

Books Reconsidered

*A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis: Charles Rycroft**

The renown of this book rests on the single word 'critical'. Had it simply been called *A Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, it might never have featured in this series of outstanding books of their time. The introduction of the word 'critical' implied that the book was going to tell the reader what was wrong with psychoanalysis; and this is what many non-analysts would like to know. Four years after its first appearance it was published by Penguin, who were no doubt aware that the critical element was its main selling point. They emphasised this by displaying on the front cover an absurd and vulgar sketch combining the face of Freud with a large, protuberant breast.

On the first page of the book Rycroft acknowledged that it grew out of a notebook in which he had recorded his puzzlement and doubts about certain aspects of Freudian theory. I would like to suggest that reaching the point of publicly proclaiming one's disagreement with Freud represents a stage in the development of the psychoanalyst which is the equivalent of what Bowen, the family therapist, has called the differentiation of self from the family of origin. Many prominent theorists such as Jung, Adler, Reich, Klein, Suttie, Balint, Berne, Bowlby, Perls, and Laing reached and passed through such a stage. In fact, the Freudian system lends itself to such a process. The aspiring analyst must seek admission to the system and then submit himself to a rigorous and regressive training ritual, during which his analyst, I would suggest, becomes for him what Kohut has called a self-object. Only when he emerges on the far side of this experience can he decide how much of what he has been exposed to he is going to absorb into his own identity and how much he is going to reject.

We know from Peter Fuller's excellent biographical introduction to Rycroft's more recent *Psychoanalysis and Beyond* (1985) that Rycroft did not take easily to the Freudian system. He is quoted as saying, "If I had known about the psychoanalytic movement and its quasi-sectarian quality, I would certainly not

have applied". He did apply, submitted himself to the training, and emerged a qualified psychoanalyst, at the age of 33, in 1947. At this time the ideological battle between Anna Freud and Melanie Klein was at its most intense. Initially he veered toward the Kleinian viewpoint, but subsequently he tried to maintain a middle ground. He largely conformed, became a training analyst, sat on numerous committees, and held various offices within the British Psycho-Analytical Society, but he became progressively more disenchanted with the way that polemics were conducted within the Society.

Shortly, however, he himself became caught up in disputes and controversies. In 1956 he caused a stir with the publication of his paper 'Symbolism and its relationship to the primary and secondary process'. In this, he challenged the official view that symbolisation was invariably unconscious, regressive, and defensive. This is a view which had been re-emphasised by Ernest Jones, Freud's leading British disciple, in 1916, in an authoritative paper called 'The theory of symbolism'. During the next 20 years, in what I would consider to be his attempts to extricate himself from Freudian orthodoxy, he published a number of papers which were critical of Freud. He came to realise, however, that his voice carried little weight in the Society's affairs and that the real power was in the hands of those whose values he did not approve. As Fuller expressed it, "... the weight of orthodoxy was such that any open confrontation with it inside the Society would have dragged him into precisely those rituals of polemic and pronouncement of anathemas that he was seeking to reject". He submitted his resignation, but he was persuaded to withdraw it. He was warned about how damaging it would be for the movement to have further splits. Eventually, in 1978, he let his membership lapse. Thereafter his two most important books were published, *The Innocence of Dreams* in 1979 and *Psychoanalysis and Beyond* in 1985.

The Critical Dictionary appeared, therefore, midway between the publication of his first critical paper and his final departure from the Society. In the first sentence of the book Rycroft appears to be struggling

*London: Nelson (1968).

with his obvious ambivalence towards psychoanalysis. He explains that the book is not intended to be a dictionary of criticisms of psychoanalysis or to provide ammunition for those who may wish to demolish it. Instead, it is intended to help those who wish or need to inform themselves about it to do so intelligently and critically. Thus he intended to be constructively rather than destructively critical. In fact, he only allowed himself to be mildly critical and, for the most part, the book is a straightforward explanation of those psychoanalytic terms which had been in use up to the mid-sixties. The length of the explanations ranges from two lines to two pages, and in some of the longer explanations there are pointers to Rycroft's major disagreements with Freudian orthodoxy. To fully appreciate what those disagreements amount to the reader would need to refer to his longer texts.

The dictionary proper is preceded by an 18 page introduction which raises a number of interesting points about psychoanalysis. The reader is reminded that most of the psychoanalytic literature was originally thought out and subsequently written in German and that, although most of the translations are excellent, it seems likely that some ideas are not easily transported from one language to another. The German word *Angst*, for example, is more heavily laden with overtones of anguish and fear than is the English word anxiety, and this may lead to the incorrect assumption that the normally adjusted person does not become anxious. It is suggested that the German tendency to precede abstract nouns by a definite article, to write "the consciousness" rather than consciousness, and presumably "the unconsciousness" rather than unconsciousness, has the effect of implying that such abstractions have a real existence and may be invoked as explanatory agents. It is further explained that, in English, there is one vocabulary (derived from Anglo-Saxon) for describing everyday ideas and experiences and another (derived from Latin and Greek) for thinking and writing about abstract concepts. We use the Anglo-Saxon word 'I' to refer to ourselves, and the Latin or Greek word 'ego' to refer to the more abstract conception of the self. The equivalent German words are 'ich' and "das Ich". This, it is argued, causes the English reader to dissociate the more impersonal structure of the ego, with its characteristics and functions, from what is really nothing other than the person himself. I feel that here Rycroft is blurring a distinction which really does exist. Jacobson, for example, has argued in the reverse direction: that Freud himself sometimes used the term 'ego' to refer to a psychic structure concerned with the ego functions and defences, and sometimes

used it to refer to the self. The two concepts are, in fact, so distinct that there are now two separate psychoanalytic schools, the ego psychologists led by Anna Freud and Hartman and the self-psychologists led by Kohut and Kernberg. Ironically, in the main body of the dictionary Rycroft does draw a distinction between the ego and the self, and correctly draws attention to the preoccupation of the existential psychoanalysts with such a distinction. He makes no reference, however, to self-psychology or to any of the self-psychologists whose writings were not widely recognised in the mid-sixties.

From this point on, I will concern myself with various preoccupations of Rycroft's which are alluded to in the explanations provided in the dictionary but which are more fully examined in his longer texts. I will begin with his dissatisfaction with what he considers to be the implication of psychoanalysis, that man does not have a will of his own. He considers that it was Freud's belief that the human ego is a passive entity lacking energy or force of its own and only capable of action in so far as it is acted on by forces external to itself. These forces may be located either in the (unconscious) id or in the environment. This places man in the same category as the animals. Under the heading 'Will' he maintains that the concept of will forms no part of psychoanalytic theory, being incompatible with the assumption of psychic determinism and with the idea that mental illnesses are caused by unconscious processes to which the notion of will is obviously inapplicable. Under the heading 'Psychic determinism' he explains that such an assumption leaves no place in analytic theory for a self or agent initiating action or defence, or for the use of explanations other than causal ones. He maintains that most analysts believe that the claims of psychoanalysis to be a science are based on its use of causal-deterministic assumptions. He further claims that psychoanalysts need to view the neuroses as being illnesses like physical illnesses in which the patient is a victim of circumstances which impinge on his body without his own will being in any way implicated. There are clearly other reasons why psychoanalysis can lay claim to being a science, and it is not necessary for the patient to be viewed simply as the passive recipient of forces in the way that a physical object is.

Somewhat unconvincingly, I feel, he tries to proffer the influence of early experiences to justify his belief that the ego is not a passive entity. Under the heading 'Development' he states that psychoanalysts believe that adult behaviour can be interpreted as an elaboration or evolution of infantile behaviour and that complex 'higher' forms of behaviour can be interpreted as elaborations of simple, primitive

behaviour patterns and drives. The developmental process as a whole can be considered to result from the evolution of innate developmental processes and the impact of experience on these processes. In the introduction he explains that, in the neuroses, the patient appears to be suffering the consequences of relationships in which he must have been, to some extent at least, a willing agent. It is not entirely clear to me why this leads him to conclude that the ego is, in fact, an active agent, capable of initiating behaviour, including those ultimately self-defeating forms of behaviour we know as the neuroses. It seems to me that one could interpret Rycroft's preoccupation with free will as a manifestation of his own internal conflict over the extent to which he should allow himself to be a passive recipient of Freudian dogma and the extent to which he should exert his own free will in standing up against the orthodox psychoanalytic position.

He goes on to argue that if the ego is an active agent, rather than a passive entity, it cannot be possible to maintain that everything that goes on between analyst and patient is "a scrambled repetition of the patient's childhood", with the analyst acting as a "completely detached, though benevolent observer". It is his belief that, although psychoanalysis was formulated as though it were based on the objective and detached scrutiny of 'material' presented to the detached and uninvolved analyst by the analysand, its insights really arise out of the relationship that develops "when two people are gathered together in a psychotherapeutic setting". He considers that the raw material or basic data of his science is the relationship he is having with his patients. Any reference he might have made early in his career to the "psychic apparatus" was, in his opinion, "making kow-towing movements towards classical theory". It has often been observed that Freud's tendency to present his theory in terms of structure and apparatus was a continuation of his medical and neurological patient-centred orientation. Rycroft's prediction that, one day, psychoanalytic theory will have to be reformulated as a communication theory is very much in line with Szasz's long-held belief that psychiatry is really a science of communication and Sullivan's interpersonal approach both to psychoanalysis and to psychiatry as a whole. (The quotations in this paragraph are from Fuller).

From the publication of his first critical paper in 1986, Rycroft continued to be preoccupied with the distinction between the primary and secondary processes, which he believed to be Freud's most important contribution to our understanding of mental functioning. There is, however, a fundamental difference between Freud's conception of these two

processes and Rycroft's. Under 'Processes, primary and secondary' he explains that Freud believed primary process to be ontogenetically and phylogenetically earlier than secondary process, that it was that mode of thinking which was operative in the id, and that it was characteristic of unconscious mental activity. Secondary process, on the other hand, was that mode of thinking which was operative in the ego, and it was characteristic of conscious mental activity. Primary process was governed by the pleasure principle, whereas secondary process was governed by the reality principle. Rycroft maintains that Freud considered the two processes to be mutually antagonistic, that secondary process was superior because it developed later, and that primary process was primitive and maladaptive. Rycroft explains that psychoanalytic observation and theorising is involved in the paradoxical activity of using secondary process to observe, analyse, and conceptualise that form of mental activity (i.e. primary process) which scientific thinking has always been at pains to exclude. Rycroft believes that, in fact, the two processes complement each other and that they are equally adaptive and equally necessary for creativity. It is certainly the case that, in dreaming, primary process is most evident, but secondary process also occurs. Similarly, although the conscious thought of most adults is predominantly primary process, secondary process is also sometimes apparent.

Probably one of Rycroft's most important modifications of Freudian theory is his elevation of primary process to a status equal to that of secondary process. It seems highly probable that primary process does represent an earlier form of psychic functioning. It is a feature of the thinking and conceptualising of primitive people and of ancient mythology. Children exhibit a great deal of primary process before they are taken over by an educational system which emphasises the importance of logic and precise grammatical expression. It is, however, an essential component of creative thinking, regardless of whether this be of an aesthetic or a scientific kind. Under 'Creativity' Rycroft observes that psychoanalysis has always been tempted to demonstrate similarities between creative activity and neurotic processes. Freudian analysts, he claims, interpret the content of novels and paintings as an oedipal fantasy. Kleinian analysts have tried to prove that creative activity is either depressive or schizoid, that it either represents an attempt to make reparation for destructive fantasies or is in some way analogous to the delusional system-making of schizophrenics. He notes that since classical psychoanalysis designates imaginative activity as primitive, infantile, and a

function of the id, writers such as Hartman and Kris have been driven to describe it in terms such as regression at the service of the ego. Creativity is individualistic and therefore, more than anything else, is difficult to include within a causal-determinist framework. At the end of his life Freud rejected the idea that psychoanalysis has anything to contribute to aesthetics. In contrast, Rycroft has constantly emphasised that imagination is a natural, normal activity of an agent or self. He has an acute awareness of the role played by the imagination at every level of mental functioning.

Not surprisingly, Rycroft has also challenged the Freudian attitude to dreams. His book *The Innocence of Dreams* (1979) represents an alternative to Freud's classic *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Under the heading 'Dreams' he explains that Freud's interest in dreams derived from the fact that they are normal processes, with which everyone is familiar, but which none the less exemplify the processes at work in the formation of neurotic symptoms. For Rycroft, dreams are not necessarily disguised expressions of repressed wishes, the royal road to the unconscious, nor analogies for psychopathological symptoms. He maintains that dreams are merely the form which the imagination takes during sleep and that there is no reason to suppose that symbolism is essentially a device by which dreamers deceive and obfuscate themselves, even though on occasion it may be used in this way. Freud considered dreaming to be essentially a visual rather than a verbal process, and that dream interpretation involves expanding the condensed, non-discursive, mainly visual imagery of the dream into the discursive symbolism of language, i.e. of converting primary process into secondary process. Since Rycroft considers the two processes to be complementary he would not be in favour of translating one into the other.

What appears to be behind most of Rycroft's criticism of Freud is his dissatisfaction with the concept of the unconscious and with the fact that the individual is helplessly and passively controlled and directed by instinctual forces and reactions which originate within the unconscious. Under the heading

'Unconscious' he observed that patients with a speculative turn of mind may, if they have an unwary analyst, entertain an indefinite number of hypotheses about their unconscious motives without having any idea how to decide which of them are true. While he seems prepared to acknowledge that there are unconscious mental processes and also unconscious thoughts, he seems unable to accept the idea of entity called the unconscious which has a kind of autonomy of its own.

Where then does all this leave us? Rycroft is of interest because he is a psychoanalyst who rebelled against Freudian orthodoxy. Most psychoanalysts who rebel are able, through their rebellion, to make important contributions in their own right. Some rebel more strongly than others, and the originality of their contribution is a reflection of the intensity of their rebellion. Fritz Perls, who once wrote, "It took us a long time to debunk the whole Freudian crap . . ." rebelled a lot more strongly than Rycroft has and, in so doing, created the excitingly innovative Gestalt therapy. Rycroft's rebellion has been a relatively modest affair, but is no less valuable for that. Although no longer a member of the British Psycho-Analytical Society, he remains true to the psychoanalytic tradition.

Whatever critics may say of the efficacy of psychoanalysis as a form of treatment, there is no doubt that psychoanalysis has created a means of accommodating the subjective, the emotional and the irrational and provided a conceptual framework within which to generate theories about psychological development and human motivation. Along with all of this it has created a language, and all languages require a dictionary. Now that a dictionary exists it is capable of being expanded and updated and, now that Rycroft's has come of age, it is to be hoped that somebody, if not Rycroft himself, will come forward and take on this onerous but necessary task. Finally, it would be sad if all that Rycroft were remembered for was his dictionary. In the dictionary there are only pointers to his theoretical position. Hopefully this brief review will stimulate the reader to seek out his more substantial contributions.

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