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 contraints 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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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, United Kingdom
http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA http://www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Monotype Plantin 10/12 pt. [WV]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Petocz, Agnes
Freud, psychoanalysis, and symbolism / Agnes Petocz.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 59152 X
1. Freud, Sigmund, 1856–1939. 2. Symbolism (Psychology).
3. Psychoanalysis. I. Title.
BF109.F74P48 1999
150.19′52 – dc21 98-39047 CIP

ISBN 0 521 59152 X hardback

For Anna and Dani
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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 disorganisation 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 position 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 psychological 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 argument (which runs through the whole book) presents an unlikely (to some, no doubt, inconceivable) combination: the symbol, psychoanalysis, 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 psychological 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 personality 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 psychological 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.

I am grateful also to a number of people whose respective areas of technical expertise contributed towards the smooth preparation of the manuscript: John Holden, Noel Hunt, Cyril Latimer, and Les Petocz. Catherine Max, of Cambridge University Press, has throughout been extremely patient and supportive, not only in negotiating reviews of the manuscript, but in responding readily to my questions and concerns. I have also been encouraged by comments on the manuscript from Jim Hopkins and Nigel Mackay, whose suggestions have allowed me to fine-tune some of my arguments, and extend them in directions I would not otherwise have taken.

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.