Freud, Psychoanalysis, and Symbolism

*Freud, Psychoanalysis, and Symbolism* offers an innovative general theory of symbolism, derived from Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and relocated within mainstream scientific psychology. It is the first systematic investigation of the development of Freud’s treatment of symbolism throughout his published works, and discovers in those writings a broad theory which is far superior to the widely accepted, narrow, ‘official’ view. Agnes Petocz argues that the treatment of symbolism must begin with the identification and clarification of a set of logical constraints and psychological requirements which any general theory of symbolism must respect, and that these requirements have been neglected by existing accounts across a number of disciplines. Her newly proposed ‘Freudian Broad’ theory of symbolism, by contrast, does meet these requirements, but only after it has been rehabilitated within a revised psychoanalytic context. An important contribution to the ongoing development of a coherent and scientifically acceptable version of psychoanalytic theory, *Freud, Psychoanalysis, and Symbolism* also offers a radical reconceptualisation of the unconscious and repression and of the role of language.

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Freud, Psychoanalysis, and Symbolism

Agnes Petocz
For Anna and Dani

*non omnino moriemini*
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Preface

This book had its origins in two questions related to symbolism, and in my dissatisfaction with the existing answers. Firstly, given the central place of symbolism and symbolic activity in human behaviour and mental life, is it possible to have a general, unified theory of the symbol? Secondly, if symbolism is so obviously important, why has it been almost completely neglected by the very discipline which claims to be concerned with human behaviour and mental life – psychology, especially scientific psychology? At present, the answers to these two questions may be found in the extensive non-psychological literature on symbolism. In this literature, which spans many different fields – philosophy, sociology, anthropology, hermeneutics, semiotics, aesthetics, and so on – and which is, perhaps not surprisingly, full of controversies, one observation which is made time and time again is that symbolism is inherently elusive; that the complex and multifaceted nature of the symbol rules out not just a coherent scientific treatment, but any kind of general theory. Thus, the answer to the first question is: ‘no’; and the answer to the second question is: ‘because symbolism is beyond the reach of science’.

In this book I challenge those answers. I do so by bringing together three lines of argument, none of which, to my knowledge, has previously been proposed. The first line of argument reverses the typical treatment of symbolism. Rather than survey the multitudinous manifestations of the symbol in human life, and conclude that a general theory is out of the question, my own treatment focuses the discussion about symbolism onto what should be the primary task, that of identifying the criteria for an adequate general theory. It seems to me that any unified theory of the symbol must respect certain logical constraints (one of which, significantly, is that it be a psychological theory) and must, thereby, meet certain psychological requirements. When these requirements are spelled out (as they are in the final chapter of the book), it becomes clear that it has been the lack of awareness of them, and the consequent failure to meet them, rather than the infinite variability and complexity of the
symbol, which is responsible for so much of the confusion and disorgan-
isation in the field. The second line of argument concerns Freud’s
psychoanalytic theory, and is a response to Ricoeur’s comment, made
three decades ago, that a systematic investigation of Freud’s notion of
the symbol remained to be done. That investigation is undertaken here
(in the first part of the book), with surprising results. The picture which
emerges is quite different from the narrow and easily dismissible pos-
tion which has been taken (even by Freud himself) to be Freud’s theory
of symbolism. As a result of this new picture, it becomes evident that
psychoanalysis contains the foundations for a general theory of the
symbol, a theory which does appear to meet the logical and psychologi-
cal requirements, albeit only when it is consolidated via a number of
modifications and revisions to Freud’s general theory (these revisions
are developed in the second half of the book). The third line of argu-
ment (which runs through the whole book) presents an unlikely (to
some, no doubt, inconceivable) combination: the symbol, psychoanaly-
sis, and science. However, my particular combination is made possible
because it is based on an approach to the symbol which is not found
elsewhere in the literature, on a modified version of psychoanalysis, and
on a view of science which does not accept the contemporary, largely
postmodernist, (mis)characterisations. In weaving together these three
lines of argument, my aim is to show that, when the logical and psycho-
logical criteria for an adequate account of symbolism are identified,
when an investigation of Freud’s treatment of symbolism is undertaken,
and when a number of conceptual weaknesses are removed from
psychoanalytic theory, then we have the ingredients for a scientifically
coherent, general, psychological theory of the symbol.

The question of symbolism began to occupy me when I took my first
degree in Classics during the 1970s at the University of Sydney. With a
growing interest in philosophy and psychoanalysis, I eventually became
diverted into psychology. Most of the work for the book was done over
the ten years that I taught (while also completing my doctorate) in the
history and philosophy of psychology, psychological theory, and person-
ality theory, in the Department of Psychology at the University of
Sydney. During that time, I was fortunate enough to come into contact
with John Maze, whose rigorous but open-minded approach to psycho-
logical theory in general, and to psychoanalytic theory in particular, and
whose own contributions in those areas, became a continuing source of
inspiration to me, as they have been to many others.

During the early 1990s, the administrative demands of my additional
role as Coordinator of First Year Studies made it almost impossible to
find the time to work on this project, and I am particularly grateful to the Deputy Head of Department, Ian Curthoys, for his unfailing support ‘from above’ through these difficult times. I am also grateful to my assistants during that period, Agi O’Hara and Sandra Rickards, both of whom took on much more than their fair share of the workload, despite heavy teaching and research commitments of their own. A number of other colleagues at the University of Sydney have made numerous contributions in the form of discussions and critical comments on parts of the manuscript – my thanks especially to Olga Katchan, Doris McIlwain, Terry McMullen, Joel Michell, and George Oliphant. My debts to Joel and George are particularly great, for they accompanied me on every step of this long journey: Joel also gave me the use of his office and computer, and his loyal support sustained me through many difficult times; George proofread and commented on every draft of every chapter of the book; each brought to many hours of discussion his keen insight and clarity of thought.

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Finally, I would like to give special thanks to two people: firstly, to my current Head of Department in Psychology at the University of Western Sydney Macarthur, Jim McKnight, not just for his support during the last difficult year of completing the manuscript, but, what is much rarer these days, for his steadfast promotion of the value of critical conceptual inquiry in psychology, and for his readiness to back it up by providing the kind of environment which is conducive to conducting theoretical research; secondly, to Glenn Newbery, for all those things to which mere public acknowledgement could never do justice.