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**Ekphraisis and Psyche: Symbols Spoken From the Deep**

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*I would have you imagine, then, that there exists in the mind of man a block of wax…that this tablet is a gift of Memory, the mother of the Muses; and that when we wish to remember anything…we hold the wax to the perceptions and the thoughts, and in that material receive the impression of them as from the seal of a ring—Socrates (Plato’s Theaetetus, trans. 1892)*

**Ekphrasis as a Literary Convention**

In Book 18 of Homer’s *Iliad* there are 153 lines dedicated to the description of Achilles’ new shield—following Patroclus’ death Achilles lost his panoply to the Trojan Hector. The text calls the new shield “a world of gorgeous immortal work” (Homer, 1990, *Iliad* 18., p. 564). It is Hephaestus, the crippled artificer of the Greek gods, who makes the “great” and “massive” shield at the request of Thetis, the mother of Achilles (*Iliad* 18., p. 558). Upon it he forges an entire world, a moving *kosmos,* consisting of: 1) “the earth and the sky and the sea;” 2) “two noble cities filled with immortal men;” 3) “a fallow field;” 4) “a king’s estate;” 5) “a thriving vineyard;” 6) “a herd of longhorn cattle;” 7) “a meadow deep in a shaded glen;” 8) “a dancing circle;” 9) “the Ocean River’s mighty power girdling round the outmost rim of the welded indestructible shield” (*Iliad* 18., pp. 565, 572, 629, 639, 654, 670, 686-687, 690, 708-709).

These details may be regarded as literary superfluity, as simple artistic flourishing containing no great intellectual value; but, in fact, this stylistic convention comprises a long history of what may be called a discourse in vividness, a type of artistic aliveness and “*energeia”* (Preston, 2009, p. 115). Notably, this theme of aliveness/activity (*energeia*) in creative expression-ing is outlined in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric.* In Book 3 chapter 11 of this volume Aristotle (1954) defines, apropos of the *Iliad,* narratives becoming “living beings” by the action of “proportional metaphors” (*Rhetoric* 3. 11:2, p. 5). Aristotle (1954) says of the *Iliad* that “[Homer] represents everything as *moving* and *living;* and activity is movement [italics mine]” (*Rhetoric* 3. 11:8). *Energeia,* as Aristotle sees it, is not merely an example of word-ly exhibition-ing, but rather is a sort of philosophical mode of expression that is utilized by authors to bring about a condition of “liveliness” to a poetic work or work of argumentation (*Rhetoric* 3. 11:17).

Indeed, “*energeia”* may also be said to be the end result, the final culmination, of a number of literary devices employed within a certain work. In other words, “vividness” as such is the effect within a work that is produced by the implementation of several stylistic literary tools. These might include, but are not limited to, chronographia, topographia, and pragmatographia (Preston, 2009).

One other of these narrative mechanisms is known as *ekphrasis,* which in the Greek literally means “to speak out” (*Oxford English Dictionary,* 1978, p.36). More specifically, *ekphrasis* is “verbal pictorialism” (Preston, 2009, p. 117). Its first surviving mention—as a mechanism of narrative expression-ing—occurs in the works of the Rhetor Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1st Century B.C.); though, the idea of literary and verbal “representation,” as glimpsed in Aristotle’s work, was clearly significant long before Dionysius.

Following Dionysius of Halicarnassus *ekphrasis* takes on a strong rhetorical function in an epoch now known as the Second Sophistic Period (1st-4th Centuries A.D.). Here *ekphrasis* becomes synonymous with *descriptio.* As a result, throughout this period *ekphrasis* is utilized as an important element of communication, especially within the context of courtrooms and epideictic oratory. The *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, one of the most influential ancient rhetorical texts, is an example of this type of ekphrastic use. In this case, “vivid description” is applied as the “imaginary demonstration” of the “consequences of action” in order to “prompt” those being persuaded to a course of future action (Preston, 2009, p. 116). This condition thus creates a vital listener response!

It is in the crucial function of the reader/listener response that *ekphrasis* takes on an especial role. *Ekphrasis’* ability to create interpretive response is the basis of its literary power. This crucial element enables *ekphrasis* to operate not exclusively as a tool of simplistic imaging, but more precisely as a narrative implement with important dramatic ramifications, especially in its poetic uses.

The following represents the various types of listener responses that might be evoked by ekphrastic use, in particular poetic *ekphrasis*: 1) It may invoke our cooperation; 2) it may cause us to reflect; 3) it can present what would otherwise be technically un-showable; 4) it can analyze or analogize (Preston, 2009, p. 119). Thus, the idea that *ekphrasis* is not merely a description produced solely for description’s sake bears repeating. On the contrary, *ekphrasis* is in its fullest sense a descriptive portrayal embedded with profound meaning, designed and produced with the express intention of bringing images and considerations to the minds of readers/listeners. One good read of Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield reveals this point!

What is more, *ekphrasis* has the supplementary effect of generating a pause, or a “suspending” of the “discursive flow,” of a work (Preston, 2009, p. 119). This attribute, “enforces a particular kind of readerly attention to detail” which, as already mentioned, directs attention away from narrative flow and toward “precise interpretive responses” (p. 119). This action takes place through the ornate descriptions of physical facts that are filled with “abstract meanings” (p. 119). Put simply, *ekphrasis’* characteristic pictorial representation serves to not only enlarge our “visual and spatial sense of a scene” but at the same time it invites our avid interaction with the text (p. 117). Interaction, then, becomes the condition produced by the ekphrastic element of a narrative. Indeed, a more acute and thoughtful dialogue is created between the reader/listener and the text by way of ekphrastic elements.

Page Dubois, author of the book *History, Rhetorical Description and the Epic: From Homer to Spenser* defines *ekphrasis* as “the verbal description of a work of graphic art,” and sees *ekphrasis* as an important poetic tool for all three participants of poetic works: the author, the reader/listener, and the epic hero within the works themselves (3). A brief exhibition of Dubois’ (1982) notions is as follows:

1. For the author of a work *ekphrasis* is employed to “embody the relationship between the poet’s art and his ‘world’ through the medium of another type of art—visible plastic art” (p. 7). Here the “object” delineated in the *ekphrasis* can become a “metaphor” for the literary work (p. 7).
2. For the reader/listener the *ekphrasis* can be used as a “monitory” instrument, warning the reader/listener of the hero’s future, as well as acting as a didactic mechanism to teach “lessons” about life and living to the reader/listener (pp. 6, 7).
3. For the epic hero Dubois says that *ekphrasis* is the tool that allows the hero to bring his audience into a relationship with his history, and theirs. “He meets people—seers, prophets, hosts—who tell stories of past and future. And he sees, in graphic form, representations of significant events, on weapons, buildings, tapestries […] The trajectory of his individual life brings these representations into existence” (p. 3). Therefore, the hero and the *ekphrasis* are conjoined. There cannot exist one without the other; these are in a complimentary relationship!

**Ekphrasis as a Vivid Symbolic Tool of the Psyche**

As Psychoanalytic thinkers we are ineluctably drawn to ask questions into the nature of the psyche, and into the dynamics of the psyche’s procedures, into the way it communicates and operates. That the unconscious psyche is fundamentally creative, and perhaps literary in nature, is well described in the psychoanalytic tradition (Freud, 1900; Freud, 1905; Lacan, 1979). Yet, there is more that can be said about certain functions of the mind. *Ekphrasis* offers an interesting and novel perspective of the psyche’s operations, of the Unconscious’ mode of operating and communicating. For instance, with all of its dramatic imagery and symbolism, what is a dream—along with the other psychically charged internal fantasy material—but a kind of *ekphrasis?* Indeed, we implore the reader to view dreams and other fantasy phenomena in this way in order to gain a unique sense of the proactively creative and symbolical life of the psyche.

It seems to us, and we thus argue, that dreams and fantasy employ—or the psyche in the process of dreaming and fantasizing employs—ekphrastic techniques; these *ekphraseis* impress upon our preconscious and conscious selves with concrete symbols—something akin to literary messages in *bas relief—*sent from the proverbial deep. As Homer uses *ekphrasis* to point to the cosmic order on Achilles’ shield, the unspeakable energy of the cosmos, the psyche appears, too, to intimate the Unconscious, the unknowable, through the use of *ekphrasis*. In this way *ekphrasis* internally, and quite literally, has the capability to drive a person into external action.

What is more, e*kphrasis* creates a vivid energy in the psyche’s dream-life, and fantasy life; the symbolism is provocative, evocative, and impressionable. Perhaps we can thus speak of this creative process by utilizing the language of printing: the Unconscious stamps ekphrastic imagery upon the preconscious and conscious ego, imagery that the Unconscious specifically carves by itself, by its own creative urge, using its own creative means and ends, communicative representations, for its own purposes.

As to the meaning of unconscious imagery found in dreamscape, and in fantasy along with the other permutations of unconscious significances, Psychoanalytic theoretical interpretations abound; for, to ask about unconscious imagery is to ask about what forms the foundation of the psyche itself. We limit our theoretical discussion here to a general and brief overview of Freud’s and Jung’s perspectives, respectively, as a way to narrow the focus and to bring to the fore our conceptions apropos of the psyche and the symbolical process of psychic *ekphrasis*.

Freud (1900, 1905) exhibits the Unconscious as a creative psychological mechanism presenting conscious awareness with various and sundry forms of symbolic, ideational, and emotional communication. That these symbols and correspondences from the Unconscious are primarily rooted in infantile wishes for Freud does not obfuscate the fact that there is a vast amount of vivacious dynamism and sheer symbolic beauty that emanates from this intra-psychic realm.

Respecting dreams in particular, and the way the Unconscious uses dreams to communicate meaning to the preconscious and to consciousness, Freud (1900) makes clear in his theoretical worldview that the “dreamwork” (p. 178) is indeed a complex and energetic process, whereby various motivations, drives, and urges are presented to the conscious mind by way of condensation, displacement, and dramatization; the symbolic is thus manufactured in the Unconscious and offered to consciousness. The notion we are advancing here is that the above presentation of symbolic significances from the Unconscious to the preconscious and consciousness—in this case by way of the dream-life—is founded upon a procedure much like literary *ekphrasis* witnessed in epic poetry*,* thus adding vividness, energy, and impetus, and a type of semiotic meaning, to overall psychic functioning, and eventually effecting our ego’s functioning in the world, externally*.* In other words, this internal process is then, and at once, witnessed in external activity and daily functioning.

The Unconscious is equally compelling and creative for Jung (1973); in fact, Jung sees a kind of cosmic creativity and sublime energy associated with the psyche and the Unconscious, as well as the various communications emanating from unconscious impulses. Generally speaking, Jung considers the psyche in developmental terms with wholeness and integration constituting the psyche’s teleological aim. Assistance is provided to the psyche, in its developmental course to integrated maturation, by signs and symbols arising and radiating from unconscious elements, as well as from collective mythologies and literatures (Jung, 1983).

Like Freud, Jung views the procedural aspects of the dreaming life, and the other permutations of dreaming such as fantasy, etc., in psychoanalytic terms; functionally, these impress the ego (i.e. consciousness), effectively stamping consciousness with concrete and animated symbolisms, urging meanings from the deep dark resources of unconscious psychic life (Jung, 1973). In this fashion, unconscious emblems and symbols become emissaries to an individual’s consciousness originating in the veritable source of psychic life, the Unconscious; for, in Jung’s calculation “empirical reality has a transcendental background” (1983, p. 335). Indeed, the entire psychological endeavor, for Jung, is founded upon the purposeful pursuit of comprehending the Unconscious and its inexhaustible and myriad representations:

“…psychology investigates the bases of consciousness by pursuing the conscious processes until they lose themselves in darkness and unintelligibility, and nothing more can be seen but effects which have an organizing influence on the contents of consciousness.” (Jung, 1983, p. 336)

**Ekphrasis, the Psyche, and Praxis**

Arguably, one of the great tasks of psychoanalysis, if not the only task, is founded upon the recapture of psychic energy, from the Unconscious, for adaptation-al purposes, adaptation that is functional, *in vivo,* and useful—for Freud libido is sexualized whereas for Jung libido is generalized psychic energy (Jung, 1983). As in epic poetry, the *ekphraseis* emanating from the Unconscious add energy and vitality to ego functioning. The *teleos* of this ekphrastic activity is physical action itself, *praxis,* we suggest. Certainly these *ekphraseis* serve as a call to deeper understandings, i.e. wisdom; but, they are, contemporaneously, a call to action as well. In some way, then, the Unconscious begs for an individual’s response through the symbolic mechanism of psychological *ekphrasis*. How often do the symbols arising from dreams spur us to action!

Again, we proffer that the preconscious and the ego are presented with symbols/images/*ekphraseis* that are generated in the Unconscious by way of dynamic psychological mechanisms rooted in metaphorical *poiesis.* In the constant flow of internal images and symbols, much like epic poetry, *ekphraseis* emerge with the requisite psychic force and energy to compel the ego, and therefore the individual, into purposeful action in the real world, in real time. Though much internal material may be suppressed, because of an ego-dystonic flavor or general intolerability, we argue that much of the ekphrastic substance deriving from the Unconscious quite literally sets the stage for the external unfolding of the psychodynamic drama of daily life; indeed, these *ekphraseis* are the psychological fuel for both pragmatic and meaningful living!

Two clinical examples come to mind in this respect, one pathological and offering a type of indirect support of our hypothesis, the other conventional and providing for more direct apprehension of our proposal. The first involves a young man with a history of profound physical and sexual trauma who suffered from recurrent disturbing hallucinatory delusions and fantasies that disabled his daily functioning. It was determined by the therapist that these images and fantasies were, quite importantly, emanating from the client’s creative Unconscious; though they were, in the end, rejected by the client’s fragile ego. In essence, the client’s consciousness, or ego, was presented with two distinct and often intolerable (to the client) intra-psychic symbols, *ekphraseis* in fact, one of Jesus that produced mixed feelings of comfort and dread, and the other of a green-eyed beast that repeatedly and steadily produced affective terror, in an absolute sense.

Once more, the therapist viewed these delusions as projected psychic material emerging from the creative Unconscious of the client; these highly symbolical delusions presented themselves at crucial moments consistent with the client’s various and alternating, and often primitive, affective states. The client was, in point of fact, effectively and absolutely disabled by the autonomous production of these images, especially the green-eyed monster. In actuality, the client could not successfully operate in the world; his ego functioning was utterly immobilized. The therapist thus worked to bring to the client’s conscious awareness these ego-rejected symbols in order to bring about adaptive and salubrious functioning in the real world.

These images were ekphrastic in nature, quite simply because they were complex and concrete symbols created by the Unconscious, offered by the Unconscious to the client’s ego, though they were rejected by the client. It was clear that these symbols contained psychic energy for quotidian functioning, but the client could not, or would not, access the symbolic meaning and energy connected with these symbols, for whatever reason. Often trauma creates an inability to trust internal symbolisms, and thus dialogue with unconscious elements can be interrupted; in this case the opposites of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ were castigated by the client, projected outside his psychic realm by the use of projective, and thus protective, psychological mechanisms.

Leading the client to healthy internal and external adaptation was the main therapeutic goal of the therapist. To this end the therapist worked at assisting the client in reestablishing meaningful connection with his Unconscious by the internal acceptance and willing exploration of these particular images, which were dexterously created by his very own psyche. Over the course of time the client was able to dialogue with these images, and thus gained internal and external ego mastery, the final culmination of which was adaptive functioning in the real world. The therapist, by providing an avenue for the client to accept the ekphrastic symbolism emanating from his own Unconscious, assisted the client to engage in healthy and adaptive *praxis,* in the quotidian day-to-day*.*

Another case, more conventional and not particularly pathological in nature—in that this case did not exhibit the psychotic symptoms seen in the case above—concerns the drive to accomplish a personal goal, the energy of which, along with the decision-making impulse, were provided for by ekphrastic dream imagery. The client in this instance was commonly neurotic, dealing with various and sundry anxieties including slight social phobia and minor hypochondriasis. The client had a short history of substance use and general oppositional behavior as well; but these were not overly worrying to the therapist. In a sense, the main issue representative in this client was manifested in his activity of, proverbially, ‘shooting himself in the foot’ at every turn, thereby constricting meaningful productivity in the real world.

Through work with the therapist over 16 months the client was enabled to access personal goals and thus begin striving towards these objectives; though, with some of these aspirations the client was repetitively caught in psychological double binds and impasses. One particular ambition, the matriculation into a branch of the armed forces, was stymied by double bind anxieties. Although the therapist reflected the client’s own innate and communicated desire to join the military for at least some part of his life, the client resisted taking any practical action at all. This client-created psychological stalemate, affecting both internal processes and external living, lasted for months, until the client had a profoundly symbolical dream, a dream which included the *ekphrasis* of a gigantic naval ship navigating through the city streets of the client’s dreamscape; an image that brought clarity and psychic force, *energeia,* to the client’s final decision to take practicable action to enlist in the military.

Notwithstanding a general analysis of the desire to join the military—and analysts the world over will be acquainted with the age-old desire to seek superego and ego strength through military enterprise—the client was driven, in reality, to join the military by the e*kphrasis* presented to him in his dream-life, that of a colossal naval ship sailing in urban waters. Some peculiar and creative aspect of the internal workings of this client’s Unconscious offered to his very own mind’s eye, his ego we argue, his consciousness, the requisite symbolism and energy for pragmatic, and goal-oriented, action in the world. What is more, in this case the *ekphrasis* absolved the client of neurotic double binds and impasses allowing for free application of psychic energy to goal-oriented praxis.

We have highlighted only two clinical situations that underscore, we feel, the general and practical benefits of psychological *ekphrasis.* Ultimately, however, cases of ekphrastic imagery in bringing about grand and dramatic discoveries, thereby constellating great social and scientific change, have also been known and well described throughout history. These are instances wherein psychological *ekphrasis,* and its symbolic influence,moves from the merely personal to the greater collectivity.One such example is related to Einstein’s fully developed general theory of relativity. Einstein whilst working at the patent office in Berne had at the time what he calls the “happiest thought of my life” (qtd. in Hey & Patrick, 1997, p. 8). Einstein states:

I was sitting in a chair in the patent office…when all of a sudden a thought occurred to me: ‘If a person falls freely he will not feel his own weight.’ I was startled. This simple thought made a great impression on me. It impelled me towards a theory of gravitation. (qtd. in Hey & Patrick, 1997, p. 8)

This description accentuates the process by which e*kphrasis* produces measured and directed impact upon consciousness, in this case with great implications for collective scientific and human endeavoring. We think it poignant that Einstein uses the words “impress” and “impel” in his portrayal. Again, and crucially, the language of printing comes to mind; for, in our line of thinking, the Unconscious literally impresses the ego and consciousness with ekphrastic symbols creating, in the end, the psychic impelling to purposeful and meaningful action.

**Concluding Thoughts**

We have, perhaps, on the surface of things, outlined a dynamic akin to the infinity of interpretations offered by symbols within symbols, in our exhibition of *ekphrasis*. Yet, we consider the ekphrastic characteristic of depth psychological processes to offer fresh insights respecting both internal functioning and meaning, and external behavior as well. For, *ekphrasis* is not simply the presentation of a symbol embedded within a symbol; rather, as we posit it, *ekphrasis* is a mechanism that calls for, demands in fact, a response, whether this response be psycho-emotional or behavioral or both. In other words, the ekphrastic elements of psychological functioning appear to be used much like those found in literary works.

These symbolic features, indeed, speak to our consciousness in vivid ways and with *energeia*, oftentimes with great energy, calling us into action from the inside out. These psychologically ekphrastic components transform internal and external modes of operating; and they, with the use of descriptive portrayal, bring images and considerations and symbols to consciousness, elements that enliven existence. Like the epic poet carving her protagonist with words and verbal images, the dynamic Unconscious creates and utilizes *ekphraseis* with the express intent, it seems, to modify psychological and practical factors, molding crucial parts of human living and internal experience, at least through the action of dreams, daydreams, and fantasy material.

Consequently, we advocate for the use of an ekphrastic lens of interpretation in perceiving the ongoing dialectic between unconscious strivings and the conscious awareness of these strivings. Comprehending unconscious impulses and symbols by the utilization of the ekphrastic lensinvigorates interpretations of unconscious psychic material and assists in creating an adventuresome relationship between consciousness, ego processes, and unconscious activities. To engage the Unconscious as if it were an epic poet using a literary tool like *ekphrasis* to influence ego consciousness allows for novel and dramatic, and quite intimate, insights apropos of internal psychic procedures. Thus, the creative mystery of Unconscious symbolic mechanisms, that resemble ekphrastic images in literary works, effectively delivers psychic energy for ego functioning in the world.

Freud (1910) famously remarks that “the interpretation of dreams is in fact the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious; it is the securest foundation of psycho-analysis” (p. 33). We proffer, through this short exposition, that *ekphrasis* offers distinctive and noteworthy access to the royal road of the creative functions of the unconscious, to the mechanisms of unconscious psychic *poesis. Ekphrasis,* in other words,is the securest foundation of comprehending the wonderfully creative, and innately symbolical, capability of human psychology.

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