

ON POETIC IMAGINATION: SIGMUND FREUD AND MARTIN HEIDEGGER

Sunnie D. Kidd

I. Introduction

This work centers on one topic, one idea: poetic imagination. It discusses the dialectic relationship between creativity and reality. It begins with Sigmund Freud's metapsychological structures of the human mind. These conceptions are then put into dialogue with Martin Heidegger's viewpoint. This discussion of poetic imagination includes looking at not only the impact it makes through the work of art but metapsychological structures of the poet as artist.

II. Freud and the Artist

Turning first to Freud, we find that poetic imagination and creativity are typically presented in terms of phantasy, daydreams and nocturnal dreaming. These phenomena are related to the pleasure principle. Freud says that poetic imagination is a form of substitution and can be seen in the play of childhood. Phantasy is playfulness. Phantasy is the adult's potential for play. It involves a flight from reality. Freud's distinction of the play of a child and the play of the daydreaming adult shows that each comes from a different motivational context. Child's play is determined by one wish: to be grown up. By contrast, the adult already knows what is expected of adults and is therefore bound by the reality-principle. Adults must keep some wishes secret. Adults are often ashamed of many of their wishes and daydreams. Freud says that these secret wishes stem from the adult's dissatisfaction with the way things really are:

...happy people never make phantasies, only unsatisfied ones. Unsatisfied wishes are the driving power behind phantasies; every separate phantasy contains the fulfilment of a wish, and improves on unsatisfactory reality.

Primary wish fulfillment, says Freud, undergirds psychical activity whether it be play, daydreaming or nocturnal dreaming. Dissatisfaction with the way things are emanates from the fertile unconscious. Pleasure-oriented imaginings escape from the unconscious. Employing a method of analogy, Freud uses poetic works to illustrate this process. He relies upon unfolding the poet's insights in terms of psychological complexes to amplify primary connections of the poet, the work of art and the reader. Freud uses a double method by describing an emotional/unconscious identification which happens with poets and the reader's experience of the work. These complexes are revealed in the work of art. Expression of these universally experienced psychological complexes is the work of poetic imagination. It is

as if one's unconscious wish touches another's. The poet reveals to others configurations of deeply dark secret wishes in the work. These contacts of unconscious wishes provide the release of energetic emotional investments on the part of the reader. As this happens, the reader becomes attracted to the poet's sensitive and softened treatment of personally experienced moments of truth. In the work of art the poet becomes the agent for expression of this truth and self-reveals these truths to others through the process of emotional identification. As this bond develops a, "release of tensions in our minds" ensues.³ According to Freud, this happens in one of two ways: 1) a poet may soften egotistical characteristics in the work of art through some form of disguise, presenting materials in such a way that they are experienced as aesthetic; 2) a poet presents materials in a way whereby the audience is able to enjoy personal daydreams without shame or guilt.

The underlying assumption is that everyone resists revealing contents of the unconscious. Secretly one daydreams. Secretly one wishes for the unthinkable. Through the works of a poet others are helped to participate in personal daydreaming. Through the process of unconscious wish fulfillment in tragedy or heroics, the poet's skill is measured by an ability to slide past repulsion by the unconscious. This allows others to daydream shameful wishes and think unthinkable thoughts. These processes are universal psychological complexes worked out by the poet. Readers participate in poetic images and are allowed to do, in phantasy what is secretly wished. Phantasy in the work of art gives respite from the harsh edge of the reality-principle. Flights of fancy often make it possible for one to release the tension which holds one fast to what "should" or "must" be. The condition known as neurosis awaits anyone who chooses not to return to reality.

In the work of art, the poet, provides a compromise by choosing to favor one over the other and to be able to make it work, to create something new through this tension. The neurotic person is unable to utilize this tension in a creative way. The poet is saved from neurosis by an ability to give expression to the tension in a work of art. By turning away from reality the poet is also turning toward an unknown, mediating the two. Quite often, a poet's artistic temperament displays possible neurotic tendencies. A poet may be the genius who lives in another world, one which seems too solitary yet beyond where others dare not enter. Freud's thought leads to alternatives of turning toward as well as turning away but only pursues the one side, turning away. Reality must contain unpleasant or undesirable elements, things which one feels one must face. Through neurotic patterns one keeps trying to escape these facets of reality. According to Freud:

The artist is originally a man who turns from reality because he cannot come to terms with the demand for the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction as it is first made, and who then in⁴ fantasy-life allows full play to his erotic and ambitious wishes.

As artists, poets bring back from the world of phantasy new aspects of possible realities. Audiences provide justification for that particular creation through personal agreement that the work reflects actual life possibilities. Through the poet's works, says Freud, people are permitted to become heroes, kings, queens and creators while remaining free from responsibility for altering everyday reality:

But this he can only attain because other men feel the same dissatisfaction as he with the renunciation demanded by reality, and because this dissatisfaction, resulting from the displacement of the pleasure-principle by the reality-principle, is itself a part of reality.

Following out a turning away from reality the poet escapes from yet returns to it with revelations of other possibilities. Freud points out that these possibilities contain very little of the egocentric qualities of personalized daydreams or unconscious wishes. Many of these images are said to shed light on common structures in psychological conflicts experienced by humankind. Through a poet's flight from reality comes visible structures of other human possibilities. The poet's skill then is measured by the ability to catch others unaware.

Freud's statements about human development, vicissitudes of instincts, childhood memories and fixations as certain developmental stages show the importance of time upon the unique development of creative people. For Freud, an experience happens in the present, stirring up childhood memories of the past. This experience takes on the form of wish fulfillment in expression of the poet's work. Freud says that the recent event and the old memorable aspects are discernible. But as this experience happens, latent meaning becomes conscious to that person. Past meanings link up with meaning of the present and are pursued into one's future. Freud's formulations emphasize the meaning and power of the past to guide, direct and control the present. Our pasts seem to create the personal future of each of us through repetition.

The poet's work of art stands for the satisfaction of instinctual wish fulfillment. Remaining unfulfilled, these wishes, desires and repressed childhood dreamings have the potential to become a psychological prison of neurosis. Fixations become walls over which the person cannot move and develop. These are the tendencies of each person which the poet must slide by in the work to be successful. According to Freud, "poetic treatment is impossible without softening and disguise."⁶ In poetics, personal presence of the poet is absent as structural forms in human conflict stand out focally. Articulating these universal structures is the work of the poet.

Freud distinguishes between two different ways of being a poet: 1) there is the poet who takes over materials ready made for the work to be created; 2) there is the poet who creates material for the work spontaneously. This distinction is important to the discussion as it points to two different forms of creative work. The first poet uses phantasy materials which have come down through time as fairy tale, legend, story or myth. This poet maintains a certain form of independence from the eventual work by utilizing materials already in existence and shaping the work's completion by choice of material.

The second poet who creates material spontaneously is involved in another kind of creative activity. Freud indicates here that something quite different is happening. The process involved in this creative work is distinguished by the uniqueness of the work in expression. Something new is revealed by these poets who venture into the dark unknown of the unconscious, bringing light to shine upon some universal experience of human conflict. In the poet's skillful way of softening and disguise, images are embellished and matured until they have grown into thematic constructs in the work of art. The poet's work reaches others through these common unknowns. In the spontaneous creation of work there is, by the poet, remembrance of a deep and unfathomable space devoid of personalized form. This is imaged by the work of the poet. In Freud's eyes to be humanized implies foregoance of the Id and its instinctual satisfaction. The individual ego mediates between instinct (animal) and abstract (morality) and undergoes trauma of these transformations. Poets are able to revivify dynamic structures involved in human development and fixation of potentialities. They do this in their work. From this perspective, the past is known, the future unknown and the present a possibility for both. Although poets may often lack integration of the known and unknown in personal life, they are able, through creative works, to provide this link for the audience. Audiences respond to this work as "I am what the poet sees."

III. Freud and Heidegger in Dialogue

A brief summary of Heidegger's formulations regarding the poet as artist will provide a framework within which to see the dialogue clearly. Heidegger looks at the poet and the work of art as being a co-constituted structure of Being. This means that the poet and the work of art are one expression. Heidegger presents two forms of creativity by distinguishing poetic imagination from imagination. Poetic imagination expresses horizons of the unknown revealed as new dimensions of Being. The poetic image is dynamic and expands consciousness by revealing something new. In this revealing there is a conserving. Heidegger's way of looking at the work of the poet is revelation. Truth is revealed by the poet in the work of art. The work of art is alive in its symbol. Poetic images are charged with power, gathering meaning through time. In expression comes a stepping down of its

moment of origin. Imagination is simple poesy, the words and language of the poet. There is in the creative process this stepping down of the creative urge in expression. Imagination which is contained in the work of art as poesy is not the a-live, dynamic poetic work of the image which founded a possibility by lighting up Being:

...“poetizing” designates poetry in the broad sense and “poesy” in the narrow sense...whereas “poetry” should be considered as prescinding from (hence encompassing) both.

Whereas, poetic imagination is dynamic. The poetic image that works in the work of art evokes a sense of truth for those who read it. Other people are caught by the image’s effectiveness in lighting up new aspects of living. For Heidegger, poetic imagination is a great downpouring of light. It channels this light. The poet is one who stands in the clearing which is lit by Being. According to Heidegger, the poet stands facing this Open, this unknown, waiting on something which is to be revealed as Being. Heidegger says that this process of revelation demands a self-sacrifice by the poet. This means that the poet must sacrifice the smallness of the personal self by standing open for truth. This self-abandonment provides an opening up, “In a work of art, (then), comes-to-pass this opening-up, sc. the revealing, sc. the truth, of beings.”⁸

We are now looking at creativity from Heidegger’s existential view of human consciousness rather than Freud’s conceptualization of being conscious with its attendant metapsychological constructs of the conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious. Heidegger speaks of nothing other than consciousness, nothing above, below or beyond. Freud’s conceptual framework including phantasy, wish fulfillment and the unconscious as a major factor in determining experience describes the conflict in becoming conscious. The driving forces to become conscious meet and conflict with the forces resisting movement toward becoming conscious. From the standpoint of time, Freud emphasizes the unknown of the past, childhood, primary instinctual dissatisfaction. By contrast, Heidegger emphasizes facing the unknown of a future yet to be given expression. For Freud, the unconscious is as unknown and uncanny as is the Open for Heidegger. Again, the thought parallels, especially when the question is asked: from where does the poetic image emerge? Here Freud differs from Heidegger by looking at the turning away from reality, an escape and flight from the reality-principle. Heidegger moves to the other side by looking at the turning toward that unknown in self-abandonment, waiting on the revelation of Being. It should be remembered that we are speaking about a contrast in poetic action. In other dimensions of the thought of both Freud and Heidegger, it appears that these structures might also be similar. For Heidegger, the poetic, the unknown, is a timeless dimension. That timeless dimension is not a structure of human existence. Turning toward the Open

means that the poet is also open, receptive to that which is revealed in the poetic moment.

Both Freud and Heidegger see creative work as free from personal qualities of the poet. For Freud, the poet disguises the conflict of unconscious forces and gives expression to universal, primary wish fulfillment. The poet must elude and evade the natural repulsion by unconscious force. Whereas Heidegger says that the poet waits patiently, empty of self. The poet becomes a vessel for the light of Being. In this way of thinking the poet sacrifices the self to be filled anew, to dwell *Inbetween* different worlds, the worlds of mortals and the worlds of gods. Although the two theorists give different ways of understanding, the thought of both share some common characteristics, beginning with the unknown. For Freud, the unknown is the unconscious. For Heidegger, the unknown is the Open. Both distinguish between two kinds of creativity, each saying that one is dynamic, the other not. Each sees that truth is revealed, whether something escapes from the unconscious as Freud says or whether it is revealed in the clearing lit by Being as Heidegger describes. Truth is revealed in the work by the poet's moment of facing an unknown. The work of art is not as important as the work of the dynamic poetic image it expresses. In Freud's conception, the poet flees from becoming conscious while for Heidegger, the poet moves toward expanding consciousness through turning toward the unknown. Either way of thinking reveals that in these moments something new emerges. As Thomas Langan has said, "Being comes to be when an existing Da-sein within its transcendental horizon illumines the things that are."⁹

A poetic image in a work of art expands horizons of the known, the conscious, by an inclusion of the alien in the familiar. This is, says Heidegger, the work of the poetic image:

This is why poetic images are imaginings in a distinctive sense: not mere fancies and illusions but imaginings that are visible inclusions of the alien in the sight of the familiar.¹⁰

This means that the truly poetic image is a founding, an originative kind of work in the language of the poet. Poetic images are primordial structures of human experience. Images which are poetic bring things to awareness. For Heidegger, the poet languages the truth of Being in the work of art. Recalling the previous discussion of Freud and Heidegger, we saw that both make distinctions regarding the type of the poetic work. Freud pointed out that not all phantasy is qualified to be a work of art. Normally one person is repulsed by another person's freely described daydreams. Frequently this is experienced as objectionable or presents information suggesting that which must remain repressed in the darkness of the unconscious. But the true artfulness of a work done by poets is measured by the ability to circumvent and disguise the content, thereby avoiding the

repulsion. Freud distinguished between two different kinds of poets: those who take over materials from myth, story and fairytale and those who spontaneously create new material. Similarly, Heidegger distinguishes between two different kinds of imagination. For both Freud and Heidegger, the poetic is not mere fancy but describes the process of bringing into light something new. For Freud, the poetic image escapes from the unconscious. For Heidegger, it is the revelation of Being. In both instances for whatever reason, poetic works light up a void in awareness, they reveal something new. What is revealed, according to both Freud and Heidegger, is truth. As this truth is revealed, horizons of the known retire even further into the beyond of the unknown. Heidegger points out that in a poetic work truth is not only revealed but is at the same time conserved by its revelation. It is conserved in the work of art. Being is gathered up in the poet's work. The impact made by the work of art upon others shows to them the meaning of standing in truth or standing open for truth, letting-things-be-as-they-are. For Heidegger, this is *Dasein's* essence, revealing things as they are. In Freud's eyes, the work of art is the outcome of a process of necessary human conflict. It is an expression of repressed wish fulfillment. The impact of the poetic work depends upon its ability to light up truth in others, to catch them unaware. To do this, the poetic work must touch the unconscious of other persons without being repulsed. In Freud's way of thinking, the unconscious finds a means for expression and connection with the unconscious of the audience who reads the work. It is the poet, as artist, who turns away from the harsh edge of the reality-principle and flees from demands to renunciate instinctual desires. By turning away, the poet opens the door to primary wish fulfillment. Freud points out that it is most often the daydreaming adult who admires the honesty and playfulness in the child's world of imagination. The poet is forced to disguise and soften innermost wish fulfillment. Poets daydream possibilities. Heidegger speaks to this dimension of not-yet-fulfilled as an advancing truth to which the poet responds, "in his word boldly presents what he has glimpsed, so as to tell in advance of the not-yet-fulfilled."¹¹

It is the temporal human aspect of poetic images which provides structures for the layering of universal possibilities in their expression. While from Freud's view the work of art comes through the poet as an expression of turning away from reality. This is understood as working out primary wish fulfillment. Without this expression the person would not be recognized as a poet but would probably be imprisoned by the conflicts in a condition of neurosis. According to Freud, poets are saved by expressing themselves in the work of art. Their works reflect universal human conflict. The work of the poetic image reveals secrets long held by humanity, shedding new light upon the darkness of the unknown.

Notes

- 1) Sigmund Freud (1908), "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming", *Character and Culture*, ed., intro. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1972), pp. 34-43.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 4) Sigmund Freud (1911), "Formulations Regarding the Two Principles in Mental Functioning", *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed., preface John Rickman, appendix Charles Brenner (Garden City: Double Day Anchor Books, 1957), p. 44.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 6) Sigmund Freud (1928), "Dostoevsky and Parricide", *Character and Culture*, ed., intro. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1972), p. 286.
- 7) William Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, second edition (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), fn. 24, p. 410.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 405.
- 9) Thomas Langan, *The Meaning of Heidegger: A Critical Study of an Existentialist Phenomenology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 117.
- 10) Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 226.
- 11) Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry", trans. Douglas Scott, *Existence and Being*, ed., intro. Werner Brock, foreword Stefan Schimanski (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1949), p. 287.