What better place for this year’s Freud Lecture than the newly renovated auditorium of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and Society, with a standing room only exuberant audience. There was an air of celebratory anticipation of Dr. Frances Baudry’s lecture, in which he reviewed the past half-century of Ego Psychology with the centenarian Martin Bergmann, in the wings, to follow with his discussion. Did the past 60 years reflect “stasis or evolution?” That was the question of the evening. Might the evening be the dawn of a new post-Ego Psychology era?

Dr. Baudry’s was a clear and comprehensive account of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute’s flourishing half-century era with its luminary educators such as Hartmann, Kris, Lowenstein, Greenacre, Arlow, Stone as well as the European émigrés escaping Nazi persecution, Mahler, Jacobson et al. Baudry’s familiarity with French and English analysts contributed a welcome leavening of the Oedipal core of classical psychoanalytic theory with the pre-oedipal dynamics to which Freud had given less attention. How our rich body of psychoanalytic theories is or is not connected to technique was described with acknowledgement that perhaps there had, in the early days, been too much regard for neutrality, abstinence, and relative anonymity, especially with more troubled narcissistic and borderline patients. Despite the fact that much of ego psychology is still relevant today, Dr. Baudry left open how psychoanalysis will evolve in the future.

Dr. Bergmann, physically frail, mentally agile, and stentorian in his delivery, looked back on this past half-century fondly but he was cautiously skeptical about our future. Neither static nor evolving he thought psychoanalysis had become too fractionated. He began by citing the implied cowardly silence of Heinz Hartmann in not responding to Sidney Hook’s challenge at the New York University conference on psychoanalysis, the scientific method and philosophy in the late 1950’s. Not until a few years later, according to Bergmann, did Robert Waelder write a proper defense of the scientific foundations of psychoanalysis. In preparing this review I scanned Hartmann’s introduction to that conference and feel Bergmann’s criticism unwarranted. Hartmann gave a thorough discussion of the problems and limitations of psychoanalysis if held to the standards of the physical sciences. But a more immediate concern for Bergmann was the more recent arrival of pills for mental disorders and, in his view, an apparent tilt by younger analysts toward more supportive techniques, contributing to analyses that are more difficult to terminate. He commented on Freud not having chosen a successor to point in some direction for the field resulting in some splintering of the field. This seemed peculiar to me in that science ought not to be dynastic in its organization, though, as Thomas Kuhn has pointed out, this is often the nature of most groups. Ludwig Fleck before Kuhn called such conformism “thought collectives.” Usually only religions, businesses, and political entities attempt such dynastic structures. Bergmann, in closing, reminded
us that every analysis consists of two unique individuals which makes it hard for our field to be reduced to formulaic manuals or textbooks or even a general theory of psychology.

In my memory there had not been a discussion following a Freud lecture. The honored speaker usually had the last word. The fact that there was a discussant was a refreshing change in a field that, too often, limits such dialogue. Bergmann’s age may have freed him to speak his mind. The standing ovation following his discussion reflected the audience’s appreciation of a stimulating evening with the spirit of inquiry that both good art and courageous science invite. The fact that there was such a discussion after the Freud lecture was a refreshing change pointing to the possible dawn of a new era.

In the interest of further discussion, looking ahead fifty years, I feel that, unless psychoanalysis truly widened its scope to include Freud’s social, cultural and philosophical interests there will be little remaining of what was once such a promising addition to our comprehensive understanding of the human condition. To give two examples, had economists and psychoanalysts collaborated, it would not have taken so long for economists to finally incorporate the “irrational” in its theories. This is in keeping with the recent cogent comments (2/20/12) on this web blog by David James Fisher on George Makari’s “Revolution in Mind.”

Had psychoanalysis been discovered in the 20th century, after the discovery of quantum mechanics, there may not have been a need to abandon the seduction theory in favor of infantile sexual wishes and conflicts. Rather than the positivism of the 19th c. which contributed to the medicalization of psychoanalysis, Heisenberg’s principle of uncertainty (1928), and post-modernist thought might have created a context for both clinical psychoanalysis and family therapy. When looked at from one perspective Little Hans and Dora were troubled individuals (think particle/intrapersonal) and from another perspective they were living in quite dysfunctional families (think wave/interpersonal). This use of metaphors from physics is similar to Freud’s use of drive, energy and archeology in the early days in his formulations. Had we not been embedded in 19th c. positivism we might not today be suffering from a dearth of trainees, patients, and our waning vitality. Our literature may still be robust but the application of our understanding of unconscious processes remains too narrow in its scope.