

I Dream, Therefore I Am

Cătălin Dîrțu*

“But his eyes, beneath closed lashes, now awoke in dream’s sweet charm”

Mihai Eminescu, *Third Epistle*

Abstract: According to the poet’s inspired words, dreams enable “our inner eye” to catch a glimpse of another reality. The “different” reality always has the ability of surprising and even shaking us, given that none of us mortals has ever been able to escape dreaming. Impregnated by strong emotions, the dream is often experienced so intensely, that it can influence our mental state for the entire day. Accompanied most often by the sensation that everything happening to us is real, the dream seems to be the second-ranking game of the human psyche, worth taking seriously. And the fact that scientists have only been able to get a shallow grasp of its secrets, my goal in this paper is to conduct a periplus of the primary theories that have attempted to surprise, in its essence, this sleep-related process capable of marking everyone’s awakening.

Keywords: dream, interpretation, psychoanalysis, evolutionary psychology, cognitivism

Regarded from the perspective of both researchers and ordinary people, the dream has remained, to this day, a strange, complex, and challenging concept, which is proven by the multitude and diversity of theories meant to explain it. The first set of theories – extremely simple and convenient for those who resist giving in to the strangeness of dreams – reunites experts denying their relevance whatsoever. The deeply negative attitude toward dreams manifested by such scientists determines them to refute any positive aspect related to this phenomenon. According to them, the dream is an insignificant rest of the diurnal mental life, manifested during night-time. When the brain relaxes, there are energy remains to be released. Hence, dreams are

* Cătălin Dîrțu (✉)

Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Romania

e-mail: dirtucatalin@yahoo.com

nothing but trash – a random discharge of neuronal energy during sleep. The need to release the useless energetic garbage indeed makes dreams universal. According to dream deniers, however, the energy release is random; hence, dreams cannot be considered a mental phenomenon. It should have a stage-based structure, meaning, and significance if it were a process. Nonetheless, the incoherence and strangeness of dreams – sometimes throwing us into the most unrealistic and absurd of situations – is perfectly explicable precisely by the lack of inner significance and coherence of the dreaming phenomenon. The diversity of dreams in terms of the form contents, length, complexity, emotions, etc, makes it almost impossible to classify them according to anything but superficial characteristics.

At the opposite extreme of the theories denying any relevance of dreams, one may place the theories conferring peak significance upon dreams; they see them as carrying messages of utmost importance from the afterworld. Such theories comprise all theologies (more or less elaborate). All consider dreams highly relevant, from shamanism to the polytheistic or monotheistic religions. For the shamans, dreams are a vehicle transporting people into the world of spirits and facilitating communication with them. According to polytheistic religions, dreams comprised messages from the gods, but such messages were far from easy to comprehend. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (one of the oldest surviving writings), the seemingly absurd dreams of the hero Gilgamesh are interpreted by Goddess Ninsun herself – his mother who is “wise and with deep knowledge” – because he is unable to interpret them himself.

For the ancient Greeks, the messages sent by gods through dreams are not always in good faith. Greeks thought that the dreams sent by gods entered the dreamer’s soul through two gates: one fashioned of horn and one of ivory. Dreams entering through the ivory gate are deceitful, while those through the horn gate are real. When gods want to get a mortal lost, they take his mind first, according to the Greeks. Therefore, the rather jealous and quick-tempered Greek gods would send deceitful dreams either out of vengeance or simply to play with the fate of mortals. Thus, all relevant Antiquity leaders had around them one or more persons specialized in interpreting the signs sent by gods through dreams, stars, animal entrails, etc.

In monotheistic religions, also, dreams represent a significant message from the afterworld. It may come directly from God and subordinated entities such as the archangels or angels. In this context,

some dreams and visions are deemed deceitful (targeting our pride and arrogance directly) stemming from the father of lies, i.e., the devil.

It is worth making one other mention here. Not only theologians support the theory of dreams as messages from the afterworld. And the adepts of various forms of magic – catalogued as heretics by the theologians – share the idea. Except that dreams represent no longer a way to communicate with God or the angels, but a way to communicate firstly with the spirits of our ancestors or those of the people deceased recently and whose spirit is still around our world.

In the 19th century, following a hypothesis present in Aristotle's *On Dreams*, physiologists advanced the idea of sensory stimulation during sleep as a triggering factor of dreams. A great number of facts were brought to support this assumption; hence, it was no longer possible to ignore it, and it became highly popular among scientists.

Freud has the merit of having created the most comprehensive, coherent, and complex theory about dreams. According to his psychoanalytic theory, the dream is outside the realms of neurology, physiology, theology, and/or magic, and is placed in the field of psychology indefinitely. Freud has made it clear that the dream is a psychological process, and it may be interpreted only from the perspective of psychology. He vehemently stated that dreams always have a meaning and significance, thus rejecting the hypothesis of the dream as a residue, as garbage (Freud 2010b). In addition, whereas he admits that physiologists are right (he accepts partially the hypothesis of the role played by the physiological stimuli in triggering dreams), Freud argues that the role of physiological stimuli stops when the dream begins; from that moment on, dreams become a purely psychological process. Furthermore, according to the Austrian psychologist, the primary stimuli triggering dreams are not physiological but derive from the conflicts occurring between the primary forces of the human psyche; concerning the theological standpoint on dreams, Freud rejects it. However, it is worth highlighting that he considers dreams as carrying messages, but this time messages coming from the deep world of the human psyche. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the unconscious is, according to Freud, a world beyond the world of conscience, without dimensions and thus without limits, like the “afterworld”.

The definition of the dream from the perspective of psychoanalysis is clear: dreams represent a psychic process of illusory attainment of desires stemming from the unconscious. Its primary function is to

protect sleep, which is essential for our balance and mental health. The mechanism of dream production is not extremely hard to understand, either. Our unconscious is full of desires – from the simple, physiological ones to the more complex ones often prohibited by society and moral laws. However, regardless of interdictions, each desire (that Freud necessarily sees as a form of primal sexual desire, of the Eros) is endowed with its libidinal energy and is highly prone to become reality.

During sleep, when the force of the Superego (the psychic structure holding moral interdictions) is significantly diminished, and the desires making efforts to become reality risk ruining our sleep, the match between the two mental forces, i.e., the Unconscious and the Superego, usually ends in a draw. Following the armistice, the desires of the unconscious are allowed to manifest themselves, but only in a distorted, dissimulated, almost unrecognizable manner. It becomes clear why dreams often seem illogical and absurd, without any apparent meaning. Nonetheless, the benefits of dreams are clear: the camouflage or distorted form of our desires manifesting in dreams allows the Superego to avoid its raw, direct, and unpermitted update, while the Unconscious is allowed to consume under a somewhat more acceptable form the energy that – should it remain unconsumed – would make it impossible for us to get our much-needed rest.

It is obvious why both fighting camps support a compromise and why both collaborate to make dreams harder to comprehend. In a more direct phrasing, dreams lie to us. They hide – under a convenient mask – the intrapsychic conflict, and they lie to us that all is well, to protect our sleep and thus our mental integrity.

The effort of the two psychic structures to hide the identity of desires makes it necessary to have an interpreter, a psychoanalyst only, as per Freud. Dreams were the “royal road to the Unconscious” (Freud 2010a); hence, a psychoanalyst’s effort to interpret dreams was necessary because it was a condition to get a better insight into the neurotic symptoms displayed by patients under treatment.

The process of dream interpreting involves several steps and the observance of various rules, given that it unfolds in a reverse manner compared to its formation. Starting from realizing that the goal of the dream is to hide and dissimulate, an interpreter must look for the weak points of the camouflage. Only insofar as psychoanalysts focus on details, will they be allowed to get beyond the apparent form of the

dream and discover the latent ideas, the underlying causes of the dream (Freud 2010a).

In the following lines, I will try to provide a psychoanalytical explanation for the existence of nightmares. At a superficial glance, the existence of a nightmare cancels everything I have stated above about the sleep-protecting function of dreams. A nightmare is a dream, but it wakes us up and frightens us so terribly at times, that we are unable to get back to sleep. Often, it overshadows the entire following day. Freud explains that a dream turned into a nightmare is a dream failing its goal. Just as a guard may be outnumbered by burglars, a dream may become a nightmare if the desires attacking from the unconscious are far stronger.

Carl Jung argued for a much different theory of dreams. Without denying the existence of dreams as a manifestation of desires, Jung included them in a superficial layer of the unconscious, i.e., the personal unconscious. The true dreams – that are essential for us – are those produced by the collective unconscious, i.e., the most profound form of the unconscious.

The contents of the collective unconscious, according to Jung, are different from those of the personal unconscious dominated by desires. Therefore, the deepest level of the unconscious includes the archetypes (ancient psychic structures that may store the experience of tens of thousands of our ancestors and even preceding species, with a role in the emergence of our species). The dreams of the collective unconscious are, in Jung's opinion, products of activating these archetypal structures, among which the best known are the persona, the shadow, the self or animus, and the anima (Jung 2017).

The function of the dream is no longer to merely protect sleep, but also to warn us about the dangers lurking on our way to transform our soul into a spirit. For Jung, the human psyche has the mission of focusing on a balance based on energetic restoration and preservation of the status quo, as well as evolving in a dynamic balance, and the main issues on this road are related to the spiritual evolution of humankind.

According to Jung's theory, dreams are not deceitful, and they do not have the goal of hiding something. Our failure to understand them and their strange form is caused by the fact that they are the expression of an ancient language, impregnated by metaphors and symbols. We are the ones having forgotten this language; we may learn it again by restudying the myths and stories, by reading the theological,

alchemical, and Gnostic texts. A good interpreter of the daytime dreams and visions should have a great grasp of the symbolical and metaphorical language, different from our regular language (Jung 2014).

Jung's theory is a reliable source of inspiration for evolutionary psychologists who developed their view of dreams. Starting from Darwin's theory, evolutions highlight the adaptive function of dreams. More precisely, dreams help us in our effort to survive and evolve as individuals. Just like Jung, these psychologists believe that our ancestors left us a significant heritage, but they do not agree that it manifests only at the level of mere warnings coded symbolically and metaphorically. They believe that dreams activate certain ancient strategies for solving our adaptive problems.

In other words, dreams are a genuine "instruction camp" where we are provided with low-cost training for what we can experience in the real life at a very high price. For instance, not many people have the chance to fly individually (e.g., paragliding or parachuting), just like not many of us experience paralysis (the inability to move or flee in crucial moments). According to the "costly signaling theory" in the evolutionary psychology (McNamara & Szent-Imrey 2007), the role of dreams is to put us in exceptional problematic situations and to seek and activate strategies to be used at any point in similar real-life situations. This adaptive contribution of the dream – along with that of the other psychic processes and continuous behavioural modelling in agreement with the challenges of the environment – ensures a greater chance of survival for our species.

Insofar as evolutionary psychologists have increasingly argued for the existence of mental problem-solving stimulations within dreams, they have eventually agreed with cognitive psychologists, who point out the same thing. For cognitivists, it is as very apparent that it does not suffice to discuss an instinctual unconscious (Freud) or collective unconscious (Jung). They pinpoint the existence of yet another type: the cognitive unconscious. It must be stated very clearly here that the cognitivists consider not only a new function of the personal or collective unconscious but a new form of the unconscious altogether, this time complementary to the Ego (Robbins & Tanck 1988).

Whereas the other types of unconscious defined by the adepts of abyssal psychologies were dominated by desires, instincts, emotions, or symbols, this new type of unconscious aims to continue processing the information necessary to solve a problem (the processing having

begun during the day under the patronage of conscience). Often – according to cognitivists supported by the accounts of various great researchers – the solution to seemingly unsolvable or almost unsolvable problems comes in a dream. In the opinion of such researchers, it stands to show the intense efforts of efficient data processing carried out by the collective unconscious with additional means to those of conscience. The advantage of information processing conducted by the collective unconscious is that, by using intuition and skipping logical steps and blockages, the processing is far more rapid, and the conclusions are often surprising (Baylor & Deslauriers 1987).

Consequently, though I have briefly outlined above various views showing the complexity of the phenomenon of dreaming, I am aware that I have merely scraped the surface of what dreams, as a psychological process, can offer. I believe that especially researches in neuropsychology – and, in general, in neurosciences - will bring further clarifications in such a fertile field as dream interpretation.

REFERENCES:

- Aristotle. 1984. *On Dreams*. In Jonathan Barnes (Ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 729–735.
- Baylor, G. W., & D. Deslauriers. 1986-1987. “Dreams as problem solving: A method of study: I. Background and theory”. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 6(2): 105–118.
- Freud, Sigmund. [1899/1900] 2010a. *Die Traumdeutung*. Romanian translation: *Interpretarea viselor*. Bucharest: Trei Publishing House.
- Freud, Sigmund. [1916-1917] 2010b. *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*. Romanian translation: *Introducere în psihanaliză*. Bucharest: Trei Publishing House.
- Jung, Carl Gustav [1991] 2014. *Traumanalyse: Nach Aufzeichnungen der Seminare 1928-1930*. Romanian translation: *Analiza viselor*. Bucharest: Trei Publishing House.
- Jung, Carl Gustav; Aniela Jaffé [1962] 2017. *Erinnerungen, Träume, Gedanken*. Romanian translation: *Amintiri, vise, reflecții*. Bucharest: Humanitas Press.
- McNamara, P., & R. Szent-Imrey. 2007. “Costly signaling theory of REM sleep and dreams”. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 5(1): 28–44.
- Robbins, P.R., & R.H. Tanck. 1988. “Interest in dreams and dream recall”. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 66(1): 291–294.