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Chapter 8

Dream Interpretation Revisited

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Despite proposed theoretical and clinical modifications emanating from ego psychology, object relations theory and self psychology (for a review, see Fosshage, 1983), Freud's biologically dominated conception of dreams as primarily energy discharging and wish fulfilling in function has remained central to the classical psychoanalytic models of dream formation and dream interpretation. Although the shift from the topographical to the structural models of the mind (Freud, 1923; Arlow and Brenner, 1964), has emphasized in dreams the omnipresence of conflict between the three psychic agencies (id, ego, and superego) the primary impetus for the dream, from a classical vantage point, remains the wish that represents an instinctual drive, *infantile in origin and seeking gratification throughout one's life* (Atte-
man, 1969). And clinically, although dream interpretation has increasingly focused on the latent conflict, in contrast to simply the

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latent wish, no dream is considered fully analyzed until the infantile sexual or aggressive wishes have been uncovered.

Consistent with the entirety of his personality theory, Freud anchored his clinical finding of latent wishes in dreams in a metapsychological model, i.e., the drive-discharge model, dominated by the biological and physicalistic models of his day. With the recognition that the in-depth scientific investigation of mental states requires that we remain in the realm of psychological discourse, a number of authors with the classical psychoanalytic tradition have contributed to the establishment of a psychoanalytic psychology free from and unfettered by the biological and physicalistic-energy models (Gill, 1967; Holt, 1967; Klein, 1967; Gedo and Goldberg, 1973; Kohut, 1977, 1984; Loewald, 1978; Stolorow and Lachmann, 1980; Atwood and Stolorow, 1984). In a similar vein, I have proposed a revised psychoanalytic model of the psychological function of dreams (Fosshage, 1983, 1987). My purpose here is to set forth briefly this model and to compare the clinical applications of the classical and revised models through a reformulation of a detailed clinical illustration initially presented from the classical perspective.

THE REVISED PSYCHOANALYTIC MODEL

Within the classical model, dreaming is viewed as predominantly the product of a regression to a primitive mode of mentation called primary process. Primary process is economically (energetically) defined as mobile cathexes that press for immediate discharge. Because this mode of mentation theoretically never changes or develops and, thus, remains forever primitive (i.e., unbound energy always presses for discharge and lacks organization), dreams, dominated by primary process mentation, are also viewed as regressed and comparatively primitive products. Although the structural model opened the door theoretically to the participation of complex secondary process ideation through the participation of ego functioning in dream formation, the view of dreams as regressed, primitive primary process products predominates—and the higher-developed and more complex forms of cognition are by and large excluded from dreaming mentation.

Out of the empirical observation of dreams, creative productions, and psychotic mentation on the one hand, and through the theoretical extrication of primary process from its energy-based definition on the other, primary process has gradually become reconceptualized by some as a form of cognition which serves an overall

organizational function of integration and synthesis (Holt, 1967; Noy, 1969, 1979). In keeping with these theoretical contributions, I have proposed that primary process be redefined as follows:

primary process [is] that mode of mental functioning which uses visual and other sensory images with intense affective colorations in serving an overall integrative and synthetic function. Secondary process, on the other hand, is a conceptual and logical mode that makes use of linguistic symbols in serving an integrative and synthetic function. These processes may be described as different but complementary modes of apprehending, responding to, and organizing [the experiential world]. . . . (Fosshage, 1983, p. 649).¹

It is posited that both forms of mentation develop in organizational complexity more or less throughout one's lifetime. In dreaming, both modes are clearly operative, although primary process or representational thinking (using Piaget's term) is usually predominant.

In keeping with this reconceptualization of primary process I have proposed that "*the supraordinate function of dreams is the development, maintenance (regulation), and, when necessary, restoration of psychic processes, structure, and organization* (Fosshage, 1983, p. 657).² Dreaming, as with waking mentation, is an affective-cognitive activity that, in serving an overall organizational function, ranges from the elemental to the most highly complex forms of mentation. The complexity ranges between what might be seen as the elemental repetition of a day's event, similar to a momentary daydream, and the most intricately, imagistically dominated scenario and complex logical problem-solving efforts. Occurring at night, when external input is limited, places dreaming mentation advantageously for dealing with insufficiently attended-to subjective concerns. In providing this organizational function dreaming mentation, as waking, both utilizes and

¹Similarly, McKinnon (1979) describes two cognitive-affective modes of organization, the Visual-Spatial semantic form and the Auditory-Sequential semantic form, which correspond respectively with primary and secondary processes. On the basis of infant research, Lichtenberg (1983) also differentiates between these two modes of mentation.

²Stolorow and Atwood (1982), independently arriving at a similar formulation, refer to the maintenance and consolidation of psychological organization through the dream's concrete representations. Jung (1916) was the first to view dreams as regulatory and developmental, i.e., "compensatory" and "prospective," in function. Ullman (1959), Palombo (1978), Breger (1977), and Jones (1980) speak of the adaptive function; French and Fromm (1964) of the conflict-resolving function; De Monchaux (1978) of the trauma-integrating function; and Greenberg (1985) of the production of schemas (for a more complete review, refer to Fosshage, 1983).

maintains our primary organizational principles, i.e., the thematic ways in which we organize our experience (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984).

Dreaming mentation frequently continues the management of sexual, aggressive, and narcissistically related processes which have been stimulated, but insufficiently modulated, during the day. Kohut (1977) noted this regulatory function in some dreams, called "self-state dreams," in which the dream would manifestly attempt to deal with an "uncontrollable tension-increase or . . . [a] dread of the dissolution of the self. . . . by covering frightening nameless processes with nameable visual imagery" (p. 109). Within the revised model wish-fulfillment, central to the classical model, is no longer viewed either as a defensive process or as a fantasied gratification of libidinal or aggressive impulses with the primary function of discharge, but rather as an avenue of regulation and management of affective-cognitive experiences.

Dreaming mentation not only serves to maintain organization, but contributes to the development of new organizations, a crucially important dream function that has remained unrecognized within the classical model. Dreams frequently further the consolidation of emergent affect-laden images of self and other. The fundamental motivational principle posited by Kohut (1984), namely, "the self" striving to realize its "nuclear program of action," can be viewed as operative in dreaming mentation, as in waking, to bring about incremental developmental movements. Because these developmental movements may first appear in dreams, their recognition is crucially important in order to further the consolidation of ongoing changes.

Dreams also continue "the unconscious and conscious waking efforts to resolve intrapsychic conflicts through the utilization of defensive processes, through an internal balancing or through a creative, newly emergent re-organization. . . ." (Fossbage, 1983, p. 658). In contrast to the classical intersystemic conflict model, wherein conflicts are viewed as ubiquitous in dreams with little movement toward resolution, with the revised model conflicts are not seen as always present or the most salient issue in dreams, but, when they are, the higher-order function of conflict resolution is always operative, even if not successful, just as in waking mentation.³

With regard to the manifest-latent content distinction that is central

³I am not suggesting that dreaming mentation is always successful in its functioning, just as is the case with waking mentation. An obvious example is the nightmare, wherein dreaming mental efforts are unsuccessful in regulating intense anxiety-producing processes. Clinically, of course, we must remain focused on the dreamer's experience to elucidate the salient issues and the dream's function.

to the classical model, because the revised model posits that dreams serve developmental and maintenance functions, "there is no theoretical necessity to posit the ubiquitous operation of disguise and transformation of latent into manifest content" (p. 652). For example, Kohut (1977) clinically noted that associations did not lead away from the manifest content to a presumed latent content in self-state dreams. Defensive operations are utilized in dreaming, as in waking mentation, only in response to anxiety-producing conflict. When intrapsychic conflict is present, however, the use of defenses—resulting in a manifest-latent content discrepancy—varies, as with waking mentation, with the intensity of the conflict and the dreamer's recognition, clarity, and acceptance of the conflict. Rather than assuming from the vantage point of the classical model the omnipresence of defensive functioning and the corresponding differentiation between manifest and latent content, it is proposed within this model that, instead of utilizing the terms "manifest" and "latent content," we refer more precisely to *the dream content* that may or may not involve defensive functioning. When defensive operations are present, they will be empirically discovered (not assumed a priori) through the dreamer's associations.

Dream images are poignantly meaningful representations that serve as thematic or organizational nodal points. The primary clinical task, in contrast to the translation of dream images, is to amplify and elucidate the meanings of the chosen images. For example, in contrast to the common assumption that the analyst is always, at least latently, in the dream, with the revised model the analyst is never *assumed* to be present in the dream unless he or she actually appears. However, because the primary organizational patterns are operative in both dreams as well as in the transference relationship,⁴ the analytic discussion, without requiring translation, can focus on the particular organizational pattern as it emerges in the dream as well as in the transference. When the dream image is not translated, its significance will be better understood and the appearance of the identical organizational principle in the transference will be thoroughly understood when it is operative. To assume incorrectly that a particular organizational theme is operative in the transference, and has precipitated the dream, is restrictive and potentially undermines the richness of object relations and organizational complexity, and/or of re-organizational developments. Thus, associational activity is more focused, aimed at elucidating the images within the context of the dream and the experience of the dreamer within the dream. To re-

⁴Stolorow and Lachmann (1984) redefine transference as the operation of primary organizational principles within the analytic relationship.

main at the phenomenological level elucidates the poignant meanings of dream images, increases the dreamer's participation and conviction in the understanding of the dream, and minimizes the potential imposition of the analyst's idiosyncratic organizations of the dream data.

Within this model, dreaming, rather than providing a royal road to latent wishes and intersystemic (id, ego, and superego) conflicts, is accorded a far more profound role in its developmental, regulatory, conflict-resolving, and restorative functions. Dreaming mentation—as waking mentation—utilizes, maintains, and transforms a person's primary organizational principles. The view that defenses are operative in dreaming mentation only in particular instances of intense intrapsychic conflict enables us in the clinical arena to observe more directly—i.e., usually without translation—the meanings of particular dream images and themes. The recognition that dreaming, at times, can initiate and further emergent psychological organizations in keeping with developmental strivings and, in so doing, can express representationally incremental developmental achievements, facilitates the use of dreams in analysis to enhance this consolidation process.

A CLINICAL ILLUSTRATION

For comparison of the clinical applications of the classical and revised psychoanalytic models, I have chosen a dream of a patient presented by Ralph Greenson (1970)⁵ a highly respected classical analyst who was especially well known for his work with dreams. My reformulation of the understanding and interpretation of the dream is not to be considered exhaustive, for I have intentionally limited myself to address the most salient features of the dream, a process which, of course, is usually paralleled in the clinical situation.

The patient, Mr. M., was a thirty-year-old writer "who came for analytic treatment because of a constant sense of underlying depressiveness, frequent anxiety in social and sexual situations, and a feeling of being a failure despite considerable success in his profession and what appeared to be a good relationship to his wife and children" (Greenson, p. 534). The second dream of Mr. M., which is

⁵I wish to express my gratitude to Mrs. Hildi Greenson, Executrix of the Estate of Ralph Greenson, and to the *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* for permission to reprint the clinical material from Dr. Greenson's (1970) article, "The Exceptional Position of the Dream."

the one I focus on, occurred about two and a half years after his first dream. Greenson writes:

The patient had to interrupt his analysis for six months because of a professional assignment abroad and returned some three months before [having] the dream. During this three-month interval of analytic work Mr. M. was in a chronic state of quiet, passive depression. I had interpreted this as a reaction to his wife's fourth pregnancy, which must have stirred up memories and feelings in regard to his mother's three pregnancies after his birth. It seemed clear to me that he was reexperiencing the loss of the feeling and fantasies of being his mother's favorite, the only child and the favorite child. The patient accepted my interpretations submissively and conceded they had merit, but he could recall nothing about the birth of his three siblings nor his reactions, although he was over six when the youngest was born. My interpretations had no appreciable influence on his mood.

Mr. M. came to the hour I shall now present, sadly and quietly, and in a somewhat mournful tone recounted the following dream:

"I am in a huge store, a department store. There are lots of shiny orange and green plastic raincoats on display. A middle-aged Jewish woman is arranging other articles of clothing. Nearby is a female manikin dressed in a gray flannel dress. I go outside and see a woman who looks very familiar but I can't say specifically who she is. She is waiting expectantly and eagerly for me near a small surrey, putting clothes in it. I feel sorry for the poor horse and then realize the surrey is detached from the horse. I lift up the surrey to connect it and I am surprised how light the surrey is, but I don't know how to hitch it up to the horse. I also realize then that I was silly to feel sorry for the horse."

Mr. M.'s associations were as follows: "The three women in the dream were so different from one another. The older Jewish woman was a motherly type, working, doing, arranging, like my own mother used to before she became bedridden. The manikin reminds me of how I used to think of gentile girls when I was a kid; beautiful, pure, and cold, like my wife. But they taught me different. The best sex I have ever experienced was only with gentile girls. Jewish women just don't turn me on. They never did. Since my wife's pregnancy our sex life is practically nil. She isn't feeling well and I must say I'm in no mood for sex. I would like to be close to her in bed, but I don't want her to think it is a sexual demand so there is no talking even. I'd like to just be close and cuddle. My wife is so quiet of late. I feel she is getting revenge on me for all my past wrongs. I never realized before I had had such a bad temper and that she had been and still is so afraid of me. [Pause] I feel so alone in that big house of ours. I work like a horse to pay for it. Maybe I am the horse in the dream that I felt sorry for."

I [Greenson] intervened. "It might be so. You think he had such a big load to carry, but then you lift up the buggy and you are surprised

to discover how light it is." [Greenson immediately addresses what from his and my perspective is the most striking feature in the dream.] The patient interrupted me. "That buggy is so light, it's a baby buggy, it's a baby carriage. No wonder it was so light, it was so tiny, and the woman was putting clothes in it, like diapers." [Pause] I interrupted. "A baby buggy is very heavy for a little boy, he has to work like a horse to push it." [Greenson here shifts the focus to the historical context.] Mr. M. burst in with, "I can remember trying to push my baby sister in her buggy but it was too heavy for me. Now I see my father carrying the baby carriage downstairs as if it were a toy. I can even remember my brother and me together trying to push it." [Mr. M. easily relates to his past and confirms Greenson's portrayal of the boy's experience of the baby buggy as heavy. The crucially important intonation and affect are absent, but I wonder if Mr. M. is not recalling his father's ease in handling the baby carriage with some admiration, a point that I will discuss later.] [In contrast,] I [Greenson] interpreted and reconstructed: "I believe you have been depressed ever since your wife got pregnant because it stirred up memories of how you reacted when you were a small boy and your mother got pregnant and delivered your brother and sisters. You didn't want to face the fact that your father was hitched up to the coming of the babies. You wished you could have been the father of the babies. But you weren't—you didn't know how to do it as a little boy and you felt left out in the cold, detached. You have been depressed about this ever since." [Through this theoretically dominated reconstruction of the oedipal rivalry and defeat, Greenson shifts the focus away from the dream element with its much lighter affective tone, expressed in such statements of the dreamer as "I am surprised how light the surrey is," and supplies instead an explanation of feelings of depression and defeat, a focus which corresponds with the patient's waking, in contrast to dreaming, affective state. Following the interpretation, Mr. M. seems to comply and to feel like a defeated man.] After a pause, Mr. M. said, "I've always felt I'm not a real man. I act like one, but inside I still feel a real man should be like my father; strong physically, tough, and unafraid. I can fly airplanes but my hands sweat whenever I want to screw my own wife [pp. 540-542].

Using the classical dream model Greenson presents his rationale for the reconstruction of the oedipal defeat: "I could see now the dream work had condensed, reversed, and disguised the agony of feeling abandoned, unloved, inept, and depressed by pictorializing an attractive woman waiting eagerly for him to join her" (Greenson, p. 543). Greenson clearly views the attractive woman waiting eagerly for the dreamer to join her as a wish-fulfillment which, serving a defensive function, conceals the underlying feelings of abandonment and depression. To posit the ubiquity of the manifest and latent content distinction paves the way for "free," i.e., free from content, and