



PSYCHOANALYSIS

Ruggero Levy

Symbolization in psychoanalysis

*The processes of subjectivation and
the aesthetic dimension of psychoanalysis*

Blucher

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aesthetic dimension of psychoanalysis*

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Symbolization in psychoanalysis: the processes of subjectivation and the aesthetic dimension of psychoanalysis

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Preface

This book is the result of my interest in symbolization processes, which began many years ago. In the early 1980s, I worked with autistic children for almost ten years in a therapeutic community at the Pinel Clinic in Porto Alegre (RS). At that time, I was already interested in understanding how the first symbolizations were created; how and why they were not created; and why some of them were unable to develop their mental life and remained in a dementalized and predominantly dismantled state, to use Meltzer's concept.

During that period, I produced some work on these processes of subjectivation and non-subjectivation, especially one called "Echolalia and Childhood Autism,"¹ in which I studied the function of the word in the autistic child's echolalia, whether it had a symbolic function or not, and how the autistic child's mental space was constituted. That was when my interest in symbolization began.

Later, in 1995, my work for admission as an associate member of the Psychoanalytic Society of Porto Alegre (SPPA) also revolved around the theme of symbolization. Not coincidentally, I studied and reported the case of a patient with pseudomaturity and "don juanism", in which *acting outs* were very important and mental space was extremely restricted. His preconscious was extremely shallow and thin, with little capacity for symbolization. Throughout the

1 Levy, R. et al. (1980). Ecolalia e autismo infantil: comunicação preliminar a propósito de um caso clínico. *Revista de Psiquiatria do Rio Grande do Sul*, 2(3), 225-233.

analysis, it was possible to follow the expansion of his capacity for symbolization, the symbolic chain, and the chain of representations. Subsequently, my work to become a full member of the SPPA also revolved around symbolization and was called “From symbol to symbolization: a review of theoretical evolution and its repercussions on psychoanalytic technique”.

Finally, in the last ten years, I have become interested, along with other psychoanalytic authors – inserting myself into this current of research – in this topic that is so prevalent in contemporary psychoanalysis: the issue of non-symbolization. In other words, what problems and failures in the process of symbolization are and how they occur; how the so-called *voids* in the symbolic web occur. As a result of my work and interest in the psychoanalysis of adolescence, I also began to study how the process of resubjectivation occurs at this moment of reconstruction of the subject’s subjectivity.

In the first part of the book, in Chapters 1 to 5, a history of the conceptualization of symbolic processes will be presented, starting with Freud, of course, and evolving mainly along the path of the English school. Some contributions from the French school of psychoanalysis will be mentioned as well, especially from André Green and René Roussillon.

In the second part of the book, more contemporary aspects will be developed, especially with regard to flaws in the symbolic web, non-symbolizations and their repercussions on the psychoanalytic clinic, and the technical modifications that have been necessary to deal with the clinic with these patients. And also, more generally, the construction of analytic intimacy in this model of psychoanalysis.

In the third part of the book, the participation of symbolization processes in the resubjectivation of the adolescent subject will be studied, with adolescence understood as a major symbolization process.

This book is intended for psychoanalysts, psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapists, students of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, who are interested in the study of symbolization processes, their pathologies, as well as the technique of psychoanalytic work with patients with disturbances in the construction of symbolic systems, that is, in their subjectivity.

Introduction

instead of defining man as an “animal rationale,” we should define him as an “animal symbolicum”.

Cassirer (1944/1997, p. 50)

Freud, with his discovery of the unconscious, shocked the culture of his time by revealing that human behavior was determined by a part of the mind that the subject himself did not know. What he did was denounce the existence of mental elements absent from immediate human perception, which could only be accessed through their derivatives, or their symbolic representatives, if we prefer. Since then, the understanding of symbolic processes has played a central role in the study of the functioning of the human mind.

The great divide between man and other animal species, according to Cassirer (1944/1997), is the existence of an intermediary symbolic system between the stimulus receptor system and the effector/motor system. Thought, as a symbolic system, mediates the immediate reaction, as Freud already said in “Formulations on the two principles of mental functioning” (1911/1969).

man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art, and religion are parts of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience. . . No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face,

except by the interposition of this artificial medium.
(Cassirer, 1944/1997, p. 48, my emphasis)

Psychoanalysis, insofar as it sets out to understand and modify the human mind, has man's symbolic system as its "raw material". Psychoanalysis sets out to understand and act on what is most human in us, our symbolic system. This is the process of human subjectivation: moving from the perceptual, sensory and affective level of psychic functioning – present in all animals – to the symbolic level of the construction of the psyche. Subjectivation would mean moving from the body to the mind, from the corporeal to the mental, from the concrete to the symbolic, which is characteristic of the human being. Therein lies the human essence.

In this book, I intend to study not so much human symbolism, understood more generally, but symbolization from a psychoanalytic point of view, the creation of symbols in the human mind, in other words, the process of subjectivation. I will study the concept of symbolization, outline its meaning and evolution throughout the theoretical development of psychoanalysis, and highlight some consequences for psychoanalytic technique. Psychoanalysis, the science of the subjective, which seeks to study the subjective experience of reality by the human subject, has described the construction of this subjectivity from innumerable angles, in innumerable ways, all the way to more complex conceptualizations. However, I believe that all of them contribute to the theme and that is why they will be studied in this book.

The theme of symbolization runs through an endless series of questions that extend throughout psychoanalytic theory and technique: how are the first inscriptions in the psychic apparatus created and what are they? What about the creation of the psychic apparatus itself? What are mental contents? What about dreams? What about the transformations of the psychic apparatus? What about the ability

to think? What about “listening” to the latent through the manifest? Does one symbolize the other? There are countless others that could be listed, so in order not to lose objectivity and be exhaustive, I will focus on discussing some aspects that have interested me for many years.

In fact, they have interested me since the time when, at the beginning of my career as a child psychiatrist, I worked with autistic children. Children who did not speak, did not look at their interlocutor, did not play or take part in games. They spent hours, days, months in the therapeutic community, left to their own bodily sensations. How to help them speak? More than that, how do we inscribe them in the human world? How to help them move away from purely sensory, drive-based behavior towards human behavior?

On that occasion, I wrote a few articles to express the anguish generated by that experience, but also to share the challenge and even the wonder that came from it. Some children – very few, admittedly – managed to get in touch with other human beings and with themselves; others, unfortunately, did not, and had a sad evolution; sad because it was poor and deficient from the point of view of the acquisitions necessary for human development.

There I gained a profound understanding of the importance and centrality of the development of the symbolic function and its most obvious corollary, verbal language, for a being to become human. And today, many years later, this is still a subject of interest to me, I think because I am trying to help human beings who – on a different scale, it is true – also have difficulty thinking, communicating and relating.

There seems to be a common thread – which I have tried to follow in my research and which I try to expose in this book – along which the discoveries of psychoanalysis around the theme of symbolization extend. This thread runs from Freud, of course, through Ferenczi and Jones, to Melanie Klein, and from there to Winnicott, Bion, Meltzer and, more contemporarily, to Green, Ferro, Roussillon, Civitarese, and

others. As we shall see, it is like a great jigsaw puzzle whose pieces we slowly find, putting them in place, giving us a sense of well-being and discovery, even though they were there waiting for us.

Of course, among these great thinkers of psychoanalysis, countless authors also made essential contributions because they clarified or synthesized what had been thought. These include Susan Isaacs, Hanna Segal, Harold Blum, and many others. I do not intend – and even if I did, I would not be able – to exhaust all the authors who have studied the subject, or even everything that each of these authors has written about it. Lacan, for example, has made great contributions to the subject, but to include him would take me months of study, or perhaps years. I will only mention those that I have been able to review and that have enabled me to achieve the objectives I set myself.

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PART I

Conceptualization of symbolic processes in psychoanalysis

1. The symbol: general aspects

Initially, it is necessary to make some conceptual definitions, since the subject of symbolism and symbolization transcends psychoanalysis and these terms often refer to different concepts. Even within psychoanalysis itself, there are differences in the use of this terminology. As we shall see, after the Kleinian contributions, the concept has acquired a much wider scope, sometimes at the cost of some imprecision.

Several authors (Jones, 1916/1925; Green, 1975/1994; Laplanche & Pontalis, 1982/1997) trace the term “*symbol*” back to the Greek definition of *symbolon*, which consisted of an object cut into two pieces carried by two people belonging to the same sect who were separated and, therefore, a sign of recognition when the bearers met again and were able to reunite the pieces. In other words, the *symbolon* denoted the *link* between those two subjects.

Another interesting origin of the term symbol is given by Jones (1916/1925). He states that in Greek, “to symbolize” meant to *re-unite*, to *merge* and that the root of the term in Sanskrit (*gal*) designated the meeting of several rivers, an estuary. This is extremely interesting because it is precisely what we find in various symbolizations: the meeting, the confluence of various meanings that flow into a particular symbol.

In *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, by Laplanche and Pontalis (1982/1997), we see that it is possible to use the concept of symbolism in psychoanalysis in its broad form or its strict form and that Freud generally used it in the strict form. So says the dictionary:

a) In a broad sense, a mode of direct and figurative representation of an idea, a conflict, an unconscious desire; in this sense we can consider any substitutive formation to be symbolic in psychoanalysis. b) In a strict sense, a mode of representation that is distinguished by the constancy of the relationship between symbol and unconscious symbolized; this constancy is found not only in the same individual and from one individual to another, but in the most diverse domains (myth, religion, folklore, language, etc.) and in the most distant cultural areas between them. (p. 41, my emphasis)

So we already have some definitions of what we call a symbol. In the non-psychoanalytic dictionary definition, the concept of symbol is limited to saying that it replaces something abstract or absent (Aurélio Digital, 2010). In the psychoanalytic definition of symbol, “absent” must include the notion of the unconscious: whether it is an unconscious idea or a repressed desire, which will be symbolized by something; or an unconscious elaboration of the absence of some object that can be replaced by a symbol.

However, as we will see throughout this chapter, even when it comes to the psychoanalytic concept of symbol, there is a great deal of variation in its conceptualization and, perhaps even greater regarding its creation; in other words, in the process of symbolization. For example, Freud and Jones understood the symbol in its restricted, supra-individual, collective sense, with constant meaning, while for Meltzer it is highly individual, personal, idiosyncratic.

Laplanche (1980/1988) criticizes Freud’s position, by saying that, based on the discussion about the meaning of circumcision, it is a pre-psychoanalytical conception of symbolization. He says that this theory of symbolization considers the symbol and what it symbolizes to be two terms in a two-way correspondence, that is, a theory of the

symbol as a simple designation of a specific object, disregarding what is known about the multiple chains and the complex weave between symbol and symbolized. He cites Jones himself to show how the links between symbol and symbolized are not two-way but rather constitute a network of associative chains: similarity of totality, part to part, links by metonymy (the part symbolizes the whole), links by the contrary. This wealth of associative chains was shown by Freud himself in relation to dreams, in which each element can refer to a multitude of associative chains, although Freud did not use the concept of symbol for these representations. We will see more about this later.

Thus, taking circumcision as an object of study, Laplanche shows that it becomes a complex symbol enclosing within itself relations of analogy (since castration and circumcision are two analogous acts since they cause an amputation); of metonymy since the part (foreskin) is taken for the whole (penis); but also of opposition, because the extirpation of the foreskin is understood as eliminating the “feminine” from the penis. Circumcision, then, is a symbolization of the double meaning of the threat of castration and, at the same time, a “masculinization,” through the extermination of what would be “feminine.”

Every symbolization introduces a new order, because when one symbolizes, one does not just introduce a new symbol, but a whole new symbolic set. To symbolize is to provide a new interpretation, which does not end with ambiguity or the possibility of new interpretations. The new symbol will have several meanings (Laplanche, 1980/1988). Step by step, we will try to understand each of these conceptualizations.

Perhaps the common element between the various conceptualizations of symbol and symbolization in psychoanalysis is that the production and use of the psychoanalytic symbol are unconscious, as is what is symbolized. Blum (1978) proposes a spectrum of symbolization that begins with conscious abstract and conceptual thought, passes through the allegorical expressions of preconscious metaphors, and reaches unconscious symbolism. His proposal combines

the usual non-analytical notions of symbolism and psychoanalytical symbolism in a single framework. He raises the possibility that the same mechanism or process that leads to psychoanalytic symbols is related to the symbolic process that results in human language. He warns, however, that the differences are so great between the two types of symbolic processes that he does not think it is useful to place the two symbolic forms on a *continuum*, although they must have originated from a common, undifferentiated, protosymbolic matrix. He thinks that imagining a single symbolic function takes the emphasis off unconscious formations and the characteristics of psychoanalytic symbolism. As we will see below, this way of understanding the symbolic chain is close to the Bionian proposal evidenced in Bion's Grid (1965/2004), which organizes thoughts into levels ranging from the concrete (beta elements) to the most abstract levels (algebraic calculation).

Another distinction that might be worth making is between symbol, sign, and metaphor. The symbol not only represents an absent element but also brings with it an exchange of meanings. Meltzer (1984) goes on to say that this exchanged meaning enriches the two elements present in symbolization, the symbol and the symbolized. So, for example, if for one patient the "leper boy" symbolized his feeling of smallness and incontinent skin, we can see that not only the idea of leprosy enriches the idea of incontinent skin (insofar as it transfers to it a meaning of a disease, perhaps progressive, repulsive) but the idea of incontinent skin enriches the idea of leprosy insofar as it transfers to it the notion of the anguish of losing bodily limits.

As far as the sign is concerned, it is understood almost as an agreed sign to indicate something. A distinction can be made between the use of signs and symbols as follows: signs are elements that indicate or lead to a certain reaction when they have been associated, by concomitance, with certain stimuli (Langer, 1941/1989). They are the beginning of intelligence and the first manifestation of the mind.

Animals develop a language of signs, learned by trial and error, which tells them the most appropriate reactions for their biological functions. Therefore, even the animal mind works through a primitive semantics in which some phenomena are signs of others.

Humans can use signs differently: they can use them to indicate things, like animals, and they can also turn a sign into a symbol. For an animal, a certain word is a sign of the presence of something or of an immediate action; for a human being, it can be a way of talking about something absent, thus representing that object. Except that the signs used in this way are symbols (Langer, 1941/1989). For example, a traffic sign, which is primarily a sign, can, for someone, become a symbol of a certain highly emotionally significant experience: it can represent an accident, a romantic situation, carrying with it a highly personal and idiosyncratic emotional meaning.

For Cassirer (1944/1997), symbol and sign belong to two different universes of discourse: “a sign is part of the physical world of being; a symbol is part of the human world of meaning. Signs are ‘operators’ and symbols are ‘designators’” (p. 58). A sign has a fixed and singular meaning, linked to the thing to which it refers, while “a genuine human symbol is not characterized by its uniformity, but by its versatility” (p. 65).

Making this distinction has not only an academic purpose, but a relevant clinical utility that will be explored in more depth at the end of this work. It is important, for example, to make a distinction between symbolic formation and creative thinking, on the one hand, and a “computerized” use of signs and a simplified use of experiences and ideas received from the past, on the other. “The creation of idiosyncratic symbols, as opposed to the manipulation of conventional signs, constitutes a watershed between personality growth and adaptation” (Meltzer, 1988/1995, p. 35). Or, if we prefer, between a creative life and an operative life. We will return to this essential aspect of mental functioning and psychopathology later.

To finish off this chapter, it may be worth mentioning other forms of indirect representation, such as analogy, metonymy, and metaphor. In analogy, relationships of similarity are established between the two terms being compared. In metaphor, a comparison is made and one of the two terms compared is removed. So instead of saying the fox is clever, John is clever, therefore John is a fox, you say straight out: John is a fox. A metaphor is used in order to economize on the description of attributes and adjectives of a given expression, to highlight a particular attribute and to immediately cause an affective impact on the interlocutor. According to Jones (1916/1925), insofar as it appeals to a more concrete, visual element, it uses a more primitive element and is therefore closer to the affects. Finally, metonymy uses a part to represent the whole. A sculpture, for example, can be said to be a bronze. These relationships of analogy, metaphor, and metonymy are then carried out consciously or preconsciously. However, I think that even in the process of unconscious symbolization, the type of relationship between the two terms varies, and can be symbolized by analogy, metonymy or metaphor.

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2. Symbolization: some points of contact between philosophy and psychoanalysis

This chapter is not intended to provide an extensive review of philosophy's contributions to the concept of symbolization. However, it is interesting to make a small incursion by reviewing at least two authors, Cassirer and Susanne Langer, for the richness of their contributions and the influence they have had on psychoanalytic thinking, especially that of Bion and Meltzer. Of course, a more consistent review of the contributions of philosophy should include at least Kant, since he was Freud's interlocutor many times and for the influence of his thought on Bion; it should also include Heidegger, for the points of contact between his ideas and Winnicottian thought (Loparić, 1997). I will leave that for another paper, or for another colleague who is better qualified than me in this area.

Cassirer (1944/1997), in his book *An Essay on Man*, calls for unity in the search for something that explains the "real general character of human culture" (p. 43). To this end, he highlights the constant concern of philosophers to discover the nature of man and states that knowledge of oneself is the goal of philosophical inquiry.

Socrates inaugurated the anthropological vision of philosophy, seeking to define the nature of man. He tries to do this by describing man's virtues (goodness, courage, justice etc.), because he believes that

man's nature cannot be detected like that of physical things. What is really interesting is Cassirer's statement that "man's character can only be understood in his immediate relations with other human beings" (p. 16). Man's truth ceases to be understood as something that can be grasped by the individual thinker and becomes tangible in confrontation, dialog, dialogical, or dialectical thinking. "It can only be obtained through the cooperation of subjects in mutual questioning and response" (p. 17). These ideas are noteworthy for their harmony with the appreciation of the intersubjective construction of meaning in psychoanalysis to discover the nature of the unconscious, ours and our patients'.

In the 19th century, Darwin, with his book on the evolution of species, established biology as the hegemonic science for understanding man's insertion into nature (Cassirer, 1944/1997). The theory of the evolution of species places man in a continuous line of evolution of life, but the question regarding *human culture* remains to be resolved: how do we understand it? "Is the cultural world, like the organic world, made up of accidental changes?" (p. 38). From this, various philosophical systems developed in the 19th and 20th centuries (Nietzsche, Freud, Marx) to understand what sets our thought and will in motion, producing culture as a result. A central thought (metaphysical, theological, mathematical, biological) is lost and we fall into a complete diversity of thoughts, each area approaching the problem from its own point of view.

The point of view that Cassirer will develop – and which, because of its nature, is quoted so extensively in this chapter – is that the symbol is the key to understanding the nature of man. He will say that in man, in addition to the receptor and effector systems found in all animals, there is the *symbolic system*, which indicates a qualitative change in the evolution of the human species. This acquisition has transformed the whole of human life.

We will see how close this is to the ideas defended by Freud in “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning” (1911/1969). “There is an unmistakable difference between organic reactions and human reactions” (p. 48). Human reaction is mediated, “slowed down by a long, slow and complicated thought process” (p. 48). The last two sentences belong to Cassirer (1944/1997) but could be confused with Freud’s in the aforementioned work, such as the statement that “language primarily does not express thoughts or ideas, but feelings and affections” (p. 49), which could be confused with Bion’s statements that will be discussed later.

Language, myth, religion, and art are ways man has found to organize his feelings, desires, and thoughts. By analyzing these languages, we can build a theory about man. What distinguishes man from the other inhabitants of the planet is not his physical or metaphysical nature, but rather his work, what he produces: his language, his myths, his religion, art, science, and history. These productions are united by a common thread, which is the production of symbols.

It is also quite striking how much this view of man coincides with the most up-to-date contributions of historians and anthropologists, such as Yuval Harari (2020) in his book *Sapiens*. Based on various pieces of evidence, Harari develops the thesis that *Homo sapiens* prevailed over several species of hominids that lived together at the same time because thanks to its symbolic capacity, it was able to construct myths that were shared by growing groups of individuals and were therefore more powerful than other groups that did not have this capacity. And also because they were able to start drawing up more sophisticated hunting plans.

Drawing a dividing line between animal and human thought, the animal does not compare two things, nor does it confuse them; it does not think *about* it, but only *it* (Cassirer, 1944/1997). In other words, the animal does not place itself at a distance, discriminating the *self* from the object of thought in order to judge or compare it: it

simply thinks the object in the sensory, concrete realm. In the development of the human individual, there is also an evolution from a concrete, sensory, pragmatic attitude to a symbolic attitude, and here we have a consensus between philosophy and psychoanalysis. Confirming this, we all have patients who, having difficulty entering the symbolic world, will live in automatism, and we will see that, in their way of behaving, they live in a world of signs, simply operating, as if the facts had no symbolic meaning for them. And they will tell us: "I just did it, I don't know if it means this or that, but if you're saying..."

The discovery of the symbolic universe represents a mental revolution because it opens up new horizons, introducing the subject to a world that transcends the world of concrete things, limited to things themselves. It introduces the subject into a world without limits, which is that of creative thought, of human creativity, of human culture. "Once in possession of this magic key (the word), the continuation of man's progress is guaranteed" (Cassirer, 1944/1997, p. 63).

One of the problems that psychoanalysis has come to deal with is precisely this: in individuals in whom there has been damage to the development of the symbolic function, or an attack on it as a form of escaping from internal reality (Bion, 1957/1988), we have a mind that cannot grow and develop. The apprehension of the internal and external world – in order to be thought about, not just felt – is mediated by the symbol. If its production is impaired, there will be a difficulty or inability to think about oneself and the world.

Finally, Cassirer defines that the *abstract space*, that is characteristic of man, has nothing to do with the space of the senses. It is a symbolic space, constructed through the apprehension of abstract relationships between things. Geometry is a typical example of this space. The concept of truth changes, because in it we are not dealing with the truth of things, but with the truth of propositions and judgments.

Since psychoanalysis deals essentially with abstract, symbolic space, its phenomena definitely do not belong to the domain of facts, of the world of the senses. Therefore, positivism, which essentially deals with real facts, cannot deal with the object of psychoanalysis. A new epistemology will be needed that can deal with truth not as a correlation to facts, but as a symbolic consensus (Rezende, 1997), as will be studied in more depth in the chapter on the construction of the possible truth in psychoanalysis.

Even if there is individual differentiation among higher animals (something that does not seem to exist in lower animals), with greater capacities in a given individual of a species, these capacities will not be passed on to the species due to a biological incapacity and will disappear with the death of that individual. Man's capacities, even if subject to the same biological law, can survive the individual to the extent that he expresses and records his works symbolically (Cassirer, 1944/1997). "Taken as a whole, human culture can be described as a process of man's progressive self-liberation. In the various cultural forms, man discovers and experiences a new power – the power to build a world of his own, an ideal world" (p. 371). This is also true for the individual: the ability to produce symbols that give meaning to their experiences frees the subject and gives him a sense of power, as it enables him to build a world of his own – the dream world, in Meltzer's (1984) sense.

Marilsa Taffarel (1997) makes an interesting study of the correlation between the concept of subjectivity in psychoanalysis and Cassirer's contributions, especially those in his first book, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Taffarel believes that Cassirer's contributions are more in tune with those of Kleinian authors.

As we will see later, there is a very strong correlation between Cassirer's ideas and Kleinian conceptions of symbolization, since, especially since Segal (1957/1982), Kleinian theory defines two clear types of symbolization: the symbolic equation and the symbol itself.

It is Segal who clearly differentiates between them. It is only in the depressive position that the symbol itself can originate, the result of various separations; the *self* understands that the symbol only represents the object, it is not the object, and it endures this depressive pain. As in Cassirer, an evolution is conceived that goes from the concrete to the abstract, which will be extensively developed in the Bionian contributions.

Susanne Langer's (1941/1989) contributions in her book *Philosophy in a New Key*, highlighting the importance of symbolization in understanding man, are just as relevant as Cassirer's. She says that modern psychology (psychoanalysis) and modern logic have developed beyond their expectations due to their discovery of the power of symbolization. She says that modern psychology (psychoanalysis) and modern logic have developed beyond their expectations due to their discovery of the power of symbolization. She makes an epistemological consideration that is of great interest to psychoanalysts, stating that if we follow the scientific methods of the natural sciences, we get closer to histology, physiology, genetics, and biochemistry; however, if we want to study the human mind, by using these methods, we get further and further away from what we should be getting closer to. The scientific scheme of physicists that so seduces "psychologists" is useless for the study of mental phenomena.

The new concern with symbolization, both on the part of epistemology and psychoanalysis, even though they deal with different concepts of symbol, helps to shed light on the question of the functioning of the human mind, of the "*human response to the world*" (Langer, 1941/1989, p. 35).

The discovery of the importance of the symbolic function in man has shaken up the concept of intelligence: it is not a prodigious memory, or a superior mental speed, or an extremely sensitive perception (often found in animals) that makes man more intelligent, but rather it is his ability to operate with symbols, to speak, to record, to create

culture, that designates his superiority over other animals. “Thus, our interest in the mind has increasingly shifted from the acquisition of experience, the domain of sense, to the *uses* of sensory data, the realm of conception and expression” (p. 38).

“The importance of the use of symbols, if admitted, soon becomes central to the study of intelligence, because the essential act of thinking is symbolization” (Ritchie quoted by Langer, 1941/1989, p. 38). The key to understanding mental life, which is characteristically human, not animal, is symbolization. This is centrally important, as it links the ability to create and operate with symbols with the individual’s intellect, explaining why we have the impression of low intelligence in patients who have difficulties with their symbolic abilities.

What is most striking about Langer’s contributions is their almost immediate connection with Bion’s ideas. She believes that man has *a basic need, which is the need for symbolization, essentially human*. Symbolization can be crude, primitive, but it must exist.

The function of making symbols is one of the primary activities of the human being, just like eating, looking and walking. It is the fundamental process of the mind and it works all the time. Sometimes we are aware of it, sometimes we are merely faced with its results, and we understand that certain experiences have passed through our brain and have been digested there. . . For if the material of thought is symbolism, then the thinking organism must always be providing symbolic versions of its experiences in order for thinking to continue. In reality, symbolization is not the essential act of thought; it is essential to thought, it precedes it. Symbolization is the essential act of the mind and the mind takes in more than what is commonly called thought. (Langer, 1941/1989, p. 51)

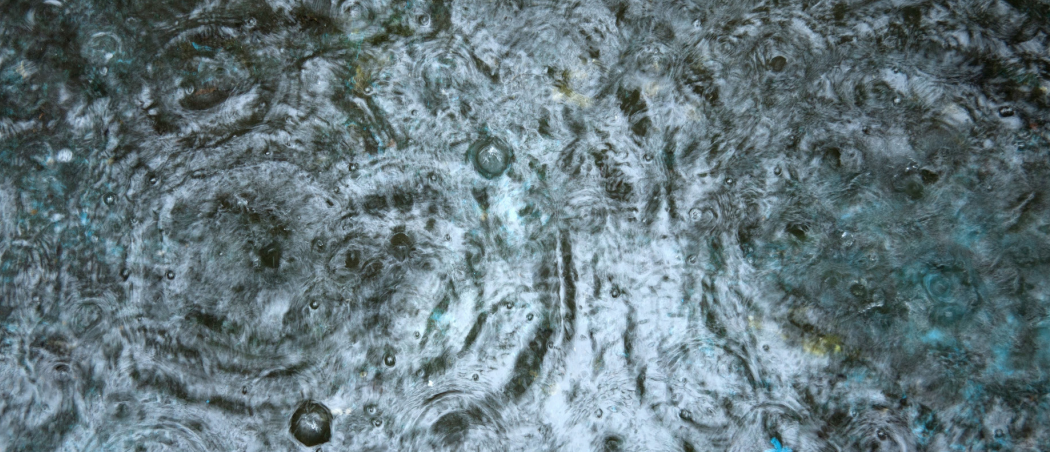
Langer (1941/1989) understands the brain far beyond its physiological function; she understands it as an organ that is always in activity, like the heart, lungs, and kidneys, “following its own law, actively translating its experiences into symbols” (p. 52), constantly carrying out a process of ideation. For her, the brain is a symbol-maker, an idea shared by Bion and Meltzer.

To conclude this topic, I would like to highlight her conception that “symbolization is pre-rationative, but not pre-rational. It is more general (and previous, I would say) than thinking, fantasize, or taking action. . . Each perception is sucked into the stream of symbols which constitutes the human mind” (p. 52).

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Following in the footsteps of philosopher Ernst Cassirer, who described the human being as a symbolic animal, Levy takes readers on an extraordinary journey to the heart of contemporary psychoanalytic theory by examining the central role that symbolic processes – their vicissitudes, possibilities, and failures – play in psychic functioning, emotional development, the formation of the self, and the therapeutic action of the analytic process. Readers of all levels will emerge with a heightened sense of the applicability, power, and ongoing evolution of psychoanalytic theory and practice in the twenty-first century.

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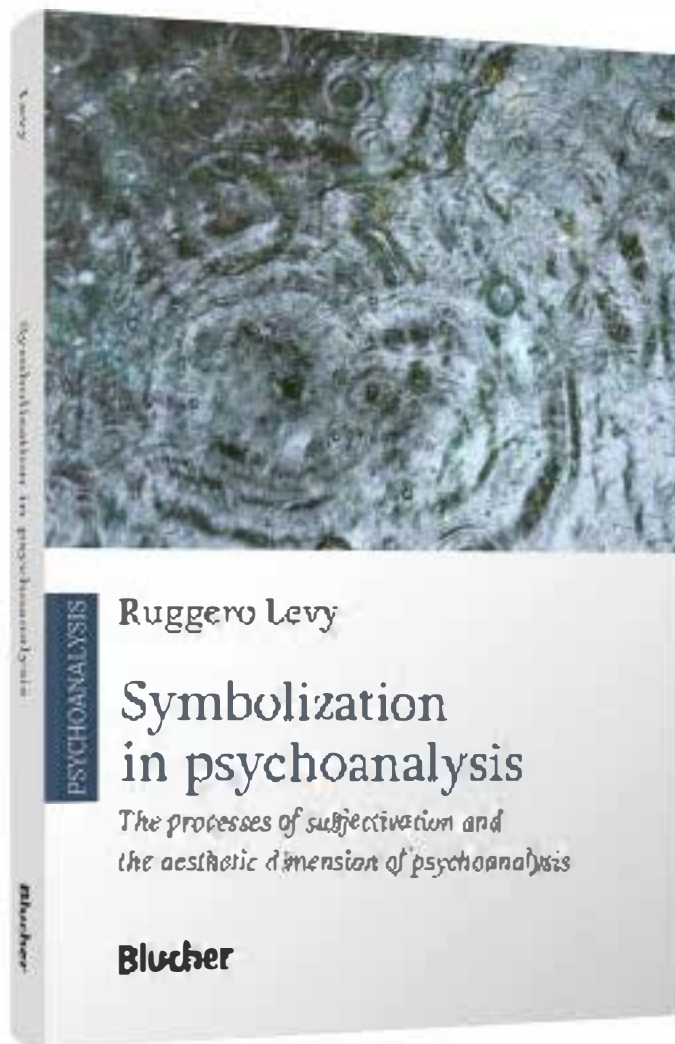


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