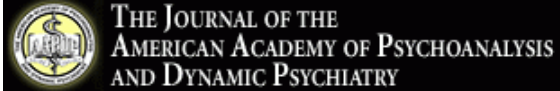


Eckardt, M.H. (1991). The Ambivalent Relationship of Psychoanalysis and Creativity: The Contributions of Suzanne Langer to the Formative Process of our ...



(1991). Journal of American Academy of Psychoanalysis, 19:620-629

The Ambivalent Relationship of Psychoanalysis and Creativity: The Contributions of Suzanne Langer to the Formative Process of our Psyche

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Psychoanalytic evolution, to most observers, appears to proceed somewhat noisily by organizational schisms, disputes, or fashions. Recent trends have centered around object relations schools and Kohut's controversial highlighting of the self and the role of empathy. Yet much more important changes are taking place silently, changes that in time will have profound effects on theory and practice. Our view of the unconscious is changing, for example. It is no more just the playground of the primal forces of the libidinal id; it is the realm of learning, orientation, and integration. Our new knowledge derives from many sources: from new brain research, dream lab research, and new visions of the formative, creative functions of the brain.

I wish to highlight some of these visions of the biological basis of our creative and formative abilities. A basic premise of the views I will present is that our manner of perceiving or of conceiving involves two modes of mental representation, the verbal one used in everyday discourse, also called the discursive mode, and the nondiscursive mode, which includes representational forms, such as are found in all art forms including poetry and literature, but also in myths and, of course, dreams.

Two examples from recent writings about the brain with similar important messages but written in very different styles will illustrate these two modes. The first excerpt is from an essay titled, "The Attic of the Brain" by Lewis Thomas (1983).

My parents' house had an attic, the darkest and strangest part of the building, reachable only by placing a stepladder beneath the trapdoor, and

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis in New York City, May 1990.

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filled with unidentifiable articles too important to be thrown out with the trash but no longer suitable to have at hand. This mysterious space was the memory of the place. After many years all the things deposited in it became, one by one, lost to consciousness. But they were still there, we knew, safely and comfortably stored in the tissues of the house.

These days most of us live in smaller, more modern houses or in apartments, and attics have vanished....

Everything now is out in the open, acknowledged and displayed, and whenever we grow tired of a memory, an old chair, a trunkful of old letters, they are carted off to the dump for burning....

But it is in our nature as human beings to clutter, and we hanker for places set aside, reserved for storage....

And now, I think, we have a new kind of worry. There is no place for functionless, untidy, inexplicable notions, no dark comfortable parts of the mind to hide away the things we'd like to keep but at the same time forget. The attic is still there, but with the trapdoor always open and the stepladder in place we are always in and out of it, flashing lights around, naming everything, unmythified.... (pp. 138-140)

Thomas favors some dust, darkness, and mystery in the attic as it may be a condition for novel happenings. "We might in this way," he writes,

regain the kind of spontaneity and zest for ideas, things popping into the mind, uncontrollable and ungovernable thoughts, the feel that this notion is somehow connected unaccountably with that one.... If after all, as seems to be true, we are endowed with unconscious minds in our brains, these should be regarded as normal structures, installed wherever they are for a purpose. (p. 140)

The second excerpt is from the excellent book *The Dreaming Brain* by Alan Hobson, professor of psychiatry at Harvard University and director of the Laboratory of Neurophysiology, Massachusetts Mental Health Center. He writes,

We now know that our brain consists of billions of individual elements, each of which has the capacity to generate its own energy, and this energy is used to create signals of the system-a much more sophisticated system than the primitive model available to Freud. The late-twentieth-century brain is dependent upon neither external energy nor external information. It creates its own energy and its own information. Our brain-mind has a dynamic life of its own with which it interacts with the external world.... There are at least twenty billion individual elements in each human brain.... Each of these elements generates messages at a rate varying between one hundred and two or three hundred signals per second; hence each of the twenty billion citizens of our brain-mind is talking to at least ten thousand others at least once.... This incessant activity all proceeds silently, with only

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relatively peaceful consciousness as its product... And the organization of this symphony of activity is such that it is sometimes externally oriented (during waking), sometimes oblivious to the outside world (during sleep), and sometimes so remarkably aware of itself (during dreaming) that it creates the external world in its own image. (Hobson, 1988, pp. 131-133)

Both excerpts ask us to appreciate the enormous and vital task of the mostly silent workings of our brain, which interacts, integrates, and creates. The styles chosen for this communication are different. Hobson's is scientific reasoning in a discursive mode, though he includes metaphorical references. Thomas, also a scientist, chooses to write as an essayist, using the attic as an analogy. Both give us valuable information. Hobson gives us more scientific facts; Thomas reaches for a different kind of comprehension that invokes images and feelings. The excerpts are examples of the use of two distinct symbolic modes of understanding and communicating. Discursive thought is rooted in language and thereby in society and its history. We learn language as part of our socialization. We can use words in purely conventional ways; we can manipulate them; and we can use them with or without personal meaning. In contrast, the use of metaphorical language and image is invariably related to personal meaning.

In her book, *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), the philosopher Suzanne Langer opened our minds to the essentially biological nature of symbolizing activity and made an important contribution to analyzing the remarkable qualities of the nondiscursive mode. While her books were well received in art circles, psychoanalysis failed to take note. The time was not right. But in the light of recent interest in the silent symbolizing activity of the brain, her writing becomes relevant and poignant.

Before I discuss Langer's contribution, a brief mention of Freud's understanding of metaphorical expression is essential. Freud's god was reason. He stated in "The Future of an Illusion" (1927) that while the voice of the intellect was as yet soft, the god of reason would prevail. He waged a passionate war against religion, against its power to keep people in the immature state of an obsessional neurosis. This neurosis makes them cling to the wishfulfilling ideas of religion to ward off their feelings of helplessness against dangers from without and within. Intuition and inspiration are not seen as new sources of knowledge. They can be safely counted as illusions, as wish fulfillments or wishes. Illusion is contrasted to knowledge. Freud is adamant in his position:

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The bare fact is that truth cannot be tolerant and cannot admit compromise or limitations, that scientific research looks on the whole field of human activity as its own, and must adopt an uncompromising critical attitude towards any other power that seeks to usurp any part of its province. (Freud, 1933, p. 181)

The other powers were art and philosophy. Art, according to Freud, is almost always harmless and beneficent. It does not seek to be anything else but an illusion. Philosophy tries to behave like science but really only clings to an illusion that it can produce a coherent picture of the universe. Only religion is a serious enemy. Freud's extreme and passionate position for science and knowledge and reason and against all the realms of nonreason is hard for us to appreciate nearly a century later. He reflected the scientific stance but not the spirit of his time, for around the turn of the century artists were breaking out of past molds and asserting the meaningfulness of their expression. Yet, whatever the complex factors are that led to Freud's position, his mind-set shaped psychoanalytic theory and practice for some time.

Ideas and history march to independent tunes, however, in this case orchestrated by the irony of fate. It was the much belittled art world that fell in love with Freud. This world was stirring and ready to throw off the shackles of the old and try new roads. Artists loved Freud's *via regia*. Delving into the unconscious led them not only to the unruly passions of Freud's eros but, beyond libido, to the wellsprings of creativity. They experimented with free association and automatic writing. They found their affinity with the dream world. To them Freud was not the destroyer of illusions but the liberator of imagination. They thought of imagination as the most decisive characteristic of mankind and believed that it was perhaps on the point of reclaiming its rights. Louis Aragon wrote in 1924 that there were other relations besides reality that one was capable of grasping and that also were primary, like chance, illusion, the fantastic, the dream. In 1938, Max Beckman, the painter wrote,

What I wanted to show in my work are the ideas which hide themselves behind so-called reality. I am seeking for the bridge which leads from the visible to the invisible. My aim is to get hold of the magic of reality and to transfer this reality into painting ... to make the invisible visible through reality. It may sound paradoxical, but it is, in fact, reality which forms the mystery of our existence. (Quoted in Chipp, 1968, p. 187)

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Paul Klee, whose notebooks reveal his poetic nature, wrote, in 1920, in a similar vein, "Art does not reproduce the visible, rather, it makes visible.... Today we reveal the reality that is beyond visible things, thus expressing the belief that the visible world is merely an isolated case in relation to the universe and that there are more latent realities" (Quoted in Chipp, 1968, p. 182). Freud had a similar influence on literature and, beyond that, on creative experimentation in living. If Freud has a hold on this century, then it is as much due to his unintended liberation of the imagination as to his passionate campaign to relieve humankind of the need to seek comfort in illusions.

Suzanne Langer's writings are an expression of her time, just as Freud's were. Langer and others reacted against the positivist idealization of science, in which facts represented the supreme value of progress. This idealization, moreover, was accompanied by an antagonism to religious beliefs, a belittlement of the arts, an exclusive belief in causation, and a belief that language was the only means of

expressing thought, that everything that could not be put into words was mere feeling and not really known. Langer reasserted the fundamental nature and significance of metaphorical expression and by her detailed inquiry enriched our understanding of our diverse modes of expressing ideas, thoughts, impressions, and feelings. Using the medium of philosophy, Langer reaffirmed, as Beckman did, the many magical dimensions of reality. She did more than aim at a theory of art; she formulated principles that have relevance for human functioning. The main exposition of her theory of art is in her book *Feeling and Form* (1953), the foundations for which were laid in *Philosophy in a New Key*. There she declared her article of faith (and thus confession of heresy) that there was a primary need in humans for symbolization, that this symbol-making function was one of our primary activities like eating, looking, and moving about. It is a fundamental process of the mind and goes on all the time. Sometimes we are aware of it, sometimes we merely find its results and realize that certain experiences have been digested there (Langer, 1942, p. 45). The brain is not to be thought of as a transmitter but a transformer. The current of experience is given form and meaning. Symbolic activity finds its outlet in all aspects of human life, which is an intricate fabric of reason and rite, knowledge and religion, prose and poetry, fact, fiction, and dream. She distinguished between the two symbolic forms mentioned above, the discursive form, which is the everyday use of language, and the nondiscursive, representational

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form. Language requires that we string out our ideas even though their objects rest one within the other, as pieces of clothing that are actually worn one over the other have to be strung side by side on the clothesline. This form restricts the expression of thoughts to those that can be arranged in this peculiar order. In contrast, representational symbols do not use a vocabulary defined by convention. The meaning is expressed through form, and form can express complex combinations. Thus the two different symbolic modes have intrinsically different attributes and thus have a different appropriateness as modes of expression.

For Langer these two modes are equal partners. And it is this partnership that we psychoanalysts need to appreciate, for we are steeped in a tradition that is inclined to equate knowledge and verbal expression, and has encouraged the notion that experiences that we cannot formulate in language are burdened with the dynamic tension responsible for repression.

Langer was not interested in dreams. The two books mentioned appeared just prior to the discovery of REM sleep and the launching of our modern dream research. But her analysis of art appears amazingly relevant to our new way of seeing the functions of dreaming. In dreams we create new worlds, illusory worlds, which, however, have the power to speak more clearly than actual events. Langer (1953) writes,

In art, forms are abstracted only to be made more clearly apparent and are freed from their common uses only to be put to new uses to act as symbols, to become expressive of human feelings. Through abstraction we ban all irrelevancies that might obscure the logic and especially divest it of all its usual meaning so it may be open to new ones. In order to abstract, the form has to estrange itself from actuality, to give otherness, self-sufficiency. This is done by a realm of illusion, in which it functions as semblance free of worldly offices. (p. 51)

We are well acquainted with the exciting sense of revelation we experience when patients, after vaguely telling us about their feelings of depression, oppression, and anxiety, move us into the world of their dreams or spontaneously recalled images and memories. Here the essence of the experiences is revealed because they are removed from the context of social or literal meaning, a drama that paradoxically makes sense of reality.

I offer a brief example. A patient came to see me because her life felt bogged down. At some point I talked about the need for her to be open to new possibilities, and used the phrase "looking for open

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doors." Some hours later her often unexpressive talk became more lively, and she challenged me. "You and your talk of open gates. How do I know that I will not just move from one trapped situation to another? I see myself like Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, jumping from one ice floe to another." It is of interest that she used the word "gate," which not only projects something bigger and heavier than "door" but also evokes fences and walls. Certainly her Eliza never reached her island of freedom but was forever jumping. This image gave me a totally new perspective on her way of looking at change as ominous and suggested new areas to explore.

Langer stresses another feature of this need to find a medium divorced from reality: the need to be plastic so the medium can be manipulated in the interest of expression instead of practical signification. A further function of the creation of a fictionalized world stripped of irrelevancies is that it allows us to register the essence of personal meaning and thus facilitates our orientation to life's events. In this Langer sees the biological importance of art. She writes, "We are driven to symbolization and articulation of feeling when we must understand it to keep ourselves oriented in society and nature. So the first emotional phenomena a person wants to formulate are his disconcerted passions" (Langer, 1953, p. 253).

What attracts me to Suzanne Langer's formulations? How do I perceive their relevance for our world of psychotherapy? Langer basically is pointing to phenomena familiar to us. We have always known the worlds of art, ritual, and poetry. In recent times we have become acquainted with right and left brain characteristics. We characterize people as intuitive, grasping essences, or having the aptitude for concrete details. Yet by redescribing these phenomena Langer adds a new dimension. The two modes of representation are distinct, coexistent, and of equal importance in our orientation to life. The descriptions of the active, formative, orienting, integrative, and silent working of our brain makes our past divisions of conscious and unconscious almost irrelevant or restricts their usefulness once we admit nondiscursive knowing as a vital equal partner.

Langer's description of feeling illustrates this more extensive comprehension. There are many ways we can express affect, yet not

“feel.” Langer (1953) writes,

Indeed, the very notion of feelings and emotions not really felt, but only imagined, is strange to most people. Yet there are such imaginary affects; in fact, there are several kinds: those which we imagine as our own; those

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which we impute to actual people on the stage in drama or dance; those which are imputed to fictitious characters in literature, or seem to characterize the beings portrayed in a picture or a sculpture, and are therefore part and parcel of an illusory scene or an illusory self. (p. 181)

This description would certainly include the phenomenon we call projection. While we define projection as pathology, Langer is just describing a natural phenomenon of feelings not felt but imagined. It is this that attracts me to Langer. She affirms our manifold, rich, nature-given capacities for expressing thoughts, feelings, and meaning by illusions and imagination, by metaphor and imagery, in addition to verbal communication. These expressions transcend categories of normal or pathological, conscious and unconscious. They are infinite in variety and reflect the creative core of our being and our potential for adaptation.

Langer challenges that part of our professional mind that for historical reasons acquired knowledge of the human psyche by way of investigating psychopathology. We psychiatrists are tied to the question: What is wrong? It is our metier, our reason for being. But such a question influences what we will see, and, thus, it can illuminate or blind us. It is not easy to shed these constraints. Let us occasionally take a day off, shed our identity, and step into the wonderland of infinite fascinating variations of every aspect of our species.

Bird lovers will travel far to discover yet another variation of wing formation, flight and migration pattern, or mating ritual and song or color display. There is joy in this discovery of variety in nature. We experts of our field rarely stop to wonder and admire. We seem to be asking the question why along the only dimension that has meaning to us, the inquiry into pathology.

Discursive thought is rooted in language and thereby in society and its history. It is mainly the outer mold of experience. Much of our inner experience cannot be rendered discursively as it is not formally amenable to this form of expression and thus seeks formulation by other means such as music, poetry, literature, and dance. Let us embrace these nonverbal expressions and not equate mental health with abilities for verbal formulations. Let us appreciate the full phenomenology of our endowment with two modes of perception and expression in endless variations of dominance.

Anything which is given form has an added dynamic of its own.

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Life is incoherent unless we give it form. This form is not only important in terms of what it expresses, but also as existence as form rather than as formless or chaotic. Any structure, pattern, way of being, any conceptual formulation, will have attraction as a form itself, which gives meaning and orientation.

In summary, our idea of the unconscious is changing and challenges psychoanalysis with new vistas and new conceptual paradigms. Our growing appreciation of the essential, fantastic, silent workings of the brain has led to a new recognition of the importance of nondiscursive coding (Bucci, 1985) and the everpresent formative activity of the brain. This new perspective highlights an important historical bias woven into the fabric of psychoanalysis, created as it was in the climate of the “religion” of science and rationality. Irrationality and our penchant to project illusions were recognized, but only as a dubious partner in living. This new awareness will change our ideas of pathology. We discovered general psychology through our investigation of pathology. What is needed is to reappraise psychopathology in light of a richer appreciation of the variety of general psychological processes. Among these is a belated recognition of the importance of illusions, projections, metaphorical expressions, and imaginings as equal partners in our adaptive orientation to life.

The human psyche will never lend itself to neat categories as its formative capacity will always bring surprises. In a recent issue of the magazine *Natural History*, Stephen Jay Gould wrote a column on the evolutionary meaning of creativity, specifically on the principles that permit major innovations in the history of life. He holds that the watchwords of creativity are sloppiness, poor fit, quirky design, and, above all, redundancy (Gould, 1990). Thus, he echoes the plea by Lewis Thomas with which I began this conceptual journey, the plea to appreciate the need for a cluttered, dusty, mysterious attic, a place for functionless, untidy, inexplicable notions, a place that, however, favors creative happenings.

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Article Citation

Eckardt, M.H. (1991). The Ambivalent Relationship of Psychoanalysis and Creativity. *J. Am. Acad. Psychoanal. Dyn. Psychiatr.*, 19:620-629

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