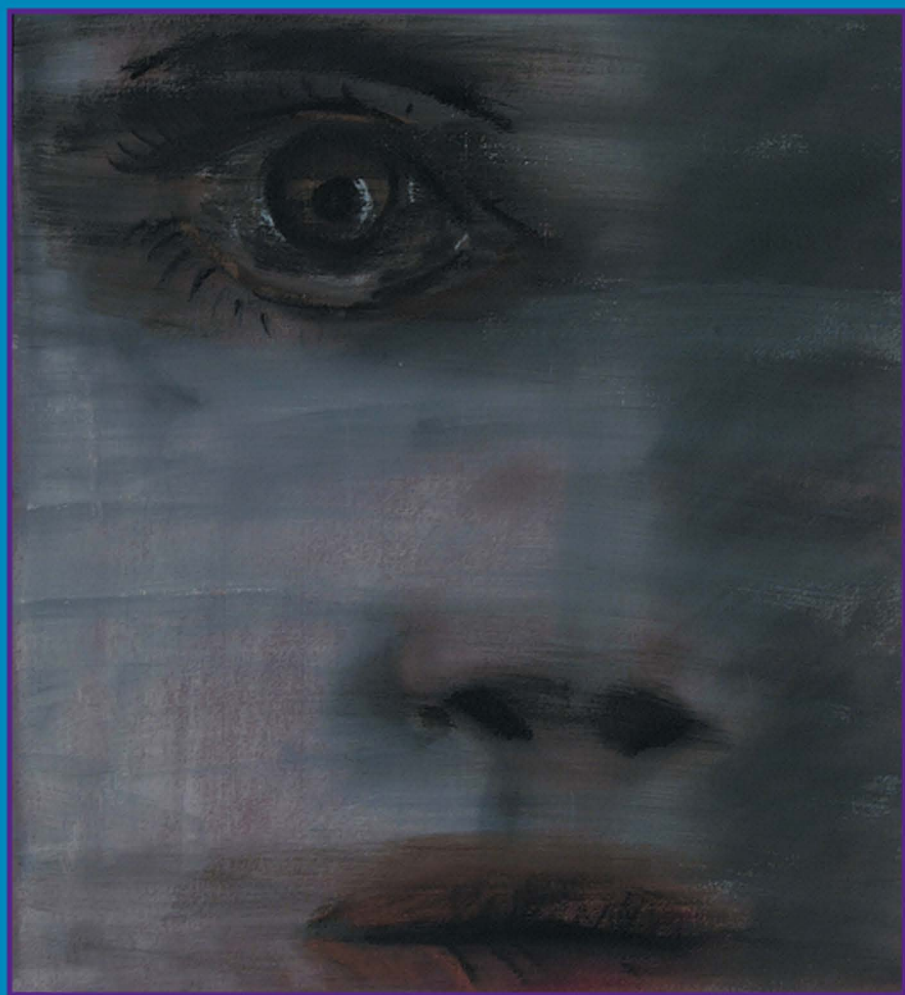


Reflecting Psychoanalysis

Narrative and Resolve in the
Psychoanalytic Experience



JURGEN REEDER

ROUTLEDGE


REFLECTING
PSYCHOANALYSIS



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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
CHAPTER ONE Metapsychology: defining the field of inquiry	9
CHAPTER TWO A contribution to the interpretation of unconscious fantasy	23
CHAPTER THREE A theory of reflection: the hermeneutic circle	41
CHAPTER FOUR A separate reality	93
CHAPTER FIVE Character formation	143
CHAPTER SIX Narrativity and beyond	185

CHAPTER SEVEN	
The ethical moment: a metapsychological description	233
<i>REFERENCES</i>	269
<i>INDEX</i>	279

Introduction

During the past three decades or so, psychoanalysis has been teeming with new and often competing theories—both those dealing with clinical realities and with metapsychological reflection on the workings of the mind. In this respect, the period has differed from the previous one—roughly lasting from the time of Freud’s death through the sixties—when a great part of the theoretical work that was carried out dealt with the clarification, elucidation, and systematization of established Freudian and post-Freudian theoretical positions. Of all the new directions of the last 30 years, I wish to mention two: hermeneutics and intersubjectivity.

Hermeneutics has been a preoccupation for the psychoanalytic community ever since the publication in English of Paul Ricoeur’s *Freud and Philosophy* (1965). Although still definitely a relevant issue for discussion and controversy, the main exchanges seem to have taken place during the years 1975–1985. What one then most often asked was whether psychoanalysis itself should be taken to be a method and a theory of interpretation.

When approaching the issue of psychoanalysis and hermeneutics from such a vantage point, one has chosen a view which construes

hermeneutics as an “objectivating discipline”. By that, I wish to designate a not uncommon conception in which the hermeneutic project is taken to be “reason’s understanding and comprehension of an exterior object”. Such an object may be the Other’s (or my own) speech or comportment, a written text, a work of art, in fact any form of cultural artifact. (Throughout this book, “the Other” is mainly used to designate *the radically Other*—i.e. she or he who is *not* an object in my mind, *not* an actor in my fantasies, *not* appropriated through the categories of my ego. In short: *not* a representation. Such an Other is notoriously absent in virtually all psychoanalytic deliberations. Only occasionally will the term be used to designate that which is “alien” to the subject—and then, hopefully, the context will be such that this specific meaning is apparent.) The object in itself will be regarded as the primary aim of the interpretive activity.

Almost as long as there has been a discussion on the topic of hermeneutics, a form of reflection upon psychoanalytic work purporting to be “new” has been taking place—these days one often hears of a fundamental *intersubjectivity* inherent in the psychoanalytic experience. As with the hermeneutic discussion, this is more of an investigation into the nature of things than an attempt to found a new theoretical school; neither does it necessarily propagate new clinical procedures. I would say that the intersubjectivity discussion is an attempt to bring forth and elucidate aspects of analytic work that most probably have been present with the really good psychoanalysts—regardless of theoretical inclination—for as long as our practice has been in existence.¹ In other words, intersubjectivity is mainly a way to conduct the psychoanalyst’s self-reflection

In contrast to classical psychoanalytic self-understanding—with its tacit trust in an unsuspecting, but objectivating, conception of interpretation—the intersubjective model is founded upon the conviction that psychoanalytic experience rests upon the unique human *encounter*. This includes also the belief that such an encounter can never be guided by supposed scientific knowledge, wherein the analysand is objectivated. Intersubjectivity is precisely that dimension where we do *not* have knowledge of each other, but we nevertheless act upon and influence one another. In accordance with all this, it is impossible to fall back on technical procedures and the reductionistic faith in unconscious content lying in wait to be

uncovered. Rather than conceiving of it in static terms—i.e. as the correspondence between manifest (conscious) and unconscious representations—truth is seen as something always *on its way*, not a possession, but a process embedded in the intersubjective dialectic of interpreting. Thus, as we shall see, intersubjectivity has a definite affinity with hermeneutics.

This book is written in sympathy with the intersubjective model, and in line with that, my conception of what it is that constitutes the hermeneutic core will most probably come as a surprise to the reader. I suspect that my way of using the term “interpreting” may have an unfamiliar ring to it. After all, psychoanalysts usually speak of “interpretation” and “interpretations”. I, for my part, make a point of maintaining a distinction between interpreting and interpretation. By interpretation, I refer to a methodical activity which presupposes a division between the observer and the observed and the objectivation of what is alien, for its incorporation within the ego’s sphere. My interest in interpreting, on the other hand, has to do with uncovering a primary or structural condition; this concerns something which we, along with Freud, may call unconscious thought processes, and it is namely that pristine act by which these unconscious thought processes come to be expressed in the form of speech, dreams, fantasy or heedful action.¹

To avoid all misunderstanding, let me state at once that I regard *interpreting* to be that act which is most representative of genuine and truly good psychoanalytic work.

* * *

My interest in these issues became urgent during the eighties, after close to a decade of work as an analyst in private practice, when I met with something I hadn’t been in touch with since my days as a candidate treating my first cases: I was struck dumb before my analysands. Gradually I realized that this bewildering and painful experience was the expression of a crisis in my trusting relationship to the psychoanalysis I sought to put into practice. Today, I see the crisis (among other things) as the symptom of an ethical problematic buried within the psychoanalytic project itself, a difficulty that could be formulated as “With what legitimacy do I assume the right to interpret my fellow being?”

It became clear to me that both my manner of working and my

ways of thinking about my analysands and what I was doing when together with them, could no longer follow the same paths as earlier. I started to look for new theoretical guidelines and resumed my study of the French analyst Jacques Lacan, whom I had approached somewhat before I began my analytic training. Here I found support for my feeling that there is no legitimate knowledge to be had of the Other and that psychoanalysis is so fascinated by its knowledge that it threatens to be blinded by it. This work resulted in two books, the first one on Lacan's theory (1988), while the second was a dissertation on desire and love (1990).

Meeting analysands several times a week and over the years, is an intimate experience I have always found difficult to speak of. Had I the inclination, I would surely have preferred to express that experience through some kind of literary presentation. It seems, however, that theoretical discourse comes easiest to hand. I want to think that the content and form of my presentation are coloured by my striving to arrive at a theoretical position most consonant with my innermost convictions concerning what it may mean to be a human being. But, such attentive listening to one's inner voice is a delicate task and I can only hope that I shall not too often slip into the unfounded.

Acknowledgments

This is not a methodological investigation in the sense that I give a systematic account of every source of inspiration. Rather than being a summary and a display of what others have said, the study is above all else an exploration into my own standpoints. Therefore, my way of relating to and using the texts of others is instrumental rather than expository, and by that I mean that I make use of the thought of others mainly to mark my own path.

Some influences, however, I do not wish to omit. However multifariously Jacques Lacan may be represented in my text as a partner in dialogue, it should be emphasized that my intellectual debt to him is far greater than what is explicitly stated. The same—if on a smaller scale—pertains to Paul Ricoeur, W. R. Bion, and Donald W. Winnicott. I will not remain faithful to anyone in particular, and no one will be extensively quoted, but in many

places in my text, I will engage both concepts and conceptions of theirs—sometimes to polemicize, at others to propagate my own interpretation.

When it comes to Sigmund Freud, my text is a close grappling with some of his central concepts, and my indebtedness will be abundantly clear. Returning to Freud is not a question of canonizing his work, nor should it be motivated by a wish to stipulate the correct interpretation. You return to Freud for the same reasons that it proves to be necessary to—for example in an analysis—return to one's first family: one returns to find one's roots. Or, like Lacan says of Freud in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: "One uses him. One moves around within him. One takes one's bearings from the direction he points in" (1986, p. 206). The work of Freud is the *Ur-matter* of psychoanalytic knowing, and one returns both to *become* and *stay* an analyst. Theoretical work applied to his texts will stand somewhat as a guarantee that psychoanalysis will not lose its track and become something else—moral treatment, ideology, or a doctrine of salvation.

With the years, I have come to realize that my relationship to psychoanalysis has been deeply shaped and coloured by two persons in particular. The first of these is Jan Stensson, with whom I was in analysis in Stockholm during the latter part of the seventies. The second is Harold Stewart, member of the British Psychoanalytic Society, from whom I took supervision both individually and in a group setting during the first half of the eighties. It is true that I have come to develop a critical stance towards the object relations theory that Harold stands for—this book being no exception—but Harold and Jan have offered something much more indispensable than mere theoretical information: each in their own way, they have put me in touch with *the psychoanalytic experience* and thus given me my first clear picture of what psychoanalysis may be.

* * *

Reflecting Psychoanalysis is an individual project within a Swedish research program under the heading "Transitions. Psychoanalytic investigations into the nature of change", where my colleagues Iréne Matthis, Bengt Warren, and Andrzej Werbart are to be thanked for their helpful and inspiring comments during our seminars.

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I wish also to thank the following persons for their unconditional help in reading and commenting upon parts of my work at differing stages of its development: John Swedenmark, Zagorka Zivkovic, Clarence Crafoord, Hans Ruin, Cecilia Sjöholm and Per-Johan Ödman. During the last phase of my work, I was especially helped by view-points coming from two persons who struggled with the material in its entirety: on the one hand Bengt Warren, mentioned above, and on the other Lena Forssén, editor at the publishers Natur och Kultur in Stockholm. When it comes to this edition, I wish to express my deep gratitude to Chris New, who has put in an enormous amount of work on the task of making good English of my attempt at translating my own text.

I wish also to mention the participants of a post-graduate seminar I held at the Department of Education in Stockholm during the years 1993–1995 under the heading "The limits of interpretation". Furthermore, the candidates in seminar group IX at the Swedish Psychoanalytical Association during the course "Metapsychology II" in 1993, as well as the participants of the seminar "Theories of representation in psychoanalysis" which I held at the Department of Education in 1996. At these seminars I have presented my work as it developed and received valuable responses to it.

Preparatory work and work in progress have been published in the Swedish psychoanalytic journal *Divan* (Reeder, 1991, 1992b, 1993, 1994, 1995a). Of these some have appeared in English translation in the *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* (Reeder, 1992a, 1995b). More or less revamped, these articles have all been integrated with the present text. In the English version, I have also included parts of two later articles (Reeder 1998a [b] & 1999). I want to express my gratitude to both journals for their permission to use these texts in the present study.

Notes

- 1 The fundamental sense of the Greek *hermeneuein* is “to interpret”, as in “interpreting what was said”, but for some authors it also means “to put in words”, “to give expression to”. For Aristotle, among others, the noun *hermeneia* carries the sense “the interpretation of thoughts with the help of words” (Liddell & Scott 1843, pp. 580–581). In the introduction to *On interpretation*, he writes: “Words spoken are symbols or signs of affections or impressions of the soul” (16a).



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Metapsychology: defining the field of inquiry

For a considerable part of his life, Freud no doubt harboured a dream that the unconscious could be transparent to the rational gaze. As the years passed, however, it became clearer that he could not undividedly embrace such faith in progress. The introduction of the death drive and the emphasis on the repetition compulsion in “Beyond the pleasure principle” (1920), his analysis of the human condition in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930), and the well-known “pessimism” of “Analysis terminable and interminable” (1937a), where he attempts to fathom the inescapable limitations of psychoanalysis, all bear witness to the fact that he was not prepared to overlook the ethically and epistemologically tragic aspects of the analytic experience. In the text he was working on at the time of his death—“An outline of psychoanalysis” (1940a)—he unequivocally declared the unconscious as belonging to “the Real” [*das Reale*], i.e. that which cannot be known, like Kant’s Thing-in-itself.

The metapsychological domain

The foremost instrument for psychoanalytic self-scrutiny is the part

of its theory we know as *metapsychology*. The term itself does not appear often in Freud's writings, and turns up for the first time in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess written February 13, 1896: "I am continually occupied with psychology—really *metapsychology*" (1985, p. 172), and 2 years later Freud continues on the same track: "It seems to me that the theory of wish fulfillment has brought only the psychological solution and not the biological—or, rather, metapsychical—one. (I am going to ask you seriously, by the way, whether I may use the name metapsychology for my psychology that leads behind consciousness.)" (March 10, 1898; *op. cit.*, pp. 301–302).

Freud was well aware of the limited capacity of the ego and of consciousness to render an accurate image of the real world,¹ and in his writings he keeps coming back to how they offer material which is limited, and inadequate in explaining even psychic phenomena. To solve the problems for which a descriptive and introspective psychology had proved to be insufficient, he wishes to found a "psychology that leads behind consciousness". Such a formulation is, however, not without its complications, for one may well ask what kind of *psychology* it may be, that leads *behind* consciousness.

During the years 1910–1919, Freud had plans for the publication of a work on "Preparatory metapsychology", the aim of which was to clarify and develop the theoretical foundations of psychoanalysis.² However, no such book ever came to be, even though some of its intended chapters were issued as articles—today these are known as the "Metapsychological essays". Perhaps we may find the answer to our query here.

In the essay "The unconscious" Freud defines what he wished to see as the kernel of metapsychological knowledge: "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" (Freud, 1915c, p. 181).

These are probably the most frequently quoted lines used to present Freud's conception of metapsychology. It certainly is a precise definition, using terms exactly mirroring the content of the mentioned essays: *dynamically*, psychological phenomena are described as the result of conflict obtaining between contrary forces; *topographically*, these forces belong either to the conscious/pre-conscious or the unconscious system; *economically*, finally, the assumption is that these forces are determinable as to their energy

content and that these energies are bound or unbound within their respective systems.

Considering what lies implied within such a definition, it is clear that metapsychology would not be a “second psychology”. For the dynamic, topographical, and economic aspects mentioned by Freud, all refer to structures and processes *totally lacking in psychological quality*. That is to say, they do not possess such characteristics as would make them available either to introspection or identification.

To think in metapsychological terms is to think through the very foundations of psychoanalytic knowing. (The distinction between *knowing* and *knowledge* is crucial for my argument and is borrowed from the one often made in French between *savoir* and *connaissance*. Knowing pertains to the (unconscious, primary process) *disposition* or *capacity* for saying or doing, whereas knowledge has to do with *contents* residing in the (conscious, secondary process) mind—such as may be expressed in the form of propositional statements or in writing. Thus, knowledge will always presuppose knowing, but not necessarily the other way around.) Metapsychological reflection works as a corrective by putting a check on the deliberations and founding hypotheses upon which clinical theory is based. And, through its control over clinical theory, it will also be definitive—in the double sense of the word: both delimiting and making explicit—of what it is possible to communicate and think about in psychoanalytic experience. Thus, in a sense, the “world” of psychoanalytic knowing begins and ends with metapsychology. (The reader is invited to imagine what psychoanalytic knowing would be like without its fantastic conjectures regarding, for example, repression or unconscious thought processes.)

By aiming beyond the sphere of the ego and consciousness, metapsychology also offers a position from which it is possible to scrutinize the pervasive tendency to psychologize (which may, in fact, be a remnant of Man’s primitive urge to anthropomorphize all that is alien to him). Rather than letting metapsychology serve the mapping of the unconscious, we should, to my mind, let it be an instrument for examining the most critical area of psychoanalytic experience, namely the passage from unconscious to conscious. At this point the analyst is relentlessly faced with the limits of his knowledge: What do I know, and what may possibly be known?

With what authority do I interpret the analysand's words? What degree of knowledge is it ethically reasonable to claim?

To avoid a vicious circle of self-confirmations, theoretical work must at least at some decisive point abstain from the temptation of wholly relying on only the psychoanalytic experience and received psychoanalytic knowledge. Here, metapsychology has the advantage of being able to stay open to other disciplines, in the most fruitful way, and enter a dialogue with, for example, linguistics, neuro-physiology, or anthropology. The reason for this is that metapsychology moves in a realm where knowledge meets with its limits, philosophy—with its long tradition of epistemology, ontology, ethics and so forth—is probably its best conversation partner in theoretical work.

Theoretical work

To Freud, metapsychology was apparently a project in progress. This was no ground over which he would get mixed up in serious controversy. His dogmatism would surely show when it came to the Oedipus complex, the theory of sexuality, transference and resistance, but more seldom when metapsychology as such was an issue. As a matter of fact, Freud decidedly maintained the relativity of metapsychological ideas: "Such ideas as these are part of a speculative superstructure of psycho-analysis, any portion of which can be abandoned or changed without loss or regret the moment its inadequacy has been proved" (1925, pp. 32–33).³

Metapsychology is a game where a number of gambits may be played. The theoretical work of metapsychology relies, as stated by Freud a number of times, upon speculation—a term to designate how the process of thinking allows itself to stray from the evident, the observable and that which may be proven. Speculative thinking is like playing, and under specific conditions it will result in the form of fiction we call "theory".

The primary aim of theoretical work is to forge *concepts*. Its second concern is the enlivenment of these same concepts by way of narration. Even if we would think of theory as pure structure, it will be in need of a narrative presentation. Only when our theories are wholly formalized—for example as diagrammatic representations,

Bion's "grid", or the "algorithms" and "mathemes" of Lacan—will they be rid of the demand for theoretical narrative. (On the other hand, accessibility will diminish rapidly.) To a large extent, psychoanalytic theory is made up of such narratives: the Oedipus complex, the assumed contents of fantasy, the vicissitudes of the drives, the primal scene, and so on...

Any story told or imagined is dependent upon a point of departure, its essential "Once upon a time...", which would be the same as the theory's founding hypothesis, like a mythology. In addition, since metapsychology so often concerns itself with basics like structures and functions of the mind, its mythical function will be more obvious than in the case of clinical theory.

Incidentally, "mythology" is the word Freud employed when discussing his drive hypothesis in a letter to Albert Einstein: "It may perhaps seem to you as though our theories are a kind of mythology [...]. But does not every science come in the end to a mythology like this?" (1933b, p. 211). Most clear in this respect is Freud's theory of the drives, which has been psychoanalysis' foremost account of the sources of psychic life and activity. And that does not mean that one necessarily must follow him in the choice of which drives are to be stipulated, or, for that matter, in how one shall imagine them to operate. To me, the whole issue is quite pragmatic: every story is in need of its starting point and in theoretical work one chooses (or creates) that mythology which is most consistent with one's carefully elaborated convictions and at the same time appears to be most credibly useful for reflecting upon clinical experience.

The possibilities of variation within the metapsychological field are considerable and most important is probably not where one finally ends up, but the path trodden. Theoretical work is an experience in its own right, with a possibility of deeply affecting the theorist, as he must question his beliefs concerning what it is to be a human being and think through such things as the relationship between man and woman, the meaning of madness and perversion, or examine his own sexual fantasies and preferred practices. In all its manifestations, theoretical work—when pursued with an open attitude to what the unconscious may surprise us with—will be a deep-going process which sometimes may change something within him who enters upon its track.

Theory

Psychoanalysis is not a general science of Man. Before all else, it is a procedure and a form of *praxis* that is accompanied by a body of knowledge developed to fit the method. On the basis of first hand experience, psychoanalytical concepts belong only to the analytical experience; beyond that, analytic knowing has no specific application—except, perhaps, as a model for reflection. The fact that psychoanalytic experience is the foundation for its theory stands as a guarantee that metapsychological speculation shall not descend into opinionated nonsense.

* * *

Every now and then, though, psychoanalysis is criticized both from within and from without for not solving its theoretical differences with reference to clinically based observational facts or data (not to speak of its aversion to clinical experiment). Not without some contempt, these critics will point out how often one confines oneself to finding evidence for one's own standpoint by way of reference to what someone else has said or written. But since his statements, too, are unrelated to valid observations of the kind requested, the argument in this case is deemed to be equally weak.

But, if the psychoanalytic experience stands as the sole guarantor that the speculations of metapsychology will not derail and become "wild", haven't we then made the claim that psychoanalytic knowing does not rest upon empirical foundations? To our everyday and common-sensical reason, speaking of what is empirical is to speak precisely of observations. But psychoanalysts seldom refer to observations of their own or of others, for the simple reason that observational facts simply do not obtain in the psychoanalytic situation. For, an observation presupposes that its object is determinable in time and space, and also as to its qualities and quantity. Furthermore it must be possible to let more than one independent observer reach the same conclusion concerning the content of the observation.

Only in a very superficial sense is it possible to speak of such observations in relation to the psychoanalytic experience: indisputably there is an analysand and an analyst, both producing utterances. It is possible to register these utterances, and they may

be scrutinized in that form by more subjects than those originally involved. In principle, the same could apply to the participants' facial expressions, gestures, and general appearance. But beyond that, the determinability of observations will falter, for what the practice of psychoanalysis ultimately takes as its interest is not what is said, but *the saying*, i.e. the process or activity of two subjects in dialogue and the effects that this may engender. To tap such a process the analyst must turn his attention towards something letting itself be known from within himself. No observations will catch such a realm and, in consequence of that, no facts won.

So, when reflecting on his practice, instead of referring to observations, the psychoanalyst—just as the philosopher often does—turns to thoughts formulated by others, formulations that have grown out of experience. With the philosophers, it is the experience of living and reflecting, with the analysts, it is the psychoanalytic experience. Not seldom is the analyst's choice of quotations determined by his having been impressed by someone else's capacity to unveil the world in new ways, or that he simply has stumbled upon an apposite formulation which he possibly wishes had been his own. The latter circumstance makes it clear that one of the desires lying behind theoretical work must be designated as aesthetic.

Yet, meaningful theoretical work cannot be carried out without empirical foundations. Here, it is important to stress the origins of the words we choose to use. The Greek *empeiria* means "experience" and is etymologically related to words conveying senses such as "skill", "habit", and so forth. Like a weave of acquired dispositions, experience is the most intimate subjective knowing. From a hermeneutic point of view, it is a matter of course that experience is a valid epistemological ground for good theoretical work. Reminding ourselves that Plato and Aristotle use the word *theoria* to designate what we may call "contemplation" or "speculation", it is possible to grasp that the theoretical work of psychoanalysis is a sort of keen listening to experience combined with meditative thinking. Paying heed to the knowing that resides in experience and allowing it to reach a reasonable form of interpreting is the very prerequisite for the claim that theoretical discourse—both clinical and metapsychological—is "genuine" and "true".

The theoretical products of psychoanalysis are creations appearing within a variety of possible traditions. Together these voices

constitute a rich reservoir, where the individual psychoanalyst has a good chance of finding something that will appeal to him and fit his need of inspiration for his own continued reflection. Apart from this individual interest, the multiplicity of theories constitute a field where prevailing convictions concerning the meaning of psychoanalysis may come forth and contest one another.

Representationalism

Ever since its beginnings, psychoanalysis has felt the “political” necessity to ward off any suspicion that its outcomes would be effected by suggestion and subjective influence.⁴ Freud’s clear attempt to underscore the scientificity of psychoanalysis made him cling to a model of effects and their causes, demonstrated in how, in his early theories, he established a relationship of correspondence between symptoms and memory gaps on the one hand, and trauma, repressed fantasies and memory traces on the other. The degree of concreteness conveyed by such a model—with its implied demonstration: “Gentlemen! On the side of consciousness we have this, and on the side of the unconscious we have that”—would surely have made it well suited for convincing the medical community concerning the scientific status of psychoanalysis.

Freud sticks to this basically reductionist paradigm all through his subsequent development as a theorist: the analyst’s understanding and interventions are considered to be *reducible*—in the sense that it may be brought back—to a definite intrapsychic configuration that is treated as the truth of the moment. In this perspective—whose metaphysical foundation is a theory of correspondence between the interpretation and the interpreted—it is of little import whether the intrapsychic configuration is conceived of in terms of a certain *content*—which could be a repressed memory or a drive impulse, or a certain *form*—which could be a trauma marking the subject, an incompleteness in his structure, like a psychical fault or scar. The analyst’s attention is always brought back to this hypostasized unconscious or latent reality calling for its given answer: for the memory or impulse, the well-suited interpretation capable of clothing its content in words; for the psychical scar, the interpreting attitude that will create the adequate conditions for a healing process in the psyche.

Any reductionist paradigm will be in dire need of a theory that dares claim that it speaks with privileged knowledge. In the case of psychoanalysis, privileged knowledge will concern the contents of the unconscious. The paradigm demands that for every analytical situation there must exist a piece of knowledge of this other realm capable of giving correct guidance as to the time, form and content of the interpretation. Lest analytical treatment should be in danger of derailing and becoming “wild” (i.e. subjective, unscientific, and suggestive) the analyst’s interventions must be such that they—at least in principle—can be justified in terms of this indispensable knowledge.

Despite its apparent speculative character, when attempting to “legitimize” its practices and gain respectability, psychoanalytic theory has—perhaps unwittingly—nonetheless been influenced by the naturalistic view of the positive sciences, where only the objectively existent will merit attention. Thus arises a need to treat the postulates of a daring theory as if they actually referred to a self-existent substance. For, when defending his practice in the face of charges of charlatantry, the analytic practitioner has felt that he must be able to demonstrate that what he does in his consulting-room—preferably by way of offering interpretations—lays bare something which already has existence *within* the psyche, and before treatment had begun: be it repressed memory, infantile complex, or intrapsychic conflict.

This typical psychoanalytic reductionism is connected with a metaphysical problematic that has complicated Western epistemology ever since the beginnings of philosophy, a complication I have chosen to call *representationalism*. Its general structure has been aptly described in the following fashion by Rorty:

To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; so to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations. Philosophy’s central concern is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so). [1979, p. 3]⁵

Within psychoanalytical thinking, the idea that knowing and

knowledge rest (or should rest) upon internalized (albeit “unconscious”) images, ideas or forms recurs in constantly new variations, laying the foundations for the theory of correspondence that often underpins its clinical practice and reflection.⁶

The arrogance of Knowledge

Psychoanalysis is torn by the internal contradiction that on the one hand Man is construed as a being dominated by an unconscious split off from his conscious experience of self, and, on the other, this very same being’s zeal for knowledge. To the basic *ethos* of psychoanalysis belongs our respect for the unicity of the Other, our capacity to persevere in the face of not knowing (rather than coming to premature conclusions), and our readiness to listen rather than to propose—in sum, it is an ethic founded upon the understanding that the unconscious is not susceptible to colonization by Knowledge. However, the way psychoanalysis has become fettered to its theoretical assumptions puts this ethic in risk.

Knowledge hungers for the world and grasps at it, putting its mark on everything it can get at by assimilating it. And when Knowledge has established its realm of visible and fathomable things, it has of necessity also secreted its shadow—an unknown remnant of the real which will haunt it with its alien and frightening meaning. The more Knowledge tries to control its world, the more something is given off which will threaten its coherence.

To the psychoanalytic experience, isn’t this shadow the unconscious? And isn’t it so, that one has been trying to circumvent one’s paranoid fear of its menace by forcing it to wear a mask of rationality? Thus it is claimed that the unconscious always was already structured in accordance with the principles of the ego long before we started to explore it, thereby making of it something decipherable. The arrogance of Knowledge shows in the grand project of controlling the unconscious by colonizing and mapping it. The, at times, fierce wars between differing conceptions of what the mapped landscape should look like, testify to the scantily hidden paranoia that creeps up when Knowledge’s convictions feel threatened.

As was just intimated above, in response to the demand for "objective reality" and the dictates of the metaphysic of representationalism, psychoanalytic knowing will tend to establish a circumscribed theoretical realm and then treat its derived concepts as if they designated observable entities and "facts". One such central concept in post-Freudian psychoanalysis is *unconscious fantasy*, a conception which has inspired the considerations of analysts of, seemingly, most persuasions. The idea has become something of a *passe partout* within psychoanalytic parlance, a device for letting the most diverse standpoints uphold some illusion of concord. As will hopefully become clear in the following, this master-key of the present is not congruent with what was once Freud's idea of fantasy.

With the conception of unconscious fantasy follows a view of the relationship between ego/consciousness and the unconscious as one between two worlds in parallel, with the unconscious becoming something of a "second consciousness" beyond the immediate scope of the apprehensible ego. For, like the ego, the unconscious is built up of representations and therefore stands out as merely a fuller and more "genuine" container of such content with which our conscious ego already is filled. Being made of the same "stuff", the unconscious must (in principle) be accessible to the introspective psychological eye—with the proviso, of course, that such accessibility will most often be dependent upon *psychoanalytically informed* interpretations. The "empirical credibility" gained by such schemes—to satisfy the positivistic appetite—is founded precisely upon the fact that the theoretical postulates have been phrased in a language recognizable to commonsense reflection and everyday identifications.⁷ (The more extended implications of the psychological sphere envisaged here will be developed in ch. 4.)

Such is the, by now, more or less traditional way in which psychoanalysis—perhaps unwittingly and despite its manifest contentions—actually harmonizes the unconscious with the ego. With such bearings, the promise of full knowledge and total control will certainly become a temptation and, ultimately, nothing human will ever seem to be alien, Other, or foreign. Oughtn't we, in fact, to view the veritable flood of articles, together with all the monographs, papers and presentations delivered, as the very expression of the desire to establish an exhaustive encyclopaedia of the

vicissitudes of human passion? The persistent flow of fresh texts in this *genre* indicates that here lurks an unconquerable optimism as to the possibility that our theories will, at least in principle, be able to develop an explanation to everything, no matter what problems may be encountered.⁸

At this point, psychoanalysis has complied with the demands of the ego (and its will to power) seemingly without reflection, and the encyclopaedia of the human passions is attaining grotesque proportions (even though, of course, there will be those who continue to complain of our inadequate knowledge). But it cannot be a given that psychological categories should offer the best means for locating and conceptualizing the unconscious. In fact, this very inclination constitutes a danger in that it threatens psychoanalysis with a theoretical dead-lock. For ultimately, when one has pre-ordained the unconscious to be a representative of the categories familiar to consciousness, it will be very difficult to discover and investigate anything other than the already well-known and reasonable world of the ego.

In the face of a phenomenon such as the unconscious—which not only touches upon my own being, but also the kernel of my fellow man—it behooves us to question what we believe ourselves to know. If the limit to reason is as inevitable as the structure of knowledge does seem to imply, psychoanalysis must put its knowing to a test and investigate what it is that we do *not*—and *cannot*—know. Isn't that the profound meaning of Freud's concept *das Reale*, Lacan's *le réel*, or Bion's *O*?

Do not designations such as these imply that we truly cannot know the nature of the unconscious: whether it has real existence, or whether it is a construct; whether it has "contents" made up of mental representations, or whether it is "proto-mental"; whether it is possible to map out and speak of it, or whether it is ineffable and only secondarily knowable...

Thus it must be a task for every generation of analysts—and for every analyst—to reinterpret the unconscious as to its ontological and epistemological status. These interpretations are perishable goods and they need to be made over and over again, lest our concept of the unconscious become not only out of date, but also dogmatic and sterile, i.e. lacking heuristic powers.

Notes

- 1 For example, in "The unconscious" Freud writes: "The more we seek to win our way to a metapsychological view of mental life, the more we must learn to emancipate ourselves from the importance of the symptom of 'being conscious'" (1915c, p. 193).
- 2 See Freud, 1917, p. 222n.
- 3 See also Freud, 1914a, p. 77; 1915a, p. 117.
- 4 This issue is discussed extensively by Freud in Lecture xxviii of the *Introductory Lectures* (1916–1917).
- 5 For a historical exposition and a philosophical critique of representationalism, see Rorty 1979 and 1988.
- 6 It should not be difficult for the psychoanalyst to recognize representationalism as the chosen underlying structure in much of psychoanalytic theory, as is evident in the following lines from Otto Kernberg (even though one may suspect that to many analysts, representationalism is taken for granted to such an extent that they do not ordinarily consider it, either as fact or problem):

The stages of development of internalized object relations [...] reflect the earliest structures of the psychic apparatus. Discrete units of self-representation, object-representation and an affect disposition linking them are the basic substructures of these early developmental stages, and will gradually evolve into more complex substructures (such as real-self and ideal-self, and real object and ideal-object representations). (Kernberg 1980, p. 17)

In terms of representations, there is often a tendency in theoretical constructions to depict the "facts" in a way that implies that the "contents" of the unconscious have a narrative or proto-narrative form, something which, according to my line of reasoning (to be developed below), can only belong to the secondary process realm of the ego:

In psychological terms, every wish involves a self representation, an object representation and a representation of the interaction between these. There is a role for both self and object. Thus the child who has a wish to cling to the mother, has, as part of his wish, a mental representation of himself clinging to the mother. But he also has, in the content of his wish, a representation of the mother or her substitute responding to his clinging in a particular way, possibly by bending down or embracing him. This formulation is rather different from the idea of a wishful aim being directed towards an object. The idea of an aim which seeks gratification has to be supplemented by the idea of a *wished-for interaction*, with the wished-for or imagined response of the object being as much a part of the wishful fantasy of the child as the

activity of the subject in that wish or fantasy. (Sandler & Sandler, 1978, p. 288)

- 7 Cf.: "[W]herever we search for that which we are not, we encounter only the patterns of our own minds" (Arendt, 1958, p. 287).
- 8 It is important to underscore that my characterization of the reductionist paradigm is not intended to describe a prevalent state of matters within the psychoanalytic community, nor is it meant as irony. The paradigm has, however, still laid the foundations for many of the prevailing schools of psychoanalytic theory, even as they struggle to escape from the boundaries it sets.