THEORETICAL MODELS
AND THE PSYCHOANALYTIC
UNDERSTANDING OF SYMBOLS

GERALD J. GARGIULO

CROSS CURRENTS: SPRING 1971
In his attempt to map the different aspects of the mind, Freud developed and employed what he referred to as his metapsychology. By metapsychology Freud meant to indicate the assumptions upon which psychoanalysis operates; they are the conceptual models used both to clarify psychic phenomena and to be organizing systems for further insights. In his paper on "The Unconscious" we read: "I propose that when we have succeeded in describing a psychical process in its dynamic, topographical and economic aspects, we should speak of it as a metapsychological presentation." Although Freud did not include the genetic aspect in this enumeration, it is clear that this is central to his thought. For instance:

Not every analysis of psychological phenomena deserves the name psychoanalysis. The latter implies more than the mere analysis of composite phenomena into simpler ones. It consists in tracing back one psychical structure to another which preceded it in time and out of which it developed . . . thus from the very first psychoanalysis was directed towards tracing developmental processes. It . . . was led to construct a genetic psychology.²

Finally, we may note that with the writings of other analysts, such as H. Hartmann, Anna Freud and Erik Erikson, further aspects have been brought to light, namely, the adaptive aspects. (This last category has also been classified as the sociohistorical approach.)

Contemporary psychoanalytic theory enumerates five aspects in its delineation of metapsychology: the dynamic, which enables us to speak of intrapsychic forces; the economic, which organizes psychic phenomena in terms of amounts of energy; the topographical (structural), which first was used to map consciousness as to place, as it were (Conscious, Preconscious, and Unconscious), but which was replaced with Freud's later understanding of the psychic structures indicated by the terms Id, Ego, Superego; the genetic, which enables us to appreciate the full weight of personal history (including constitution) upon the present

---

Gerald J. Gargiulo is a psychoanalyst in private practice in New York City. Formerly a professor of religious studies, he is currently a member of the facul-

ties of The Metropolitan Academy for Psychoanalytic Training and the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis.
moment; and, finally, the adaptive, which enables the observer to appreciate the person's capacity to weigh and appropriately to interact with external reality. (This last assumption is not to be confused with the adjustment theories of the Neo-Freudians.)

It is clear that Freud's metapsychology organizes the facts of psychic experience in a highly useful although necessarily limited way. That is, Freud's categories make possible an analysis of emotional conflict in view of an inter-systemic model (id, ego, superego), an intra-systemic model (experiences within one system, e.g. the fusing and defusing [neutralization] of aggressive and libidinal energy), as well as a normative approach to both of these in terms of the development of reality testing (ego and environment). Thus the metapsychological assumptions allow for an appreciation of the complexity of the psyche as well as furnish, with relatively few concepts, a clear and encompassing approach from which to develop technique. Freud's papers "On Narcissism: An Introduction", "Repression", "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes", and "The Unconscious' focus attention on the individual and his personal development; they predispose toward empirical "mechanistic-type" categories for a description of human experience; finally, they make possible an approach to the unconscious, in particular, which stresses its personal subjective reality. This approach is in clear contradistinction to Jungian models, for instance, which have a different organizing of psychic experience (archetype/individuation, for example) and which predispose toward an understanding of the unconscious as both personal but preeminently as objective. With Freud's conceptualization of the mind in terms of his metapsychological models, his consequent understanding of psychic defenses and his emphasis on the unconscious as subjective, he has set the stage whereby a very particular understanding of symbol will emerge. In order to appreciate Freudian thought on symbols we will study, in further detail, the role of models.

There is significant difference, it seems to me, between the conceptual models Freud uses to organize his data (metapsychology), together with the language symbols he had available to him (e.g., cathexis, anticathexis, neutralization), and the existential experience of value, for example, which his approach makes possible. For the purposes of classification and clarification we will speak of "expressive models" for his metapsychology and language, and of "experiential models" for the experience of value. Expressive models are meant to signify the articulated areas of thought within a particular system; for example, the dynamic, economic, and topographical assumptions express Freud's encounter with psyche and his organizing response. In contrast to this there is not, to date, a developed body of thought and literature on the experiential models operative in psychoanalysis. By this term is meant the lived experience of such values as personal autonomy, the import of the individual, and the experience of matured love, for example.
The existentialist analysts have approached such phenomena, but frequently they have abandoned psychoanalytic metapsychology and therefore do not articulate their insights within a Freudian framework. One of the proposals of this paper is that some of the conflict between analytic schools could be lessened if there were a more pronounced articulation of the role of Freud's expressive models (metapsychology) and the experience of meaning and values (experiential models) in psychoanalysis. Furthermore, a clear understanding of this classification would aid in understanding both the historical Freudian approach to symbols (clearly formulated in Jones' 1916 essay) and the more contemporary response to symbols expressed in the works of such authors as Paul Ricoeur, the philosopher, or Peter Homans, the theologian, for example.

To read an author more productively and to be sensitive to the models he employs, it is necessary to know, at least in broad philosophical outline, the intellectual tradition in which he stands. In terms of western experience, Freud stands within the Aristotelian rather than the Platonic tradition. The hallmarks of this tradition are an inductive methodology, a careful classification of phenomena, and an approach that opts, in its articulated mood, for reason and activity. Thus the reader of Freud's works sees continually his careful classification of symptoms, his detailed study of the different types of conflicts, his naming the defenses and relating them to developmental stages; finally, his individualizing of the unconscious and his profound reliance on reason and his willingness to intervene, to light up the darkness, as it were. These last characteristics are particularly exemplified in his study of religion. In contrast, we may very briefly note that Jung stands more within the Platonic and Neo-Platonic traditions. Platonism is more deductive in its style, is concerned with the individual as an example of the pre-eminent universal, and its philosophical mood is more sympathetic to "un-reason" and passivity. Seen within such a tradition we can understand Jung's emphasis on the concrete individual as the exemplar for the collective unconscious, and on the individual or individuals, for example, as the vehicle for an archetype—the German people and the god Wotan prior to World War II. Such formulations stand within the tradition of such Platonic thoughts as the world soul, the theory of divine emanations, and of the normative reality of universal ideas. The language of this tradition is both mathematics and an approach to symbol which sees its function as revelatory (i.e., as exposing or presenting the hidden in the present). And for the reader of Jung it becomes clear that he has a basic sympathy for what we have called passivity and unreason: Jung typically listens to dreams, whereas Freud uncovers and interprets them, for example.

A brief exposition of this difference will highlight some of the main points of this paper. Following his penchant for description and classi-
Freud introduced the categories of primary processes and secondary processes of thinking. With this tool for understanding the psyche, dreams became capable of interpretation and both neurotic symptoms and normal behavior became more understandable. In Freud's thinking and in the writings of most analysts, the primary processes describe that type of thinking operative in early childhood and still present in the unconscious and manifested throughout life in dreams. Because they were manifested developmentally earlier than the secondary processes and because primary processes employed condensation, displacement, and symbolization as primary operative mechanisms, they were thought of as primitive in comparison with that mode of thinking which employed delay of affect as well as the perception of causal relationship, of space and time—the secondary processes. We may further indicate what is meant by these terms by saying that primary processes reflect non-discursive thinking, art, for example; whereas the term secondary processes is meant to indicate the areas of man's discursive thinking, e.g., logic. Given this Freudian perspective, symbols were historically defined as one form of conscious phenomenon (i.e., sign) which, regarded in the light of primary processes, were understood as intrinsically related to certain early body and emotional experiences repressed in the course of development, whose affective energy was displaced onto a conscious representative. Such an object consequently stands as a symbol for the unconscious original object(s) or experience(s). For example, the god symbol and the devil symbol are seen in Freudian theory as an attempt at resolution of early emotional ambivalence (love/hate) towards primal parental figures. (Primal is understood ontogenetically and phylogenetically.) These symbols preserve the gratification of the passive needs for the good object (God) and allow for the expression of primitive hate and destruction (early sadism) toward the bad object (the devil). The establishment and preservation of such symbols also aid in the repression of the guilt and promote the need for infantile specialness (e.g., God's elect) which are part of the early experiences of ambivalence toward parental figures. Freud's thesis is that this is true of the race, in its earliest beginnings, as it is of the individual in his earliest beginnings.

To clarify further our understanding of theoretical models and notions of symbol, we can return to an example given previously. Jung states many times over that if a dream is unclear, it is because the analyst and/or patient do not understand its meaning, not because of any mechanisms of disguise. Dreams are to be listened to, as stated, and one needs the skill of an analyst to read the presence of certain emerging or present archetypes and to integrate them into the patient's evolving individuation by arriving at a balance between the objective unconscious and the personal unconscious and consciousness. Within such a system symbols are organizing images which reflect different stages of the process of individuation and with which the person interacts (trans-
scendent function) in his growth process. The Freudian approach to dreams is to analyze them in terms of manifest and latent content, to study the dream process in terms of condensation and displacement, to relate the dream images and symbols to early, primary body experiences and to developmental sexual conflicts. This approach to dreams, from a metapsychological perspective, conceptualizes them in categories which stress their regressive aspects. That is, the expressive models seem to imply a reading of symbols which can be understood simply as an unmasking. (That the process of interpretation, in an analytic setting, enables one to experience certain transcendent values and to appreciate certain universal experiences is rarely mentioned, i.e., these are unarticulated in terms of expressive models.)

A further understanding of the Freudian metapsychological approach may be seen from the following analysis: if one approaches a dream dynamically one analyzes the presence of drives and counter-forces (defenses) and sees the dream images and/or symbols primarily as compromise formations between these two forces. If one studies a dream in view of economic considerations, one weighs the presence of aggressive or sexual energies and the stability of the ego structures to integrate these; and consequently one sees the dream images and/or symbols as either direct expressions of these energies, i.e., penises or breasts, or as indirect compromise images, e.g., knives, stairways or trains, for example. Genetic considerations are reflected in a predisposition to see any symbol as a displacement from a primary body experience highly charged with libidinal energy and disguised through a conscious image. In this light all symbols would be ultimately reducible to such bodily activities as eating, sexual stimulation, defecation or touching, for example. Genetic considerations need not be simply understood as regressive, but in practice this is done. Adaptive assumptions would predispose one to see the dream and its latent thought in reference to the developmental tasks and the present life situation of the patient. In this light dream images and/or symbols can be seen reflecting creative resolutions to psychic tasks as well as areas of human experience beyond repressed infantile sexuality.

As mentioned above, the work of H. Hartman, Anna Freud and Erik Erikson have brought to light this adaptive assumption; they have, in effect, developed psychoanalysis as a general psychology by carefully studying the growth and the functions of the ego system and the sociohistorical influences on identity formation, thus allowing for a more sophisticated notion of all the psychic systems. And by emphasizing the inherent adaptive functions of the ego system they have laid the foundations for a broader understanding of the two processes of psychic functioning. A recent work by Pinchus Noy, the Israeli psychoanalyst, has significantly developed these concepts. That is, by elaborating on the concept of adaptation as an inherent capacity to develop feedback systems, he has presented a new understanding of secondary process think-
ing, one that emphasizes its dependence on sensory feedback and thus its inherent relation to external survival of the organism (a basic requirement of which is recognition of individuation and negation—time perception). The primary processes are also related to ego development via an approach which sees these mechanisms in relation to the progressive development and preservation of the self-concept. The self-concept schema needs a mobility and intensity of affective energy not required, and in fact harmful, were it operative in the secondary processes. Noy, as stated, sees the primary processes as intimately related to the psyche's capacity emotionally to adapt to the environment in its life task of preserving and deepening the self-concept;—thus preserving continuity of the internal reality.\(^{12}\)

In view of the growing understanding and integration into theory of the adaptive perspective which we have outlined and in conjunction with Noy's reading of the primary and secondary processes, there is evidence, it seems to me, for a contemporary Freudian understanding of symbolic representation, for example, art, in other than regressive categories.\(^ {13}\) And this conclusion can be reached with no violence to Freud's metapsychological assumptions which are so essential for an analytic approach. For if, to use an Eriksonian perspective, epigenetic development can bring about a resolution of previous identity conflicts while presenting new tasks, and if in these life stages there is a concurrent sophistication of the primary processes as Noy implies,\(^ {14}\) then symbols can also be, in addition to indirect re-presentors of the hidden unconscious, "reflectors" or signs of a higher organization of consciousness. In the language we have employed they can be seen as an organizing model for certain experiential values.\(^ {15}\)

What we are suggesting is that artistic, literary or some religious symbols, because they can be organizers of affective and/or aggressive emotions in a particularly concise (condensed) and relatively universal (displaceable) manner, can serve as experiential loci for articulating a particular culture's identity—its self-concept, as it were, to expand on Noy's insights. Within this light such values as the autonomy and absolute value of the individual, the significance and reality of mature love (affective experiential dimensions of man) can be concretized by being symbolized in varying degrees in different cultures. And as even the briefest acquaintance with history reveals there seems to be a constant need to re-symbolize and thus rediscover even these most basic of human values.

Abstract expressive models, because of their attempt to order experience, to reflect on it and foster functional interaction with the environment, will necessarily employ mechanisms of the secondary processes. That is, in order to achieve the affective distance required to have an abstract scientific system, intensity of affect must be lessened and discrete signs, which have only a minimum of energy attached to them, become necessary if prolonged and complex abstract thinking is to take place.
On the other hand values such as enumerated above and symbolized through artistic, literary and religious images, beyond the possibility of their evidencing unreflected attempts at resolutions of unconscious conflicts, can also be a means of overcoming the distance that scientific expressive models entail by enabling a new organization of consciousness to be registered or imprinted, as it were. Just as mature genital love, in a Freudian reading, is unequivocally the child of oedipal conflict, it is, quite clearly, also a new organization of libidinal energy and of historical identity. If a man could not developmentally adapt to his maturational task of personal identity and to the concomitant experience of values, he would lose contact with his sense of human selfhood; he would, in Erikson's language, experience isolation and despair.

In this connection we can briefly note the Jungian practice of using a patient's artistic productions, produced specifically for this reason, for exploring (affectively) the psyche and, in their models, realizing personal archetypes. In Freudian structures affective intensity is, for the most part, limited to the transference; thus the predisposition, based on clinical models and intensified by certain metapsychological assumptions, to read such experiences in terms of regressive and genetic assumptions. That there are other than transference interactions, that there are mature and appropriate experiences of value in the analytic relation and thus in other relationships is just explicitly coming into Freudian literature. When such experiential phenomena can be expressively communicated we will have discovered an understanding of symbol which will take us a step closer to knowing man's mind. And in the process we will have gone a long distance in developing Freud's thoughts on one of the non-neurotic possible fates of an instinct—that is, sublimation.

NOTES

5. The primary focus of this paper is on Freudian thought; Jungian models will be used by way of generic contrast.
7. The work of Erik Erikson, in America, has come closest to formulating and articulating expressive models for such values within a traditional psychoanalytic framework.
9. Here we are making broad distinctions for the sake of clarification. One of Freud's most promising students, Theodor Reik, developed those profoundly intuitive aspects of Freud's thoughts. See for example his Listening With the Third Ear for his sensitivity ("listening quality") to dreams. For Jung's position note the following: "I have no theory about dreams, I do not know how dreams arise. And I am not at all sure that my way of handling dreams even deserves the name of a 'method.' . . . On the
other hand I know that if we meditate on dreams sufficiently long and thoroughly... something almost always comes of it." C. G. Jung, "The Aims of Psychotherapy," Collected Works, 16, p. 42.


11. To return to Jones' classic paper on symbolism, which clearly summarizes the traditional Freudian reading, we may note the following succinct analysis by Ricoeur in Freud and Philosophy: "Descriptively, the author places symbols, in the psychoanalytic sense, in the general class of indirect representations commonly called symbolic and characterized by the role of double meaning, by the analogy between primary meaning and secondary meaning, by the attributes of concreteness and primitiveness, by the fact that symbols represent hidden or secret ideas, and by the fact that they are made spontaneously... 1) true symbols always represent repressed unconscious themes; 2) they have a constant meaning, or very limited scope for variation of meaning; 3) they are not dependent on individual factors only; this is not to say that they are archetypes in the Jungian sense, but rather stereotypes that betray the limited and uniform character of the primordial interests of mankind; 4) they are archaic; 5) they have linguistic connections, strikingly revealed by etymology; 6) they have parallels in the fields of myth, folklore, poetry." As Ricoeur states, this approach does not see a significant relation between symbol formation and sublimation and this is seen as a loss for psychoanalytic theory. I fully agree with Ricoeur in this critique. Paul Ricoeur, Freud & Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation (1970), p. 502.

For a highly sophisticated contemporary discussion of symbolism, see David L. Rubin, "Perception, Reality Testing, and Symbolism," The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child (New York, 1961), XVI, pp. 73-90. The author, in this article, studies the structural process of symbol formation but essentially relates this to regressive phenomena. That is, he studies this process in relation to the different levels of mental functioning evidenced between sleep and waking life. Note the following:

What distinguishes symbols and symbol formation from other derivatives of primary-process operation is that the ego state described above favors the development of imagery, predominantly visual. These images constitute the raw material of symbolism... When such an image is formed, and represents a percept or memory trace thereof which has a conflicting affective charge (that is, painful and pleasurable, good and bad) and a strong drive cathexis, there is conflict as to whether to seek out and approach, or to avoid and withdraw... It is this kind of conflict which results via processes of displacement and condensation in the formation of a symbolic representation, p. 84-85.


The main thesis of this paper is that the primary processes are used by the ego for all the functions aimed at preserving self-continuity and identity and assimilating any new experiences and lines of action into the self-schema. The secondary processes are used for all functions aimed at encountering reality and for any inner integration and mastery which is done in relation to reality. Further on, elaborating his thought, he adds:

"My assumption... is that primary processes almost never totally disappear from conscious thought processes, and that all the primary processes—those excluded from consciousness and those which remain conscious—continue to develop, modify and change in integration with all mental functions."

And lastly:

"... as the secondary process has to detach itself in the course of development from personal meanings and become more and more objective, the primary process
has to improve its ability to deal with these personal meanings, i.e. become more and more subjective. So, each one has to develop in a different direction—but of course to the same degree."

13. As Noy makes clear, even Ernest Kris' formulation "regression in the service of the ego" is an inadequate approach to art. For "as the theory of regression in the service of the ego was created to integrate the view of artistic creativity as a superior ability with the psychoanalytic theory of the 'primiveness' of the primary process, it stands or falls with this last theory."

As the above quotations (footnote 12) make clear Noy rejects this 'primitive' reading of primary process.

14. Note Noy's example of the sophistication needed both to produce and particularly to appreciate modern primitive art.

15. This conclusion, although highly dependent on and respectful of P. Ricoeur's thought, is nevertheless different. For Ricoeur there is a teleological role of symbol whereby it reflects what is on the horizon of man's consciousness, a beyond or a Wholly Other which man can not grasp.

Nor does this conclusion see the role of symbols as revealing some all encompassing power of fantasy images possessing intrinsic power to reveal, or point to, again, some future hoped for state of happiness. Peter Homans in his Theology After Freud, develops this last position. See my reviews of Ricoeur's book on Freud (Cross Currents, Summer 1970, 347–351, and of Homans (American Image, Spring, 1971).

16. The formulation of this paper is likewise different from a Jungian one; note latter's use of such concepts as personal archetypes in the individual's dialogue with the objective unconscious, which this paper does not employ.


18. For a review article stressing the need to analyze the creative person in other than reductionistic categories, see Heinz Kohut, M.D. "Beyond the Bounds of the Basic Rule," in The Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 1960.