion's insight—that "minus K" is a paranoid state of splitting, where one feels as if knowledge is being stolen, burned, kept from the individual, or as a vengeful thing that threatens the individual. The phantasy is that knowledge persecutes, dismisses the thinker, and banishes one to a lonely and devalued experience precisely because this precocious omniscience falters. These are thoughts without thinkers. We witness these painful experiences in "pedagogical meltdowns."

But why should this be the case? Bion describes the painfulness of not learning as "an attack on linking." Linking refers to a function of thinking as making relations, and not as referring to the attributes of an object; it is conveyed through exploring the nature of projective identifications made from thinking and interpreting ("Attacks"). Part of the attack is to banish the question of why something occurs while privileging the "what." The grammar is passive; "it seems" is the opening of a thought without a thinker. Interpretations, then, feel like attacks against the self, and not as actions of relating to new meanings. The attack is against curiosity, a destruction of the unknown and a denial of emotional significance. Bion's discussion of clinical work, in the section of this paper titled "Curiosity, Arrogance and Stupidity," reminds readers what is distinct in his psychoanalytic approach: "I suggested that Freud's archeological investigation with psychoanalysis was helpful if it were considered that we were exposing evidence not so much of a primitive civilization as of a primitive disaster" (94). The disaster may have many origins—Winnicott's candidates include the fear of death, emptiness, and non-experience—but its afterlife attacks the capacity to think, to find significance in what the other has to offer, and to accept the work of new ideas. It can come in the form
of believing that there is nothing new to learn, that language is ruining experience, and that others have nothing to offer. "Thinking," Bion writes elsewhere, "has to be called into existence to cope with thoughts" ("Theory" 111). Thoughts, which originally symbolize profound frustration, must be tolerated by way of the activity of thinking. Felman describes the move toward thinking as having come after a crisis, but Bion helps us to understand that thoughts coincide with crises. Indeed, the concept of crisis works as a thought, but one that does not yet link to a thinker.

The work of Milner offers a way to consider educational crisis and how a reliance on the transparence of the apparatus, where symbolization itself becomes a defense against thinking, forecloses the problem of significance. Milner's clinical writing is exemplary in that her case studies concern her own development as a thinker with the "thoughts" of both herself and her analysands. She explores changing her mind and a rendition of clinical experience that creates a knowledge of relationality. She is able to hold in abeyance a great deal of her knowledge—indeed, her own ego boundaries become bracketed—in order to encounter the other's experience. Milner's account of her work with an eleven-year-old boy who was "suffering from a loss of talent for school work" explores the force of the conflicts described by Winnicott and Bion ("Role" 88–89). Here is a game the boy devised for her in the analytic setting:

The defense against the anxiety . . . took the form of a reversal of roles in his play with me; he himself became the sadistic punishing schoolmaster, and I had to be the bad pupil. For days, and sometimes weeks, I had to play the role of the persecuted schoolboy: I was set long monotonous tasks, my efforts were treated with scorn, I was forbidden to talk and made to write out "lines" if I did; and if I did not comply with these demands, then he wanted to cane me. (91)

Milner assures us that the boy knew that he had never been treated as badly as he was treating his analyst. Even though the school made efforts to adapt to his difficulties, she also suggests that memories of learning are closely tied to phantasies of refusing to learn. Phantasies of refusing to learn can take the form of reversing positions where the helpless learner becomes the demanding teacher. We observed this turning around in our own seminars. Milner pushes this idea further when she suggests one more move: not learning is symbolically equated with having to be punished. This little boy's distress was impervious to the demands of reason, and Milner's sense of frustration in her role as powerless schoolboy testifies eloquently to the boy's emotional reality. The boy's
transference of an anticipated education onto his present conflicts represents, for Milner, "difficulties in establishing the relation to external reality as such" (92). The difficulty, Milner suggests, has to do with the boy’s worry of reality as objective and rigid. As the boy’s capacity to play creatively with the toys provided by the analyst increased, so too did his ability to symbolize his school experience with greater fluency, less as an equation where the symbol becomes collapsed with the object it represents, and more as a construction (see also Segal). He became able to tolerate the inevitable frustration of learning while also being able to enjoy his engagements with knowledge. If transference is an obstacle to representing learning in the present, symbolization allows one to return the obstacles to the archaic conflicts they represent. It also makes something new: a sense that reality, too, requires a thinker.

The work of symbolization, clearly at stake in both producing knowledge and reflecting upon learning, provides a route out of the tensions of childhood helplessness enacted in the game Milner must play. And yet, Milner speculates that symbolization cannot be confined to the developmental task of adapting to external reality, for adapting to reality, at least in psychoanalytic views, may be akin to closing the gap between the symbol and that to which it refers. This is compliance, and it is justifiably experienced as coercion. Symbolization, she suggests, does not merely name the world and its objects; it also reflects the capacity to express emotional significance within a symbolic language. That is, in symbolization, the idea and the affect influence one another. This is what Bion terms as linking and what for Winnicott might count as experience. And this relation, for all three analysts, makes thinking creative. But because symbolization flows from the oscillations between the necessity to search for substitutes for original objects and "the emotional experience of finding the substitute," its rational quota can become undone by an excess of affect (Milner 87). Here, too, between the agony of losing beloved (although also often feared) objects and the ecstasy of finding beautiful substitutes, questions of knowledge are made and broken.

Milner’s discussion brings us to a perplexing dilemma: learning for internal authority is uncannily organized by one’s autobiography of phantasy projected onto present experiences, people, and events. This is the dilemma of the transference: it is both an obstacle to and the means for learning. Transference, however, poses intimate problems for narrating learning because presentations of learning are imbued with phantasies and are not yet moved into the double action of representation that Green identifies—that is, a unity between two things that includes in the new
representation an earlier history of their disunity. Our focus on the transferential qualities of learning works against the idea that knowledge is made rationally and that the rationality will somehow win out, provided that the knowledge is persuasive enough, that the teacher creates sufficient scaffolding, and that the learner is able to use what is provided. We suggested the failure of this illusion in our students’ reception of Felman, which essentially repeated the model but as a defense against having to learn. The transference, then, represents an obstacle made from emotional ties consisting of love, hate, and ambivalence toward both new and old events and their figures. Transference is the signature we make upon histories of learning, but it writes in invisible ink. If learning begins with efforts to sustain one’s continuity (through familiarity) the transference represents something of one’s unresolved conflicts—indeed, one’s own discontinuity with one’s own emotional experience in having to learn. And it is from within this tension between continuity and discontinuity that crisis emerges.

Milner’s case study considers what it means to work within a space where inner reality and external reality confront each other in order for the difference to emerge between what belongs to the inside and what belongs to the outside. In Milner’s terms, this is the work of symbolization, “establishing a relation to reality as such” (92). We have been calling this relation between internal and external reality “significance,” made when symbolization can hold both the force of affect and the insistence of the idea, when the symbol can tolerate something of the difference between these events without recourse to rendering reality obdurate or catastrophic.

From her work with the little boy whose early school success had given way to failure and overwhelming anxiety, Milner considers the movement from inner reality dominated by phantasies of fusion to a world where difference between the self and other can be tolerated and enjoyed:

Thus a central idea began to emerge about what the boy was trying to tell me; it was the idea that the basic identifications which make it possible to find new objects, to find the familiar in the unfamiliar, require an ability to tolerate a temporary loss of sense of self, a temporary giving up of the discriminating ego, which stands apart and tries to see things objectively and rationally and without emotional colouring. (97)

This precarious work of identification requires something from the self and, oddly enough, something from external reality as well. Milner is
interested in the conditions that allow such a state of toleration to exist because she believes it to be requisite for all kinds of creative activities, be they artistic or scientific in nature. A temporary loss of self is, however, only one piece of the puzzle:

In addition to the gradually growing capacity to tolerate the difference between the feeling of oneness, of being united with everything, and the feeling of twoness, of self and object, there is the factor of a capacity in the environment. It is the capacity of the environment to foster this growth, by providing conditions in which a partial return to the feeling of being one is possible; and I suggest that the environment does this by the recurrent providing of a framed space and time and a pliable medium, so that, on occasions, it will not be necessary for self-preservation’s sake to distinguish clearly between inner and outer, self and not-self. (101)

Whereas play provides an early environment for the mixing of inner and outer, self and not-self, for adults, symbolic activity constitutes their playground. Many psychoanalytic practitioners, particularly those working within object relations theory, conceive the analytic dialogue in similar terms. Milner argues that these experiences are neither merely the stuff of early development nor of therapeutic intervention but that the mixing of inner and outer remains necessary throughout all of our lives. The temporary loss of self at the boundaries between inner and outer reality and between self and not self, she suggests, continues to be the grounds of creativity in aesthetic and epistemological relations. The inability to tolerate such loss, combined with the failure of a certain plasticity in the environment, results in rigidity of thought and action as well as the refusal of emotional significance. These are what Bion called “thoughts awaiting thinkers.” But what made the difference for Milner’s work with the young boy was not in proffering him these sorts of interpretations but in creating contexts where the boy could encounter reality as less objective, less fixed—indeed, as fluid. The boy had found reality too soon, and Milner did not want her interpreting to become fused with that.

These psychical enactments that testify to the benign trauma of learning, developed so well by our three clinicians, allow us to reconsider a more intimate side of “difficult knowledge,” to be located not in the curriculum but in the learner’s archive, a strange combination of unformulated experience and an autobiography of learning the history of learning. We now think that our students fused Felman’s work with an earlier reality
of education as authority. This collapse sustained the archaic sense of educational betrayal that Milner witnessed with her young analysand. Just as significantly, the students may also have been caught in a centrifugal force that inheres within the cultural study of trauma and crisis, one that calls us back to the worst of reality and that can break, or render irrelevant in the face of such pain, any hope for a pedagogical relation. When Milner was trying to understand what the boy’s play was saying, she considered the problem of boundaries, something our students may have been trying to tell us through their metaphor of “pedagogical meltdowns.” At times, Milner felt the boy acted as if there were no boundary between them: “The way he behaved could also be described by saying that he kept me inside him, since he continually used to insist that I knew what he had been doing or was going to do, when I had in fact no possible means of knowing” (94). Indeed, and like pedagogical meltdowns, for Milner, much of the material of this boy’s play had to do with “burning, boiling down, and melting, which seemed to me to express the idea of the obliterating of boundaries” (94). Perhaps this was at work as well when the students in our seminar refused to have faith in the asymmetrical difference any pedagogical relation entails: teachers and students have different work to do in the classroom, even if what this work entails cannot be known in advance.

We find this question of boundaries compelling, for it offers us another vantage from which to understand pedagogical meltdowns now as Winnicott’s “missed experiences,” but also through some of the dilemmas Milner considered as she encountered and survived the boy’s phantasy of the analyst’s or teacher’s retaliatory omnipotence. We suggest Felman’s crisis may have felt like a pedagogical meltdown: what may have unhinged our students’ thinking as they read Felman was the thought of a teacher, a phantasy of the teacher’s omnipotence, the wish and fear that the teacher really does know what the students are thinking before they say their thoughts, the very idea that Felman knew her students before they knew themselves. Thus, Felman’s intervention of returning the authority of significance back to the students was collapsed into the authority of a rigid reality, akin to the horrible reality they were also trying to study. And this preposterous significance now threatened to dissolve the pedagogical relation into one of compliance, imposition, or, even worse, emptiness. Paradoxically, the breakdown of defense also had to be defended against by the pedagogical meltdown: boiling away the boundaries of student and teacher might be seen as an effort to preserve the learner’s omnipotence. These dynamics may well be an implicit dilemma of linking education and
crisis, but they are also part of the benign trauma of learning, for where there is a link, there will be an attack on linking. And from this attack, significance will have to be remade.

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Works Cited


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