

The Stuff of Dreams

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REAM-LIFE,— elusive, mystifying, paradoxical; ever hurling forth a challenge to the thinker, ever defying solution. Dreams are as familiar as man himself; they appear and vanish in rythmical succession enshrouded in fantastic mist which our mind's eye has never satisfactorily penetrated. They have played their part in shaping the destinies both of individuals and of entire peoples. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on," as Shakespeare expresses it, "and our little life is rounded with a sleep."¹

Interest in dreams, as in every other object of human thought, has been subject to ebb and flood, and it is the privilege of our generation to witness a flood-tide of dream popularity after several centuries of reflux. A brief survey of the trend of present day research will not permit us to subscribe to the opinion of a certain Catholic writer. "As a matter of fact," he states, "dreams are now—we speak of civilized people—seldom heeded . . ."² Undoubtedly we are to understand from this that the race has ceased to consider them as realities, as portents of future events, "heralds of eternity." With this conclusion we would not quarrel; it does seem that this time-stained conception of dream-life has gone by the boards; but in its stead there is offered a gross, unromantic, materialistic theory, fascinating in a degree, yet in the final reckoning drawn from poisoned wells. Psychoanalysis, self-styled the religion of the twentieth century, has thrust the dream problem once more upon Catholic thinkers; in justice to our traditions, in vindication of our claim to the central niche in the Hall of Philosophy, we must pick up the gauntlet.

Dream philosophy has by no means escaped the common lot of progress and relapse, and by tracing its course as far back as documents and traditions can guide us, we find that its many meanderings have been motivated by one of three general tend-

¹ The Tempest, IV, i.

² Cath. Ency. "Dreams."

encies, the natural, the supernatural or a combination of both. Primitive man seems to have been unable to realize the separation of the domain of dream-life from that of actuality, since, although he did not advance to the formulation of his beliefs in philosophic code, it is evident from his actions that for him dreams were but the continuation of real experiences. In the quiet of night he shook off the sordid shackles by which he was hampered during his waking hours, and wandered far afield into a delightful land to revel in a host of novel and entrancing adventures.

But with the further development of society and the consequent glimpses of a higher and remoter world, a new coloring was added to the significance of dreams. They now came to be looked upon, in whole or in part, as channels of communication with a supernatural agency, especially among the Egyptians and Assyrians where it was taught that every dream embodied a message from the gods, who took occasion of the lucid hypersensitiveness of sleep to confer with man. The Jews, secure in the tenets of revelation, believed that only certain dreams were indicative of divine will; although at times there crept in a superstitious tendency to consider all such phenomena as omens, yielding to interpretation in the hands of professional sooth-sayers.

The Greeks, however, gave greater prominence to the natural element of the dream, as we may gather from the following passage of Aceius:

"Dreams are in general reflex images
Of things that men in waking hours have known;
But sometimes dreams of loftier character
Rise in the tranced soul, inspired by Jove,
Prophetic of the future."

This view was further indorsed by Socrates and Plato, while among the Romans, Pliny attributed such dreams as occur after heavy meals to the ordinary workings of the mind—others to divine interposition.³ Cicero, however, would have none of the supernatural explanations; for him all dream phenomena were linked up with purely natural causes.⁴

Aristotle, who had carefully studied the entire question of sleep, concurred in the belief that dreams of the future some-

³ Plato, "Republic," Book IX.

⁴ Cicero, "De Divinatione."

times come true in the sequel—not because they are inspired by God, but rather through mere coincidence, or by reason of the delicate sensibility of the faculties in this state. In waking hours many images fail to come into consciousness; but at night, when the senses are at rest from distracting external influences, these latent images ply their trade. In sleep all impressions are grotesquely exaggerated: a slight sound in the ear of the sleeper may appear as a clap of thunder, and should a bit of moisture rest on the tongue, he may imagine that he is sipping a most delectable beverage. Many interesting observations on this question are to be found in Aristotle's writings, all based upon this common-sense view-point of a subject only too often exploited by humbug. Still later Christian philosophy, crystallized in the teachings of the Schoolmen, maintained the twofold cause of dreams, animal and spiritual; but concerning them we shall speak more in detail in another passage.

In the modern era, especially since Materialism has once more pushed its way to the foreground, dreams have been dealt with as products of the brain like feeling and thought, assignable to normal causes and operating according to universal laws. This view, with peculiar colorings, has been stressed by the psychoanalysts and is in great vogue at the present time. Since, according to Freud's own words the dream is "the via regia to the unconscious," the keystone of his edifice, it follows that in order to understand the system as a whole we must first acquaint ourselves with the part which it has assigned to dream-life.

Freud's geography of the mind recognized three great regions,—consciousness, comprising those thoughts, feelings and desires actually uppermost at a given time; foreconsciousness, where are to be found latent thoughts, feelings and wishes which may at will be summoned into consciousness; and lastly, the unconscious, the storehouse of the repressed desires of early infancy. This last state held a peculiar fascination for Freud and he made it the special subject of his research. The jungles of the unconscious are impervious to direct introspection; its aims, chief among which is the love craving, are grotesquely at variance with those of the conscious, social self, and are excluded from consciousness by a sort of subliminal mechanism, the "psychic censor."

Where do dreams fit into this economy? If we are to give

ear to the psychoanalyst, they are to be directly referred to the long forgotten wishes of infancy which have been tucked away in some nook or other of the unconscious. Such wishes, manifestly in opposition to the standards of conscious thought, have been repressed and are vigorously excluded from the conscious domain. However, a vehement tendency impels them to seek egress from their confinement, and to this end they resort to many specious devices.

First of all, several of them coalesce, are "condensed" in such a fashion that only two or three remain. Then in order the better to befuddle the censor, the important elements of this condensed unit recede, while the lesser ones assume the garb of importance. This is termed the process of "displacement." Thereupon the condensed and displaced wishes take a further step in this ingenious work of deception by concealing their real nature under symbolical appearances, so that they may thus have some concrete expression in which to come before the mind. There can be no hard and fast system of symbols, inasmuch as they depend upon the haphazard associations of personal experience; although certain ones—they may be found in any text-book on the subject—seem to be common and universally employed.

Once this concrete expression has been realized through the work of dramatization, the outlaws are ready to attempt their escape to the upper regions. Obviously it would be foolhardy to risk a trial during the waking state, when the vigilance of the censor is at its height; so they bide their time until the wee sma' hours when their enemy is expected to be off guard. If successful, they present their dumb show in the guise of a dream, thus enjoying for a brief space the domination of the mind until the censor is aroused, who will lose no time in expelling the usurpers. Such is the Freudian account of the genesis of the dream,—a mere working out of our unconscious desires in sleep in symbolic form; for although Freud admits the actuality of undisguised fulfillment dreams, yet they are the exception which proves his rule.

Freud did not stop with mere theorizing but put his principles to work in the attempt to effect a cure for his numerous hysterical patients. He argued thus: the struggle to repress and blot out overwhelming desires naturally works havoc in mind and body; to benefit the sufferer the motivating desires

must be unravelled, and it is precisely in the dream that we shall find material for this process of analysis. This fathoming and probing of the generating unconscious desires in order to reveal the central complex is properly termed "psychoanalysis." Perhaps an illustration will serve to bring out the mechanism more clearly.

A certain woman patient dreamed repeatedly of a smell of pudding burning. "At first she persisted in denying ever having known such a smell attracting her attention; but finally it was brought to her mind that at the crisis of an unhappy love affair she had been employed in baking a pudding, which she had overdone. In her conscious mind, she had forgotten the incident; and so it was all the more suited to act as a symbol for her repressed love to use in order to evade the censor and obtain imaginary fulfillment."⁵

But how does this unentangling help the patient? One might rather expect that it would prove detrimental, since it seems to entail the re-opening of healed wounds. On the contrary, the wounds have never healed over; they have been thrust forth from consciousness but have not ceased to impair the subject's welfare, though he be no longer awake of their influence. Once the tormented person can be brought to realize the exact nature of the unseen foe, he can then choose suitable weapons of defense and boldly come forward to do battle for his safety. It may be well to note right here that on this point we may agree with psychoanalysis; despite all its flummery and claptrap it has nevertheless secured the alleviation of the sufferings of countless nerve patients by the method here outlined. Whether or not this be a new discovery or merely a novel application of time-hallowed principles, is another question to be considered later.

Later psychoanalysts have further embroidered the concept of their leader, or have considered the problem from a new angle. We have seen that the earlier explanations were concerned with the cause of dreams, and intended to assist the patient in gaining a better insight into his condition. But Jung and others, while adhering to this interpretation, emphasize the symbolic meaning of the dream and look rather to the future solution. In their estimation the dream is not so much the ful-

⁵ Ratcliff, "A History of Dreams," p. 147.

filling in the imagination of a suppressed wish as it is a purposeful activity in the nervous economy,—a compensation to restore the natural balance of things, an “agency working in our minds to repair the inequalities of our lot by giving hopes of better days.” In the dream we escape from the unhappy reality of actual existence, obtain the success denied us in real life and shield ourselves from despair. In other words the divergence is in this: Freud places the primary purpose of the dream in wish fulfillment; Jung in compensation for the limitations of actual life. The former method obtains the cure of past ills; the latter enables us to avoid those of the future. Not that there is any incompatibility between the two systems; one complements the other.

We shall borrow an illustration which will bring out the different views of the two schools. “It is related by a writer of a book of travels how once he met with a native chief who always wore women’s clothes. He learned that this man had once been a great and bloodthirsty warrior, but that, at the very height of his fame, after an expedition that had proved an unparalleled success, he had dreamed that the Great White Spirit had come to him, and bidden him from that time onwards be no longer a man, but a woman. The chief had thenceforward dressed like a woman and ordered his behavior on the model of the women of his tribe.”⁶ If we agree with Freud, such actions indicate an unconscious desire for a peaceful life; while Jung would be inclined to interpret them as compensatory for the chief’s previous energetic career. These same standards are followed out in the attempt to fathom the significance of dreams.

Thus have the new psychologists brought back the dream question from a state of quasi-oblivion, and by reducing it to a commonplace formula have divested it of the glamor of romance. That the theory contains a grain of truth we would not deny: such is a quality of all error. It has met with more or less opposition from all camps, not only because of the thread of materialistic philosophy which runs through the entire fabric, but also by reason of its pseudo-scientific terminology, its fanciful assumptions and its extreme generalizations. It now remains for us to glance at the outstanding features of Catholic thought around and about this subject.

⁶ Ratcliff, loc. cit.

This problem was foisted upon the consideration of Christian thinkers from the earliest ages of the Church. Sorcery and divination were rife in the first few centuries of its existence, and consequently it became the task of the Fathers to warn the people against false dreams and prophets. In fact, clear thinking on this point was a necessary condition to the sympathetic understanding of the fundamentals of Christianity. Briefly, the stand of the Fathers was as follows: Allowing that dreams are the natural product of the human organism and not an aberration nor a violation of nature, they nevertheless maintained the possibility and the fact that dreams may proceed from divine or diabolical sources. They may seem to have stressed natural causation, but this was essential to counteract the exaggerated notions of the time; their chief care was to prevent mere dreams being interpreted as visions.⁷

In the Middle Ages dreams, visions, nightmares and all this sort of phenomena ran riot, and popular beliefs assumed a high coloring of superstition. Saint Thomas Aquinas did much to clarify the Christian stand and has left us a careful, compact and scientific study of this vexing problem, both in his Commentary on Aristotle and in the *Summa Theologica*.⁸ Modern Catholic philosophers and theologians, although they have kept abreast of recent developments and have not hesitated to benefit by the findings of science, have followed the lead of the Angelic Doctor. We now wish to present what seems to be a fair epitome of their teachings.

Properly speaking the dream is a product of the imagination; during sleep the images here conserved are summoned forth and unite to form new and most curious representations—a process not unlike that of the psychoanalysts. However, dreams may also influence the external senses; just as the fantasy derives its images through the medium of the senses, so by a reversal of the process, these images may pass from fantasy to the senses. Thus the latter are aroused and may proceed to act as in the waking state. The weirdness of our dreams is explained by the fact that the senses are bound and reason no longer holds sway, so that logical and natural sequence of images is impossible.

⁷ Cf. Tertullian, "De Anima." Lactantius: "De Opificio Dei."

⁸ Comm. in Arist., Lect. iv, "De somniis." *Summ. Theol.* 2a 2ae, q. 95, art. 6: q. 154, art. 5: q. 172, art. 1, ad 2um.

Saint Thomas, in answer to the query, "Is divination through dreams unlawful?" has this to say: It depends on the source of the dream, and whether or not it can be the cause of future events, or assist us to come to a knowledge of them.⁹ Dreams arise either from internal or external causes. Such images may appear in the fantasy as were dwelt upon while awake, or the internal disposition of the body may cause a definite reaction in the imagination. Although such dreams cannot instruct us in the knowledge of the spiritual world, nevertheless they are valuable to the physician inasmuch as they may serve as a barometer of the patient's interior condition—another point in common with the modern psychologists. Likewise the external cause of dreams may be twofold: a corporeal cause such as atmospheric conditions, which may play upon the imagination; and a spiritual cause—God, either in Himself or through His Angels, and the Devil. Once we have ascertained the cause of a particular dream the answer to the query is evident.

In the light of Catholic teaching what can be said of the psychoanalytic theory of dreams? Any comparison between two such systems must necessarily be unsatisfactory, if not wholly impracticable. We have no common ground on which to meet and air our views; ours is a philosophical explanation based upon scholastic psychological principles concerning the nature and mutual relations of mind and organism, and the truths of revealed doctrine. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, can hardly be ranked as philosophic; it possesses no fundamental principles, no exact terminology; it disregards logic and explains away human nature on a basis widely different from our own. We shall, therefore, attempt nothing more than the indication of the chief discrepancies between these two lines of thought, with an eye to any possible reconciliations which may suggest themselves.

An obvious incompatibility lies in the fact that Catholic philosophy holds to the possibility of supernatural causation or motivation of dreams, a truth attested by revelation; for the psychoanalyst there is no realm but the material. Psychoanalysis is in direct antithesis to our psychology; the dominant role of the unconscious and of the psychic censor, the far-fetched and personified exposition of the genesis of dreams can find no

⁹ Summ. Theol. 2a 2ae, q. 95, art. 6.

place in our system. If, however, we abstract from their pretentious verbiage, there seems to be no error in stressing the element of wish-fulfilment and compensation in accounting for the character of dreams. It is undoubtedly a fact of individual experience that many of them seem to be concerned with the working out of our unexpressed desires and afford us an escape from the harsh difficulties of the daily grind. This is particularly true of day-dreams, for we are often most averse to be drawn away from our cherished imaginings, to be rudely summoned back from that land where "whatever is, is right." But there is nothing iconoclastic or novel in such a theory, nor is it at odds with Catholic teaching.

As to the therapeutic side of the question we have no fundamental objection, provided care be taken in its application that no injury be offered to the delicate mental and moral mechanism of the organism. The Catholic practice of Confession long ago attested the value of unburdening the mind of dangerous material which, if repressed, might work untold ruin. In this respect Freud seems to have been little more than a "Christopher Columbus of the obvious," despite his mystifying and fantastic jargon. But we must not overstep our bounds; further comparison between the New Psychology and Catholic thought would involve a complete criticism of psychoanalysis,—a task far beyond the scope of this paper.

A final word—this study does not pretend to be exhaustive; on the contrary it is not even sufficient. Our sole aim has been to map out the broad lines of the problem in the hope thus to commend it to the further consideration of our readers. Psychoanalysis is far from being a dead issue; it is still the fashionable cult in many prominent circles, and perhaps its most fascinating appeal comes from the extreme importance which it has attached to dreams. The psychoanalytic interpretation of these phenomena seems to be gradually usurping the field; many, even Catholics, do not hesitate to accept it as it stands, notwithstanding the manifest distortions of truth. If the meager thoughts here set down do but aid in the realization of the fact that there exists a Catholic theory of dreams, equally as attractive and far more logical and rational than that of the psychoanalysts, our purpose shall have been attained.