

The forgotten language of Artistic Symbol and Biological Symptom Formation

Claus Bahn-Bahnson

In beautiful Florence, housing some of the most profound art pieces in the world, it seems nearly profane to intellectually discuss the symbolism of art, because we all, spontaneously and unconsciously, know very well to perceive the intense, but subtle, communications of the great classical Italian artist. When we, just the same, will address this problem, it is because our great teacher and mentor, Erich Fromm, was eager to bring the message, so well understood in Florence, to the modern industrial world, that largely had lost contact with its own humanistic classic origin, and with the symbolic language in word, picture, dream, and music, that serve us all as a rich experiential channel preserving us from illness and disintegration. When I, in addition, include somatic bodily symptoms in the discussion of symbols, then it is because I believe that many physical illnesses and symptoms also serve as symbols for communication, both to ourselves and to others. The tumor in the body often can be understood as an internal sculpture, a piece of art produced biologically as a symbol of a lost painful relationship.

Symbols, presented in dreams and fairytales, play a dominant role in Erich Fromm's work. Fromm specifically labeled such symbols "the forgotten language". Language is a modality of communication to others and to ourselves of experiential content, of thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and intents. The spoken and written language itself, as the semioticians have pointed out, carries both manifest and latent, both conscious and unconscious, channels of communication. This layering and internal structuring of language (in its restricted everyday sense) is itself of great interest to the analyst, who simultaneously receives and sends several channels of messages from and to his patient, referring to descriptive content, to unconscious symbolic choice of topic and theme, to unconscious selection of object and metaphor, and to communication of attitude and

mood through "choice" of words and tone of voice - the music of speech. Lacan has focused his therapy on analysis and interpretation of these aspects of language.

In addition to lexical-language in the narrower sense, we also consider the language of art, of visual pictorial or sculptural art, as well as the arts of music and dance, to be communicative modalities. Think how much is communicated by Goya's *Saturno* - the rage aggression, the oral destructiveness, the paranoid fears, the obsessiveness - all is communicated in one glance. It takes books of written language to communicate that. Or take a spontaneous simple drawing of a 16 year - old dying leukemia patient, painted the day before her death: How many volumes of written language would it take to express this need for being escorted and cared for during her impending death?

Pictorial-language has been particularly important to Fromm due to its prevalence as a modality of dreams and as a vehicle for their interpretation. Even if words, or given auditory or musical elements may appear in dreams, the overwhelming majority of dream content is appearing in the form of pictures, sometimes even without a specific action taking place. Thus, the visual image has been of prime interest to Freud, Jung, Fromm, and their colleagues and students. Developmentally, the picture, that is, the capacity for direct perception (or apperception) of emotionally significant figures and situations by far antecede the learned lexical communication about these perception. Since in dreaming we have regressed back to pre-lexical modes of operation and perception, it stands to reason that the later acquired mode gives way to the original, direct, mode of experiencing and knowing.

This dynamic concept of experiencing and thinking obviously is at odds with the Whorfian hypothesis of thinking, linking our thinking directly to lexical-language. From a dynamic point of view, the intertwining of thinking and language can only pertain the restricted area of conscious, object - related lexical or word transmission of signal or experience. Other levels, such as the visual-pictorial, are structured in ways quite disparate from lexical thinking. There is another difference between pictorial and lexical experience. Lexical thinking can be described preponderantly as secondary process: thinking; pictorial images mainly as primary process: manifestations, although artists, when transforming spontaneous images to a work of art, obviously integrate primary and secondary process functions.

The artistic production is like an accounting of a dream, a translation of the latent image into the manifest piece of art. In this process at least two aspects must be considered. The first is the dynamic artistic pressure to express the spontaneously emerging raw image - pictorial or

musical. The second is implicit in the adaptive and curtailing structuring of the creative image through transforming the powerful, this sometimes vague, original image into a real, manifest, piece of art through modifying or embellishing it according to contemporary rules and conventions of art - rules that may correspond to the prevailing lexical conventions of banal communication. Just the same, to the degree to which the original significant experience, feeling, or relationship has survived the adaptive secondary belabouring, to that degree has the creative act of a symbolic content served to release and carry out the aims of a need, or a drive, for the artist. (Obviously, the individual viewing or hearing this artwork vicariously experiences a relief of his or her corresponding needs, or drives, and therefore "likes" the artwork).

Freud, and later Fromm, assumed that an appearance of a dream symbol serves as a partial drive discharge or of a new goal setting. Also artistic symbols serve as a health - supporting discharge both for artist and art lover. Fromm emphasized that the dream symbol may not only represent an escape of the childish regressive and unconscious wish from the claws of defense, from the dream censor, but that dream symbols also can represent the finest, most sophisticated and future-oriented aspects of the unconscious. The unconscious, thus, for Fromm is not only a beast, but also a god. What holds for dreams most certainly also apply to art symbols. The greatest art probably best combines the strong, raw, and sensual drive in man with the most transcendental and god - like beauty - the combination of Dionysos and Apollo. Since art, as also dreams, serves as a discharge phenomenon at the same time as it crystallizes a harmonious solution, the question is whether art is therapeutic for the artist and his public. In a previous research project, my research group at the Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute in Philadelphia measured in a longitudinal design conscious and unconscious affect, changes in ego defenses, and artistic output in painters, hospitalized for psychiatric reasons. The study showed that at times when the artists were repressing their hostile and aggressive urges the most, they simultaneously were most creatively productive. When the instinctual beast was most securely chained, the sublimation of unconscious drives took over, and the creative output was the greatest both qualitatively and quantitatively. Thus, the artistic symbolization clearly served a positive mental health purpose for these artists.

In dreams, in art, and in psychosis, symbols play a dominant role. Symbols in psychosis often crystallize the main dynamic of the patient, and the understanding and interpretation of this symbol may serve as the crucial lever for treatment of such patients. The symbol thus is not a

cognitive formation, but serves as a vehicle for release of conflictual or repressed drive states, through displacement, transformation, condensation, and several other defensive strategies.

We now turn from symbols to symptoms, and not only psychotic symptoms, but also somatic symptoms. Much has been written, by Fromm and by others, about the role of psychotic symptoms in the economic dynamic household of the individual. Much less understood are the symbolic meaning of somatic symptoms. Due to the reductionist bias at Freud's time, Freud and his pupils shied away from considering somatic symbols and illness within the same framework as neurotic and psychotic illness. An exception for Freud was the conversion phenomena in hysterical neurosis, so fully described for example in the "Dora" case. Later, Alexander, Deutsch, Weiss, English, and several others, developed ideas of vegetative neuroses including autonomic as well as central nervous system involvement. However, the specific symbolic value of bodily symptoms was not pursued by mainstream psychosomatics, and stress and other more general and repetitive concepts were substituted, as we moved from the ideographic to the nomothetic approach of study. Within the framework of the complementarity hypothesis, that I developed some 30 years ago, the role of symbols and symbolization in somatic diseases reemerges.

In the complementarity hypothesis, each regressive psychology/psychiatric state is matched by a corresponding somatic state. Both psychotic and somatic regression are understood as retreats from untenable higher levels of adaptation and development, so that somatization - just as psychotic manifestations - represents a return to early (perhaps very early) childhood or fetal experiences - that is, regression a defensive retreat to safer positions. How do the symbolic aspects of bodily symptoms come about?

At least two routes present themselves. The first is inherent in the early experiences of the functions of different body parts e.g. the mouth for sucking and contact with mother, the hands and arms to grasp and control, the colon and anus to withhold or expel. As Freud, Silberer, and Fromm have pointed out, many of the external symbols borrow their existence as a symbol from a bodily structure, or function, as e.g. phallic objects from the erect penis or water as a mother symbol from the intrauterine and birthwater experiences. Therefore, in a way, the somatic symptom as symbol is a return from the external projection of a body organ or process to the original site of this symbol. The second consideration also is related to psychosomatic complementarity and to object relations theory. The first vessel for investment of emotional and perceptual energy is one's own body. At first, the external world, and the mother and her breast, is only a vague extension of the somatic self. As we develop, and in wondrous ways which we

cannot yet explain, we begin to separate inner from outer, and then have two arenas for symbol and object building, the body, and all the people, things and nature "out there". As we mature, most energy is expended on the outer world or on cognitive abstractions of the outer world, and when life goes well, the somatic organism remains relatively silent, although we always use its symbolism in our encounter with the outer world.

However, when something in our lives goes wrong, and the external cathexis cannot be maintained, we then must regress to earlier (and safer) positions, and depending on our defensive mode, that means either a move down the neurotic/psychotic axis (in the case of use of projective defenses, keeping the investment focus "out there") or the somatic axis, as the result of repressive secondary defenses. However, when a cathexis, that has been attached to an external symbolic object is given up and regressive reinvestment in an internal somatic object (an organ) is substituted, some characteristics of the external relationship are being brought back to the inner object through its recathexis so that the function of the inner organ now is contaminated or distorted as a result. The problems of the deserted outer relationship are glued to the newly internalized regressive cathexis so that the relationship to the inner organ now "carries" the internalized conflict. Therefore, the return to the body origin of the symbol is not uncomplicated and pure - that would be a return to paradise - but is contaminated with the dirt and troubles of the outer world. Thus the patient does not find peace in the regression, but experiences pain and dissatisfaction, and the cathected organ responds accordingly, that is, it develops a malfunction due to the internalized distorted signals.

Although many body symbols are quite individualized, as are symbols in our dreams, a certain symbol constancy still seems to remain regarding the "meaning" of specific organs or functions. The mouth and stomach as receptacles for nurturance; the colon as a site of work and working things out; the skin as a membrane and contact to other people and things; vision and balance reflecting orientation to the environment or disturbance of this orientation; heart-trouble as related to withheld rage against the love object and to substituting power for love; just to mention a few. Many of the body-symbol meanings are shared with the oral, with art, and with the dream worlds. That should not surprise us, because to begin with, they all originated in the body of the self and the body of the mother, were externalized, and in some cases again re-

internalized. All symbols thus have a common denominator - the self and the body, and the early (timeless) experiences. The differential fate of symbol transmission, due to different ego defensive and ego organizational styles, should not obscure the fact that all symbols have the same origin, whether interpersonal, cognitive or bodily symptoms, and that one level of symbol (and therefore symptom) sometimes is translatable into another level. That is what we call illness.

In summary: All symbols originate in body experiences and archaic relation experiences, particularly with the mother. The externalization of investment and cathexis to the outer world temporarily anchors the symbols in this external projection of ourselves, but the symbol retains many original aspects of their body or person origin. When cathexis withdrawn in regression due to difficulties and pain associated with the maintenance of the projection, it may encounter two fates. Either the psychologic past is reenacted as in psychosis - or the original somatic receptacle for energy is re-possessed, albeit with contaminated symbolizations from the external lost figures or situations. Thus, in a literal sense, the somatic symbol itself becomes an illness because this symbolization belongs to another era in the individual's development (Margolin Kubie) and fits as poorly for the adult as does the psychotic symbol. Only the artist can get away with such regression without getting sick; as Ernst Kris said: "He can dive without drowning" , and therefore bring back archaic symbols without disintegrating in the process.

Erich Fromm sensitized us all to the tremendous importance of the archaic symbol, the forgotten language that, after all, explains everything. We are indebted to Fromm for this aspect of his wisdom, which re-opened doors for research in the conceptualization of the meaning not only of external symbols, but also of the somatic symbols that represent an important modality of communication.