

REMARKS ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF DREAM-INTERPRETATION - (1923)

The accidental circumstance that the last editions of my Interpretation of Dreams (1900a) have been printed from stereotype plates has led me to issue the following remarks in an independent form, instead of introducing them into the text as modifications or additions.

I

In interpreting a dream during an analysis a choice lies open to one between several technical procedures.

One can (a) proceed chronologically and get the dreamer to bring up his associations to the elements of the dream in the order in which those elements occurred in his account of the dream. This is the original, classical method, which I still regard as the best if one is analysing one's own dreams.

Or one can (b) start the work of interpretation from some one particular element of the dream which one picks out from the middle of it. For instance, one can choose the most striking piece of it, or the piece which shows the greatest clarity or sensory intensity; or, again, one can start off from some spoken words in the dream, in the expectation that they will lead to the recollection of some spoken words in waking life.

Or one can (c) begin by entirely disregarding the manifest content and instead ask the dreamer what events of the previous day are associated in his mind with the dream he has just described.

Finally, one can (d), if the dreamer is already familiar with the technique of interpretation, avoid giving him any instructions and leave it to him to decide with which associations to the dream he shall begin.

I cannot lay it down that one or the other of these techniques is preferable or in general yields better results.

II

What is of far greater importance is the question of whether the work of interpretation proceeds under a pressure of resistance which is high or low - a point on which the analyst never remains long in doubt. If the pressure is high, one may perhaps succeed in discovering what the things are with which the dream is concerned, but one cannot make out what it says about these things. It is as though one were trying to listen to a conversation taking place at a distance or in a very low voice. In that case, one can feel confident that there is not much prospect of collaborating with the dreamer, one decides not to bother too much about it and not to give him much help, and one is content to put before him a few translations of symbols that seem probable.

The majority of dreams in a difficult analysis are of this kind; so that one cannot learn much from them about the nature and mechanism of dream-formation. Least of all can one learn anything from them upon the recurring question of where the dream's wish-fulfilment may lie hidden. When the pressure of resistance is quite extremely high, one meets with the phenomenon of the dreamer's associations broadening instead of deepening. In place of the desired associations to the dream that has already been narrated, there appear a constant succession of new fragments of dream, which in their turn remain without associations.

It is only when the resistance is kept within moderate limits that the familiar picture of the work of interpretation comes into view: the dreamer's associations begin by diverging widely from the manifest elements, so that a great number of subjects and ranges of ideas are touched on, after which, a second series of associations quickly converge from these on to the dream-thoughts that are being looked for. When this is so, collaboration between the analyst and the dreamer becomes possible; whereas under a high pressure of resistance it would not even be of any advantage.

A number of dreams which occur during analyses are untranslatable even though they do not actually make much show of the resistance that is there. They represent free renderings of the latent dream-thoughts behind them and are comparable to successful creative writings which have been artistically worked over and in which the basic themes are still recognizable though they have been subjected to any amount of re-arrangement and transformation. Dreams of this kind serve in the treatment as an introduction to thoughts and memories of the dreamer without their own actual content coming into account.

III

It is possible to distinguish between dreams from above and dreams from below, provided the distinction is not made too sharply. Dreams from below are those which are provoked by the strength of an unconscious (repressed) wish which has found a means of being represented in some of the day's residues. They may be regarded as inroads of the repressed into waking life. Dreams from above correspond to thoughts or intentions of the day before which have contrived during the night to obtain reinforcement from repressed material that is debarred from the ego. When this is so, analysis as a rule disregards this unconscious ally and succeeds in inserting the latent dream-thoughts into the texture of waking thought. This distinction calls for no modification in the theory of dreams.IV

In some analyses, or in some periods of an analysis, a divorce may become apparent between dream-life and waking life, like the divorce between the activity of phantasy and waking life which is found in the 'continued story' (a novel in day-dreams). In that case one dream leads off from another, taking as its central point some element which was lightly touched upon in its predecessor, and so on. But we find far more frequently that dreams are not attached to one another but are interpolated into a successive series of portions of waking thought.

V

The interpretation of a dream falls into two phases: the phase in which it is translated and the phase in which it is judged or has its value assessed. During the first phase one must not allow oneself to be influenced by any consideration whatever for the second phase. It is as though one had before one a chapter from some work in a foreign language - by Livy, for instance. The first thing one wants to know is what Livy says in the chapter; and it is only after this that the discussion arises of whether what one has read is a historical narrative or a legend or a digression on the part of the author.

What conclusions can one draw from a correctly translated dream? I have an impression that analytic practice has not always avoided errors and over-estimations on this point, partly owing to an exaggerated respect for the 'mysterious unconscious'. It is only too easy to forget that a dream is as a rule merely a thought like any other, made possible by a relaxation of the censorship and by unconscious reinforcement, and distorted by the operation of the censorship and by unconscious revision.

Let us take as an example the so-called dreams of recovery. If a patient has had a dream of this kind, in which he seems to abandon the restrictions of his neurosis - if, for instance, he overcomes some phobia or gives up some emotional attachment - we are inclined to think that he has made a great step forward, that he is ready to take his place in a new state of life, that he has begun to reckon on his recovery, etc. This may often be true, but quite as often such dreams of recovery only have the value of dreams of convenience: they signify a wish to be well at last, in order to avoid another portion of the work of analysis which is felt to lie ahead. In this sense, dreams of recovery very frequently occur, for instance, when the patient is about to enter upon a new and disagreeable phase of the transference. He is behaving in this just like some neurotics who after a few hours of analysis declare they have been cured - because they want to escape all the unpleasantness that is bound to come up for discussion in the analysis. Sufferers from war neuroses, too, who gave up their symptoms because the therapy adopted by the army doctors succeeded in making being ill even more uncomfortable than serving at the front - these sufferers, too, were following the same economic laws and in both cases alike the cures have proved to be only temporary.

VI

It is by no means easy to arrive at general conclusions upon the value of correctly translated dreams. If a conflict due to ambivalence is taking place in a patient, then the emergence in him of a hostile thought certainly does not imply a permanent overcoming of his affectionate impulse - that is to say, a resolution of the conflict: neither does any such implication follow from a dream with a similarly hostile content. During a conflict such as this arising from ambivalence, there are often two dreams every night, each of them representing an opposite attitude. In that case the progress lies in the fact that a complete isolation of the two contrasted impulses has been achieved and that each of them, with the help of its unconscious reinforcements, can be followed and understood to its extreme limits. And if it sometimes happens that one of the two ambivalent dreams has been

forgotten, one must not be deceived into assuming that a decision has been made in favour of the one side. The fact that one of the dreams has been forgotten shows, it is true, that for the moment one tendency is in the ascendant, but that is true only of the one day, and may be changed. The next night may perhaps bring the opposite expression into the foreground. The true state of the conflict can only be determined by taking into account all the other indications, including those of waking life.

VII

The question of the value to be assigned to dreams is intimately related to the other question of their susceptibility to influence from 'suggestion' by the physician. Analysts may at first be alarmed at the mention of this possibility. But on further reflection this alarm will give place to the realization that the influencing of the patient's dreams is no more a blunder on the part of the analyst or disgrace to him than the guiding of the patient's conscious thoughts.

The fact that the manifest content of dreams is influenced by the analytic treatment stands in no need of proof. It follows from our knowledge that dreams take their start from waking life and work over material derived from it. Occurrences during analytic treatment are of course among the impressions of waking life and soon become some of the most powerful of these. So it is not to be wondered at that patients should dream of things which the analyst has discussed with them and of which he has aroused expectations in them. At least it is no more to be wondered at than what is implied in the familiar fact of 'experimental' dreams.

But from here our interest proceeds to the question whether the latent dream-thoughts that have to be arrived at by interpretation can also be influenced or suggested by the analyst. And to this the answer must once more be that they obviously can be. For a portion of these latent dream-thoughts correspond to preconscious thought-formations, perfectly capable of being conscious, with which the dreamer might quite well have reacted to the physician's remarks in his waking state too - whether the patient's reactions were in harmony with those remarks or in opposition to them. In fact, if we replace the dream by the dream-thoughts which it contains, the question of how far one can suggest dreams coincides with the more general question of how far a patient in analysis is accessible to suggestion.

On the mechanism of dream-formation itself, on the dream-work in the strict sense of the word, one never exercises any influence: of that one may be quite sure.

Besides that portion of the dream which we have already discussed - the preconscious dream-thoughts - every true dream contains indications of the repressed wishful impulses to which it owes the possibility of its formation. The doubter will reply that they appear in the dream because the dreamer knows that he ought to produce them - that they are expected by the analyst. The analyst himself will rightly think otherwise.

If a dream brings up situations that can be interpreted as referring to scenes from the dreamer's past, it seems especially important to ask whether the physician's

influence can also play a part in such contents of the dream as these. And this question is most urgent of all in the case of what are called 'corroborative' dreams, dreams which, as it were, 'tag along behind' the analysis. With some patients these are the only dreams that one obtains. Such patients reproduce the forgotten experiences of their childhood only after one has constructed them from their symptoms, associations and other signs and has propounded these constructions to them. Then follow the corroborative dreams, concerning which, however, the doubt arises whether they may not be entirely without evidential value, since they may have been imagined in compliance with the physician's words instead of having been brought to light from the dreamer's unconscious. This ambiguous position cannot be escaped in the analysis, since with these patients unless one interprets, constructs and propounds, one never obtains access to what is repressed in them.

The situation takes a favourable turn if the analysis of a corroborative dream of this sort, which 'tags along behind', is immediately followed by feelings of remembering what has hitherto been forgotten. But even then the sceptic can fall back upon an assertion that the recollections are illusory. Moreover, such feelings are for the most part absent. The repressed material is only allowed through bit by bit; and every lack of completeness inhibits or delays the forming of a sense of conviction. Furthermore, what we are dealing with may not be the reproduction of a real and forgotten event but the bringing forward of an unconscious phantasy, about which no feeling of memory is ever to be expected, though the possibility may sometimes remain of a sense of subjective conviction.

Is it possible, then, that corroborative dreams are really the result of suggestion, that they are 'obliging' dreams? The patients who produce only corroborative dreams are the same patients in whom doubt plays the principal part in resistance. One makes no attempt at shouting down this doubt by means of one's authority or at reducing it by arguments. It must persist until it is brought to an end in the further course of the analysis. The analyst, too, may himself retain a doubt of the same kind in some particular instances. What makes him certain in the end is precisely the complication of the problem before him, which is like the solution of a jig-saw puzzle. A coloured picture, pasted upon a thin sheet of wood and fitting exactly into a wooden frame, is cut into a large number of pieces of the most irregular and crooked shapes. If one succeeds in arranging the confused heap of fragments, each of which bears upon it an unintelligible piece of drawing, so that the picture acquires a meaning, so that there is no gap anywhere in the design and so that the whole fits into the frame - if all these conditions are fulfilled, then one knows that one has solved the puzzle and that there is no alternative solution.

An analogy of this kind can of course have no meaning for a patient while the work of analysis is still uncompleted. At this point I recall a discussion which I was led into with a patient whose exceptionally ambivalent attitude was expressed in the most intense compulsive doubt. He did not dispute my interpretations of his dreams and was very much struck by their agreement with the hypotheses which I put forward. But he asked whether these corroborative dreams might not be an expression of his compliance towards me. I pointed out that the dreams had also

brought up a quantity of details of which I could have had no suspicion and that his behaviour in the treatment apart from this had not been precisely characterized by compliance. Whereupon he switched over to another theory and asked whether his narcissistic wish to be cured might not have caused him to produce these dreams, since, after all, I had held out to him a prospect of recovery if he were able to accept my constructions. I could only reply that I had not yet come across any such mechanism of dream-formation. But a decision was reached by another road. He recollected some dreams which he had had before starting analysis and indeed before he had known anything about it; and the analysis of these dreams, which were free from all suspicion of suggestion, led to the same interpretations as the later ones. It is true that his obsession for contradiction once more found a way out in the idea that the earlier dreams had been less clear than those that occurred during the treatment; but I was satisfied with their similarity. I think that in general it is a good plan occasionally to bear in mind the fact that people were in the habit of dreaming before there was such a thing as psycho-analysis.

VIII

It may well be that dreams during psycho-analysis succeed in bringing to light what is repressed to a greater extent than dreams outside that situation. But it cannot be proved, since the two situations are not comparable; the employment of dreams in analysis is something very remote from their original purpose. On the other hand, it cannot be doubted that within an analysis far more of the repressed is brought to light in connection with dreams than by any other method. In order to account for this, there must be some motive power, some unconscious force, which is better able to lend support to the purposes of analysis during the state of sleep than at other times. What is here in question cannot well be any factor other than the patient's compliance towards the analyst which is derived from his parental complex - in other words, the positive portion of what we call the transference; and in fact, in many dreams which recall what has been forgotten and repressed, it is impossible to discover any other unconscious wish to which the motive force for the formation of the dream can be attributed. So that if anyone wishes to maintain that most of the dreams that can be made use of in analysis are obliging dreams and owe their origin to suggestion, nothing can be said against that opinion from the point of view of analytic theory. In that case I need only add a reference to what I have said in my Introductory Lectures, where I have dealt with the relation between transference and suggestion and shown how little the trustworthiness of our results is affected by a recognition of the operation of suggestion in our sense.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920g) I have dealt with the economic problem of how what are in every respect distressing experiences of the early infantile sexual period can succeed in forcing their way through to some kind of reproduction. I was obliged to ascribe to them an extraordinarily strong upward drive in the shape of the 'compulsion to repeat' - a force able to overcome the repression which, in obedience to the pleasure principle, weighs down upon them - though not until 'the work of treatment has gone half-way to meet it and has loosened the repression'. Here we may add that it is the positive transference that

gives this assistance to the compulsion to repeat. Thus an alliance has been made between the treatment and the compulsion to repeat, an alliance which is directed in the first instance against the pleasure principle but of which the ultimate purpose is the establishment of the dominion of the reality principle. As I have shown in the passage to which I am referring, it happens only too often that the compulsion to repeat throws over its obligations under this alliance and is not content with the return of the repressed merely in the form of dream-pictures.

IX

So far as I can at present see, dreams that occur in a traumatic neurosis are the only genuine exceptions, and punishment dreams are the only apparent exceptions, to the rule that dreams are directed towards wish-fulfilment. In the latter class of dreams we are met by the remarkable fact that actually nothing belonging to the latent dream-thoughts is taken up into the manifest content of the dream. Something quite different appears instead, which must be described as a reaction-formation against the dream-thoughts, a rejection and complete contradiction of them. Such offensive action as this against the dream can only be ascribed to the critical agency of the ego and it must therefore be assumed that the latter, provoked by the unconscious wish-fulfilment, has been temporarily re-established even during the sleeping state. It might have reacted to the undesirable content of the dream by waking up; but it has found a means, by the construction of the punishment dream, of avoiding an interruption of sleep.

For instance, in the case of the well-known dreams of the poet Rosegger which I discussed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, we must suspect the existence of a suppressed version with an arrogant and boastful text, whereas the actual dream said to him: 'You are an incompetent journeyman tailor.' It would, of course, be useless to look for a repressed wishful impulse as the motive power for a manifest dream such as this; one must be content with the fulfilment of the wish for self-criticism.

A dream-structure of this kind will excite less astonishment if one considers how frequently dream-distortion, acting in the service of the censorship, replaces a particular element by something that is in some sense or other its opposite or contrary. It is only a short step from there to the replacement of a characteristic portion of the content of the dream by a defensive contradiction, and one further step will lead to the whole objectionable dream-content being replaced by the punishment dream. I should like to give a couple of characteristic examples of the intermediate phase in the falsification of the manifest content.

Here is an extract from the dream of a girl with a strong fixation to her father, who had difficulty in talking during the analysis. She was sitting in a room with a girl friend, and dressed only in a kimono. A gentleman came in and she felt embarrassed. But the gentleman said: 'Why, this is the girl we saw once before dressed so nicely!' - The gentleman stood for me, and, further back, for her father. But we can make nothing of the dream unless we make up our mind to replace the most important element in the gentleman's speech by its contrary: 'This is the girl I

saw once before undressed and who looked so nice then!' When she was a child of three or four she had for some time slept in the same room as her father and everything goes to suggest that she used then to throw back her clothes in her sleep to please her father. The subsequent repression of her pleasure in exhibiting herself was the motive for her secretiveness in the treatment, her dislike of showing herself openly.

And here is another scene from the same dream. She was reading her own case history, which she had before her in print. In it was a statement that 'a young man murdered his fiancée - cocoa - that comes under anal erotism.' This last phrase was a thought that she had in the dream at the mention of cocoa. - The interpretation of this piece of the dream was even more difficult than the former one. It emerged at last that before going to sleep she had been reading my 'History of an Infantile Neurosis' (1918b), the central point of which is the real or imagined observation by a patient of his parents copulating. She had already once before related this case history to her own, and this was not the only indication that in her case as well there was a question of an observation of the same kind. The young man murdering his fiancée was a clear reference to a sadistic view of the scene of copulation. But the next element, the cocoa, was very remote from it. Her only association to cocoa was that her mother used to say that cocoa gave one a headache, and she maintained that she had heard the same thing from other women. Moreover, she had at one time identified herself with her mother by means of headaches like hers. Now I could find no link between the two elements of the dream except by supposing that she wanted to make a diversion from the consequences of the observation of coitus. No, she was saying, coitus had nothing to do with the procreation of children; children came from something one ate (as they do in fairy tales); and the mention of anal erotism, which looks like an attempt in the dream at interpretation, supplemented the infantile theory which she had called to her help, by adding anal birth to it.

X

Astonishment is sometimes expressed at the fact that the dreamer's ego can appear two or more times in the manifest dream, once as himself and again disguised behind the figures of other people. During the course of the construction of the dream, the secondary revision has evidently sought to obliterate this multiplicity of the ego, which cannot fit in with any possible scenic situation; but it is re-established by the work of interpretation. In itself this multiplicity is no more remarkable than the multiple appearance of the ego in a waking thought, especially when the ego divides itself into subject and object, puts one part of itself as an observing and critical agency in contrast to the other, or compares its present nature with its recollected past, which was also ego once; for instance, in such sentences as 'When I think what I've done to this man' or 'When I think that I too was a child once'. But I should reject as a meaningless and unjustifiable piece of speculation the notion that all figures that appear in a dream are to be regarded as fragmentations and representatives of the dreamer's own ego. It is enough that we should keep firmly to the fact that the separation of the ego from an observing,

critical, punishing agency (an ego ideal) must be taken into account in the interpretation of dreams as well.