

The Psychoanalytic Vision of Reality by Roy Schafer
(Int.J.Psychoanalysis.1970)

Reflections on a Freudian Classic

Historical Introduction

In the age of ‘psychological man’ and the psychological therapies (since we are all heirs to Freud) it could be said that there are now several, even, many psychoanalyses. Or, from the perspective of post-modernism, Freud the Modern Master is dead. Long live the unfettered worlds of psychoanalysis. Everyone has an opinion on what psychoanalysis is. Historically, the psychoanalytic world-view entailed three inter-related pursuits. A unique method for investigating the mind and its depths/unconscious processes; a body of evolving detailed knowledge of human development and mental functioning; a crafted, rigorous technique for understanding and treating the mind in conflict/disorder/distress through rendering the unconscious conscious/the acquisition of insight or deepening and broadening knowledge of oneself (in relation to other selves). Is that clear statement of aims and purpose still relevant today, maybe especially, to those of us who are not trained in psychoanalysis but influenced by its ideas when we work with individuals, groups and organisations?

In his classic, perhaps now old-fashioned paper, Roy Schafer offers a plausible account of those ideas, beliefs and values (unconsciously) motivating the psychoanalytic vocation and our continued adherence to it, in some cases, perhaps uncritically. The paper also may be old-fashioned for another reason. Here is someone writing a mostly theoretical paper originating in clinical practice and yet can be understood by the intellectually curious non specialist reader as well: the psychoanalyst as intellectual in the tradition of the original psychoanalytical movement. We know that in its early years the ‘new science’ was openly shared with the interested general public.

Schafer trained originally as a psychologist who never abandoned the discipline and the clarity of thought essential for articulating psychological life/the mind and its implicit complexity. Furthermore, he was ‘apprenticed’ to an historically important mentor at the time - the forties and fifties. That is, Schafer was immersed in the rigorous investigation and development of diagnostic and psychological testing, in part to study empirically key psychoanalytic concepts with David Rapaport, the metapsychologist-researcher at the Menninger Clinic, USA. Rapaport had also studied philosophy (in Hungary) and was once described as Kantian because of the exclusive value he placed on thinking and thought. He was passionately concerned about the standing of psychoanalysis from the stand point of disciplined methodology. Later, Schafer was significantly influenced by philosophy and certain philosophers. The illustrious apprentice had learnt to recognise the importance of thought/cognition (from psychology) and of motives/affects (from psychoanalysis). This impressive capacity for integrative thinking is exemplified throughout his continually evolving work.

In 1960, the year of Rapaport’s death, Schafer happened to publish an original study: The Loving and Beloved Superego in Freud’s Structural Theory. Years before, the young Schafer would have experienced his teacher as positively nourishing of critical thinking that is ultimately creative as well. Strikingly, he developed beyond his mentor attesting to the philosopher Martin Heidegger’s assertion that a sure way to surpass one’s teacher is to acknowledge their importance and worth thereby learning optimally from their intellectual generosity. An interesting philosophical variation on the Oedipal theme-as-quest-for-knowledge.

Ironically, Schafer was to become one of Rapaport’s severest critics because of Rapaport’s insistent focus on conceptual research and metapsychological refinement as though psychoanalysis was not anchored in clinical practice. We remember that the late J D Sutherland

had written a significant paper 'Object Relations Theory and the Conceptual Model of Psychoanalysis' (1963) in which he critically questioned the conceptual model of psychoanalysis otherwise known as ego psychology or classical psychoanalysis for being too preoccupied with investigating and explaining the vicissitudes of mental functioning (seemingly) at the expense of paying close attention to personal/object relationships. In some quarters ego psychology is regarded as out-dated. After all, Freud and his immediate followers have long since become historical figures in the psychoanalytic landscape. In fact, however, ego psychology is continually revising its assumptions in response to fresh knowledge/insights from modern biology and the human/social sciences in general. Consequently, it maintains an enquiring and always empirical approach and attitude to psychological life in its complex manifestations. This is the nature of ego psychology. After all, the ego and the encompassing self are, and need to be, open systems in order that the person may adapt actively to external reality and flourish. Even though Schafer turned away decidedly from ego psychology/classical psychoanalysis, the quality of his thinking and his broad outlook remain. One surmises that he hasn't forgotten the lesson that the essential humanness of clinical practice is too narrow to account sufficiently for the life of the mind and living existentially/being in the world, all of which extend beyond the clinical encounter. The same also could be said of Sutherland. Like Schafer, he too had trained in psychology as well as in science. He never lost the enquiring, empirical, sceptical edge even though those who met him could not but be touched by his generosity of spirit/humanity. Very interestingly, even ironically, Sutherland was the distinguished visiting professor of psychoanalysis at Manninger's for many years, long after Schafer had moved on/away from that centre for ego psychological research. It is well known that Sutherland was widely appreciated for his genuine capacity for bridge-building and critical-appreciative thinking within and beyond psychoanalysis.

The Psychoanalytic Vision of Reality

I suspect that on reflection readers would recognise, with some surprise, the four visions which constitute (Schafer's) psychoanalytic vision of reality. They are the Comic, Romantic, Tragic and Ironic, gleaned from (Western) literature and implicitly encountered as such within the psychoanalytic dyad at work. Indeed, the dynamic ebb and flow and overlap of the four heuristic visions do seem, on reflection, to influence our clinical-therapeutic as well as organisational and educational ambitions. The following thematic selection of passages from Schafer's expansive, yet closely argued, dense paper will demonstrate what I mean. Obviously, the full import of it can only be appreciated through reading it in its entirety. The emphases are mine.

Schafer begins his paper 'We psychoanalysts would all agree, I think, that among the aims of psychoanalysis as a therapy that of increasing the reliability of the analysand's reality testing occupies a central position'. The Reality Principle always and necessarily holds sway. Then, on the theme of his paper he explains 'The term vision implies judgements partly rooted in subjectivity, that is, in acts of imagination and articles of faith, which, however illuminating and complex they may be, necessarily involve looking at reality from certain angles and not others. As visions influence the determination of facts and their interrelations and implications, clashes between visions cannot be settled by simple appeals to the "evidence"'. We remember Erikson's suggestion that psychoanalysis is a 'way of looking at things'. He too was influenced by Rapaport and remained an ego-psychologist, and a politically and socially aware one at that, until his death.

Schafer continues '... In this paper I explore the vision of reality inherent in psychoanalytic thought and practice. I believe there to be such a vision, a complex one, that includes comic, romantic, tragic and ironic features ... I do want to point out that, in its broad implication my investigation of this set of possibilities involves turning attention to the roots of psychoanalysis in the humanities ... However, it will be out of place for me to attempt a comprehensive presentation of previous discussions of the vision. A final conceptual difficulty is that the visions join together in certain respects – for example the tragic and romantic, the comic and the

ironic, and the tragic and ironic. Consequently, my definitions, like all others in the realm of ideas will necessarily be selective, provisional, somewhat laboured, and controversial ...’.

The Comic Vision

‘The comic vision seeks evidence to support unqualified hopefulness regarding personal situations in the world. It serves to affirm that no dilemma is too great to be resolved, no obstacle too firm to stand against effort and good intentions, no evil so unmitigated and entrenched that it is irremediable, no suffering so intense that it cannot be relieved, no loss so final that it cannot be undone or made up for. The programme is reform, progress and tidings of joy ... it celebrates the power of “positive thinking”.’ This is a pretty succinct description of the comic vision which Schafer then proceeds to elaborate on. Readily recognisable from the psychotherapy world is the proliferation of problem-solving and solution-focused therapies which offer much needed hope for those struggling with personal and interpersonal conflicts. Likewise, the benefits of grief work and grief therapy for many. At the height of the Cold War a number of earnest psychoanalysts genuinely believed that if superpower leaders underwent psychoanalysis then another world war would be averted. A contemporary counter-balance to such, realistically speaking, comic vision thinking was provided by Philip Rieff’s incisive study of *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: The Uses of Faith after Freud* (1966). Strong faith in the triumph of the therapeutic continues unabated today. Psychological ‘healers’, unfairly caricatured by Rieff as ‘merchants of consolation’, abound. Rieff may have a point. For, since we are told there are now literally hundreds of forms of counselling and therapy available in the market, it is quite possible that those of us in need of consolation would be purchasing this vital personal service.

We seem to be in something of a (therapeutic) state, or in the prophetic words of the existentialist philosopher, William Barrett, in *A Time of Need* (1965). A meeting of the comic and the ironic visions, perhaps.

The Romantic Vision

‘In the romantic vision, as conceptualised here, life is a quest or a series of quests. The quest is a perilous, heroic, individualistic journey. Its destination or goal combines some or all of the qualities of mystery, grandeur, sacredness, love and possession by or fusion with some higher power or principle... Many analysands seek analysis with a sense of failed quest, which they may verbalise as a search for authenticity, identity, dedication, and aspirations to be more at one with the world around them. The archetype of the quest certainly embraces essential aspects of the analytic process. For the analysand, analysis is initially a quest for a lost golden age, whatever else it may signify ... Heroic fulfilling of tasks becomes “working through” in the face of sometimes intolerable anxiety, guilt, grief, yearning, and despair. And the actual reward? A more united subjective self, one which has more room in it for undisguised pleasure, to be sure, but also for control, delay, decisive renunciation, remorse, mourning, memories, anticipations, ideals, and moral standards; and more room, too, for a keen sense of real challenges, dangers, and rewards in one’s current existence’ Finally, regarding the analytic experience-as-quest, Schafer observes ‘In terms of Lewin’s (1952) likening the analytic situation to the state of sleeping and dreaming, which is akin to the romantic experience, the analyst is both the soothing sandman and the harsh awakener. The simplification of romance breaks down’. The Pleasure Principle is (and must be) replaced by the Reality Principle if psychotherapy or therapeutic counselling is to be real and not illusory, for patient/client and therapist/counsellor alike. We as therapists and therapeutic counsellors are only too aware of this in our daily endeavours.

The Tragic Vision

‘The tragic vision is expressed in a keen responsiveness to the great dilemmas, paradoxes, ambiguities, and uncertainties pervading human action and subjective experience. It manifests itself in alternatives to the inescapable dangers of defeat in victory and victory in defeat, the

pain in pleasure and the pleasure in pain; the guilt in apparently justified action; the loss of opportunities entailed by every choice and by growth in any direction; the inevitable clashes between passion and duty; the reversal of fortune that hovers over those who are proud or happy or worthy owing to its being in the nature of people to be inclined to reverse their own fortunes as well as to be vulnerable to accident and unforeseen consequences of their acts and the acts of others. The person with a tragic sense of life knows the renunciations that are intermingled with the condition of gratification; the necessity to act in ignorance and bear the fear and guilt of action; the burden of unanswerable questions and incomprehensible afflictions; the probability of suffering while learning or changing; the frequency with which it is true that only in the greatest adversity do people realise themselves most fully. Of all the perspectives on human affairs, the tragic is the most remorselessly searching, deeply involved, and along with the ironic, impartial.’ This passage seems addressed to the analysand who has decided to embark on the hard work of personal therapy. Turning to the analyst, Schafer notes ‘The analyst’s truly tragic vision of the analysand, on the other hand, is not a call to personal intervention or interaction, but a stimulus to empathy, reflection, and drama: in its fully developed form that response, too, is not toward intervention; instead it is characterised by deep empathy, sober contemplation, containment of tensions, working the experience over in one’s mind and heart, and humility acting as a brake on hubris or grandiosity, all in the face of awesome power, complexity, and unpredictability inherent in human affairs.’ This passage may be read as a measured response to Rieff’s earlier concerns over the triumph of the therapeutic which he, as a psychoanalytically informed, perceptive sociologist, saw fast developing. On the matter of reality-testing mentioned earlier, Schafer makes the important point ‘... that far from being a masochistic or guilty treat, tragic dramas and the tragic sense of life represent the ascending objectivity in the ego system – what we call good reality-testing and the dominance of the reality principle. We see – and value seeing – that which we are most powerfully disinclined to see’. Regarding the vital necessity for objectivity we are aware of the denial/dismissal of the very idea of objectivity by extreme postmodernists. Is this resolute stance based on fact or belief? What could be the motivating force behind this particular forcefulness?

The Ironic Vision

‘The ironic vision I shall characterise chiefly as a readiness to seek out internal contradictions, ambiguities, and paradoxes. In this respect it overlaps the tragic vision. The difference in the two lies in their aims. The tragic vision aims at seeing the momentous aspects and implications of events and people; it values total involvement and great crises; wherever it looks, it focuses on the simultaneous presence or interlocking of the noble and the demonic, the greatest achievement and the greatest waste, pity and terror, complete being and complete annihilation. The ironic vision considers the same subject matter as the tragic but aims at detachment, keeping things in perspective, taking nothing for granted, and readily spotting the antithesis to any thesis so as to reduce the claim of that thesis upon us... The very terms of tragic thinking – heroic, demonic, achievement, waste, etc. - are challenged by irony as to their largeness, urgency, clarity, meaningfulness. (The pretentious aspects of the romantic and the paradisaical thrust of the comic are, of course, even more vulnerable to irony).’

The foregoing could be considered as indicating the ironic vision having something in common with the modern sceptical tradition in the humanities/social sciences heralded by the ‘three masters of suspicion’: MARX, NIETZSCHE, and of course FREUD. All three were critically self-reflective and who traversed the poles of triumphant self-assuredness and self-doubt/self-questioning. They could be regarded as precursors of the mid-twentieth century notion of the (always alert) reflective practitioner who takes nothing for granted, hence her reflecting continually on practice. (The analytic principle of ‘working below the surface’ as a matter of course also comes to mind.) Perhaps of the four visions, the ironic truly informs the psychoanalytic enterprise as a whole. Consequently, in respect of clinical psychoanalysis, the promotion of insight as its aim is essentially tentative and unassuming. The analytic therapist is definitely not an enthusiastic problem solver. It is sufficient to allow the analysand to be ‘open minded’ in the words of the Freudian psychoanalyst-philosopher, Jonathan Lear (1999). That is,

the patient becomes his own interpreter and, therefore insightful problem solver: he decides. We are reminded of the provocative study of 'The Importance of Disappointment' (1994) by the late British sociologist and group psychotherapist, Ian Craib. From his perspective, the psychoanalytic/psychotherapeutic experience ironically prepares the patient/client to come to terms with suffering/disappointment which is and always has been a fact of life. (Psychological) liberation has its limits. There remains an essential tension between the Pleasure Principle and the Reality Principle. In classical Freudian language the mind is in conflict.

Further on Schafer observes 'The ironic vision is directed not only outward but inward as well. Applied to oneself, irony is self-deprecatory, not so much with the aim of self-abasement or self-ridicule as of not taking any single aspect of oneself too seriously for one's own good. The emotionally overcharged and grandiose inclinations common to all of us incline us to damn and glorify ourselves (and others) recklessly, simplistically and absolutely; irony moderates these inclinations and thus safeguards good judgement and effective action'.

On that last point, Schafer notes 'In this respect, irony leans toward resignation – an active, deliberative resignation, not an apathetic one'. An example of a paradoxical interlocking of 'good judgement and effective action'. Shades of Ian Craib's thesis 24 years later.

Regarding the coming together of the four visions in the psychoanalytic endeavour Schafer insightfully, soberly observes 'The ironic and the tragic are especially important in the investigative aspects of psychoanalysis, while the comic and the romantic have more to do with its healing and emancipatory aspects'. Then on the vital importance of tact and timing in interpretation, he points out 'The effectiveness of interpretation sometimes depends on its being touched by irony; if not too heavy and thereby self-cancelling, irony can make certain analytic discoveries tolerable enough to be usable'.

On the matter of the therapist's comportment, the Freudian psychoanalyst and Joycean scholar (!) Paul Schwaber's observation illustrates beautifully the therapeutic worth of a carefully detached stance, without naming it ironic ... 'to maintain observing distance while identifying closely – to preserve, so to speak, a locale for active and empathic disinterestedness...' (2000). This tiny nugget of the 'Poetics of Place and Therapy' may strike a chord with us who strive to be truly therapeutic in an unassuming, always considerate way.

Vision and Values

The final, short section of Schafer's paper is headed Vision and Values. He suggests 'that as a system of observations, methods, and hypotheses, psychoanalysis leans toward certain values and away from others. It leans toward values that support the recognition of the depths of the inner world, complexity, ambiguity, conflict, the ubiquity of the demonic and suffering, the frequent interpenetration of victory and defeat, unremitting questioning of absolutes and the like. These would be the values inherent in the reality principle broadly conceived, along with those values (related to the comic and romantic) that emphasise taking remedial action and taking chances. Any system of thought that denied or opposed these values would be an enemy of psychoanalysis. In this case, although psychoanalysis is not synonymous with absolute truth, it is the manifestation of Freud's love of truth. Psychoanalysis is the expression of ... a body of values contained within the love of truth'. The inevitable, fateful interweaving of vision and values reminds us serious enquirers into psychoanalysis of Rieff's magisterial essay 'Freud: The Mind of the Moralist' (1959).

Concluding Remarks on the Paper

The poet W H Auden announced famously in 1956 that Freud was/is now a 'whole climate of opinion'. I would like to add the caveat, informed opinion, for those of us persuaded by the insights and values from this intricate system called psychoanalysis. The Schafer paper generously offers for our consideration an insightful way of looking at things/reality. It is also, I

suggest, an example of classical psychoanalytic enquiry at its provisional best. Schafer's offer, like every psychoanalytic interpretation, may be accepted or otherwise. It is up to us to make up our own minds as discerning adherents of psychoanalysis if this particular paper remains relevant and useful some 37 years later.

I thank Eileen Francis for having encouraged me to seek comments from two discerning literary scholars, Amy Wygant (Glasgow) and Dr Gavin Miller (Edinburgh). True to form their informed and insightful responses were critically helpful. Grateful thanks to them as well.

Neville Singh
April 2007