

Chapter 4

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**THE DREAM IN CONTEXT**  
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Psychoanalysis, in its essence, is a hermeneutic and historical science whose principal research method is and always has been the in-depth case study. Psychoanalytic propositions do not readily lend themselves to experimental procedures, and it is a rare and unexpected yield when data culled from the laboratory are found to bear meaningfully on psychoanalytic theory and practice. Greenberg and Fiss present two such welcome harvests, summarizing a variety of data from sleep and dream research that they believe offer support for a self-psychological understanding of dream function. Fosshage also offers important ideas about dream function, his data coming not from the laboratory but from the consulting room, where, I must confess, I also feel more comfortable.

Greenberg's contribution gave me some difficulty. According to him, the results of REM studies lead to a view of dreaming as "integrating information from current experience with past memories to produce schemas that are organizers of complicated behavioral tasks. Thus, the dreamer can learn and can modify or adapt behavior to new demands of the environment." "The dream," he continues, "portrays problems and also the dreamer's efforts at coping with these problems." Thus, if I understand Greenberg's argument correctly, he believes that the REM data show that the function of

dreaming is to aid adaptation and mastery. While this is a useful idea, illuminating *one* of the multiple purposes of dreams, it does not seem to me to be directly applicable to the principal domain of self-psychological inquiry—namely, *the organization of self-experience* and its vicissitudes in relation to the subjectively experienced surround. I agree with Greenberg that the theory of the self-state dream should be broadened and that all dreams can be seen to depict the organization of self-experience along a continuum of varying degrees of integration or cohesion, but I do not see clearly that his analysis of the sleep research data can provide the basis for this theoretical expansion.

Fiss, too, proposes that all dreams can be seen as indicators of varying self-states. However, the conclusions that he draws from dream research data pertain more directly to the realm of self-experience. This is consistent with his advocacy of "experimental strategies that are experience-near," an important methodological suggestion if such research is to be relevant to a depth psychology of human experience. Fiss extends the methodology of empathic inquiry to experimental data; that is, he uses the data to make inferences about the organization of subjects' self-experience and about the function of dreaming in contributing to "the development, maintenance, and restoration" of self-experience. I found his arguments persuasive and heartening.

Fiss cites Atwood's and my (1984) work on dream function approvingly, indicating that our theoretical ideas are supported by dream research findings. I would like to summarize these ideas in somewhat greater detail. Our aim was to shed light on what we regarded as the most distinctive and central feature of the dream experience—the use of concrete perceptual images endowed with hallucinatory vividness to symbolize abstract thoughts, feelings, and subjective states. We proposed that concrete symbolization in dreams serves a vital psychological purpose for the dreamer, and that an understanding of this purpose illuminates the importance and necessity of dreaming. We wrote:

It is in the need to maintain the organization of experience . . . that we can discover the fundamental purpose of concrete symbolization in dreams. When configurations of experience of self and other find symbolization in concrete perceptual images and are thereby articulated with hallucinatory vividness, the dreamer's feeling of conviction about the validity and reality of these configurations receives a powerful reinforcement. Perceiving, after all, is believing. By reviving during sleep the most basic and emotionally compelling form of knowing—

through sensory perception—the dream affirms and solidifies the unclear organizing structures of the dreamer's subjective life. Dreams, we are contending, are the *guardians of psychological structure*, and they fulfill this vital purpose by means of concrete symbolization [pp. 102-103].

We proposed further that dream symbolization serves to maintain the organization of experience in two different senses. On one hand, dream symbols may actualize a *particular* organization of experience in which specific configurations of self and other, required for multiple reasons, are dramatized and affirmed. In emphasizing that the aims of defense and disguise contribute to the construction of such symbols, and that therefore the distinction between manifest imagery and latent meaning continues to be applicable, our views differ from those of Greenberg, Fiss, and Fosshage.

On the other hand, dream symbols may serve not so much to actualize particular configurations of experience as to maintain psychological organization *per se*. With *these* dream images, the distinction between manifest and latent content is less germane, because the aim of disguise has not been prominent. Instead, the vivid perceptual images of the dream serve directly to restore or sustain the structural integrity and stability of a subjective world menaced with disintegration. This function of dream symbols is clearly illustrated by the self-state dreams discussed by Kohut (1977). By vividly reliving the experience of self-endangerment, the dream images bring the state of the self into focal awareness with a feeling of conviction and reality that can only accompany sensory perceptions. The dream imagery thereby both encapsulates the danger to the self and reflects a concretizing effort at self-restoration. Finally, we noted that the organization-maintaining function of dream symbolization can be observed not only when existing structures are threatened, but also when *new* organizations of experience are coming into being and are in need of consolidation—the developmental function of dreaming accented by Fosshage.

Following Kohut's emphasis on empathic-introspective investigation, Fosshage enjoins the analyst to explore the dream from within the dreamer's subjective frame of reference, "to illuminate as fully as possible the *experience* of the dreamer within the dream." Such an approach, he claims, unveils and furthers the emergent developmental movements envisioned in, and promoted by, the dreaming menation. His clinical material elegantly and convincingly illustrates his thesis.

Like Greenberg and Fiss, Fosshage downplays the role of uncon-

scious processes and of the aims of defense and disguise in the formation of dreams, and correspondingly his clinical approach eschews the technique of eliciting associations to dream elements. Here I fear that Fosshage, Greenberg, and Fiss are all in danger of throwing out Freud's clinical dream baby with its metapsychological bathwater. What we need is not an approach to dreams that deemphasizes the unconscious, but a *revised theory of the unconscious* that is consistent with current clinical knowledge. The concepts of unconscious mental processes and unconscious motivation do *not* have to be conflated with the doctrine of instinctual drive.

Atwood and I (1984) distinguished two realms of unconsciousness that are important for psychoanalysis—the prereflective unconscious and the more familiar dynamic unconscious. The term "prereflective unconscious" refers to the shaping of experience by invariant organizing principles that operate outside a person's conscious awareness:

In the absence of reflection, a person is unaware of his role as a constitutive subject in elaborating his personal reality. The world in which he lives and moves presents itself as though it were something independently and objectively real. The patterning and thematizing of events that uniquely characterize his personal reality are thus seen as if they were properties of those events rather than products of his own subjective interpretations and constructions [p. 36].

We contended that an understanding of this form of unconsciousness sheds new light on the unique importance of dreams for psychoanalytic theory and practice:

The prereflective structures of a person's subjective world are most readily discernible in his relatively unfettered, spontaneous productions, and there is probably no psychological product that is less fettered or more spontaneous than the dream. As human subjectivity in purest culture, the dream constitutes a "royal road" to the prereflective unconscious—to the organizing principles and dominant leitmotifs that unconsciously pattern and thematize a person's psychological life [p. 98].

It is precisely this unconscious patterning of experience that Fosshage elucidates so beautifully in his work with his patient's dream. His analysis moves well beyond the dream's manifest imagistic content to the thematic *structure* of that content, from which he can then make inferences about the principles unconsciously organizing his patient's experience.

Stripped of metapsychological encumbrances, the term "dynamic

unconscious" refers to that set of configurations that conscious experience is not permitted to assume, because of their association with emotional conflict and subjective danger (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984). From a perspective informed by self psychology, the dynamic unconscious is seen to consist not of instinctual drive derivatives, but of disavowed central affect states and repressed developmental longings, defensively walled off because they failed to evoke the requisite attuned responsiveness from the early caregiving surround (Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 1987). This defensive sequestering of central emotional states and developmental needs, which attempts to protect against retraumatization, is the principal source of resistance in psychoanalytic treatment and also of the necessity for disguise when such states and needs are represented in dreams. Where disguise is prominent, associations to elements can assist in the illumination of the dream's intersubjective context of origin.

Let me illustrate with an episode that occurred some 17 years ago, when I was still a psychoanalytic candidate in training and just becoming familiar with Kohut's early papers on narcissism. The episode made a lasting impression on me, and I learned a great deal from it. I had been working psychotherapeutically with a young woman for about a year, during which we seemed to make little progress in establishing a therapeutic bond. At this juncture she suffered what was for her a severe trauma—she was mugged and robbed while trying to enter her apartment house after returning home from a therapy session. Shortly thereafter she told me she had decided to leave treatment. During what was to be our last session, she reported a dream.

In the dream, she was in a session with her therapist, a black woman. A robber broke into the consulting room as the therapist sat helplessly and did nothing. The patient's feeling in the dream was one of disparagement of the therapist. Her only associations were to the mugging and to a joke she had recently heard, the punch line of which described God as a black woman. Putting together the trauma of the mugging and the patient's manifestly disparaging feelings in the dream, I commented that perhaps she felt disappointed that I had not been able to protect her from the assault. The patient was untouched by my interpretation and terminated, with no apparent understanding of her reason for doing so.

With hindsight it seems clear that the patient's association to the joke about God pointed to a powerful, walled off, archaic idealizing longing, mobilized in the transference by the trauma of the mugging. My interpretation of her disappointment failed to take into account that this longing was *highly disguised* in the dream's manifest content,

because it was being deeply resisted, as it had been from the outset of treatment. What the patient needed was for me to investigate her *fears* of reexposing her idealizing yearnings to a transference repetition of crushing childhood disappointments and to extend empathic inquiry to her perceptions of qualities in me that lent themselves to her expectations of retraumatization. Only by fully exploring this intersubjective situation could her dream, and the resistance it encoded, have been comprehended.

Let us now consider the intersubjective field in which Fossage's patient's dream crystallized. The patient's transference relationship with Fossage can be seen as having two essential poles or dimensions (Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 1987). At one pole is her yearning for requisite selfobject experiences that were missing or insufficient during her formative years. In this dimension she experiences Fossage as a longed-for new object who aligns himself with her strivings for differentiated selfhood, her search for a distinctive inner direction of her own. At the other pole are her expectations and fears of a transference repetition of early pathogenic experiences. In this dimension she believes that she must accommodate to Fossage's requirements in order to maintain the tie with him. Both poles of the transference are clearly represented in the patient's dream: on one hand, the wonderful stallion (Fossage) liberates her and enables her to pursue her own direction; on the other hand, she feels responsible for the stallion and required to take care of him. Fossage's interpretive approach to the dream seems well designed to facilitate and strengthen the selfobject dimension of the transference as he seeks to recognize and utilize the dream's developmental movements in order to "further within the psychoanalytic arena the [patient's] developmental course." In my opinion, he achieves this aim masterfully, yet I wonder if something important is being left out.

The patient declares that Fossage is secretly in love with her and has an agenda of his own for her, clearly replicating her experience of her father's "self-interested love." It seems to me that Fossage is in love with *development* and that his patient has been responding to, and benefiting enormously from, this passion. What has been the specific impact of this love on the patient's experience in the transference, and how is this impact depicted in her dream?

A stallion is an animal that loves to *move*, and the patient's dream is, above all, saturated with forward movement, both physical and psychological. When the patient insists that Fossage wants her to "leave everything" and "get on with it," I believe she is communicating her perception of the agenda that he does, in fact, have for her—that she go forward in her quest for a more distinct self-definition.

As with her father, this is an agenda to which she feels she must accommodate if she is to maintain the bond with Fossage as his "special one." I am suggesting that, alongside the patient's genuine developmental progress, her unconscious compliance with Fossage's developmental agenda has codetermined the galloping pace of the analysis and that this entire, complex intersubjective system is both represented and disguised in her dream imagery. Dreams, I am contending, cannot be comprehended psychoanalytically apart from the intersubjective contexts in which they take form.

## REFERENCES

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## ON DREAMING AND OUR INCLINATIONS

Paul H. Tolpin

*Dreams are faithful interpreters of our inclinations; but there is art required to sort and understand them.*

—Montaigne, "Of Experience"

For a number of reasons I had a lot of difficulty trying to clarify my thinking about the important and challenging preceding chapters. For several weeks after I received them I spent considerable time pondering the various ideas presented by the authors. I weighed their arguments in my mind, trying to reformulate their notions in terms more congenial to me. After a while I found that I was becoming increasingly irritated because I was unable to clarify my thinking, to write down what I had to say and have done with it. Then one night I had a disturbing dream. I awoke from it feeling anxious; I thought about it briefly and then fell back to sleep. On the way to the train the next morning I thought about it again. It wasn't all that complicated, but it was still puzzling.

This was the dream. I was having a discussion with someone I thought I knew—perhaps a colleague. He was talking to me about

I wish to emphasize that I speak here from the perspective of the patient's psychic reality—that is, her subjective experience in the transference.