

TO DREAM, TO ERR

A Shell

Night, how can you need me no more?
Through the endless cosmic vacuum hurled,
Gift of a shell without a pearl,
I fall delivered to your shore.

You casually stir up your coast,
Roar chanties at the tide,
Yet soon a useless sea-shell's boast
Will be your love and pride.

You'll nestle by her in the sands,
Your planet blanketing her well,
And fasten her by sturdy strands
to the turbulent abyss's bell.

And to this frail shell's openness,
Nest of a heart where no one's home,
You'll offer up the whispering foam,
The wind, the rain, the mist.

-- Osip Mandelstam

What happens to us at night when we dream?

A non-conscious side of us, a sort of darkened shore of the I, seems to be given over then to the desire for sleep. And it is for the sake of this desire that our universe of memories and drives is organized to keep the peace, yet without our losing the traces of all that is alive in us and that enters into messy conflicts, clamoring for expression.

Some remote, forgotten, and obscure desire, for instance, takes advantage of sleep to transfer itself onto recent material, reinforcing experiences and 'documents' of the previous day. Documentary material that is apt to attract to itself evidence of unforgotten oblivion or lost languages that accidentally surface at the least pretext. A fragment, some dross of lived experience (it can be the flimsiest, the most negligible), is all it takes for anxieties or distant jouissances – thanks to some unpredictable contiguity of image, sound, or sense – to be reactivated, unexpectedly weaving the web of a new story, revealing some unprecedented, hitherto unimagined writing.

A current and repressed desire, passed over by the day's business, may also be revived over the course of a night, with an intense energy coming from the unconscious. Indeed, our original desires (of which we have lost all consciousness) remain constantly active. As such, they constitute ever viable, virtually accessible pathways for recent excitations to enter upon, errant tracks over the surface of our soul. In the place-less place that is the unconscious, nothing can be considered finished or used up, nothing expired or forgotten. And thus, while we think that we are on familiar terms with our recollections and that we can successfully watch over and attend to them, an unknown web of memories is being laid out cross-wise, in shivers and fragments, over our acts and our symptoms, and may be transformed into a dream, or perhaps into some snippet of a word that might give shape to a rebus.

Thus, as the subject sleeps and sinks into a defenceless state of regression, groups of earlier, unknown psychic data are in a position to attract more recent visual and scriptural languages, thereby acquiring an unprecedented representability. Nonetheless, this

recovery of representability of evidence, embarrassing and evaded as it may be by our wakeful mind, tends to scare off consciousness, which in turn reawakens all the preliminary defenses positioned to watch over it.

And thus the inconceivable raw material takes on acceptable features and undergoes elaboration in the form of manifest content. What is involved here is the explicit part of what we have dreamed, which, for all its undeniable absurdity, is usually bearable and easy to minimize. And yet we know that compromises and censorships fail and that the calm of sleep can too often be ruined. We have all experienced how and how much a dream can become the medium for horrendous disturbances to consciousness, giving way to nightmares and anxiety.

Anxiety and desire are two fundamental elements of the dream dimension. As for desires, the dreamer is divided in his relation to them: he yearns for them, cannot do without them, yet at the same time can neither accept nor recognize nor legitimate them – above all whenever they come from a memory that has been repudiated and condemned.

And this is why even the dream – the seductive tool of common psychology – has, in this post-Freudian moment we’re living in, suffered a twofold liquidation. On the one hand, it is liquidated by psychological common sense. Because the latter – if one pays heed to it – nails it to the obvious contents of its manifest expression, as if dream work did not exist and the subject was undivided. On the other hand, the dream is banished like some piece of bad fruit to be tossed out, discarded from one’s mind: merchandise to be rejected because it makes no sense and even flaunts traits of unproductivity.

Whereas it is precisely in that logic that seems not to be a logic, in that invention of signs that repeatedly shifts our position, in those riddles and guessing-games that disorientate us (but that so profoundly belong to us), it is precisely there that the general laws of the unconscious are revealed and applied, in their fullest meaning.

In a note he added in 1925 to The Interpretation of Dreams¹, Freud writes: “ I used at one time to find it

¹Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, James Strachey translation, Ch. VI “The Dream-Work,” section “Secondary Revision” [in Avon paperback edition, pp. 544-545: ca. 3 pages from end of this section – trans.]

extraordinarily difficult to accustom readers to the distinction between the manifest content of dreams and the latent dream-thoughts. Again and again arguments and objects would be brought up ... But now that analysts at least have become reconciled to replacing the manifest dream by the meaning revealed by its interpretation, many of them have become guilty of falling into another confusion which they cling to with equal obstinacy. They seek to find the essence of dreams in their latent content and in so doing they overlook the distinction between the latent dream-thoughts and the dream-work.” Freud goes to clarify not only an essential novelty for dream investigation in his day but something which even today continues to elude us (inclined as we are toward the substance of speaking rather than its form): “At bottom, dreams are nothing other than a particular form of thinking, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep. It is the dream-work which creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming – the explanation of its peculiar nature” (underlining mine).

Thus, when we speak of a dream sense, we are referring to that dream text marked by the work of the unconscious, by that text which, with its distortions, its contractions (or metaphors) and with its slidings (or metonymies) leads us into the heart of the dreamer's unconscious syntax. And this is a truly formidable point for rooting out any hermeneutical automatism. What actually emerges through the particular cut imposed by analytical listening on the material of everyone's thoughts, images, and words (material more or less obvious at the surface of our dreams) is the peculiar, distinctive meaning of a subjective style. Thanks to this, each of us (without knowing it) articulates and, in so articulating, unravels or crystallizes his own inexorable questions.

Dreams, symptoms, and parapraxes (actes manqués), as formations of our unconscious, present various forms at the point at which each, precisely by dint of these forms, becomes one or unique, divided and, generally, caught off guard. To put it briefly: we try incessantly to speak of the unconscious, but the unconscious won't let itself be spoken about or spoken at all, much less

defined. The unconscious simply speaks. And it speaks in its own way, with its own special syntax, able to throw preconceptions or assumed knowledge off its scent.

Thus, it is with the Traumdeutung that we have been able to learn how oneiric life is the basic paradigm for that psychic space in which the subject thinks and is, precisely without realizing that he is thinking and being.

An invaluable untranslatability

If it is true that a key to dream interpretation preceded psychoanalyses by many centuries, it is also true that Freud made a decisive contribution in territories hitherto unexplored and methodologies hitherto unthought of.

Not only did psychoanalytic method allow him to discern the laws that underlie the economics and dynamics of unconscious processes; not only did he describe their mode of existence, creating a theory and practice that allowed for understanding and decipherment; but also and above all, he had an intuition that overturned the method for dream investigation pursued in the past.

I am referring to the discovery of a singular style of exploration based on the subject's free wandering within

his own arbitrary associative processes. Through contiguity, through temporal proximity of associations, it became possible to apprehend the manifestation of an internal, still hidden internal connection. Two neighboring, consecutive words can (for example) allow the verbal weft of each to slip into the woof of the other, thus creating a new signifier bearing a new signified. We will see this in rebuses, in their scrambling into anagrams when we speak of them further on in the book. The signified will not remain immutable, set down once and for all. In the course of inquiry, signifieds come into being, become. They are not prior givens.

Thus an analyzed dream – if its dreamer is not disposed toward aimlessly wandering amid the fragments of his memory and his soul – has only one sense: the sense brought to it by the interpreter, who thinks he has hit upon its truth. A dream heard, in its way, is contained only within two times or moments: the past in which it was dreamed, and the present in which it is told and immediately interpreted. A signified so obtained, however, can only remain static and unbudging, futureless.

Over the course of an analysis, initially imperceptible or as yet nonexistent signifieds may emerge when we least expect them. A subject disposed to analyzing his own errors and dreams may happen, over the course of time, to change. In that case, the subject's dream will no longer be the same and will reveal future traces invisible up to that point. Thus unwritten signifieds arise, opening the way to other long-absent signifieds.

We are entirely justified, then, in thinking that the dream's imaginary potency is fully met by the listener's language in all its transformative power: in the refuge of the dream's seeming non-sense we may maintain that the analyst's word should penetrate as a transformer of sense or as upholder of the law of the senseless. Either way, interpretation assumes the guise of a symbolic wound operating in the narcissistic space of the dream even though the analyst's alleged interpretative power is doomed to be thwarted. The dream text remains irreducible: steadfast against any accommodation that would try to make it presentable, translatable, into scenarios of reason and good sense. Unconscious representations cannot, by definition, enjoy suffrage in

the places overseen by consciousness without the risk of a fundamental distortion of their nature. But it is this distortion, this misrepresentation that we are in no way allowed to spare ourselves entirely from, unless we defend ourselves with a blunt neutrality and indifference to any enigmatic implication of the discourse of the other. For this reason, in our condition as speaking beings, it has been our lot to receive the bloody weapon of interpretation. If and when we abuse it, we wreak true havoc. If, on the other hand, we hone it like a blade, its blow can birth, where it cuts, to unprecedented texts, sights never seen before.

“There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream’s navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are

bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium."²

Very famous words. To quote them may seem an act of repetition or, worse, of blind obedience to a sacred text. This is not my intention, but rather to recall a limit to the interpretative act and to point out the deep caesura or, to put it better, the abyss, that gapes over being. Pointing out how radically desire is linked with the unknown, Freud removes the psychological camouflages from the theory of the subject, revealing its tragic dimension. The human being, unsatisfied both in knowledge and in desire, seems to have no other way out than to insist on trying to understand, to keep on desiring, aspiring. Thus these unappeased dream thoughts, those cut-off paths of access to sense, that tangle of demands and knots (which lend themselves to detection but not unraveling), this entire invisible network confirms not only the interpreter's impotence but also the erotic aspect (albeit

² Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Ch. VII, "Psychology of the Dream-Processes," Section A, "The Forgetting of Dreams" [James Strachy translation, p. 564 Avon paperback edition]

ever more under “malediction”) of what in dreams or wandering amid errors and amnesias won’t let itself be stopped, possessed, or exhausted.

Aimless ... But For a New Ethic

Every analysis could document, with many examples, how indispensable to interpretation precisely the most insignificant features and passages of the dream are. In the interpretation of a dream, every nuance of the linguistic expression in which it is couched has to be appreciated. Indeed, in the face of an absurd or insufficient text, when it seems that the effort to translate the dream into its correct formulation has not succeeded, these gaps in narration should not only be respected but even emphasized. In other words, every arbitrary improvisation that might seem hastily patched together in a moment of embarrassment is received by an analyst not only as a text, but rather as “the” text from which, par excellence, he can probably expect something.

The dreamer performs the first form of interpretation, or, rather, deformation, of a dream when he reconstructs it

by recounting it. The 'normal thought' seizes the word, producing a second level of revision (elaboration), often erroneous but no less interesting for that. It's a matter of a further form of censorship – undergone in the first and second resort – by that thicket of underlying thoughts that goes into the make-up of every dream.

Thus there is no arbitrariness to the alteration borne out in the dreamer's memory and verbal formulation. It does not deter us from understanding it, but rather offers the seal, the identity, of the psychic field about which the subject roams – a field overdetermined by a cobweb of permeability and obstructions that are not the same, but on the contrary, singular, for everyone. Thus, when we seize on the changes a dream told more than once undergoes, we don't take the new version as though it were a mistake that invalidates the truth of the dream, but rather we appreciate it in its character as an acte manqué that can help us understand something different. An imprecision, blunted there, it is a 'howler,' a still-eloquent blunder or typo. It points to new openings, new emotions, unthought-of judgments, or hidden sanctions.

But for the dreamer, the dream often exists in the form of a forgotten dream. One can sense the presence of a dream even if conscious memory cannot manage to gain access to its plot. We have dreamed, but everything is dissolved, never to return even in the guise of an acceptable distortion of its narrative. The truth is, the forgetting of dreams remains impenetrable as long as one undervalues the power of ever active psychic censorship to erase whatever might cause the judgments of the ego and its dispositions to waver.

Only in the course of a careful analysis is it possible to recover at least some part of what has been lost. It is possible to recover – starting from the leaking out of a single fragment or from certain residual sensations of the eclipsed dream – if not the dream content, at least its latent thoughts.

Furthermore: the oblivion in question does not forget, although the hygienic civilization of our time prevents our freely arriving at such a paradoxical conclusion, conjuring up spectres of every sort at the first signals of any forgetfulness or oversight. The nagging little ills of

day-to-day life continually whet the collective appetite for predictability, control, mastery.

That of forgetfulness is not a pure void, much less devoid of sense. It is, rather, a language that asserts itself by gap and omission. Lacking straight, logical discourse, with holes in memory and in surveillance, the unmindful-forgetful turns up in an alienating dimension, however trenchant it may be in its subjective truth.

Let us consider the actes manqués in which the unconscious is shown to be at work, sowing traces of vanished, banished, but never truly cancelled-out bits of knowledge. Common sense suffers an upheaval. Thus, what would be automatically be recorded and filed away as some pathological error, carelessness, absentmindedness, is revealed to be in reality the bearer, or more precisely, the mouthpiece, of divulged assessments, of judgments never before elaborated by a faint-hearted consciousness, subjugated to those primitive conflicts which nourish themselves on the practice of inhibition and renunciation.

It is not unusual for us (against our will and thus, without knowing it) to depend on a lapsus – one phoneme

replaced by another that transforms the desired word by another, unwelcome one, or vice versa – to have our only chance to say something that strikes us not so much as unutterable but above all as out of line and unseemly either for its truth or its oddity or offensiveness. As may happen with a dream of which the part left out and wrested from oblivion proves to be the most important one as well as the one most exposed to resistance, so the memory gap of a parapraxis, the stumble of a faux pas, the nervous stammer (intruding into some coherent discourse) allude peremptorily to what we don't want to know, much less be capable of. This is the essential reason for saying that forgetting – the experience which so often afflicts and mars our dream life – depends more on the system of unconscious resistances we raise up against our truth than on the gap that exists between the state of wakefulness and that of sleep. A thesis widely supported in Freud's day yet that is with us once more – just as if the Traumdeutung had never existed. We have objective motives for preferring to forget: biological ones, perhaps, or, if that won't do,

neurophysiological! Subjectivity is inconvenient, and more awkward still are the ghosts, figments, and shades that challenge us.

It is hard going, besides, to arrive at a true, genuine interpretation of a dream. It takes work, and not just a little. While such work goes on, it is necessary to halt critical arguments, the reservations of prejudice, affective compromises, and, not least, intellectual hair-splitting. According to Freud, to get the sense of a dream or an acte manqué, you have to work like an animal, "travailler comme une bête," work like a mule, with a mule's stubborn perseverance, but also with its indifference to outcome.

Which is a fundamental point. This is the task and the feat of an analysis. It is from a similar aloofness that the particular analytical understanding of the work of hermeneutics derives. Basically, indifference to the outcome – which only the obtuse labor of beasts fully represents – is the essential ingredient in that particular hearing of what the other, while he speaks, does not know and, by a thousand unconscious ploys urges one to ignore with him. The interpreter, therefore, must not

tend toward a goal, because the longing to achieve a success can only make it vulnerable to influence. The dreamer's defenses would seek an ally and the impatience of someone who meets with an acte manqué might induce the interpreter to replace it with some fully accomplished act.

Yet in a civilization which demands total accountability and which is inspired by the ethic of preestablished harmony between costs and benefits, how can one ever claim to direct a venture that can't rattle off its promises and calculate evidence of its results? How would the idea be received that error can contain a fertile errancy? It must be said: we are dealing here with a hotly contested claim, a claim in behalf of security and well-being.

And yet it is precisely here – with obscure, tortuous dreams, excruciating amnesias, and ridiculous lapsus – that the unexplored territories of the unconscious (while sometimes making themselves hateful) prove indispensable to the roots that form an ethic of the current-day subject, that modern-postmodern-antimodern subject each of us is today.

Yet however hostile this subject may claim to be to the statistical pressure of proofs based on results, he is not necessarily completely exempt from a form of prejudice. Because I tend not to let go of the aesthetic side of the unconscious: its non-functional, unsanitary, unpragmatic but essentially formal side. Admittedly, this preference that I find so rousing is surely a weak point in my confutation of the science of results, yet it is a weakness I'm not prepared – perhaps for the sake of analytic treatment – to give up. I don't want to miss out on (if and when it exists) the poetry of error, nor the enigma hidden at the surface of a dream, nor the nonsense intrinsic to blind suffering.

On the other hand, the human being, to give free play to the exploration, the navigation, that is his, needs to tolerate the anomalous fact that the I is not master in its own house and that the improvisations of its unconscious claim to remain outside of the protocols validated by by criteria of normality, stability, and adaptation.

We know that customarily the dimension of surprise – which defines the area of chance (implying, beyond the

dream, error) – is generally called into play by whoever moves in art's universe of signs, since only the artist seems to be allowed to set traps with which to capture reality at its most vital point.

Yet if there is anything we expect from the ethic of the unconscious, it is precisely the possibility that it be granted to everyone – inscribed into the framework of civilization (or rather, into the heart of its inexorable discontent) and into its singular singularity – to be allowed to stumble upon unusual knowledge and, even more, fortuitous, unsuspected, chance intuitions such as those revealed by the act of dreaming or by the hare-brained act of making a mistake, or forgetting. Thus, each of us can confront and cope with the renunciations and the tragic character of civilization if he is able to tolerate his own division as artist.

Surely we have all heard the old adage that “we learn by making mistakes.” Here, however, the instructiveness that awaits us from error is turned in the popular understanding to denote essentially what we should no longer fall into; this heaps ridicule, scorn, blame, criticism on the event (be it a lapsus, a moment of forgetting,

absent-mindedness), rather than the possibility of some probing or openness toward the value of sense contained in the act, i.e. of a subjectively imperative new sense, though one not invariably illuminated or urgently convincing. Only true scientists – the scientific and not scientific – know that when one falls into error it is not uncommon for research to advance, because the core of a discovery and a re-beginning is granted only to certain errors. Whereas the subjective, private error of each of us (even if one is a scientist) is considered a slight thing, no aid to the well-being of the world at large, and is usually just brushed aside.

“Make a mistake, try again, and make a better mistake”: Beckett’s words, which could well serve as a general commandment for life.

And indeed, in these times that race so, with their legs flying, everything that gets in the way of success and the the finishing line is consigned from the outset to the great medico-psychological catch-all of disturbance or illness: I forget because of the deterioration of my arteries; I make mistakes because I’m a loser or because I suffer from a stress-induced attention disorder. And so on: through a

lapsus and precisely through a dream. Yes, because dreams, when we don't manage to reduce them to the good reasons of some psycho-current symbology, can always point to some sleeping disorder, some defect in digestion, or some deviation from the straight and narrow path.

We try to evade the wealth of courses and recourses of unconscious ideas that struggle to gain expression, whereas dream work is cloaked in ever new and multiple significations. We try to reduce the dream to four formal commonplaces, imprisoning in our conceptual barricades the enigmas that break down into rebuses.

Furthermore, as we know, not every dream can be interpreted if the psychic forces that have deformed them battle unstintingly against investigatory work.

It also happens that the dream thoughts, as we gradually encounter them over the course of an interpretation, are forced to remain unfinished and lead from all sides into the web-like tangle of our intellectual world. When this occurs, it leaves the dream deferred to another dream (or to some further acte manqué, if not to a symptom) because the emptiness before which the work is halted is

only a momentary barrier, exposed on a subsequent re-beginning.

In the play of psychic forces, resistance operates tirelessly by night as by day. Often, however, with the passing of darkness, that bit that suffices to form the text of a dream, in deforming it, loses strength. Thus the resistances protected by the sleep state work deviously to advance a manifest plot made up of images and contents not only plausible but frequently expected, predictable or banal. All this, however, does not keep a whole pack – invisible through long, stubborn censorships or repressions – not only from existing, but above all from triggering the message that inspires the dream. It is with this message that one must measure the counterfeit art of dream work.

Resistance enters into combat while listening and investigation proceed: the more that latent thoughts become conscious, the fiercer grows the battle. Until there remains no option but to interrupt the finalized representations to which control of reflection is entrusted, turning the attention to a single dream element, which – released from all intentionality of discourse – attracts, by

unforeseen contiguity or importunate association, the stigmatized and unwanted thoughts.

We wander, then, between aimless thoughts and encounter precisely the germinal ideas of that particular dream.

But in reality there is no security in this strange voyage, there are no guarantees of revealed truth, there is only the fascination of a highly refined and trenchant exploration among the psychic representations and connections of every single dreamer.

And so the dream, like a lapsus and a symptom, is formulated as an occasion neither to be missed nor underestimated. The dream, able to revive another knowledge or authorize unexpected knowledge, the dream belongs with full entitlement to the complex, intense ethical activity of daily life. However, if we should submit, without striking a blow, the work of hermeneutic levelling to which it has been subjected by our therapeutic and hypochondriac era, we will be reduced to calling dreams only desires for objects and for comfort. We will confuse dreams with the horizons of a life of satiation: horizons that make complaint endless.

And we will in the meantime witness the painful disappearance of the scandalous, tragic, and drive-charged mixture of being with which Francis Bacon – the painter – defined his own desperate optimism.

[translated by David Jacobson]