

The Interpretation of Dreams Part 2: Autodidasker as Recognition and Microcosm

“In psycho-analysis there is no choice for us but to declare mental processes to be in themselves unconscious, and to compare of them by consciousness with the perception of the outside world through the sense-organs; we even hope to extract fresh knowledge from the comparison. The psycho-analytic assumption of unconscious mental activity appears to us, on one hand, a further development over that of primitive animism which caused our own consciousness to be reflected all around us, and, on the other hand, it seems to be an extension of the corrections begun by Kant of our view in regard to external perception. Just as Kant warned us not to overlook that fact that our perception is subjectively conditioned and must not be regarded as identical with the phenomena perceived but never really discerned, so psycho-analysis bids us not to set the conscious perception in the place of the unconscious mental process which is its object. The mental, like the physical, is not necessarily in reality just what it appears to us to be.”—“The Unconscious” (1915)

Freud’s dream with the word coinage “Autodidasker” (meaning “author,” “self-taught,” “Lasker,” and “Lasalle”) [cf. 301ff.] is a good example within Freud’s dream-evidence of a bridge between the dream material and his own conscious proclivities for word play, puzzle-solving, and self-narrative meaning, as well as his claims to have located the realms of the unconscious and the preconscious. Indeed, the bridge of word play calls into question what Freud actually discovered and accomplished by his methods. Given the highly verbal nature of his method, from where does actual meaning arise? Is there an actual objective reality to which the subjectivity of consciousness is held accountable?

A real issue for his system is whether, given that a convincing interpretation has or has not been offered, have the subject’s motives have been uncovered or simply attributed? If the former is the case, then, recognition becomes a matter of real importance. How does the subject identify the reasons or motives that were previously unacknowledged and that were, nonetheless, spurs behind agency?

Consider some aspects of the following mechanisms that Freud identifies:

- I. *Displacement* (304ff.): the meaning of the dream may not be located where the most energetic images manifest themselves.
- II. *Representation* (307-328): representation calls for a logic of relations, yet dreams refuse to offer such a logic. They have to be discovered through a narrative exegesis. Dreams refuse contrast and reduce to uniformity through a form of “just as” equation, even in cases of seeming inversion.
- III. *Visualization* (329): displacement and representation typically involve a flattening and deescalating of the pictorial image’s vividness or power.
- IV. *Second Revision* (330ff.); thus, a secondary interpretation is necessary in verbal form which can unpack the condensation and drive to uniformity in representation. The revision may even change itself in the process of trying to meet the dream representation part way. Freud concludes that this is essentially what our conscious does in everyday life (431-432).

Taken together, this suggests that the process of therapy, for Freud, is the manner of life-survival, yet it may then reduce thought to evolved adaptability.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 6, “The Dream Work”

1. How does Freud understand the translation into symbolism? (287-289)
2. If the degree of condensation is finally indeterminable, then what measure of trust can we place in uncovering meaning? Why does Freud reject condensation as a form of omission? (290)
3. How would you respond initially as a reader to the “beautiful dream” of pages 292-295?

4. How does Freud locate displacement? How is it related to condensation and censorship? (304-307)
5. How does he track the issue of representation? Why does the dream refuse logical connections? How, then, are such connections discovered? (308-311)
6. What does Freud see as the limitations of the either-or method? (312ff.)
7. Likewise, what about the methods of “just as,” identification, and composition? Why are these necessary? (314-316)
8. Is Freud correct to claim that “dreams are absolutely egoistic”? (317)
9. What are the purposes of temporal inversion and of the sharpness or clarity of dream-images? (320-324)
10. How do we locate or observe subordinate dream action and simultaneity? (326-328)
11. What is the range of interpretive possibilities in pictorial and verbal representability? (329ff.)
12. Freud’s narration often calls on the reader’s empathetic following. Does such open one to potential corruption when it comes to his sexual reductions? (361 is another example of his Oedipal myth.)
13. Look over the sequence from pages 377-402. What do these reveal about Freud’s own personal and moral conflicts? What do they suggest about absurdity and coherence? (cf. 391)
14. Is it true that inference inside the dream-world is always from dream-thoughts? Is inference always an inter-system process? (395ff.)
15. Look at pages 404-407. Must dreamwork always end in a tragic loss of the beautiful, or even of the uncanny or sublime? Is demystification always a banalization?
16. Likewise, look at the Rabelaisian dream and its interpretation on pages 408-411. What does this reveal about the uses of the grotesque?
17. Is the dream on pages 411-412 a necessary loss of comedy?
18. Speculate as to how Freud’s need for a companion and an enemy have shaped his own readings? (419)
19. What, then, does the means of “as if” offer the interpreter? Is there such a thing as true analogy for Freud? (424-425)
20. Why does Freud suggest that our minds require order for intelligibility? (431)

Chapter VII, “The Psychology of the Dream-Processes” [Not required reading]

Chapter seven does not fit well the rest of the book, in part, because it reveals the residual effects of Freud’s earlier 1895 “Project,” his mechanistic and materialistic account of psychical energy being like that of electrical energy. The free flow of the “latent” closed source of psychical energy must be released at times; it flows more evenly in dreams, though it is disrupted by the sporadically interrupted flow of the manifest energy which must adjust to the world’s demands. Ultimately, Freud still hoped for a neurological account of the psyche, and he never entirely abandoned this dream. So what does chapter seven add to *The Interpretation of Dreams*?

Freud argues that the element that refuses to be integrated into the interpretative system is “the point at which it ascends into the unknown” (448); or rather, it is the place of descent into mechanism and determinism. Yet the quasi-mystical language is revealing in its own way. Freud’s understands there is no way to finally map the neural without the human means of language. The problem, of course, is that the unknown must be explained, but explanation here is always a reduction, a desacralizing of supposed meaning, and yet Freud can only impart this within the inevitable means of language itself. For Freud, consciousness is actually the result of the preconscious warring with the unconscious, mostly successfully, and various disruptions combined with meaning vaguely disclose our actual being (though this is just energy current along neural pathways.)

Here are some key ways Freud seeks in this chapter to provide a mechanistic model behind the ones discussed in chapter 2 to 6:

A. *The Forgetting of Dreams* (438-453)

1. Memory's faulty nature threatens the data of dream themselves.
2. Analysis reveals that even insignificant elements have important meaning.
3. In a determinist system there are no arbitraries. There is no actual randomness, despite appearances.
4. The nature of resistance, its distortion and transvaluation, must be understood within the system.
5. Doubt is always a form of resistance, just as forgetting is hostility.
6. Over-determination is a necessity because one interpretation is not the only one possible.
7. Thus, the allegory of abstraction is at times a way of uncovering the attempt to import an analogy of universal elevated ideals (cf. 447-448)
8. Sleep is the reduction of psychic censorship.
9. So the association is a real connection in the unconscious and appears as a forced one in the censorship of the preconscious

B. *Regression* (453-465)

1. Psychic locality is comparable to a scope we use to bring something into range, though there is no actual real spatial reality. Instead, there are instances and systems.
2. The memory system is the basis for association at some level, while quality or character is a differing system.
3. The preconscious is that which struggles with the unconscious and prepares for consciousness.
4. The movement from unconscious to conscious is progressive, thus the approach to it from consciousness is regressive.
5. Cathexis, excitation, discharge, and (signal) disruption are ways to describe the raw materials in their unshaped form.
6. Infantile transference form early visuals form the most primal forms of unconsciousness.
7. There is, then, a 3-mode regression:
 - a) topical: see above.
 - b) temporal: the return to infantile formulations
 - c) formal: these primitive modes draw on the later ones and pull them back.

C. *Wish-Fulfillment* (465-482)

1. Four possible origination points: external stimuli during the day; rejected desire left unfulfilled; older suppressed materials; actual bodily desires that arise at night.
2. So, unconscious wish-fulfillment is often related to left over unfulfilled conscious desires (cf. 469 for 5 types).
3. Pain and punishment dreams evince the involvement of the ego in dream-formation because the ego resists certain unfulfilled wish-fulfillments.
4. Painful, resisted ideas are transferred to harmless ones.
5. Continued lack of fulfillment transfers to more acceptable secondary activities.
6. Psychosis is a fuller breaking out of the unconscious.
7. Hysteria is the merger of two highly contrasting wish fulfillments.
8. The drive to sleep is a dominant drive.

- D. *Waking Caused by Dreams, The Function of Dreams, The Anxiety Dream (482-493)*
1. The drive for comprehensibility may even intrude in the dream, and this may even awaken us.
 2. Nothing is actually forgotten but brought up again by the right trigger.
 3. All material is either bound or discharged in the dream-process.
 4. Day-residues are similar.
 5. The preconscious never has complete control of the unconscious, so our phobias are like fortress outposts seeking to control particularly strong unconscious energies.
 6. The release of pain or anxiety does not guarantee their dissipation.
- E. *The Primary and Secondary Processes, Repression (493-508)*
1. His model still has to account for abnormal processes.
 2. Trains of thought may be concentrated into a concept.
 3. Compromises arise in convergence tensions.
 4. Likewise, free association forms rather loose connections.
 5. Contradictions can also parallel one another without obvious tension.
 6. So, two differing processes seem to be at work: one which forms normal combinations and thoughts; the other which forms more abnormal, incorrect ones.
 7. As a result, there is both a system that energizes free flow and one that hesitates and retards the free flow.
 8. The second system cathects an idea when it has pain accompanying it.
 9. Basic repression is the necessary struggle for our consciousness which holds back the painful discharge of certain unconscious energies.
 10. Some of these break through in the presence of humor and laughter.
 11. The preconscious finds ways to neutralize the painful processes in the normal, healthy person.
- F. *The Unconscious and Consciousness, Reality (508-517)*
1. As a result, much of the topographical metaphor employed by Freud, he admits is not really "true," that is it is not the best description of the neurological reality. Reality is actually two processes of neural excitation.
 2. Likewise, thought is really not localized anywhere but exists along and between numerous associative neural tracks.
 3. What, then, is the "conscious"? A form of expression of various impulses via a sense-organ that perceives various psychical aspects.
 4. Thus, human consciousness is really a hyper-cathexis of a higher mobile quantity than that of other animals.
 5. The ethical questions of human responsibility are, therefore, far more complex than simple ethics would have us believe.

A Theological Interpretation and Critique

Freud's system presents a fundamental problem that continues to haunt modern neuro-science. If our psyches are ultimately simply regulatory, then, there is no real search for truth, rather only for symptoms. Things become significant in terms of either regulating the pressure built up within the flow of psychical energy, or as a kind of foreign substance (born out of trauma) that must be absorbed and, thereby, eliminated. The definition of health assumed here is one of pain and pleasure regulation. Why we should adopt such an idea considering we have access to many more is itself left unanswered. After all, why seek to regulate the stability of any one organism anyway?

Given our various philosophies and mythologies, what is the ontology and aesthetic which provides such a meaning beyond the self? What direction does the journey of reflection and understanding travel in? Upwards to the mystery or downwards to the unknown? Is the pattern and need for puzzle-solving the method of meaning-making that is the real work of the dream work, rather than dream-interpretation? We give narrative coherence, and thereby a socio-psychological nomos to our troubling experiences that seem to defy coherence or normal channels of meaning. The possibility of a social and narrative meaning raises a number of questions:

- On what terms do we affect a center of association?
- Is it simply a matter of high reoccurrence of images or words?
- Is the notion of displacement really a sorting out of the “over-determination” of symbols?
- Or is it rather the natural ludic play of language which relies on an under-determination that the audience fills in with choices?
- And, therefore, are such readings of dreams (or other phenomena) an account of the narrative of elements (rather than the half-remembered dream itself)?

Consider the various categories (method, logical tendencies) that are necessary for a psychoanalytic project. The notions of a rejected either-or, of “just as,” of identification, composition, reciprocity, agreement, competition, and redress—all these are ways of assembling our knowledge. As Freud acknowledges, a Kantian vision of our categorical understanding would separate us from the things-in-themselves—we are always bound by our epistemic organization of space-time in human personalist forms. And yet, if such is whom we are, then, the phenomenology of our life should take no other form, and neither then can we access the true form of our neural existence. Should we, then with Freud conclude that such methods are masks for primal evolved desires of sex, competition, and violence? May they not also be matters of creative joy? Might our finite and temporary experience of reality be the way reality is meant to interact with us? Why should they not be true testimonies to that which is beyond and above us?

Are we capable of self-deception? Certainly. Does our art (poetry, fiction, dance, music, theatre) draw some of its energy from these most basic drives and desires? Likely so. We often tell stories to dissemble, and at times this dissembling is a more self-aware activity than other times. Yet does this deny that they also emerge as something more and transcend these conflicts?

Freud too readily seeks to reduce the more artistic forms which transcend these supposedly primal building materials. He is correct to see the presence of the absurd, but to limit it to certain neural systemic conflicts is short-sighted. Absurdity within art can be a way of placing the reader or viewer in a troubled relation to the text—one of more or less power, a problematic that can invoke the uncanny. The most intense poetic or artistic images are often the most associative, and at times the most fraught with potential irony and conflict, yet these are also often events within the larger story, as thus have a wider and more powerful meaning. Absurdity can resist adjustment and force us to live with our limitations. Yet, at times, it does offer us the material for explanation, that is adjustment until meaning is made normal; thus, located. Surely, distinctiveness or definition is a visual one (and has analogies with music, poetry, emplotment, and so on). We need these variations of meaning and drama for the work of the fine arts. Still, the presence of obscurity can be an invitation to participation, as well as an affirmation of the mystery within the ontology and aesthetic of the work.

Such ways of organizing and leaving incomplete are also necessary elements for biography. We fill in or sketch in outline the details of a life. We also make more or less concrete some events by varying the details of specificity, and specificity can take on measures of ontological and ethical solidity. We

assemble details in order to make judgments, and Freud is correct to call attention to what we pay the most or least attention to. Gaps can be distortive of a life account, and the life-narrative is a key aspect of our political, economic, social, and moral judgments; thus, our temptation to distortion, for by such a means, we hold each other (or absolve each other of being) accountable. The gloss or commentary (e.g. in a footnote) is often another measure of this accountability—it contextualizes and thus allows us to further see the evidence differently.

The first trinity of unconsciousness, preconsciousness, and consciousness has some measure of “agency.” Yet agency, in strictly mechanistic terms, would be illusory. The unconscious is *not* for Freud agency. Freud has no choice but to employ the language of agency even to refer to that which is, finally, unrecoverable, except by the signature traced in the conscious. The language of agency would seem to make the unconscious a matter of myth or of metaphor. Surely, the emergent “I” is entitled to resist its reduction to component parts, or better said, the robbing of its soul, a theft of its essence by a switch for a system of systems, of energetic economy? Likewise, if the unconscious can only be signaled by a grammar designed and employed from the conscious, then, perhaps the unconscious is only a matter of self-interpretive exegesis through narrative construction and the recovery of *nomos*. And if this is so, then perhaps there are better ways to narrate the connections our psyches do have to a reality beyond them?

A narrative explanation of dueling agencies is appealing to some, and perhaps this is so because it provides a temptation to shift blame away from ourselves (our conscious selves, some aspect of ourselves). We image or mythologize interpersonal struggle and drama within ourselves. Good theatre has a cathartic effect upon our sympathies in both comedy and tragedy. The drama of a fated self ironically can provide a kind of stoic gnosis—we are saved by understanding. In such a vision, we become a theatre to ourselves, yet within the conversation and exegesis of therapy, so a theatre for others, too.

Perhaps one way to reconsider what Freud actually discovered is to redefine the question of the unconscious, not as a hidden current or as a theatre of warfare, but as a place of skill and trust. Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* describes how we go about learning. Much of what we learn, we do not necessarily learn by direct attention, and much of what we know remains subsidiary, rather than focal, much of the time. The notion of Freudian substitution becomes important in its own way, being easily subject to a genealogy of false consciousness, but what if there is a means of true consciousness, that of humility and growth. This makes an answer like C.S. Lewis “transposition” a useful point of interaction. The analogous, transcendent imagination is hierarchical in its ascent, in drawing upward (rather than reducing) our human experiences into higher realms of signification and beauty. Rather than regression ever downward, we have the possibility of ascent.

The journey in Christ is not primarily to know myself or to pursue a life of self-discovery; rather, it is to know Christ and the fellowship of his sufferings. Perhaps, then, Paul Ricoeur is correct to see that psychoanalysis is not about primal or theological (i.e. metaphysical) questions, and yet when it practices applied cultural analysis, it does just that—it smuggles in an aesthetic and ethic, albeit, a rather shaky, reductive, even corrupting one. Freud’s practice makes metaphysical claims about the universe, about human anthropology, about art and myth-making. We must employ analogy and the analogy of agency if we are to speak of ourselves. We have no other way of talking about anything for very long—even structure and mathematics eventually return to agency and action. We need story, myth, and account of character to picture our lives. But there are better or worse myths to live by.