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# The Historicity Of Dreams (two questions to Freud)

BY GEORGE STEINER

(for Vittore Branca)

Anyone who has lived near animals, with his dog or his cat, knows of their dreams. Vivid, often clearly tempestuous, currents of agitation or pleasure will set in unmistakable motion the body of a sleeping dog or cat. In fact, this banal phenomenon is our most direct (our only direct?) behavioural evidence for the frequency and force of dreams. All human reports on dreams come to us via the screen of language.

Animals dream. Am I altogether in error in thinking that the philosophical and historical implications of this platitude are momentous, and that they have received remarkably little attention? For if animals dream, as they manifestly do, such 'dreams' are generated and experienced outside any linguistic matrix. Their content, their sensory dynamics, precede, are external to, any linguistic code. They unfold in a semantic world closed to our perceptions, except in its superficial aspects of bodily tremour or content. We know this world to be temporally far more ancient and 'statistically' far larger and more various than our own (i.e. animals precede man in the history of the planet and vastly outnumber the human species). But only rare artists, a Rilke, a Dürer or a Picasso, have *seemed* to penetrate (this too may be anthropomorphic illusion) into the outward penumbra of the pulsing and manifold consciousness of animals. The tiger does not answer Blake's questions.

What can we say of these dreams before language?

The hermeneutic trap is all too obvious. Our intimations of that which lies prior to and outside verbalization are nothing but translations into further metaphor and analogy. The concept of the pre- or non-linguistic is itself inescapably verbal. We can imagine, in a fiction of abstractive

isolation, the deployment of images, sounds, tactile and olfactory data without conceptual paraphrase, without a verbalizable signification. But not only can we have no proof that the dreams of animals occur in some such 'imagistic-sensory' mode, but we cannot ourselves even 'think' any such mode without adulterating it into verbal discourse. Man can almost be defined as a species with only exceedingly limited and falsifying access to the universe (for it is nothing less) of silence.

One speculates, of course — and in its etymology of mirroring the verb at least edges just past speech. Biology, genetics, our rudimentary intuitions do affirm that there are primordial continuities between ourselves and animals. Could it be that the cardinal *myths* (what current structural anthropology calls *les mythologèmes*), those archetypal configurations of immediate, seemingly remembered recognition, whereby we order and give general echo to our individual and inward existence, are related to, are a modulation from, the unspoken dreams of animals? Did hominid species, in their intimate co-existence not only with primates but with the whole animal kingdom, dream *zoo-logically*? It is, since Vico at least, a commonplace to suppose that the evolution of mythology and of human speech are concomitant and dialectically interactive. But perhaps we can take a step further. The archetypes, the *ur-myths* which we sense as arising from the no-man's land (because everyman's) just outside daylight consciousness and will, are vestigial, atavistic forms of *dreams before language*. Language is, in a sense, an attempt to interpret, to narrate dreams older than itself. But as he narrates his dreams, *homo sapiens* advances into contradiction: the animal no longer understands him, and with each narrative-linguistic act, individuation, the break between the ego and the communion of shared images, deepens. Narrated, interpreted, dreams have passed from truth into history. Two things alone remind us of their organic source: that resonance and meaning beyond conceptualization which inheres in myths, and that mystery of psycho-somatic affinity with animals which can be observed in many young children, in the 'untutored' and in the saint. (It is when he meets with the eyes of a beaten horse, that Nietzsche steps from the cruel summit of articulate intelligence into the second childhood, innocence and ascetic sanctity of his *Umnachtung*.)

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The historicity of dreams is twofold.

a) Dreams are made the matter of history. Dreams of victory or of defeat, dreams annunciatory of personal elevation or disaster, oracular

or enigmatic dreams deciphered in the light of subsequent events, all these are recorded by chroniclers, historians and biographers. Indeed, and almost paradoxically, the appeal made to the relevant dream reinforces and underwrites the authenticity of the historical event. The dream is a prime document; it is deposited in the historical archives. This is particularly true of antique 'biographies', bearing in mind the extent to which the concept of the exemplary or illustrious life of the monarch, hero or sage overlaps with the concept of history itself. Pharaonic dreams, the dreams either heartening or ominous of kings and men of war as they are recorded in the Bible, Hamilcar's dream and Scipio's, the innumerable dreams set down in Plutarch's 'Lives' are treated as historical facts. Well into the XVIth century, sleep is one of the prodigal sources of historical documentation, of which the court astrologer is archivist.

More difficult to circumscribe but also more important in the dynamics of history are those dreams which transcend the consciousness of the individual. History knows of collective dreams of panic or of hope, of refuge or of action (notably if we extend the notion of 'dreams' to comprise also the twilight but coherent constructs of 'reverie', of 'day-dreams', of emblematic fantasies which are active along the whole spectrum between privacy and mass-feeling, between deep sleep and sharp wakefulness). Apocalyptic dreams have been recorded by social historians not only in the decades preceding and surrounding *les grandes paniques de l'an mille*, but around such numerologically-portentous dates as 1666 or, right now, in what certain social groups (and not only in the American south-west) sense to be the nuclear 'Revelation' of the year Two Thousand.

The critique of apocalypse is utopia. 'Promised lands', even when they are first dreamt individually, by a Moses or the founder of the Mormon quest, are re-dreamt a thousandfold by the community of the convinced. Revolutions are dreamt before they are made; first by individuals — perhaps *charisma* could be defined as 'anticipatory dreaming' of a force which can be the initiator of homologous dreams in others — then by the social group. If the rhetoric of 1789 and of the utopian impulses of 1792 and 1793 is often a rhetoric of 'feasts', of baptismal celebrations, it is also a rhetoric of dreams, of marvellously 'concrete' dream-visions just before dawn. The great grammar of messianic dream-interpretation argued by Ernst Bloch is based precisely on the potential for collectivity of the 'forward-dreams' of political, economic and social hope. The *Wachtraum* of radical and revolutionary

hope, says Bloch, is no less a dream than that of night; perhaps more so, in as much as so great a part of night belongs to the *ancien régime* both psychically and historically. To limit the concept of dreams to those of the nocturnal ego, is to negate a primordial mechanism of history:

Diese Nacht hat noch etwas zu sagen, nicht als brütend Urgewesenes, sondern als Ungewordenes, noch nirgends recht Lautgewordenes, das darin streckenweise eingekapselt ist. Doch sie kann nur etwas sagen, sofern sie von Wachphantasie belichtet wird, von einer, die aufs werdende gerichtet ist; an sich selber ist das Archaische stumm. Lediglich als ein *unabgegolten, unentwickelt, kurz, utopisch* Brütendes hat es die Kraft, in dem Tagtraum aufzugehen, erlangt es die Macht, sich vor ihm nicht verschlossen zu halten; als solches aber, wenn auch nur als solches, kann es umgehen in freier Fahrt, erhaltenbewahrtem Ego, Weltverbesserung, Fahrt ohne Ende.

*(Das Prinzip Hoffnung, I, 115)*

This night has still something to say, brooding not something that has been from the beginning, but something unborn, something not really uttered anywhere but latent in the night at various points. But the night can only say something inasmuch as it is being exposed to the light of waking imagination, that is, directed toward becoming; in itself the archaic is silent. Only as something brooding which is unredeemed, undeveloped, condensed, utopian, does it have the strength to expand into the day-dream and attain the power not to keep itself locked away; as such, however, although only as such, it can circulate without restriction, upholding and preserving the ego, for world reform, a journey without end.

*(The Principle of Hope)*

And it is, teaches Bloch, *ein Ineinander der kollektiven Traumspiele [an intertwining of the collective dream plays]* — of night and of day — which sets history in hopeful motion.

Such motion can be and is, as we know, constantly interrupted and set back by defeat and barbarism. But here also, dreams, both private and public, play their part. They can be the last refuge of freedom and

the hearth of resistance. There is a momentarily menacing yet ambiguous insight in a boast made by Robert Ley, National-Socialist *Reichsorganisationsleiter*, shortly after the regime came to power: "The only person in Germany who still leads a private life is one who is asleep." Precisely. Up to a certain point (not for the physically tortured, not for the starving), dreams can remain outside the reach of political totality. Up to a certain point, the 'safe houses' of clandestine resistance to totalitarian despotism are those of dreams.

Here again, I would venture to say, is an historically vital and socially dynamic dream-function rather outside the psychoanalytic focus.

b) The second aspect of the historicity of dreams has been virtually ignored. Dreams are a part of history and of historical documentation. But there is also *a history of dreams* or, more precisely, a history of the phenomenology of dreaming.

I have tried to show elsewhere ("The Distribution of Discourse", *On Difficulty*, 1978) that the ways in which we speak to ourselves, that the style, frequency, content and outward effects of unvoiced soliloquies, of the interior monologue which comprises the major part of our linguistic output, are subject to historical change and sociological constraints. I have tried to suggest that men and women (itself a cardinal distinction) have made different uses of the great and constant current of internal discourse at different times of history, in different social-economic settings, and in diverse cultures.

The same, I believe, is true of the activities — they are manifold — which we associate with the generation, formulation and recollection, whether wholly private or published, of dreams. Sleep, that truly massive psycho-somatic activity, about which so little is understood, is both an individual and a social reality. We lack 'histories of sleep', though these would be as essential, if not more so, to our grasp of the evolution of mores and sensibility as are the histories of dress, of eating, of child-care, of mental and physical infirmity, which social historians and the *historiens des mentalités* are at last providing for us. Different climates, different social strata (master and slave, cleric and peasant, soldier and craftsman), different historical epochs, produce different patterns of sleeping and waking. Solitary or merely connubial sleep, the privilege, as it has been for a small social élite throughout history, is a profoundly different phenomenon from the collective sleep in the peasant-hut or urban slum. And both of these 'sleep-structures' are, in their turn, different from the division of the sexes in communal

slumber as it is practised not only in the 'long houses' of certain Pacific and Australasian cultures but, nearer home, in the military barrack, the *internat* or the cloister. The invention and dissemination of successive technologies of artificial lighting has altered the psycho-physiology of 'sleep-acts'. A culture of afternoon siestas differs significantly from one whose economy of repose is almost exclusively nocturnal. The history of sanitation, of domestic plumbing or of its absence, is part of the contextual historicity of individual and of group-sleep. We have great poets of the worlds of sleep, such as Shakespeare or Proust (there is scarcely a Shakespearean play without some meditation on the multiple enigmas of sleep; *Macbeth* can be accurately defined as the drama of the exile from sleep). In Goncharov's *Oblomov*, we find the outlines of a satiric sociology of sleep. But we wait still for the true historians of a condition which, at the very least, enfolds a third of the life of the human species.

Exactly these same historicities and bio-social determinants pertain to dreaming. We do not sleep at the same hours, in the same milieu, in the same physiological aura — climatic, nutritive, sexual — as did, say, an ancient Greek, a medieval serf, a Trobriand islander. Our dreams or, to put it very carefully, a good many of our dreams, will differ correspondingly. The dreams recorded by the royal scribes of ancient Egypt or the Bible, by Plutarch or the medieval allegorists differ among themselves as radically as they differ from those set down by anthropologists and ethnographers in the field. They differ strikingly, also, from those cited as canonic in the literature of psychoanalysis.

The history, the social psychology of the production, storage and distribution of human dreams, is too vast and, as yet, uncharted, to allow a general view. Let me, therefore, adduce only one transformation, but a *fundamental* transformation, in the received function of dreams and of dreaming, as we can document it in western cultures.

Mediterranean antiquity, be it classical, semitic or 'barbarian', is unanimous in relating dreams and the act of dreaming to the phenomenology of *foresight*. Dreams, teaches Penelope in *Odyssey*, 19, may be truthful or deceptive. They may be enigmatic, thus making precarious a determination of either their truth or their falsehood (Macrobius, in his commentary on 'Scipio's Dream', designates the enigmatic kind as *oneiros*). They may have the quality of nightmare (*enypnion*) or of promissory delight. But one thing is absolutely clear: dreams arise from some visitation of/by futurity. They are, in essence,

truly or falsely oracular (*chrematismos*) and prophetic (*horama*). The art of interpreting dreams is a branch of the general arts of augury. Oracular dicta, prophecies, omens, the decipherment of bird-flights or of the entrails of sacrificial victims, are immediately cognate to the decoding of men's dreams and dream-visions (*phantasma*). Dreams are the momentary runes which the future inscribes on the sleeping soul. The very obscurity of dreams, their hermetic manifold of possible meanings, is warrant of their prophetic tenor: "If dreams prophesy the future, if visions which present themselves to the mind during sleep afford some indices whereby to divine future things, dreams will be at the same time true and obscure and the truth will reside in their obscurity" (Synesios of Cyrene, c. 410 A.D.). Aristotle's scepticism, gently argued in his opusculum *On Prophecy in Sleep* — "the thing is not incredible but rather reasonable", yet ought to be distrusted — represents an exceptional and deliberately mandarin point of view. To the ancient world at large, witness the famous 'Egyptian Dream Book' (British Museum Papyrus 10683, dated c. 2000 B.C.), witness Homer, Hesiod and the compilers of the Old Testament, the question is not whether dreams are prophetic — this is taken to be a manifest fact — but whether such prophecy stems from good or evil sources and whether mortal decipherment is capable of unriddling the foresights (*pré-voyances*) of the night.

In psychoanalysis, on the contrary, dreams feed not on prophecy but on remembrance. The semiological vector points not to the future but to the past. The dynamics of opacity are not those of the unknown but of the suppressed. When did this essential re-orientation come to pass? And why?

There can be no persuasive dating of so diffuse a change. Every indication is, furthermore, that this reversal of aetiology and temporality is by no means synchronic in different cultures and at different levels of society. Hume's scepticism as to the evidential claims of dreams, the critique of oracular visions as we find it in Beyle, were not shared by the less emancipated but numerically overwhelming plurality of eighteenth-century Europe. Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* does not banish from mass readership countless traditional 'dream-books' and more or less occult 'keys to the unriddling of the future through dreams'. On the contrary — and this is a phenomenon which calls for subtle evaluation — the therapeutic rationalism and technicity of the psychoanalytic focus on dreams actually *augments* the status and popularity of alternative and inherently 'archaic' decodings. It is a



confident guess that despite the Enlightenment and positivism, that despite modern agnosticism and Freud, a great majority of mankind — even in so-called ‘advanced’ and technological societies — continues to attach prophetic, oracular values to its dreams.

Nevertheless, it *is* possible to say that the great shift from the categories of prophecy to those of remembrance begins to occur, at least so far as the philosophic and the scientific sensibilities are concerned, in the mid-and later seventeenth century. It is just this time-frame which gives to the celebrated ‘Dream of Descartes’, dated November 1619 — and to which I will come back — its ‘antique’ character and functionality. The *crise de conscience* of the eighteenth century, the vocabulary and the grammar of dreams of romanticism, can be characterized in reference to the ‘pastness’, to the recollective motion of their dreams. The pilgrimages of sleep lead not to the *terra incognita* of tomorrow; they are homecomings to ‘the visionary gleam’ of birth and of childhood.

How are we to account for this re-cycling, for this about-turn?

A number of possible causal factors come to mind. After Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo, the respectable futurologies become those of the celestial and mechanical sciences. The ‘forward-dreams’ of the western mind are those of Newtonian cosmology, of the statistical and stochastic sciences or of Darwinian evolution. The educated man reads not the stars but articles on astronomy. By a very gradual yet observable process, responsible knowledge is assimilated to daylight (cf. the light-symbolism, the noon-poetics in the iconography and discursive conventions of the Newtonian revolution). Concomitantly, night and its output are assigned to the domain of illusion, of childishness, of pathology. As Goya has it, in that most haunting of his engravings, nightmares are born of the sleep of reason. How could they communicate knowledge of the future? A second factor in the great reversal of the time-axis of dreams may well have been the revaluation of childhood itself, the fascination with beginnings and the genesis of consciousness as we find them throughout every aspect of Rousseauism and romanticism. If dreams do not exhibit the hieroglyphics of futurity, they set forth the night-alphabet of our authentic past. They are the history of our coming-into-being. Far from being a mark of chaos or irresponsibility, the ‘childishness’ of dreams is proof of their journey from the lost core of our psyche. The ‘seer blest’, proclaims Wordsworth, is the very young child, to whose immediacies of perception dreams are, perhaps, our only access. A third factor — it

may well include the two I have just cited — is that of the internalizations of experience which come near to defining modernity itself. One need not be a Hegelian to grasp the inward shift of consciousness, of disciplined scrutiny, which distinguishes ‘modern’ from ‘classical’ and even ‘medieval’ man. Our perceptions of ‘reality’, where they are not scientific, utilitarian or teleological, in the special sense in which technology is teleological, are very largely ego-directed. When Rousseau gives to the *moi* its singularity as against Montaigne, its claims to transcendence as against Pascal, when the late eighteenth-century gives to the words *egoism* and *egotism* their new magnetism, when Narcissus begins a triumphant *fuite*, which will carry him from Rousseau to Valéry, dreams too turn inward and relinquish that lunge towards the gods, towards the objective unknown of the future which defined their function in a classical world.

Such conjectures are, I realise, too vague, too portentous, to be of real use. But the overriding fact is undeniable: at some time in the evolution of western sensibility (at different times in different classes and societies in the west) dreams and the activities of the dreamer came to be valued not for their prophetic content but for their freight of remembrance, licit or clandestine.

This is a fundamental transmutation. It underlines the historicity of dreams and dreaming. Can the Freudian model, with its implicit, axiomatic emphasis on the economy and functionality of dream-remembrance, really be a universal key?

This is my first question.

\* \* \* \*

“Haec, etiam si ficta sunt a poeta, non absunt tamen a consuetudine somniorum,” [“Although they were thought out by a poet, these are nevertheless not far away from the usual matter of dreams.”] affirms Cicero (*De divinatio*, I, 42). Freud entirely concurs. The dream ‘invented’ by the poet or playwright or novelist has equal revelatory status with that reported by the patient under analysis. Indeed, throughout the dream-interpretations of Freud and his direct disciples, fictive dreams — as we find them in Homer, in Aeschylus, in Virgil, in Shakespeare, in Goethe, in Dostoevski or in Jensen’s novel, *Gradiva* — have a privileged force of evidence. One may ask whether the Ciceronian-Freudian postulate is at all self-evident. Do the dreams which *ficta sunt a poeta*, such as Klytemnestra’s complex dream in

Sophokles' *Elektra* or the great dream of drowning narrated by the Duke of Clarence in Shakespeare's *Richard II* or the macabre dream which wakes Alyosha from innocent piety in *The Brothers Karamozov*, really have the same psycho-somatic status as the dreams told by the patient to his analyst or mentioned, often casually, to one another by such 'common folk' as you and I? The psychoanalytic argument, of course, is this: even where he is most deliberately and contextually composing a fictional dream, the writer draws upon and inevitably discloses aspects of his own subconscious. Is this a convincing rebuttal? Does it not betray that arbitrary naiveté as to the nature of literary construction, of *poiesis*, which marks so much of Freud's reading of great writers, and which goes so drastically wrong in his paper on *The Poet and Day-Dreams*?

But the question is a larger one.

Our knowledge of dreams and of dreaming, the material which constitutes the history of human dreams, *are wholly inseparable from the linguistic medium*. (I leave to one side the epistemologically teasing possibility that a mute or deaf-mute dreamer can somehow provide a pictorial or gestural *mimesis* of his dreams.) Dreams are told, recorded, interpreted in language. The phenomenology of dreaming is imbedded in the evolution and structures of language. A theory of dreams is *also* a linguistics or, at the very least, a poetics. No account of any human dream, whether provided by the dreamer himself, by a secondary source or by the dream-interpreter, is linguistically innocent or value-free. The account of the dream, which is the sum total of our evidence, will be subject to exactly the same constraints and historical determinants in respect of style, narrative convention, idiom, syntax, connotation, as any other speech-act in the relevant language, historical epoch and *milieu*. Dreams were no less splintered at Babel than were the tongues of men.

Logicians and epistemologists, notably in the wake of Descartes and of Wittgenstein, have wrestled with many aspects of the reporting of dreams:

*if one thinks that a man's account of his dream is related to his dream just as my account of yesterday's happenings is related to them, one is in a hopeless difficulty; for then . . . it may be that we are always only under the illusion of having had a dream, an illusion that comes to us as we awake. . . . In the case of remembering a dream there is no contrast between correctly*

remembering and seeming to oneself to remember — here they are identical! (It can even appear surprising that we should speak of “remembering” a dream.)

I am not competent to consider the logical-epistemological issues raised by Professor Malcolm (*Philosophical Essays on Dreaming*, 1977, p. 121) and his colleagues. But Sigmund Freud *was* a contemporary of Wittgenstein and the total imperception of linguistic philosophy in the psychoanalytic paradigm of human utterance remains disturbing. Can one really consider as philosophically responsible an aetiology and interpretation of dreams which regards the linguistic medium in which all dreams are reported as transparently neutral? When Freud does resort to linguistic factors, notably to etymology, his evidence can, as S. Timpanaro has shown in his devastating study of the *lapsus freudien*, be very slippery. But what I want to look at briefly is a more specific point.

Consider three eminent dreams.

At the start of Book II of the *Iliad*, Zeus summons *oulos Oneire* (a ‘baleful dream’, *un rêve fatidique*). He bids the Dream, a personified messenger, go to Agamemnon who is lying in his tent, ‘in ambrosial sleep’. The Dream is to declare to the son of Atreus that the gods are no longer taking sides in the battle for Troy. Hera has prevailed and the city will fall to the attack of ‘the flowing-haired achaians’. Let Agamemnon assemble his forces for victory. The dream-text is spelled out three times: in Zeus’ injunction to *Oneiros*, in the actual message spoken to the sleeping Agamemnon by and in the process of dreaming, and by Agamemnon himself who, at dawn, repeats this communication *verbatim* to his war council. The modulation is extremely subtle. The dream, exactly scripted by Zeus, traverses Agamemnon’s sleep and re-emerges unaltered in the medium of public discourse. Its threefold articulation produces both a sense of inspired authority and precisely that effect of compulsion, of *Zwang*, which we associate with totally-remembered dreams.

As we know, the dream is an ambush set by Zeus to avenge outraged Achilles. It comes through the Gates of Ivory bearing falsehood. Nestor’s proof of the verity of this dream is a peculiar one: if any man except Agamemnon had reported it, “we might call it false and dissociate ourselves. But he has seen and dreamt it who knows himself to be the most powerful of the Achaians. Come, then, let us set about arming. . . .” It is as if the high social and military status of the

dreamer validated the truth of his dream. There is, I imagine, some archaic touch of social psychology here which is lost to us.

Does Agamemnon's deceptive *oneiros* call for any interpretation 'in depths'? If we so wish, we can argue that a secular-psychological explanation lies to hand. Agamemnon's dream is a typical case of wish-fulfilment. The delivery of Troy into his hands by grace of Hera and without the intervention of detested Achilles, the fall of the city to a final assault — these can reasonably be seen to be Agamemnon's most ardent desires. The dream is so efficacious just because it corresponds so fully to Agamemnon's spoken and unspoken thoughts.

The second dream is one I have already referred to. It is the celebrated *songe de Descartes*, of which, we are told, the philosopher had himself written down a minute account, but which is known to us in Baillet's précis or recollection of this account (observe the semantic-informational complexity and possible degeneration implicit in such a sequence). Descartes's dream is unusual in that it comports three distinct parts interrupted by one or by two — this is not entirely clear — awakenings. In the first 'chapter' of his dream, Descartes is thrust by a whirlwind against the walls of the collegiate church at la Flèche, and is told that an acquaintance has a melon to give him. Awaking, Descartes prays to God for protection against any ill effects of this odd dream. In a second dream-stage, he is woken (?) by a thunderous noise and sees blazing sparks in his chamber. The third section reveals to the dreamer a dictionary and a *Corpus poetarum* open to a passage from the fourth-century A.D. Gallo-Roman poet Ausonius: *quod vitae sectabor iter?* ["Which road of life will I follow?"] An unknown man presents the dreamer with a piece of verse, in which the words *Est et Non* spring to view.

Now comes the striking moment: *asleep*, Descartes decides that the dream *is* a dream and proceeds to interpret it. As Maritain points out, in his essay on this event, Baillet's documentation here is too sketchy to be of much help. But the general lines are plain enough: Descartes interprets the two first dream-fragments as warnings concerning the waste of his past life. In dream-chapter three, the Spirit of Truth reveals to him that he must now choose his road in life (*quod vitae iter*). The dictionary represents "*toutes les sciences ramassées ensemble*". *Est et Non* are "*le oui et le non de Pythagore*" signifying the diacritical cut between truth and falsehood in human knowledge. Descartes now knows that he must choose the road of self-examination and of method which will lead to universal truth.

All this is complex enough in its emblematic-allegoric code of presentation. But the ultimate complication is this. According to Baillet, Descartes asserted that

le génie qui excitait en lui l'enthousiasme dont il se sentait le cerveau échauffé depuis quelques jours, lui avait prédit ces songes avant que de se mettre au lit, et que l'esprit humain n'y avait aucune part.

the genius that incited in him this enthusiasm which he felt had been inflaming his brain for several days, had foretold these dreams to him before going to bed and intimated that the human spirit had no part in it.

In other words, we have here a dream of precise augury which is *itself* the object of clairvoyant intimation. And we have Descartes's affirmation that this double motion of prediction and foresight is of supernatural provenance. Exactly as is the *oneiros* of Agamemnon.

The third dream, which I can only allude to summarily, is that of Tatiana in *Eugene Onegin* (V, xi-xxi).

Our heroine crosses a snowy plain, finds herself on a frail bridge above a raging torrent, is pursued by a roaring bear. The bear catches up with her, transports her to a forest hut, where he sets her down *gently*. Round the table in the hut, Tatiana perceives a round of monstrous creatures — a horned dog, a skeleton, a dwarf, a crayfish riding on the back of a spider and, of course, Onegin *en personne*. The witches's sabbath dissolves and she finds herself in Onegin's arms. But Olga and Lensky intrude. A terrible wrangle erupts, and Tatiana wakes, a scream echoing out of her torn sleep. "Who was it that you dreamt about?" asks inquisitive Olga.

The *oneiros* of Agamemnon is a natural part of a 'transcendent psychology', this is to say of a world-view in which human subconsciousness (sleep) is directly accessible to the insinuation of the divine and the daemonic. The epic poet knows of the duplicity of dreams and of their libidinal motivations (wish-fulfilment). He reflects the compulsory impact of Agamemnon's dream in his technique of repetition. What has psychoanalysis to add?

The *songe de Descartes* raises formidable problems as to the *secondary* and *stylized* format of all narrated dreams. Inevitably, one wonders as to the authenticity of either Descartes's own record or of

his communication to Baillet and attentive posterity. But no interpretation can even begin to be responsible to the evidence if it does not proceed via the allegoric devices, the *emblemata*, the rhetorical conventions, the multilingualism (French, Latin, Greek) which organize not only this particular dream but baroque sensibility as a whole. Early seventeenth-century dreams, especially when offered to us by educated and eloquent men, are rhetorically dramatic, are choreographic and sententious, as ours are not.

Consulted as to the meaning of Descartes's dream, Freud wisely remarked that any interpretation made without the possibility of questioning the dreamer would be feeble. He proposed what Maritain terms "une interprétation fort gratuite du melon" and classified the dream as a whole as a *Traum von Oben*, i.e. a dream whose sources lie very near the surface of consciousness and of the dreamer's waking concerns. This is, certainly, a tempting possibility. But what does it tell us of the actual density of the dream's content, of the primordial importance which Descartes attached to it, or of the dreamer's insistence on a supernatural provenance?

In Tatiana's dream, Pushkin opens fertile ground to a psychoanalytic reading. The relation of the dreamer to the bear, the surrealistic creatures she encounters in the forest hut, the fragile bridge over the raging torrent, the explicit presence of Onegin — all these make for a symbolic-erotic coherence along Freudian lines. The 'crayfish on the spider's back' could be out of a psychoanalytic primer (yet, even as we say this, the very different iconographic code of Hieronymus Bosch springs to mind). However, unless we treat a Freudian gloss on Tatiana's nightmare of hope as only one among several hermeneutics, we will gravely impoverish and simplify the text. Equally, if not more significant, are the elements which Nabokov cites in his leviathan commentary: the formal parallels to Pushkin's *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, the analogy between the frail bridge and the small weave of birch withes which were placed under a maiden's pillow as an instrument of divination, the overlap between the bear in the dream and the fur-clad footmen who attended on young ladies of noble station, the possible borrowings which Pushkin made from Kamenev's *Gromval* and Nodier's *Shogar*. In each of these aspects, both the historicity and the linguistics of dreams are manifest. Any technique of dream-interpretation which assumes a synchronic universality of symbolic equivalences is inevitably reductive.

The dream of Agamemnon, the *songe de Descartes* are radically different from the dreams reported to Freud by his middle-class, largely female and predominantly Jewish informants in Vienna at the turn of our century. How could it be otherwise? Tatiana's dream *does* exhibit that shorthand of sexuality of which Freud and psychoanalysis have made us too aware. But it *is* only a shorthand, and we must not reduce to it the specific wealth, the historical-poetic concreteness of Pushkin's text.

Is there not in the application of psychoanalysis to language, and to language under utmost pressure of meaning which we call 'literature', an inescapable risk of deterministic impoverishment? This is my second question.

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First published in 1966, *Das Dritte Reich des Traums* is a neglected classic. In it, Charlotte Beradt summarizes her analyses of some three hundred dreams recounted to her in Berlin 1933-4. That the images, symbols, fantasms which crowd these dreams should so obviously mirror the political changes taking place in Berlin at the time, is not surprising. What is of the very first importance, however, is the degree of depth to which external history penetrates into the subconscious and unconscious. It does not take long to discover that patients dreaming of the loss of limbs or of the atrophy of arms or legs are not displaying symptoms of a Freudian castration-complex but, more simply and terribly, revealing the terrors inflicted on them by the new rules demanding the Hitler-salute in public, professional and even familial usage.

Am I mistaken in feeling that this finding, even by itself, presents a fundamental challenge to the psychoanalytic model of dreams and their interpretation?

It is best to let the writers have their say. In his cunning fable, *Il Serpente*, Luigi Malerba says:

Tutti i sogni sono sempre un po' misteriosi e questo é il loro bello, ma certi sono misteriosissimi, cioè non si capisce niente, sono come dei rebus. Mentre i rebus hanno una soluzione, loro non ce l'hanno, puoi dargli cento significati diversi e l'uno vale l'altro.



All dreams are always a little mysterious and this is their beauty; but some are very mysterious, that is to say, one does not understand anything; they are like rebuses. But while rebuses have solutions, dreams do not. You can give them one hundred different meanings, and one is as good as another.

This may be a bleak conclusion; but I find it bracing.