

## THE UNORTHODOX SILBERER<sup>1</sup>



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### INTRODUCTION

Already from its very beginning, one of the basic aims of psychoanalysis was to unveil the mysterious, occult, religious and spiritual experiences of modern man and to find a rational explanation for them; to describe these mysterious phenomena in materialistic, naturalistic terms, to show their illusory nature and to demonstrate how they were simply the result of wish-fulfilment. Most psychoanalysts have diligently followed in the footsteps of Sigmund Freud by disenchanting the patient's inner world, replacing mystical, religious experiences to unconscious forces, hidden complexes or repressed desires. Psychoanalytic concepts became the building-blocks of a new model of the soul in which biological-instinctual forces governed human behaviour according to the rules of simple causality.

Psychoanalysis, however, although it provided a secular model of the psyche, still preserved a kind of mystery. Despite the efforts of Freud and many others to show how subconscious forces were biological and instinctual in nature, the theory of the unconscious proved to be vague and romantic in the eyes of several laymen and critics. Furthermore, the complete demarcation of the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious from occult, spiritualistic or spiritual psychological theories (e.g. Myers, 1903) has never been entirely successful. In fact, a number of Freud's enthusiastic disciples rapidly rebuilt the once detached spiritual contents into their own theories. For example, Carl Gustav Jung desexualized the Freudian concept of the libido, thus opening the way to non-biological, collective and spiritual approaches to the analysis of the psyche (Jung, 1912). Sándor Ferenczi never gave up his supposition, according to which telepathic experiences emerge in connection to transference phenomena (e.g. Ferenczi, 1932; Gyimesi, 2016). Others insisted on the outstanding significance of psychoanalysis in contemporary psychical and parapsychological research (Ehrenwald, 1951; Eisenbud, 1946; Hollós, 1933; Servadio, 1934). Even Freud was convinced that it was worth examining the question of thought-transference within a psychoanalytic framework (e.g. Freud, 1921, 1922, 1933).

Although orthodox psychoanalysis was based on the supposition of the biological-mechanical nature of the human psyche, Freud and his closest disciples were not cautious enough in demarcating the line between psychoanalysis and the so-called occult interpretations of subconscious psychological life. Their conviction that psychoanalysis was completely scientific in nature often led to a lack of precision on this matter. For this reason, several aspects of the connection between the psychoanalytic and mystical/occult interpretations of the unconscious remained unexamined and unelaborated. Partly as the result of this, a number of innovative psychoanalytic scholars later rediscovered the significance of psychoanalysis within the context of their own research into spiritualism, the occult and psychic phenomena. By examining, and/or integrating, the once detached spiritual/occult interpretations of the psyche, they again highlighted the need for differentiation and clear demarcation between the two. As a consequence, a number of scholars initiated more comprehensive demarcation processes in different contexts and at different levels:

1. Spiritualism and Psychoanalysis—Spiritualism proved to be an inspiring field of research for numerous psychoanalytically oriented thinkers who aimed at enriching their knowledge on altered states of consciousness and the hidden capacities of the unconscious (e.g. Ferenczi, 1899; Jung, 1902, 1948, 1934–1954). Motivated by scepticism, or a belief in the spiritual nature of the psyche, their experiments

and ideas significantly contributed to the clarification of the relationship between the psychoanalytic and spiritualistic concepts of the psyche and, in many cases, also to the exclusion of spiritual theories from the psychological understanding of unconscious processes (e.g. Bálint, 1955; Deutsch, 1926; Ferenczi, 1932; Gyimesi, 2009, 2011, 2016).

2. Psychoanalysis and Telepathy—Already in the early 1900s, several psychoanalysts began expressing their views on the extraordinary psychoanalytic significance of thought-transference, or telepathy (e.g. Fodor, 1947; Gyimesi, 2012, 2014; Mitchell, 1938; Servadio, 1956, 1963). Some elaborate theories were developed for the purpose of demonstrating the psychoanalytic significance of telepathy (or ESP) (e.g. Bálint, 1955; Hollós, 1933; Servadio, 1934); however, these theories had no long-term influence on psychoanalysis. They were largely forgotten during the later course of the 20th century.

3. Psychoanalysis and Psychological Research/Early Parapsychology—While numerous psychoanalysts were convinced about the parapsychological importance of their discipline (e.g. Hollós, 1933; Mitchell, 1938), in fact, the interest of parapsychologists and psychological researchers in psychoanalysis was not significant enough to support cooperation between the two domains (e.g. Kallós, 1903). The materialistic framework of psychoanalysis discouraged most of the early parapsychologists, even though some significant steps were taken in the direction of deeper cooperation (e.g. Wassilko-Serecki, 1926; Winterstein, 1930). Thus, true cooperation between psychoanalysis and early parapsychology was blocked at the outset.

While the efforts to demarcate were clearly expressed in connection with spiritualism, psychological research and early parapsychology<sup>2</sup>, there were many other fields in which the question of boundaries was not as obvious or as clearly articulated. The theories of symbol-formation proved to be one of these areas.

Within classical psychoanalysis, symbol-formation was thought to be the result of a rather mechanical process (Blum, 1978; Freud, 1900). According to the theory, the process of symbol-formation emerged on an affectual basis. When an affect, or desire, was repressed it would thus reappear in a modified, symbolized form (Jones, 1918). Furthermore, symbols were often understood as a phylogenetic inheritance; however, the exact nature of the process of transmission was not fully illuminated (see Freud, 1913). It is well-known that Carl Gustav Jung introduced a far-reaching reformulation of the theory of symbol-formation that then led to a rupture between himself and his master (Jung, 1912). Although Freud and many others (such as Ferenczi) were sure that by reformulating the theory of symbolism Jung had opened the door to occultism and to further non-materialistic ideologies, Jung was convinced that he had not deviated from the path of empirical science (Gyimesi, 2009). In his own views, he rather expanded the category of symbols, taking into account some necessary phylogenetic considerations. However, by doing so, he inevitably faced the question of spiritual psychological contents:

“To interpret symbol-formation in terms of instinctual processes is a legitimate scientific attitude, which does not, however, claim to be the only possible one. I readily admit that the creation of symbols could also be explained from the spiritual side, but in order to do so, one would need the hypothesis that the ‘spirit’ is an autonomous reality which commands a specific energy powerful enough to bend the instincts round and constrain them into spiritual forms. This hypothesis has its disadvantages for the scientific mind, even though, in the end, we still know so little about the nature of the psyche that we can think of no decisive reason against such an assumption. In accordance with my empirical attitude I nevertheless prefer to describe and explain symbol-formation as a natural process, though I am fully conscious of the probable one-sidedness of this point of view.” (Jung, 1912: 228)

Partly due to Jung’s subversive ideas, the theory of symbolism became a scene of a less-articulated but still major demarcation problem within psychoanalysis. Classical psychoanalysis and innovations, individual and phylogenetic psychological histories, instinctual and spiritual contents were all opposed within this broad category. For numerous reasons, symbol-formulation theory became a battlefield within psychoanalysis, and it proved to be the starting point for many different deviations. Interestingly, however, the exact dangers of broadening the Freudian theory of symbol-formation were still only partially illuminated.

The aim of the present essay is to explore the true reasons why the theory of symbol-formation turned out to be such an important field in the aforementioned demarcation process. For one thing, the opposition of the spiritualistic and the naturalistic viewpoints played a major role. However, the disconnection of symbol-formation from its affectional basis led not only to what Freud and many others identified as “occult”, but also to the questioning of some further fundamental principles of psychoanalysis.

In fact, Jung was not the first one who aimed at detaching the theory of symbol-formation from its instinctual, affectional basis. The Viennese psychoanalyst, Herbert Silberer preceded him. His life-work is an outstanding example of the encounter of psychoanalysis and the so-called occult. Silberer made a most honest and unique attempt to integrate the “mystical” into the psychoanalytic edifice in a non-reductive but still psychoanalytic way. It is not an exaggeration to say that Silberer’s theories on symbol-formation are still remarkable and could illuminate not only the problems of demarcation in this field, but were also in themselves a pioneering and less-referred strain of thought within the broader field of early psychoanalysis.

## THE “UNORTHODOX” SILBERER



Herbert Silberer (1882–1923) was the son of a well-known, wealthy self-made man, Victor Silberer (1846–1924). Victor was a successful representative of Austrian public life as the founder of Austrian airship travel and owner of a sports newspaper and a publishing house. Herbert, his son, was also a sportsman and one of the pioneers of Austro-Hungarian aeronautics (see Silberer, 1903). Furthermore, he was a journalist and a self-taught psychoanalyst; however, he was never able to become financially independent from his father (Baier [forthcoming]; Nitzschke, 1988). He entered the Viennese Psychoanalytic Society in 1910, and he continued to participate in it irregularly until the end of his life. His biographer, Bernd Nitzschke, has noted that when Silberer attended meetings of the society, he was normally rather reserved and usually did not comment on the talks, except when they were on topics that he himself had researched. In these cases, Silberer was always short, cautious and precise (Nitzschke, 1988). Despite the initial acknowledgment of Freud and others (e.g. Freud, 1900<sup>3</sup>; Jung, 1968), he was not able to achieve much acclaim over the course of his career. As the historian Paul Roazen pointed out, Silberer was always a kind of outsider in Viennese psychoanalytic life: “From the outset Silberer’s work was unorthodox. He was said to have come from ‘another point of view’, though it is not certain whether this meant he disagreed with the conventional wisdom or that his starting point in

academic psychology gave him a special perspective.” (Roazen, 1975: 338).

Beyond his unique professional background, another root of Silberer’s unorthodoxy was his interest and involvement in mysticism and occultism. He was a member of the occultist Martinist Order in Paris. He was also an expert in the field of Rosicrucianism and alchemy. In 1919, he joined the Sokrates masonic lodge in Vienna (Baier, (forthcoming); Kodek 2009: 327). He studied yoga and astrology, investigated the long-lasting influence of stars on the individual, and even conducted sexual-magic experiments (Stekel, 1924). As the historian Karl Baier has shown, Silberer aimed at introducing a new perspective not only in psychoanalysis, but also in Viennese occultism:

“Several signs in Silberer’s work announce a new era. His writings are more systematical and academic than those of the older generation of Viennese occultists. (...) The fin de siècle occultists of the Habsburgian Empire used a pseudo-scientific language that had no chance of being taken seriously by mainstream science, or they articulated themselves in two quite different languages depending on whether they addressed an occult or a scientific audience. Silberer succeeded in uniting his occult thought with psychoanalytical terminology.” (Baier [forthcoming]: 45-46)

Silberer neither belonged to the group of scholars whose purpose was to prove the genuineness of occult phenomena by using psychoanalysis, nor to the sceptical psychoanalysts who aimed at demonstrating the illusionary nature of mystical experiences. Rather, he considered mystical experience a valid segment of psychological life, a psychological content worth integrating into the manifold subjects of psychoanalysis. His primary objective was to introduce the reader to the little-known features of alchemy, freemasonry and other fields of occultism, and to prove that the practices, images and theories of these domains represented nothing other than another form of psychological knowledge. According to Silberer, they were alternative languages of the soul, expressions of fundamental developmental tasks, and symbols in which human existence, struggles, anxieties and fulfilments were reflected (e.g. Silberer, 1915, 1917).



Photo taken by Silberer from a balloon (Silberer, 1903)

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A good example of Silberer's basic attitude towards the so-called occult was his criticism of contemporary theosophy. He was rather critical of theosophy in general, and differentiated Blavatsky's modern theosophical movement (using the name "theosophisticism") from the authentic, old theosophy. In his book *Durch Tod zum Leben (Through Death to Life, 1915)*, he summarized the shortcomings of modern theosophists in the following way:

"I am very sorry for the theosophists that they came off so badly; not to ridicule them, but -if it is possible- to open their eyes or distract their cloud-gazing eyes to an earthly, but trustworthy mirror, I apostrophize and call them to deal with ethnology and psychology without prejudice, and, in fact, in connection to these, especially with psychoanalysis, for reasons that I will describe later. Of course, from those, who are dancing at the glittering light of the theosophistic teachings, only a few will follow my advice." (Silberer, 1915: 15)

One of his aims, therefore, was to apply psychoanalysis in the understanding of seemingly mystical, occult experiences, and, if possible, to preserve the meaning of the original occult content by using new, non-reductive ways of exploring psychological knowledge. Silberer developed his innovative ideas on symbolformation in connection with this goal. Furthermore, the general features of his prospective-finalistic (see later) psychoanalytic theory were based on this non-reductive way of applying psychoanalysis.

Unfortunately, contemporary psychoanalysis makes only slight reference to Silberer's work and heritage. Perhaps his short life is a contributing factor to his relative obscurity. Although he developed highly innovative and valuable theories, his scientific oeuvre and his unique psychoanalytic approach have somehow been overlooked, perhaps in part because of his tragic suicide. Historians of psychoanalysis have often connected this act to the frustration he supposedly experienced as a result of a rejection by Freud. As Paul Roazen writes

“It is not possible to reconstruct the sequence of events which culminated in Silberer's suicide. He was, however, depressed over his relationship with Freud. According to one good friend, Silberer felt offended and rejected by Freud's attitude toward him. No one knew for sure why Freud did not like Silberer; he was devoted to Freud and had done important work, but Freud was no longer friendly or receptive to him. It was all quite open, though Silberer apparently had trouble how Freud felt about him. His suicide was no surprise, although perhaps Silberer all along had been expecting too much from Freud.

Freud's dismissal of Silberer was curt and official. In one short letter we can see in miniature an exaggerated version of Freud's earlier methods of getting rid of troublesome students. The letter from Freud to Silberer is dated April 17, 1922:

Dear Sir, I request that you do not make the intended visit with me. As the result of the observations and impression of recent years I no longer desire personal contact with you. Very truly yours, Freud

Silberer killed himself in a horrible way nine months later; he hanged himself on a set of window bars, leaving a flashlight shining in his face as he strangled so his wife could see him when she came home.” (Roazen, 1975: 339).

In fact, Silberer's suicide came as quite a surprise. At least, Wilhelm Stekel, a good friend and a close colleague, definitely emphasized the suddenness of Silberer's act (Stekel, 1924). Furthermore, it seems that Freud's above-quoted and often referred-to letter was not written to Silberer, but to Silberer's father, Viktor (Nitzschke, 1988, 1989). It is also worth noting, that Silberer was not entirely devoted to Freud, especially not in the 1920s. Silberer criticized Freud in several of his writings (e.g. Silberer, 1921b), and even co-founded an independent psychoanalytic journal in the United States with Stekel entitled *Psyche and Eros*<sup>4</sup>. It is likely, that Silberer's tragic death was incorrectly integrated into a myth about Freud, in which the founder of psychoanalysis was said to have been an authoritarian, heartless despot, who expelled his “unfaithful” disciples and even drove them to suicide.

Today, Silberer's name is known primarily due to his innovative ideas in the field of symbol-formation. He is even referred to as a forerunner of the Jungian theory of symbolism and archetypes (e.g. Tilton, 2003). And although Jung rarely mentioned Silberer in his works, one cannot deny the parallels between his own and Silberer's psychoanalytic approach. To shed light on the more important implications of Silberer's findings, and to differentiate his ideas from those of Jung, it is essential to clarify Silberer's viewpoint on symbol-formation and to illuminate the significance that Silberer attributed to symbolism in the individual and collective history of the human soul.

## SYMBOL-FORMATION AT SILBERER

In classical psychoanalysis, the symbols found in dreams, phantasies and myths were interpreted as substitutes for primary ideas or tendencies and as compromises between the forces of the unconscious and inhibiting factors. However, in 1909 Silberer introduced a radically new and different concept: the functional category of symbols. This notion of functional symbols was linked to Silberer's interest in the question of "threshold symbolism". In his paper published in 1909, Silberer argued that the hypnagogic state that emerges in connection with awakening or falling asleep was autosymbolic and represented the physical or the mental state of the subject. Silberer then connected very specific images to threshold symbolism. For example, typical symbols of awakening were images associated with departing, opening a door, coming home, going free out of a dark surrounding, etc. Likewise, images connected to the entering of a room, a garden or a forest, or of sinking were those associated with going to sleep (Silberer, 1917). Hypnagogic images belonged to the functional category of symbols according to Silberer, and they referred to the ongoing processes of waking up or falling asleep.

The functional category of symbols turned out to be a comprehensive concept in Silberer's thinking. Although he never denied the significance of Freud's thoughts on symbol-formation, he insisted on broadening the theory of symbolism:

"The functional category is characterized by the fact that the condition, structure or capacity for work of the individual consciousness (or the psychic apparatus) is itself portrayed. It is termed functional because it has nothing to do with the material or the contents of the act of thinking, but applies merely to manner and method in which consciousness functions (rapid, slow, easy, hard, obstructed, careless, joyful, forced; fruitless, successful; disunited, split into complexes, united, interchangeable, troubled, etc.)." (Silberer, 1917: 180-181)

Silberer also made an original attempt to add a new focus to psychoanalytic thinking: the focus of the future and the future potentials of the psyche. He believed that the Freudian school had incorrectly limited its scope to the question of the origin (Where did we come?), that is to say, to the history, roots and antecedents of psychological phenomena. The question of the future (Where are we going?) and the aims of personality development were equally important in his views:

"Since psychoanalysis has found acceptance, many of its followers believe they are able to solve, with their work of analysis alone, all the psychological, esthetic and mythological problems that come up. We understand only half of the psychic impulses, as indeed we do all spiritual development, if we look merely at the root. We have to regard not merely whence we come but also whither we go. Then only can the course of the psyche be comprehended, ontogenetically as well as phylogenetically, according to a dynamic scheme as it were." (Silberer, 1917: 192)

The potentials, tendencies and developmental possibilities of the psyche could also express themselves in the functional symbolism of dreams or phantasies. This prospective-finalistic approach proved to be fundamental in Silberer's thinking.

According to Silberer, the interpretation of symbols implied there were different ways. The psychoanalytic approach was one based on the identification of instinctual impulses and repressed wishes in symbolic forms. Silberer, however, introduced the so-called anagogic approach, and this led to hermetic-religious ideas, such as the observation or recognition of a deity or god-like entities being recognized in symbols. In the case of symbols that tended to ethical development, for instance religious symbols, the anagogic point of view must be considered<sup>5</sup>. According to Silberer, the psychoanalytic approach and the anagogic approach were not in conflict with each other. They existed independently. Based on his investigation of alchemical literature, Silberer also proposed a third way of interpretation that lay between the psychoanalytic and the anagogic approaches. Silberer identified the latter as scientific (chemical):

“The interpretations are really three; the psychoanalytic, which leads us to the depths of the impulsive life; then the vividly contrasting hermetic religious one, which, as it were, leads us up to high ideals and which I shall call shortly the anagogic; and third, the chemical (natural philosophical), which, so to speak, lies midway and, in contrast to the two others, appears ethically indifferent. The third meaning of this work of imagination lies in different relations half way between the psychoanalytic and the anagogic, and can, as alchemistic literature shows, be conceived as the bearer of the anagogic.” (Silberer, 1917: 168)

Silberer differentiated three types of symbolism in hypnagogic hallucinations and dreams. Material symbolism represents the contents of thoughts or imagination (such as images, contents, trains of reasoning, etc.). It pointed to the conscious or unconscious material of thought, as it were. Functional symbolism, as described above, referred to the conscious or unconscious functioning of the psyche -that is, to its the state, structure and action. The third type of symbolism was the so-called somatic symbolism that, according to Silberer, referred to the conscious or unconscious experience of somatic processes and bodily impulses (Silberer, 1909, 1912b, 1912c).<sup>6</sup>

It must be emphasized that the collective nature of certain symbols and images were given extraordinary significance by Silberer. These he identified as interiorized types, so-called elementary types. They signified basic forces within the psyche that were collectively present and common to all men. Their symbolism, therefore, was universal. Furthermore, according to Silberer, these elementary types were especially eligible to represent the anagogic. He summarized his thoughts on this subject in his major opus, the *Probleme der Mystik und ihrer Symbolik* ((1914) *Problems of Mysticism and Its Symbolism*) (1917)<sup>7</sup>:

“In the group of symbols are contained more or less clearly the already mentioned elementary types as they are common to all men; they strike the same chords in all men. Symbolism is for this very reason the most universal language that can be conceived (...) for what it contains and works with are the elementary types themselves [or symbols which are as adequate as possible to them] which, as we have seen, represent a permanent element in the stream of change.” (Silberer, 1917: 284)

Silberer was also convinced that a symbol could never be exhausted by the supposition of equality of meanings. Rather, he interpreted symbols as points of intersections in which many different meanings meet: “foci of mind and phenomena of cosmos” (Silberer, 1920: 19). He compared symbols to suns from which rays of light or, in his words, “significance” emanated (Silberer, 1920: 24). Furthermore, he attributed a so-called momentary concreteness to these symbols, and considered them necessary “abbreviations” (Silberer, 1920: 20) in the personal and collective history of humanity (Silberer, 1920, 1921a).

Taking into account the above-mentioned characteristics of symbolism described by Silberer, it can be pointed out that he introduced a radically new form of symbol-interpretation that integrated not only the past of the subject, but also his or her present state, tendencies, and developmental possibilities -that is to say, the potential future of the subject. He introduced the idea of anagogic interpretation into the theory of symbol-formation, furthermore, through the concept of elementary types, Silberer relocated the focus from the individual to the collective, thus raising the question of inherited psychological contents in symbol-formation. Although Freud never denied the possibility of collective factors in the interpretation of personal symbols (Freud, 1912), he was definitely not ready to broaden the scope of psychoanalysis in such a radical way, neither in the case of Silberer, nor in the case of the “crown prince” of psychoanalysis, Jung.

## **CRITICISM OF SILBERER’S THEORIES**

The reception of Silberer’s innovations was rather mixed. Freud, for instance, acknowledged his work in the field of the interpretation of symbols, but also expressed his doubts concerning the true significance of Silberer’s discoveries. He referred to the theories of Silberer at many points in the later editions of the *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900); however, in sum, he considered them only interesting complements, not determining discoveries:

“The ‘functional’ phenomenon, ‘the representation of a state instead of an object’, was observed by Silberer principally in the two conditions of falling asleep and waking up. It is obvious that dream-interpretation is only concerned with the latter case. Silberer has given examples which show convincingly that in many dreams the last pieces of the manifest content, which are immediately followed by waking, represent nothing more nor less than an intention to wake or the process of waking. (...) I cannot, however, refrain from remarking that I have come across dream-elements which can be related to threshold symbolism, whether in my own dreams or in those of subjects whom I have analysed far less frequently than Silberer’s communication would have led one to expect.” (Freud, 1900: 508)<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Freud kept insisting on the overall validity of the original, psychoanalytic interpretation of symbol-formation and significantly downplayed or even denied the merits of Silberer’s theory:

“On the other hand, I cannot confirm the opinion, first stated by Silberer, that all dreams (or many dreams, or certain classes of dreams) require two different interpretations, which are even stated to bear a fixed relation to each other. One of these interpretations, which Silberer calls the ‘psycho-analytic’ one, is said to give the dream some meaning or other, usually of an infantile-sexual kind; the other and more important interpretation, to which he gives the name of ‘anagogic’, is said to reveal the more serious thoughts, often of profound import, which the dream-work has taken as its material. Silberer has not given evidence in support of this opinion by reporting a series of dreams analyses in the two directions. And I must object that the alleged fact is non-existent. In spite what he says, the majority of dreams require no ‘over-interpretation’ and, more particularly, are unsusceptible to an anagogic interpretation” (Freud, 1900: 527)<sup>9</sup>

Despite his criticism, Freud repeatedly mentioned Silberer’s contributions (e.g. 1914a, 1914b, 1922). In the course of time, however, Freud found himself more and more at odds with Silberer. Along with Freud, Sándor Ferenczi also warned against deviating from the affection-based theories of symbol-formation (Ferenczi, 1913). In his correspondence with Freud, Ferenczi called attention to Silberer’s dangerous occultism<sup>10</sup>, while Freud referred to his ideas on functional phenomena as a “fateful discovery”<sup>11</sup>.

One cannot help but recognize the similarities between Silberer’s innovations and those of Jung. It is easy to identify the common points between the two theories. Nevertheless, the similarities were never really acknowledged by Silberer’s contemporaries. Taking into account the subversive nature of Silberer’s findings, that is the “fateful discovery” alluded to by Freud, it is remarkable that Freud was definitely not as vehement in his reactions to Silberer as he was in the case of Jung. It is possible that he did not consider Silberer as dangerous and influential as Jung. It is also true that Silberer was never as close to Freud as Jung once was. Nevertheless, the similarities between the theories of Jung and Silberer were obvious. Silberer often mentioned the discoveries of Jung in connection with his own theories; although, he never really delved into the reasons for, or into the possible common roots between, the connections. It seems that Silberer declared his theory to be theoretically independent.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, despite the manifold parallels between their interpretation of symbols, the common supposition of collective and inherited psychological contents (elementary types-archetypes), their final-prospective views concerning the psyche, and their emphasis on alchemy and mysticism, Silberer was only tangentially mentioned by Jung. Jung even claimed that he had forgotten Silberer’s main work, the *Probleme der Mystik und ihrer Symbolik* (*Problems of Mysticism and Its Symbolism*) (1914) (*Problems of Mysticism and Its Symbolism*, 1917) and thus was not at all influenced by Silberer when he wrote his own book on alchemy:

“Oddly enough, I have entirely forgotten what Herbert Silberer had written about alchemy. At the time his book was published, I regarded alchemy as something off the beaten track and rather silly, much as I appreciated Silberer’s anagogic or constructive point of view. I was in correspondence with him at the time and let him know how much I valued his work. As his tragic death shows, Silberer’s



discovery of the problem was not followed by insight into it. He had used in the main late material, which I could make nothing of. The late alchemical texts are fantastic and baroque; only after we have learned how to interpret them can we recognize what treasures they hide". (Jung, 1961: 204)

It must be added that Jung acknowledged, that it was Silberer who discovered the significance of alchemy to psychology (Jung, 1963: xiv). Furthermore, Jung also expressed that he shared Silberer's view -one that had been articulated earlier by Alphonse Maeder- according to which the dream was a spontaneous self-portrait in a symbolic form that showed the current situation of the unconscious. However, while pointing to their common theoretical basis, Jung emphasized that he and Silberer had arrived at the same conclusion as a result of mutually independent work (Jung, 1916: 263).

Interestingly, it was a representative of orthodox psychoanalysis, Ernest Jones, who made a truly detailed analysis of Silberer's work. In his study on the *Theory of Symbolism*, Jones offered a comprehensive criticism of contemporary alternative approaches to symbol-formation. In addition to examining the works of Rank, Sachs, Jung and Stekel, Jones devoted a long section, in fact nearly the half of his whole work, to the criticism of Silberer.

Jones considered Silberer's work a positive contribution to the theory of symbolism, and blamed others, especially Stekel for exploiting it. However, despite the acknowledgement, Jones summarized very explicitly his problems with Silberer's ideas:

"Silberer, by first extending the term 'functional symbolism' from its original sense to cover the concrete representation of affective processes in general, and by then confining it to the cases where these are secondary in nature, recedes from the conception of true symbolism and reaches once more the popular conception of symbolism as the presentation of the abstract in terms of the concrete." (Jones, 1918: 169).

It is not surprising that Jones insisted on classical psychoanalytic theory according to which the symbol was a substitute, or a compromise, between the tendencies of an unconscious complex and inhibiting factors. In his opinion, functional interpretation was concerned with the conscious reactions to, and sublimations of, this unconscious complex. Thus, functional symbolism did not correspond to the definition of symbolism. Furthermore, he argued that Silberer had confounded the use of the metaphor with that of the symbol and thus had misperceived the nature of true symbols. His estimation of Silberer's idea of anagogic interpretation was even more negative: "Silberer implicitly, Jung explicitly, abandon the methods and canons of science, particularly the conceptions of causality and determinism, so that I may consider myself absolved from the task of attempting to unravel the assumption that they have culminated in their latest views." (Jones, 1918: 179). However, despite these critiques, Jones did not cease to emphasize Silberer's merits, and he characterized Silberer as the most important member of the theoreticians of symbolism (Jones, 1918: 183).

## **SILBERER AT THE INTERSECTION OF PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE OCCULT**

Already by the late 19th century, topics current in psychology such as subliminal, subconscious and altered states of consciousness had gained remarkable popularity in spiritualism and in many fields of western esotericism (see e.g. Sommer, 2012; Wolfram, 2009). At the same time, several early psychological and psychoanalytical thinkers were delving into spiritualism and occultism in an effort to understand the psychological characteristics and conditions of mediumistic and occult phenomena (e.g. Gyimesi, 2012, 2016; Evrard and Rabeyron, 2012). As a result, different domains at the intersection between psychology and modern occultism emerged, such as psychical research and early parapsychology. Furthermore, the psychological investigations in the field of spiritualism, mediumism or further areas of modern occultism and esotericism significantly enriched modern psychology (Flournoy, 1900; James, 1890). Silberer also belonged to the group of scholars who had twofold interest both in psychoanalysis and in occultism (more precisely, occultism, mysticism, alchemy, freemasonry, astrology, etc.). Silberer, however, developed a unique way of reconciling the two domains, in which symbolism proved to be the primary place of fusion.

In the course of time, the visual, picturesque nature of human experiences became more and more significant to Silberer. Among the various forms of visual contents, the mirror image -as a popular theme in psychoanalysis- developed into one of the most important topics to Silberer, especially in connection with the occult. In addition to elaborating its specific symbolism and psychoanalytical application, he also attempted to give a comprehensive psychoanalytic interpretation of it as a collective psychological phenomena of mankind:

“The mirror image, similar to the shadow, is a mental image, a Doppelgänger. The first mirror image was probably reflected by water. Wild people see the soul in every spitting image. A lot of them experience great fear when they are photographed, portrayed and they see their pictures in foreign hands. But there are similar superstitions in developed cultures, too; people sometimes remark that one should not allow oneself to be painted, otherwise one could die soon. (...) It can be understood immediately why the breaking of a mirror refers to death (or, according to a mitigated opinion to misfortune): it is a withdrawal of the mirror image, that is to say the soul. It is also clear why it is not permissible to put a corpse in front of a mirror, or why mirrors are covered during the period of mourning (or why is it not permissible to look into them). The soul of the dead is in the mirror, and, as we know, one must avoid facing the soul of a dead person, otherwise one could die, too.” (Silberer, 1923: 40).

In connection with his observations on the cultural significance of the mirror image, Silberer conducted a series of experiments over the course of several years on basin divination (lecanomancy). In lecanomancy, the subject would gaze into a basin of water in the same way that other people might lecanomancy gaze into a crystal ball. Silberer experimented with a patient called Lea and recorded her visions and free associations. He then wrote down his observations in several articles (e.g. Silberer, 1912b, 1921c); he noted that Lea typically had recurring visions of certain pictures. In Silberer’s words, all these visions, as symbols, subjected to inward accentuation or intro-determination. This meant that symbols could depart from their original, limited meaning and develop into types (elementary types) for classes of experiences. Thus, through this process, an advance is made from the material to the functional meaning of such symbols (e.g. Silberer, 1912b).

In 1921, Silberer published a further important work on the topic of mirroring. This time he did so in the context of occult experiences. In his work *Der Seelenspiegel: Das enoptrische Moment im Okkultismus (The Soul Mirror: The Enoptric Momentum in Occultism)*, he expressed his conviction that occult experiences such as visions are nothing other than the expressions of unconscious psychological contents. However, he did not aim to reduce these contents to instinctual, affectional components:

“It happens quite frequently that the vision has an exclusive purpose: to portray the soul. This reflection is a reflection in a mirror, in which the ego is reflected by the ego with all its emotions and motions, drives, fears, sentiments, longings, guilty feelings, fights, passions, inhibitions, splits. Not always the whole ego, that is hardly possible; once a passing sketch of a moment, once a big plan, once an in-depth study, once a sharp character, a merciless act ... I call enoptric (Enoptron (Greek) = mirror; enoptrizeithai = being inspected in a mirror) those dreams, visions, etc. in which these self-portraits of the soul as essential emerge.” (Silberer, 1921d: 18).

Silberer identified a large number of enoptric, that is to say endopsychic (Stekel, 1924) phenomena that occur in dreams or while crystal gazing (lecanomancy). Thus, he provided further psychological interpretation of occult experiences, and also illuminated and strengthened the theory of functional symbolism in this context.

Silberer’ interest in the so-called occult is most obviously articulated in his major work entitled *Probleme der Mystik und ihrer Symbolik (Problems of Mysticism and Its Symbolism)*, first published in 1914. In this work Silberer attempted to provide a non-reductive, psychoanalytic interpretation of Parabola, a Rosicrucian allegory (Silberer 1917). He also expressed his strong conviction regarding the necessity of

reframing the idea of auto-symbolism in the context of alchemy and the so-called occult (Silberer 1921d). With his comprehensive theory on functional and anagogic symbolism, Silberer did not aim to deviate from the rationalistic approach of psychoanalysis. Rather, he attempted to reinterpret the nature of alchemical findings in a psychoanalytical context, expressing his conviction that the texts and practices of alchemy -as in other branches of occultism- referred to psychological processes.

Silberer was not the first one who viewed alchemy as a field that might allow psychoanalysts a glimpse into the inner workings of the mind. There were others (and not just psychoanalysts), who saw alchemy as an area in which deep psychological content found expression. They then understood its products as a symbol or metaphor. Among the forerunners of the spiritual and psychological theories of alchemy, it was primarily Ethan Allen Hitchcock (1857) who set out the framework of Silberer's theories and proved to be a constant reference point to Silberer: "By the transmutation of metals, the Alchemists meant the conversion of man from a lower to a higher order of existence; from what is commonly called a natural, to a spiritual life, though these much used and little understood expressions cannot precisely make known their true meaning." (Hitchcock, 1857: 280).<sup>13</sup>

While integrating the psychological into the field of mystical, Silberer proved to be much less skeptical than Freud regarding the reality of occult, or mystical, experiences. Although Silberer, in general, followed a psychological approach in interpreting the so-called occult, spiritual or parapsychological phenomena, to a certain degree he was ready to accept the genuineness of some supernormal experiences. For instance, he considered telepathy among the possible stimulants of dreams, and asserted that a sleeping state was much more conducive to telepathic influences than an awakened state. Nevertheless, he did not make any efforts to prove the existence of spiritualistic, parapsychological occurrences. In fact, he showed himself to be rather critical when it came to forecasting and foreboding in dreams. In such cases, he tried to identify the logical chain of psychological events that led to the experience of prophetic dreams. Using his prospective-finalistic approach, he gave rather convincing interpretations without deviating from the logical-causal framework of psychoanalysis. He argued, for example, that even the most persuasive case of forecasting

"sheds light on the Self of the dreamer, just as it can be enlightening concerning third persons. The dream makes visible to the dreamer his own tendencies, trends, etc. which would otherwise escape his notice; also, it reveals to him to a greater or lesser degree the goal toward which he strives. Thus Hebbel rightly wrote: 'The ancients wished to prophesy from dreams what was going to happen to people . . . On the contrary, it is possible to predict from dreams what people are going to do.'" (Silberer, 1918: 380).

While evaluating Silberer's attitude towards the so-called occult, one must take into consideration that theosophy, spiritualism, psychical research, and early parapsychology flourished in the early 1900s in Vienna. As elsewhere in Europe, animal magnetism and spiritualism were making a remarkable stir already in the 19th century. And because of this, several institutionalized forms of 'occult research' emerged (Baier forthcoming; Böhm et al., 2009; Malik, 1928; Mulacz, 2000; Tartaruga, 1921; Thirring, 1925). For example, there was the *Wissenschaftlicher Verein für Okkultismus in Wien* (Scientific Society for Occultism in Vienna) founded in 1927, the *Wiener Parapsychisches Institut* (Vienna Parapsychological Institute), and the short-lived *Kriminal-telepathisches Institut* (Criminal-Telepathic Institute), all of which represented significant chapters in the history of Austrian occult research. Furthermore, several world-renowned mediums, such as Rudi and Willi Schneider and the Styrian Maria Silbert, contributed to the fame of Austrian parapsychology.

Some Viennese psychoanalysts were also involved in the investigation of spiritualistic, parapsychological phenomena. Alfred von Winterstein for instance, the head of the Austrian Parapsychological Society was a prominent figure of psychoanalysis, too; between 1949-1957 he was the head of the Austrian Psychoanalytic Society (Winterstein, 1926, 1930, 1937). Zoe Wassilko-Serecki, was a further devoted representative of both psychical research and psychoanalysis. She was the one who published the first psychoanalytic analysis of the Poltergeist phenomena (Wassilko-Serecki, 1926, 1927). There were many other psychoanalysts in Vienna and elsewhere, whose professional interests had manifold spiritual, mystical, or parapsychological roots (e.g. Fodor, 1947; Servadio, 1934). Interestingly, Silberer did not belong to any of these psychoanalytically

oriented parapsychological circles. In fact, he was primarily interested in the symbolism of freemasonry and alchemy.

Despite his obvious involvement in the occult, it seems that Silberer followed the rational-logical, deterministic interpretation of psychoanalysis whenever it was possible. In contrast to certain other psychoanalysts who were involved in the occult, Silberer did not want to legitimate or verify occult phenomena by using psychoanalysis (see e.g. Silberer, 1911a, 1911b, 1914). Instead, he aimed at introducing something into psychoanalysis that he had observed during his investigations in the so-called occult and mysticism. Through his pioneering theory of symbolism, Silberer attempted to give a psychoanalytical form to these occult contents. Since he was convinced about its psychological nature, he tried to translate the occult wisdom into a psychological language.

## CONCLUSIONS

Today, functional symbolism is what experts refer to most often when discussing the investigations of Silberer. However, Silberer also made important contributions to the ongoing debate on the connection between psychoanalysis and the so-called occult. This is not because Silberer ever attempted to verify the reality of occult experiences by means of psychoanalysis. Rather, it is because he considered the language of the occult a psychological language that had to be translated into psychological terms. The concept of functional symbolism proved to be a valuable tool in this work. However, his theory on functional symbolism inevitably led to tension between his viewpoint and the basic principles of psychoanalysis:

1. The theory of functional symbolism questioned the overall validity of the affection-based, reductive interpretation of symbol-formation described by Freud and Jones.

2. By introducing the theory of elementary types, Silberer, at least partially, relocated the focus of investigation from the individual to the collective.<sup>14</sup>

3. Furthermore, Silberer's prospective-finalistic approach was radically opposed to the mechanical-causal foundations of psychoanalysis.

4. Finally, by introducing the anagogic interpretation of symbol-formation, Silberer obviously deviated from the path of rational-mechanistic interpretations of psychoanalysis and opened the way for hermetic, religious-spiritual approaches.

It seems that accepting Silberer's theory of symbolism could indeed have had subversive consequences regarding the foundations of psychoanalysis. These problems also illuminate that approaching psychological phenomena from a radically different point of view -that is, from one that did not originate in the causal-mechanistic, deterministic epistemological basis of the natural sciences- really did signify a "fateful discovery" in psychoanalysis. However, this does not mean that this different angle had no legitimacy. It is well-known that non-reductive approaches in the field of symbolism and dream interpretation gained great popularity in depth-psychology, primarily due to the works of Jung. In connection with this, the prospective, future-oriented, finalistic interpretations of psychological phenomena also found reflection in some later theories of depth-psychology, such as in the case of the Hungarian analysts Leopold Szondi (Szondi, 1955).

Silberer's oeuvre shows that considering occultism and mysticism a valid psychological language could lead to a radically new form of psychology. However, it is important to note that the conflicts that emerged due to the integration of the occult by Silberer did not lie between materialistic and spiritualistic worldviews. Rather, they originated in theoretical oppositions. This feature definitely differentiates Silberer's work from most of the psychoanalytically oriented parapsychological theories. It was not his intention to determine whether occult, mystical parapsychological phenomena actually existed; rather, he considered the occult a valid form of human experience and one that was worth examining by means of psychoanalysis. Thus, his work is perfect example of the impregnating effects of the occult on psychoanalysis and depth-psychology.

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## NOTAS:

- 1.- This research was supported by the Scholarship Foundation of the Republic of Austria. I gratefully acknowledge the comments of Karl Baier that greatly improved the manuscript.
- 2.- It must be added that the process of demarcation in the above-mentioned areas was not entirely successful (see Gyimesi, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2016).
- 3.- Comments and paragraphs on Silberer were added later to the original text (in 1911, 1914, 1919, etc.)
- 4.- Between 1920 and 1922 Stekel and Silberer edited an English-language bi-monthly journal for psychoanalysis, applied psychology and psychotherapeutics entitled *Psyche and Eros*, a successor to *Zentralblatt für Psychoanalyse*. The co-editors of the periodical were Samuel Tannenbaum, Charles Baudouin, Ferdinand Morel and Eduard Claparede.
- 5.- Silberer applied the anagogic approach to symbols in his interpretation of myths, too, which was significantly inspired by the works of Otto Rank (1909) and Karl Abraham (1909) (see Silberer, 1912d; Merkur, 2005).
- 6.- Silberer connected the functional category of symbols and anagogic interpretation in a rather thought-provoking way. While functional phenomenon depicted an actual psychological state or process, the anagogic image on the contrary pointed at the state or process that was to be experienced in the future (Silberer, 1917: 186).
- 7.- The book was translated into English in 1917 under the title *Problems of Mysticism and its Symbolism*
- 8.- The translation is based on the eighth German edition of the *Interpretation of Dreams* (1930).
- 9.- The translation is based on the eighth German edition of the *Interpretation of Dreams* (1930). This paragraph was added in 1919
- 10.- Ferenczi's letter to Freud, November 26, 1911 (Brabant et al. 1993: 316).
- 11.- Freud's letter to Ferenczi, October 1, 1913 (Brabant et al. 1993: 510).
- 12.- From a certain point of view, his theory was really independent. He was an outsider to the Viennese psychoanalytic community, one who arrived at his conclusions through the investigation of the rich picturesque materials of mysticism and occultism and also by his own experiments. As an outsider, he was independent from the common natural scientific education of psychoanalytic physicians; he began his work from a different epistemological basis.
- 13.- The notion of alchemy as a self-transformative psychological process originates in Victorian occultism. However, in fact, this interpretation of alchemy is historically invalid (see e.g. Principe, 2016).
- 14.- Actually, Freud himself also paid significant attention to collective psychological contents, such as inherited memories. However, he did not identify precisely the method of transmission, and by this he obviously left the possibility of Lamarckianism open (e.g. Heyman, 1977).