

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JLS-8 ARE WE LEGALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CONTENT OF DREAMS?  
(CONTINUED)

TWO: Surface and Core

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Dear Mr. Nolte,

It has been said that we are all Freudians, and it may be difficult to see that interpretation is quite a special way to treat a dream or a symptom or a slip of the tongue or a piece of ordinary behavior. Freud's decision to interpret dreams was a significant choice among conceivable alternatives, although quite a natural one for him to make. Our modern minds seem almost required to see the world through the lens of a distinction embodied in these pairs of words,

|             |            |
|-------------|------------|
| latent      | manifest   |
| unconscious | conscious  |
| essence     | appearance |
| core        | surface    |
| cause       | effect     |
| invisible   | visible,   |

a distinction so ingrained in us that we are more comfortable with the dispute between Karl Marx and Oscar Wilde in the epigraphs at the beginning of the previous newsletter than with the seemingly paradoxical resolution in the words of Lao-tse.

And the choice to interpret requires an inclination to downgrade the manifest in favor of the latent: interpretation is the devaluation of the visible. The manifest

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dream is nothing but a code to be cracked, a rebus, a series of pictographs, of hieroglyphs. It is laconic, mendacious, and incomplete. Reading Freud's own dream analyses we encounter the invariable aim of penetrating the disguise of the manifest dream in order to reach the core of latent meaning. What interests him is rarely what reaches consciousness: this is viewed as superficial. 'To interpret a dream,' Freud tells us, 'is to specify its "meaning," to replace it by something which takes its position in the concatenation of our psychic activities....' (emphasis added)

The unconscious becomes only that which may be reached through interpretation. Interpretation persuades us that 'to understand is to interpret.'<sup>1</sup>

Erikson uses the occasion of his analysis of the Irma Dream to argue for a reinstatement of the manifest dream as a subject for serious attention:

The psychoanalyst, in looking at the surface of a mental phenomenon, often has to overcome a certain shyness. So many in his field mistake attention to surface for superficiality, and a concern with form for lack of depth. But the fact that we have followed Freud into the depths which our eyes had to become accustomed to does not permit us, today, to blink when we look at things in broad daylight. Like good surveyors, we must be at home on the geological surface as well as in the descending shafts. In recent years so called projective techniques...and the observation of children's play have clearly shown that any segment of overt behavior reflects, as it were, the whole store: one might say that psychoanalysis has given new depth to the surface, thus building the basis for a more inclusive general psychology of man....it has become a matter of course that any item of human behavior shows a continuum of dynamic meaning, reaching from the surface through many layers of crust to the 'core.'

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<sup>1</sup>Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation.' Miss Sontag, concerned principally with the interpretation of art, goes on to say that 'interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon the world.' Without quite agreeing, it is still amusing to consider that the 'wish' of the Irma Dream, its motive force, was for revenge against Irma, Otto, and Dr. M. Freud's ultimate revenge, of course, was to prove his critics and ungrateful patients wrong by inventing the interpretation of dreams.

In words halfway like those of Lao-tse, Erikson endeavors (in 1949) to reinstate the visible in the 'concatenation of our psychic activities.' Modern-day ego psychology seems not to have followed him in this; current texts on psychoanalytic dream interpretation still warn against being misled by the manifest dream and avoid instructing the reader in understanding it. And while Erikson's analysis of the Irma Dream is greatly illuminating, we may wonder how thoroughly he has surmounted the limits of interpretation in attempting to puzzle out the meaning of the surface, what it represents. He uses throughout words like 'stands for,' 'suggests,' and 'reflects.' Overt behavior may 'reflect' in a non-dualistic way 'the whole store,' but we still seem required to interpret the overt in order to divine what the whole store is about. The reference to children's play in the quotation from Erikson is a telling one, for it reflects again the psychoanalytic view that play is indicative of something deeper. But there are alternatives. In her reviews of D.W.Winnicott's work on play, the British psychoanalyst Victoria Hamilton shows that the unrelenting application of interpretation to the content of play may put an end to play as a creative activity. Interpretation channels the potential space that playing inhabits, preventing play--ruling it out.

Alternatively, the therapist might resist imposing a latent order on the manifest playing:

All that is not pattern is noise, formlessness or nonsense, the only possible source of new patterns....'Organized nonsense is already a defense, just as organized chaos is a denial of chaos. The therapist who cannot take this communication becomes engaged in a futile attempt to find some organization in the nonsense, as a result of which the patient leaves the nonsense area because of hopelessness about communicating...

Miss Hamilton, in a private communication, observes that one can see the goal of psychoanalysis as learning how to play. Again this differs from the objective of interpretation; it does not locate play as outer, meaning as inner. For Erikson

as for Freud the visible, the outer, is treated as material, as a text, and therefore as discontinuous with the latent.

The reader may be tempted to ask, What is there to do with dreams except interpret them? One possibility lies close at hand, in the Irma Dream itself. Freud's interpretation of it, his choice to replace the visible with its cause, was an act of great advantage. By doing so he discovered conflicts in his feelings toward Frau Emma, his wife, and Breuer that he may not previously have recognized. But he did not stop there. The Irma Dream was in its way a revelation. It was not simply the embodiment of a wish to discover, it was an act of discovery. It was not only a text to be translated for its hidden instinctual meaning, it itself was the meaning. Freud acknowledged this in his letter to Fliess quoted earlier: 'the mystery of dreams revealed itself.' But he chose not to generalize this potential for revelation in formulating his theory of dreams. And this, I think, is a curious thing about the Irma Dream. For Freud used it intellectually in a manner quite different from how he understood it.

Psychoanalytic dream interpretation has changed in the seventy-nine years since the Irma Dream, but it has changed least in this regard. Freud's biographer Ernest Jones refers to Freud's discovery as 'a perfect example of serendipity' made 'quite incidentally--one might almost say accidentally.' Erikson acknowledges that the Irma Dream 'may, in fact, carry the historical burden of being dreamed in order to be analyzed, and analyzed in order to fulfill a very special fate,' but the qualification 'very special' warns us that this way of using dreams is not open to everyone.<sup>1</sup> Psychoanalysis does recognize what are called 'special transferences.' (For example, psychoanalysts of different schools Jungian, Adlerian, and so forth, provoke systematically

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<sup>1</sup> The 'accidental' view of dreams would have surprized a wide variety of non-occidental peoples who regularly sought and received useful dream visions--from the Iroquois of the last century to the medieval Hindu artist who, on the night before beginning his work, prayed: 'O thou Lord of all the Gods, teach me in dreams how to carry out all the work I have in my mind.' Agni Purana, ch. xliii

different patterns of manifest dream; sometimes prolific dreamers who enter analysis stop remembering their dreams when they realize how much dreams may mean to their analyst; once-sluggish dreamers may flood the analytic hour with dreams to distract the analyst from other matters.) But these are fringe phenomena in psychoanalysis, of minor interest only. For the most part, dreams just happen to us, sometimes, and to interpret them is the best we can do.

I propose that we can learn from the practice of several non-occidental cultures of which there is record where the dreamer is instructed in techniques for participating in his dreams, by entering them--by remembering within the dream to do a specified act or think a specified thought and thus to wake up into the dream as a conscious person with the feeling of volition. Where the goal of psychoanalytic dream interpretation is to make the unconscious conscious, these techniques appear to introduce consciousness into the unconscious. The dreamer learns to act on, in, and through his dream, often with the goal of solving a specific problem. Given Freud's great discovery that both dream and symptom are compromise formations between unconscious wish and unconscious defense, learning to enter one's dreams might be a useful adjunct to therapy in our culture. It would be, in a sense, the perfection of Erikson's project of relating levels of meaning from deepest core through the manifest dream and beyond to the rituals and values of society.

For the Senoi people of the Malay Peninsula, according to the report by Kilton Stewart, learning to enter one's dreams is a regular feature of child education. Breakfast in a Senoi house is like a dream clinic where dreams are described, interpreted, and suggestions given for solving the problems they embody; afterwards, the men gather in the council, report their own dreams and problem dreams from their families, and understand them with each other's help.

Almost every Senoi child reports a dream of falling (or climbing, flying, or traveling) from which he awakes in terror before resolution is reached, before landing or arriving. The adult tells him that a falling dream is a wonderful dream to have and that the next time he has a falling

dream, he will remember this in the dream, will relax and enjoy it. 'The falling spirits love you. They are attracting you to their land, and you have but to relax and remain asleep in order to come to grips with them.' In the case of everyone in Senoi society, the dream of falling in terror is thus transformed into a dream of flying with volition and a sense of adventure.

The words of the adult evidently include an interpretation put in terms of the beliefs and mythology of the Senoi, but they include more--the suggestion to solve an unconscious dilemma in its own terms on the manifest dream level with the images of Senoi culture. The dreamer is encouraged to follow fearlessly a dream to its resolution and to bring back to waking life something of use or beauty. Throughout his life, when he dreams of flying, the Senoi dreamer follows the rule that he should 'arrive somewhere, meet the beings there, hear their music, see their designs, their dances, and learn their useful knowledge.' The dreamer is encouraged to explore what we would call his unconscious for solutions to intrapsychic and adaptational conflict in ways that validate and enrich Senoi culture itself.

The technique of entering dreams is found in several other cultures, for example the technique of 'recognizing dreams' in Tibetan dream yoga, and the practice of 'setting up dreaming' that Carlos Castaneda attributes to the Yaqui Indians. At a later point in my activities as a Fellow of the Institute, I'd like to investigate these techniques further. Many attractive features of Senoi dream therapy are undoubtedly attributable to the particular qualities of their society; these techniques are not used in comparable ways in other cultural settings or, it seems, to the same advantage. It would be interesting to learn how interpretations are made by the Senoi and what part interpretation plays in entering dreams; and to assess whether the techniques might be applicable to a culture with so different a mythology as ours, where dreaming is an activity so isolated from waking life.

The question of responsibility for the contents of the unconscious is an easy one for the Senoi:

If the dreamer injures the dream images of his fellows or refuses to cooperate with them in dreams, he should go out of his way to express friendship and cooperation on awakening, since hostile dream characters can only use the image of people for whom his good will is running low. If the image of a friend hurts him in a dream, the friend should be advised of the fact so he can repair his damaged or negative dream image by friendly social intercourse.

In marked contrast, Freud, in 1892 before the Irma Dream, could console his hysterical patient Elizabeth von R., who he believed was suffering from the somatic consequences of her unconscious feelings of love for her brother-in-law, with the words, 'we are not responsible for our feelings.'

But after the discovery of interpretative pathways to the unconscious, Freud would change his mind. Dream interpretation raised the possibility that modern occidental man might for the first time take responsibility for his unconscious. Writing thirty years later in the essay 'Moral Responsibility for the Content of Dreams,' he declared, 'Obviously one must hold oneself responsible for the evil impulses of one's dreams. What else is one to do with them?' But Freud's choice to interpret simultaneously opened, defined, and thereby limited a channel between unconscious and conscious. To review the consequences of this choice: the system of dream interpretation that Freud developed viewed dreams as accidental, required a replacement of the visible, located dreaming as an inner experience, and defined the unconscious as only that which may be interpreted.

The result is a sharp and scarcely permeable boundary between unconscious, latent, and core on one side and conscious, manifest, and culture on the other. And it seems in the nature of such boundaries that they generate paradox. It thus seems odd to assert (as Professor Fingarette does) that an unconscious wish carries the same guilt as an act. In what sense are we responsible for wishes that never become actions? Should we feel guilty for wishes in the manifest dream only, on the grounds that they have evaded our defenses and thus might someday be carried into action? Or does our responsibility extend only to latent wishes inferrable only through interpretation but closer to heart?

Perhaps it is the paradox of interpretation that hinders the rapprochement of psychoanalysis and law.

These themes will be developed further in future newsletters. I take leave of them temporarily in my next communication, however, to report on my research into psychiatric diagnostic categories.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jeffrey Steingarten". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal tail on the final letter.

Jeffrey Steingarten

Received in New York on October 1, 1974.