

Freud, Psychoanalysis, and Symbolism

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1 From disorder towards the focus of inquiry

The problem of definition

‘There is something very curious in semantics’, says Lévi-Strauss (1978), ‘that the word “meaning” is, probably, in the whole language, the word the meaning of which is the most difficult to define’ (p. 12). Perhaps because of its intimate connection with the concept of meaning, the term ‘symbol’, despite an extensive literature devoted to the subject, is almost as difficult. Derived from the Greek verb *συμβάλλειν* (literally, ‘to throw together’), the noun *σύμβολον* (a ‘tally’) referred originally to each of the two corresponding pieces of some small object which contracting parties broke between them and kept as proof of identity (Liddell and Scott 1968). That meaning subsequently expanded to include a diversity of meanings (other kinds of token, seal, contract, sign, code, etc.), which today has mushroomed even further. Many contemporary definitions reflect the mystique originally associated with symbols, and which prompted Whitehead (1927) to comment on the ‘unstable mixture of attraction and repulsion’ (p. 60) in our attitude towards symbolism. But the most frequent observation is that it is impossible to find a general, unifying definition. Bertalanffy (1981), for instance, complains that ‘in spite of the fact that symbolic activity is one of the most fundamental manifestations of the human mind . . . there is no generally accepted definition of “symbolism”’ (pp. 41–2), and Safouan (1982) warns that ‘anyone who tries to study symbolism in all its generality is liable to discover that there is no unity at all that underlies these different uses of the word’ (p. 84). To underscore the point, we are faced with such vacuities as ‘whatever has meaning is a symbol, and the meaning is whatever is expressed by the symbol’ (Radcliffe-Brown, in Skorupski 1976, p. 117), or, worse, ‘wherever we look around us, everything can be expressed by the concept of symbol’ (Ver Eecke 1975, p. 28). Even amongst those who bring some rigour to their treatment of the topic, there is considerable disagreement: disagreement, for example, about how to classify signs and symbols – what

is the difference (if any) between the two, which is the broader term, and to which does language belong; disagreement also about the nature of symbolism – what constitutes symbolism, what activity may properly be described as ‘symbolic’, what are its origins, development, role, effects, and so on.

But this picture of disorder should not lead us to agree too readily that there can be no general theory of symbolism. Instead, by considering the definitions of symbolism from two different perspectives in turn, the first an overview both of the scope of the subject matter and of the extent of the disorder, the second allowing a convergence on the real centres of controversy, we shall find ourselves on a journey which leads through the disorder towards a focus of inquiry.

Perspective one: the broad to narrow continuum

The more obvious perspective is to regard the enormous range of definitions of symbolism as lying along a continuum, from very broad definitions to extremely narrow ones. At the broad extreme we find the **symbol as superordinate category**. Here are located the ‘Bibles’ of symbolism (as Bertalanffy (1981) calls them): Cassirer’s *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1953, 1955, 1957 [orig. 1923, 1925, 1929]), and Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942). Each of these works is neo-Kantian in spirit; philosophical concern with the question of ‘meaning’ intersects with the treatment of symbols from a strongly phenomenological, constructivist perspective. Cassirer’s Kantian debt is the more marked; for him, the ‘symbolic’ is equated with ‘structure’ or ‘form’, and it is the symbolic concept, not the semantic, that is truly universal. Thus, ‘the conceptual definition of a content goes hand in hand with its stabilization in some characteristic sign. Consequently, all truly strict and exact thought is sustained by the *symbolics* and *semiotics* on which it is based’ (1953, p. 86). Langer also says that symbolisation is the *essential* act of thought, and that ‘The symbol-making function is one of man’s primary activities, like eating, looking or moving about. It is the fundamental process of his mind, and goes on all the time’ (1942, p. 41). Unlike Cassirer, however, Langer combines this broad definition with a more modern information-processing view of thinking, according to which ‘the human brain is constantly carrying on a process of symbolic transformation of the experiential data that come to it’ (ibid., p. 43). This notion is still, of course, popular, especially with those involved in computer applications in psychology and artificial intelligence. McCorduck, for instance (in Graubard 1988), suggests that artificial intelligence might be the best hope for discovering that ‘universal

symbolic code', that 'set of universal concepts', which 'underlies all human symbolic expression' (p. 82). Others who appear to follow the general Cassirer–Langer broad approach include: Rapoport (in Royce 1965), for whom symbols are 'products of the human abstracting process' (p. 97), Hayakawa (*ibid.*), for whom symbolism is 'that which shapes the entire psychic life of man' (p. 92), and Whitehead (1927), for whom symbolism 'is inherent in the very texture of human life' (p. 60). Piaget too, though he is not consistent, occasionally treats symbolic behaviour as being almost as broad as what he terms 'operational intelligence', and his philosophical perspective is similarly neo-Kantian and constructivist. In general, what characterises these very broad definitions of symbolism is the view that the 'symbolic' is universal because it is somehow fundamental to the thinking process.

At a little distance from the broad end of the definitional continuum are treatments of the **symbol as a kind of sign**; the sign is the generic term and the symbol is the special case, albeit special in different ways for different theorists. This view is typical of semiologists or semioticians. As Todorov (1982) says, 'if one gives the word "sign" a generic meaning through which it encompasses that of symbol (the symbol then becomes a special case of the sign), one may say that studies of the symbol belong to the general theory of signs or semiotics' (pp. 9–10). Eco (1973) defines a sign as 'anything that can be taken as "significantly substituting" for something else . . . a sign is something (whether a natural or an artificial object) which stands in place of something which is absent' (p. 1149). Hawkes (1977) points to the culmination of the historical development of a general theory of signs in Jakobson's synthesis of the work of Peirce and Saussure – a curious combination, given the radically different views on the concept of 'symbol' held by these two. For Peirce, the American 'founder' of semiotics, the tripartite division of signs produces the icon, the index, and the symbol, the last being the case where the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary; thus the major systematic manifestation of symbols is in language. Saussure, on the contrary, held that it is the *sign* which is arbitrary, and the *symbol* which is non-arbitrary or 'motivated', and so does not properly belong to the field of semiology (which, of course, locates Saussure's position further along our definitional continuum, in a region where the symbol is no longer a *kind* of sign, and where 'affect' plays a crucial role). In Jakobson's synthesis, the Saussurean fundamental dimensions of language – the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic – will be found in *any* symbolic process or system of signs. Bertalanffy (1965) follows Peirce; for him also the sign is the broader term, deriving from the general notion of 'meaning' (i.e., representation), and symbols are *kinds* of

signs (other kinds are signals, schemata, etc.) which are characterised by being arbitrary, i.e., 'freely created', there being no biologically enforced connection between symbol and symbolised. Within this general position, there are other views on what kind of sign a symbol is which do not depend on the arbitrary/non-arbitrary distinction. For Skorupski (1976), symbols can be characterised as 'designators which *represent* what they stand for' (p. 12), as opposed to those which *indicate* what they stand for:

the symbol substitutes for the thing symbolised . . . it . . . is treated for the purposes of symbolic action as being what is symbolised. On this picture, the structure of a symbolic action is clear: it represents or enacts an action, event or state of affairs in which the thing represented by the symbol plays a part analogous to that which the symbol plays in the symbolic action itself. (ibid., p. 123)

One major contribution made by these theorists is their recognition of, and emphasis on, the fact that symbolisation (like any representation) is a *relational* phenomenon, a fact which should not be overlooked in the concern with the entities involved in the relation. So Peirce's tripartite classification is made in terms of the *relation between* signifier and signified. Morris (in Eco 1973) also insists that 'something is a sign only because it is interpreted as a sign of something by some interpreter . . . semiotic, then, is not concerned with the study of a particular kind of object, but with ordinary objects insofar (and only insofar) as they participate in semiosis' (p. 1149). Skorupski emphasises the same point:

While a symbol may often have some natural appropriateness which fits it to the object represented, this characteristic is not constitutive of its semantic status as a symbol: what is essential for this is simply that it is taken as standing for an object, as when the pepperpot is taken to represent a car involved in an accident . . . The relation between symbols and things is that of conventional identification: symbols are *taken to be* their objects. (1976, p.139)

Still further along the definitional continuum we find treatments of the **symbol as vehicle of indirect expression**. Here, typically, the symbol is taken to be something which *does* have some qualities analogous to, or some natural association with, what is symbolised, and many of those whose views are located here claim that the primary form of symbolism is metaphor. But the situation at this point is not clear; sometimes the symbol is still classified as a kind of sign; sometimes it is opposed to the sign; sometimes the symbol is 'indirect' *only* in the sense that it is merely a vehicle for saying what a sign *cannot* say; almost always, however, 'affect' is seen to be an important characteristic of symbolism. Amongst those who see the symbol as a vehicle of indirect expression, Ricoeur's position is probably the broadest, and he explicitly

locates it somewhere between the ‘Cassirer’ position and the ‘metaphor’ view:

I give a narrower sense to the word ‘symbol’ than authors who, like Cassirer, call symbolic any apprehension of reality by means of signs, from perception, myth, and art to science; but I give it a broader sense than those authors who, starting from Latin rhetoric or the neo-Platonic tradition, reduce the symbol to analogy. *I define ‘symbol’ as any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first.* (Ricoeur 1965, p. 245, italics in original)

To mean something other than what is said – this is the symbolic function . . . it presupposes signs that already have a primary, literal manifest meaning. Hence I deliberately restrict the notion of symbol to double or multiple-meaning expressions whose semantic texture is correlative to the work of interpretation that explicates their second or multiple meanings. (Ricoeur 1970, pp. 12–13)

There is a similar emphasis on the *indirect* nature of the symbol in the neo-classical view. Todorov (1982) notes that, in Augustine’s theory of signs, ‘signs (in the restricted sense) are opposed to symbols as the proper is to the transposed, or, better yet, as the direct is to the indirect’ (p. 57). What is important here, and what marks off the neo-classical view from the romantic, is that the symbol is ‘indirect’ only in the sense that it is a different way to say what the sign says.

Further along the continuum, the romantic conception treats the **symbol as vehicle of the ineffable**. Indeed, the concept of the symbol is central to romanticism: ‘without exaggerating, we could say that if we had to condense the romantic aesthetic into a single word, it would certainly be the word “symbol”’ (Todorov 1982, p. 198). This approach combines an emphasis on the proper/transposed distinction with an insistence on the importance of affective/motivational factors, following the Jung/Silberer idealist position. The affect which lies at the heart of symbolism is the affect of idealism, the ‘spiritual’, the affect which accompanies the expression of something which could never be expressed by the sign. In Jaffé’s words: ‘the symbol is an object of the known world hinting at something unknown; it is the known expressing the life and sense of the inexpressible’ (1964, pp. 309–10). In the romantic approach, above all, the notorious mystique associated with symbols is created and maintained: symbols are intransitive, intuitive, ineffable; they ‘involve the progressive, typological elaboration of feelings and impulses which are ineffable and incapable of literal description’ (Munz 1973, p. 78); and this is as it must be, for ‘reality that is strictly metaphysical . . . can be approached in no other way than

through myths and symbols' (Eliade, in Fingesten 1970, p. 136). On this view, symbols are characterised as 'progressive' or 'anagogic' – they are indicators of the forward-moving, spiritual, religious aspects of human nature.

In opposition, further towards the narrow end of the continuum, but also with an emphasis on affect, is the treatment of the **symbol as unconsciously produced substitute**. This approach is often characterised as 'regressive', and belongs to the realm of classical psychoanalysis. What is important here is the unconscious nature of the symbolic process, and the 'primary' nature of what is symbolised. While many later psychoanalysts support a position nearer the broad end of the continuum, arguing that the term 'symbolism' should be used generically to cover both conscious *and* unconscious productions, the classical psychoanalytic position, as expressed by Freud, and supported by Jones, restricts the term 'symbolism' to cases where the substitutive process operates largely unconsciously and in the service of defence. On this view, symbolism and symbolic activity is the result of a compromise between repressed and repressing forces. Thus Jones (1916) explicitly rejects the view of Jung and Silberer, that metaphor is the symbol *par excellence*, on the grounds that metaphor does not necessarily involve unconscious affective and repressed forces. According to Jones's defence of the psychoanalytic position, 'only what is repressed is symbolised; only what is repressed needs to be symbolised' (1916, p. 116). How far this view is from that of the linguists and semioticians can be seen from Grünbaum's (1986) reminder that 'symptoms, as compromise formations, have traditionally been viewed as "symbols", but they are "symbols" in the nonsemantic sense of being substitutive formations affording replacement satisfactions or outlets, not linguistic representatives of their hypothesized unconscious causes' (p. 219).

At the narrow end of the definitional continuum, we find Freud's later (1914a, 1916/17) treatment of the symbol as unconscious, phylogenetically inherited universal code. Here the word is reserved for those 'universal' symbols which appear in dreams (and also in myths and folklore), and have three characteristics which distinguish them from all other forms of 'indirect representation': firstly, constancy of meaning, i.e., the relation between symbol and symbolised provides a 'fixed' meaning in the unconscious; secondly, these symbols are 'mute' – or, rather, the dreamer (or subject) becomes mute in the face of them, being unable to produce any associations to them as he or she can to other repressed material; and thirdly, the meanings of these symbols are not learned, but inherited. As will later be seen, this peculiar restricted view is at odds with Freud's treatment of symbols elsewhere, and there are, I shall argue, compelling reasons for agreeing with those who reject it.

Limitations of perspective one

Surveying the range of definitions of 'symbol' along this broad/narrow continuum provides a general overview of the subject, and gives us some indication of the number and variety of views on symbolism. But this perspective is limited in two ways. Firstly, many theorists or theories, especially those with a broader approach, occupy more than one location on the continuum, also supporting a narrower definition in the case of *some* symbols. So, for example, Langer characterises only *some* symbols (e.g., a cross) as 'charged with affect', and only *some* symbols (the 'non-discursive' ones) as indicating a different realm of reality and truth. Sapir (1959) treats *one* kind of symbolism ('condensation' symbolism) in a manner akin to the narrow psychoanalytic approach; such symbolism 'strikes deeper and deeper roots in the unconscious and diffuses its emotional quality to types of behaviour and situations apparently far removed from the original meaning of the symbol' (pp. 492–3). Again, we find those at the narrow end of the continuum occasionally making pronouncements which properly belong to the broad end. The psychoanalyst Rycroft (1956) asserts that 'symbolisation is a general capacity of the mind, which is based on perception and can be used by the primary or secondary process, neurotically or realistically, for defence or self-expression' (pp. 142–3). Even Freud often uses 'symbol' in the sense of metaphor (e.g., the 'sweet taste of the bread' is 'symbolic' of the happy life that might have been led with a particular girl (1899, p. 315)), and he allows that 'the concept of a symbol cannot at present be sharply delimited: it shades off into such notions as those of a replacement or representation, and even approaches that of an allusion' (1916/17, p. 152). Secondly, and more crucially, this perspective draws no distinction between those cases of symbolism which, for psychologists as well as for everyone else, are uncontroversial and uninteresting, and about which there is general agreement, and those cases which are controversial and which have for centuries been sources of dispute. A second perspective allows this distinction to be made.

Perspective two: 'conventional' versus 'non-conventional' symbols

This second perspective identifies a fundamental distinction between two kinds of symbol, and allows us to move swiftly towards the focus of inquiry. Since, logically, anything can symbolise anything else (more accurately, anything can be used or taken to symbolise anything else), it seems reasonable to ask what the grounds are for claiming, in any particular case, that a symbol means one thing and not another. In the

case of, for example, the symbols of logic, mathematics or language, the meanings of the symbols have been established by agreement or convention. In such cases, naturally, what the symbol stands for must be learned, is not generally in dispute, and so is not held to pose interesting psychological questions. But there are other phenomena, which are considered to contain symbols, or deal with them, or be symbolic, or have some kind of symbolic force, in the areas of dreams, art, literature, rituals, myths, fairy tales, folklore, psychopathological symptoms, and so on. Because the interpretation of *these* symbols is *not* set by convention, the explanations of the occurrence, and the meanings, of such symbolic phenomena are contentious, and have in fact been investigated, discussed, and disputed at enormous length.

Now, perhaps not surprisingly, given its central importance, this distinction between what may be termed 'conventional' and 'non-conventional' symbols is one which seems to emerge naturally from the general confusion of definitions and classifications, cutting across the broad versus narrow approaches discussed above, and also cutting across the various terminological, classificatory divisions to be found in the different subject areas in the literature on symbolism – in philosophy, semiotics, anthropology, psychology, etc. Thus, sometimes, the distinction is made between two different kinds of symbol (e.g., Langer's (1942) and Bertalanffy's (1981) 'discursive' versus 'non-discursive' symbols, Sapir's (1959) 'referential' versus 'condensation' symbols, Turner's (1968) 'logical' versus 'non-logical' symbols). On other occasions, the distinction is made between signs and symbols, the former representing conventional, the latter non-conventional, symbols. Here the distinction is characterised as 'arbitrary' versus 'transitive', or 'direct' versus 'indirect'. But, whatever the terminology, and whatever the disagreements, there appears to be a major (albeit often only implicit) agreement that it is the non-conventional symbols which are the psychologically interesting and controversial ones. Further, there is notable cross-domain generality in the grounds on which the non-conventional symbols are separated from the conventional ones. For Langer, the 'non-discursive' symbols, the non-scientific, controversial ones, point to a radically different symbolic 'mode', the two 'modes' having important ontological and epistemological implications: 'truth is so intimately related to symbolism that if we recognise two radically different types of symbolic expression we should logically look for two distinct meanings of truth' (1942, p. 260). Sapir distinguishes between 'referential' symbols, such as writing, speech, code, and other conventional devices for the purpose of reference, and 'condensation' symbols, which are 'highly condensed forms of substitutive behaviour, allowing

for release of emotional tension', the essential difference between the two groups being that 'while referential symbolism grows with formal elaboration in the conscious, condensation symbolism strikes deeper and deeper roots in the unconscious . . . and . . . diffuses its emotional quality to types of behaviour and situations apparently far removed from the original meaning of the symbol' (1959, pp. 492–3). For Turner (1968), 'logical' symbols 'are conceived in the conscious mind, as Pallas was in Zeus' head', whereas 'nonlogical' symbols 'represent the impress on consciousness of factors external or subliminal to it' (p. 579). Sausure too, though excluding symbols from semiology, does so on the grounds that they are 'motivated' and 'involuntary'. Bertalanffy supports Langer's distinction between discursive and non-discursive symbols; for him, discursive symbols convey facts, but non-discursive symbols (also called 'experiential' or 'existential' symbols) convey values. In romanticism, symbols (as opposed to signs) have the characteristics of Bertalanffy's 'existential' symbols; they are intuitive, transcendent, ineffable, belong to a 'higher' reality, and act as vehicles for the expression of the spiritual and 'progressive' aspects of human beings.

As for the question of the *relationship between* these two kinds of symbolism, this is rarely addressed, although, amongst the few speculations which are offered, there seems to be some agreement that the controversial non-conventional symbols enjoy an ontogenetic priority over the conventional symbols, the latter developing from the former via a gradual diminishing of affect coupled with an increasing contribution of conscious, as compared with unconscious, processes, although it is not clear how this transition is supposed to occur. Sapir (1959) suggests that it is likely that most referential symbolism evolved from condensation symbolism, and that the essential feature of this development was the gradual erosion of the emotion, so that 'the less primary and associational the symbolism, the more dissociated from its original context, the less emotionalized it becomes, the more it takes on the character of true reference' (p. 493). Balkányi (1964) agrees: 'I still would assume that the difference between verbal symbol and verbal conventional sign is an evolutionary one . . . the combination of the sound-image with the thing-presentation alone makes possible that wearing down of the sensual value which leads to abstraction. This combination is the word' (p. 72). Langer, too, argues that 'denotation is the essence of language, because it frees the symbol from its original, instinctive utterance and marks its deliberate *use*, outside of the total situation that gave it birth' (1942, p. 75). Even Bertalanffy (1981), though not explicitly supporting this position, comes close to it in his view that the so-called Freudian

symbols, because of their biologically determinate or obsessive nature, are not yet genuine symbols, but are best seen as 'pre-symbols', as unconscious associative formations which provide the raw materials from which true symbols arise. A radical version of this evolutionary view came from the Swedish philologist Hans Sperber, who suggested (1912) that much of the origin of speech is concerned with sexual issues – a suggestion which was embraced by Freud and Jones, and which has, in modified form, found some favour with more recent psychoanalytic supporters. Baker (1950), for example, after an extensive survey of etymological linguistic connections in the Polynesian languages, concludes that Sperber's views deserve some respect, for:

primary experiences of pleasure-giving bodily functions – oral, anal, urethral and genital – serve to bequeath to the individual a series of unconscious images which he never throws off. These images form the associative bases for all his later conquests of reality. Since language is one of the main instruments for this conquest, one can scarcely be surprised to find that it bears multitudinous traces of man's infantile fantasies. (Baker, 1950, p. 178)

Whatever the relationship between the two classes of symbols, it is clear that the focus of our inquiry here must be on the non-conventional symbols.

Sources of confusion and centres of dispute

One major source of confusion in the literature on symbolism, and the reason for the disorder along the broad/narrow continuum, is that, when the controversial (i.e., non-conventional) symbols are under discussion, most theorists neglect to maintain clearly and consistently the distinction between the two types of symbol, slipping back and forth between them. This contributes to a second source of confusion, the question of the specific nature of the symbols which belong to the non-conventional group. There are two, closely connected, centres of controversy: the first is the question of the conscious or unconscious nature of the symbolic processes and productions, including the question of the *relative* contributions of conscious and unconscious processes; and the second, related, question is that of the 'progressive' or 'regressive' nature of symbolism, and whether there is any connection between these two. As mentioned earlier, the conventional symbols are unproblematic; almost all writers on the subject consider them to be entirely conscious productions. They do not all agree, however, that the *non-conventional* symbols are *unconscious*; nor do they agree on the degree to which unconscious processes contribute to the symbolic productions, or on the origin and function of these unconscious processes. It is perhaps no

surprise that this area is rife with inconsistencies. The resulting tensions encourage theorists to speak (albeit uncertainly) of the 'double aspect' of symbolism; 'logos' versus 'mythos', 'demystification' versus 'remystification', 'transparent' versus 'opaque', 'concealing' versus 'revealing', and so on. The tensions also fuel the disputes and confusions surrounding the 'progressive' versus 'regressive' vectors of symbolism. For the supporters of the 'progressive' or 'anagogic' view, symbols either have nothing to do with regressive, biological instinctual drives and their gratification, or they somehow 'accomplish liberation from the slavery of the biologically imposed' (Hacker 1965, p. 82), while still having '“natural”, biological, quasi-instinctual origins and vicissitudes' (p. 87). For the supporters of the regressive view, on the other hand, the 'anagogic' approach, with its idolisation of the mystical 'opacity' of the symbol, and its celebration of the freedom and creativity of the human spirit, is merely an attempt to disguise the formation of symbols, and 'divert interest from their instinctual roots' (Freud 1919a, p. 524), and grows out of idealism, the 'philosophical brand of escapism' (Reichenbach 1951, p. 254). It will become clear how both the failure (of which Freud is also guilty) to draw clearly and maintain consistently the distinction between conventional and non-conventional symbols, and the tensions produced by vacillations concerning the conscious/unconscious and progressive/regressive aspects of non-conventional symbols, serve as foci from which many difficulties and confusions arise.

The aim of this brief journey was to give some idea of the great number and variety of different approaches to, and pronouncements about, symbolism, to narrow the focus onto the subject matter of the inquiry, and to point to some of the sources of confusion and centres of controversy which have rendered problematic various approaches to symbolism – in short, to indicate why it is that there is a widespread belief that no unified theory is possible. But, as I have said, I do not share that belief. The general theory of symbolism which I am proposing in this book is derived from a *particular version* of Freud's theory, so my next step is to present and develop an account of that particular version. This, as I indicated earlier, will require a detailed, chronological examination, exegetical and critical, of Freud's published writings, tracing the development of his treatment of symbolism from the early years, through many additions and modifications, to a major shift and its consequences. In particular, the problems with which he is faced as a result of his changes will be examined, and I shall argue that those changes were neither warranted nor tenable. That will clear the way for consolidating the theory via revision of some of the important aspects of

Freud's theory which relate to symbolism, and for defending it by assessing its ability to meet certain logical and psychological requirements, requirements which any theory of symbolism must meet.