

of psychoanalysis to pathologize life. We must find a way that when we search the index of our knowledge, the listing for "How the mind works" does not say "See Pathology."

Dilemmas notwithstanding, it is hard not to feel awe at what an astonishing world was exposed when Freud pulled back the curtain hiding unconscious forces and at how fortunate we are to be lost in exploring such terrain. How privileged we are to be welcomed into the lives of specific, singular, and unique individual others to share such a project.

## References

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## Rather my own shortcomings

Lord, help me find the truth, and, Lord,  
protect me from those who have already found it.  
— An ancient prayer

Most of them met at art school, the Académie Julian, gifted youngsters eager not only to learn from their masters but also to move beyond them. Influenced by ideas Sérusier had brought from Gauguin in Brittany, the young Vuillard, Denis, Bonnard, and others banded together. Wanting to leave the prevailing style of impressionism behind, they called themselves Nabis, prophets, and together with a few added colleagues set out to find a new approach to painting and color.

Denis became their theorist. In 1890, when only 19 years old, he published his *Définition du néo-traditionnisme*. Its first paragraph famously set down the basic premise from which the other principles of the Nabis derived: "Remember that before it is a warhorse, a naked woman, or a trumpety anecdote, a painting is essentially flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order" (Russell 1971, p. 20). As is common with any diktat of theory, implications for possible rules of technique soon followed.

As time passed, the individuals among the Nabis painted and experimented, some staying close to the principles set down by Denis and some moving away. Troubled by a style felt to be insufficiently true to the theory, in 1898 Denis sent Vuillard a letter of concern about Vuillard's having wandered too far afield. In a long reply, a letter that seemed at once an effort at self-defense yet also a genuine striving toward self-definition, Vuillard wrote, "To sum up, I have a horror (or rather, an absolute terror) of general ideas that I have not arrived at by myself. It is not that I deny their validity. I'd rather own up to my shortcomings than pretend to an understanding that I don't really possess" (Russell 1971, p. 65).

So much is present in those three short sentences. Vuillard does not rebelliously repudiate the principles offered but respectfully values their validity. Nonetheless, he insists on his need to digest and assimilate those principles for him to make them his own rather than accept them as a formulaic recipe for technical procedure.

This is no mere bit of vanity; it matters. Struggling toward authenticity, Vuillard prefers to acknowledge personal shortcomings rather than become a poseur, one who gains acceptance by assuming whatever is thought to be the preferred way of doing things. Even within the tenets he valued in a specific school of art, he would not make art that was not essentially his own. Instead, he labored to translate those cherished concepts into what was true to his personal experience. He knew that imitation could grow into mastery only through the difficult struggle of integrating principles, not by perverting them into external rules.

### From visual art to psychoanalysis

What might this say for psychoanalysis?

Clinical analysis involves one person putting his mind into the service of the mind of another. In the service of the patient's introspection, in what Robert Gardner (1983) has spoken of as reciprocating self-inquiries, the analyst structures a special situation, one with controlled limits and regularity of routine, in order to facilitate the patient's calling forth the hidden forces within the patient's mind. The analyst's discipline, the analyst's efforts toward neutrality and abstinence, are not goals in themselves but are modulated techniques designed to move the relationship from the conventional and toward opening what is buried and hidden. It seems appropriate that an analytic session is called a *séance* in French.

Yet, if the analyst imposes a personal view of the way the patient's world is likely to be constructed, the validity of the search is corrupted into an effort at persuasion. True psychoanalytic efforts are struggles of inquiry, not indoctrination.

It may be psychoanalytic theory itself that most often intrudes. Basic concepts, including the one that says that behind every expression lie other meanings as yet unexposed – those fundamental principles allow investigation to take place.

Higher-level theories, such as those of infantile sexuality or defense mechanisms, and so on – all of those matter mostly to remind the analyst to wonder (not conclude) about important out-of-awareness forces that might be passing unconsidered. The more abstract the theory, the greater likelihood that it may not be apt in any individual instance.

Rather than open new possibilities, theory can also be misused, brought in not to open new potential understandings but to comfort an analyst's mind in the face of uncertainty. Misuse of the analyst's theoretical thinking may be most innocent with young analysts in training, albeit no less disorienting and potentially harmful to genuine exploration. Such is the nature of learning: identifying with a valued teacher, taking in what is new, perhaps even imitating the teacher, and over time digesting and assimilating the newly learned so that it becomes one's own – ah, Vuillard.

More destructive are the narrow theories forced on unfolding clinical material by those who are insistently devoted to parochial schools of analysis.

I suspect all clinicians have heard at times from representatives of every analytic school reports of clinical work that did not sound and feel individual or fresh. After the first several minutes of listening in such instances, the final formulations that are about to unfold can be predicted with distressing success. Sadly, even the wording of interpretations can at such times be foretold. The listener may hear important analytic ideas exposed and clinically confirmed, but the material reminds one of the lawyer who starts his trial summary by saying, "And these, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, are the conclusions on which I base my facts."

Under such circumstances, surprise never seems present. The absence of the presenting analyst's being confused or bewildered (the natural state in the uncertainty of trying to figure out what has been kept unknown) goes missing, the analyst seeming never to be confronted by something totally unexpected. As Gardner put it, "It's a long way to heaven; and in analysis as elsewhere it is mainly a matter of meanwhiles" (1983, p. 34).

There is no royal road to exposure of the unconscious in clinical work; perhaps that is why it is called "work." Psychoanalytic theory drawn from generations of individual clinical analyses provides valuable clues for possible implications of new observations and for possible directions toward new progress. It cannot substitute for figuring things out afresh. Psychoanalytic inquiry is not a scavenger hunt in which the analyst searches to find the desired list of explanations thought to be provided by a favored theory.

### All this and Freud too

Freud was aware of this when he stated,

It is not enough, therefore, for a physician to know a few of the findings of psychoanalysis; he must have familiarized himself with its technique if he wishes his medical procedure to be guided by a psychoanalytic point of view. This technique cannot be learned from books, and it certainly cannot be discovered independently without great sacrifices of time, labor, and success.

(1910, p. 226)

Freud was greatly confident of his clinical discoveries about the psyche, basing that confidence on the experience of relentless inquiry and repeatedly ready to alter prior convictions as the result of newer experiences. Reviewing psychoanalytic possibilities near the end of his life, Freud commented on both the value of theoretical inferences from experience and the limits inherent in even a disciplined attention to theoretical understanding. "We know," he wrote, "that the first step towards attaining intellectual mastery of our environment is to discover generalizations, rules and laws which bring order into chaos. In doing this we simplify the world of phenomena; but we cannot avoid falsifying

*it*" (1937, p. 228; emphasis added). With his customary wit, Freud went on to say, "every step forward is only half as big as it looks at first."

Like Vuillard, Freud similarly preferred to "own up to my shortcomings [rather] than pretend to an understanding that I don't really possess" (Russell 1971, p. 20). What is valid and most useful is what we assimilate, not merely imitate.

### References

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## Part II

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# The psychoanalytic situation

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