

SOME ADDITIONAL NOTES ON DREAM-INTERPRETATION AS A WHOLE - (1925)

It may be asked whether it is possible to give a complete and assured translation into the language of waking life (that is, an interpretation) of every product of dream-life. This question will not be treated here in the abstract but with reference to the conditions under which one works at interpreting dreams.

Our mental activities pursue either a useful aim or an immediate yield of pleasure. In the former case what we are dealing with are intellectual judgements, preparations for action or the conveyance of information to other people. In the latter case we describe these activities as play or phantasy. What is useful is itself (as is well known) only a circuitous path to pleasurable satisfaction. Now, dreaming is an activity of the second kind, which is indeed, from the point of view of evolution, the earlier one. It is misleading to say that dreams are concerned with the tasks of life before us or seek to find a solution for the problems of our daily work. That is the business of preconscious thought. Useful work of this kind is as remote from dreams as is any intention of conveying information to another person. When a dream deals with a problem of actual life, it solves it in the manner of an irrational wish and not in the manner of a reasonable reflection. There is only one useful task, only one function, that can be ascribed to a dream, and that is the guarding of sleep from interruption. A dream may be described as a piece of phantasy working on behalf of the maintenance of sleep.

It follows from this that it is on the whole a matter of indifference to the sleeping ego what may be dreamt during the night so long as the dream performs its task, and that those dreams best fulfil their function about which one knows nothing after waking. If it so often happens otherwise, if we remember dreams - even after years and decades - it always means that there has been an irruption of the repressed unconscious into the normal ego. Without this concession to it the repressed would not have consented to lend its help to the removal of the threat of disturbance to sleep. We know that it is the fact of this irruption that gives dreams their importance for psychopathology. If we can uncover a dream's motivating force, we shall obtain unsuspected information about the repressed impulses in the unconscious; and on the other hand, if we can undo its distortions, we shall overhear preconscious thought taking place in states of internal reflection which would not have attracted consciousness to themselves during the day-time.

No one can practise the interpretation of dreams as an isolated activity: it remains a part of the work of analysis. In analysis we direct our interest according to necessity, now to the preconscious content of the dream and now to the unconscious contribution to its formation; and we often neglect the one element in favour of the other. Nor would it be of any avail for anyone to endeavour to interpret dreams outside analysis. He would not succeed in escaping the conditions of the analytic situation; and if he worked at his own dreams, he would be undertaking a self-analysis. This comment would not apply to someone who did without the dreamer's collaboration and sought to interpret dreams by intuitive insight. But dream-interpretation of such a kind, without reference to the dreamer's

associations, would in the most favourable case remain a piece of unscientific virtuosity of very doubtful value.

If one practises dream-interpretation according to the sole justifiable technical procedure, one soon notices that success depends entirely upon the tension of resistance between the awakened ego and the repressed unconscious. Work under a 'high pressure of resistance' demands (as I have explained elsewhere) a different attitude on the part of the analyst from work under a low pressure. In analysis one has for long periods at a time to deal with strong resistances which are still unknown to one and which it will in any case be impossible to overcome so long as they remain unknown. It is therefore not to be wondered at that only a certain portion of a patient's dream-products can be translated and made use of, and, even at that, most often incompletely. Even if, owing to one's own experience, one is in a position to understand many dreams to the interpretation of which the dreamer has contributed little, one must always remember that the certainty of such interpretations remains in doubt and one hesitates to press one's conjectures upon the patient.

Critical voices will now be raised. It will be objected that, since it is not possible to interpret every dream that is dealt with, one should cease asserting more than one can establish and should be content to say that some dreams can be shown by interpretation to have a meaning but that as to the rest we are in ignorance. But the very fact that success in interpretation depends upon the resistance absolves the analyst from the necessity for such modesty. He may have the experience of a dream that was at first unintelligible becoming clear during the very same hour after some fortunate remark has got rid of one of the dreamer's resistances. A portion of the dream which the patient had hitherto forgotten may suddenly occur to him and may bring the key to the interpretation; or a new association may emerge which may throw light upon the darkness. It sometimes happens, too, that, after months or years of analytic labour, one returns to a dream which at the beginning of the treatment seemed meaningless and incomprehensible but which is now, in the light of knowledge obtained in the meantime, completely elucidated. And if one further takes into consideration the argument from the theory of dreams that the model dream-products of children invariably have a clear meaning and are easy to interpret, then it will be justifiable to assert that dreams are quite generally mental structures that are capable of interpretation, though the situation may not always allow of an interpretation being reached.

When the interpretation of a dream has been discovered, it is not always easy to decide whether it is a 'complete' one - that is, whether further preconscious thoughts may not also have found expression in the same dream. In that case we must consider the meaning proved which is based on the dreamer's associations and our estimate of the situation, without on that account feeling bound to reject the other meaning. It remains possible, though unproven; one must become accustomed to a dream being thus capable of having many meanings. Moreover, the blame for this is not always to be laid upon incompleteness of the work of interpretation; it may just as well be inherent in the latent dream-thoughts themselves. Indeed it may happen in waking life, quite apart from the situation of

dream-interpretation, that one is uncertain whether some remark that one has heard or some piece of information that one has received is open to construction this way or that, or whether it is hinting at something else beyond its obvious meaning.

One interesting occurrence which has been insufficiently investigated is to be seen where the same manifest dream-content gives simultaneous expression to a set of concrete ideas and to an abstract line of thought based upon them. It is of course difficult for the dream-work to find a means for representing abstract thoughts.⁸

(B) MORAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CONTENT OF DREAMS

In the introductory chapter of this book (which discusses 'The Scientific Literature Dealing with the Problem of Dreams') I have shown the way in which writers have reacted to what is felt as the distressing fact that the unbridled content of dreams is so often at odds with the moral sense of the dreamer. (I deliberately avoid speaking of 'criminal' dreams, as such a description, which would overstep the limits of psychological interest, seems to me quite uncalled-for.) The immoral character of dreams has naturally provided a fresh motive for denying them any psychical value: if dreams are the meaningless product of disordered mental activity, then there can be no ground for assuming responsibility for their apparent content.

The problem of responsibility for the manifest content of dreams has been fundamentally shifted and indeed disposed of by the explanations given in my Interpretation of Dreams.

We know now that the manifest content is a deception, a façade. It is not worth while to submit it to an ethical examination or to take its breaches of morality any more seriously than its breaches of logic or mathematics. When the 'content' of the dream is spoken of, what must be referred to can only be the content of the preconscious thoughts and of the repressed wishful impulse which are revealed behind the façade of the dream by the work of interpretation. Nevertheless, this immoral façade has a question to put to us. We have heard that the latent dream-thoughts have to submit to a severe censorship before they are allowed access to the manifest content. How can it happen, then, that this censorship, which makes difficulties over more trivial things, breaks down so completely over these manifestly immoral dreams?

The answer is not easy to come by and may perhaps not seem completely satisfying. If, in the first place, one submits these dreams to interpretation, one finds that some of them have given no offence to the censorship because au fond they have no bad meaning. They are innocent boastings or identifications that put up a mask of pretence; they have not been censored because they do not tell the truth. But others of them - and, it must be admitted, the majority - really mean what they say and have undergone no distortion from the censorship. They are an expression of immoral, incestuous and perverse impulses or of murderous and sadistic lusts. The dreamer reacts to many of these dreams by waking up in a fright, in which case the situation is no longer obscure to us. The censorship has

neglected its task, this has been noticed too late, and the generation of anxiety is a substitute for the distortion that has been omitted. In still other instances of such dreams, even that expression of affect is absent. The objectionable matter is carried along by the height of the sexual excitement that has been reached during sleep, or it is viewed with the same tolerance with which even a waking person can regard a fit of rage, an angry mood or the indulgence in cruel phantasies.

But our interest in the genesis of these manifestly immoral dreams is greatly reduced when we find from analysis that the majority of dreams - innocent dreams, dreams without affect and anxiety-dreams - are revealed, when the distortions of the censorship have been undone, as the fulfilments of immoral - egoistic, sadistic, perverse or incestuous - wishful impulses. As in the world of waking life, these masked criminals are far commoner than those with their vizors raised. The straightforward dream of sexual relations with one's mother, which Jocasta alludes to in the Oedipus Rex, is a rarity in comparison with all the multiplicity of dreams which psycho-analysis must interpret in the same sense.

I have dealt so exhaustively in these pages with this characteristic of dreams, which indeed provides the motive for their distortion, that I can pass at once from this topic to the problem that lies before us: Must one assume responsibility for the content of one's dreams? For the sake of completeness, it should, however, be added that dreams do not always offer immoral wish-fulfilments, but often energetic reactions against them in the form of 'punishment dreams'. In other words, the dream-censorship cannot only express itself in distortions and the generation of anxiety, but can go so far as to blot out the immoral subject-matter completely and replace it by something else that serves as an atonement, though it allows one to see what lies behind. But the problem of responsibility for the immoral content of dreams no longer exists for us as it formerly did for writers who knew nothing of latent dream-thoughts and the repressed part of our mental life. Obviously one must hold oneself responsible for the evil impulses of one's dreams. What else is one to do with them? Unless the content of the dream (rightly understood) is inspired by alien spirits, it is a part of my own being. If I seek to classify the impulses that are present in me according to social standards into good and bad, I must assume responsibility for both sorts; and if, in defence, I say that what is unknown, unconscious and repressed in me is not my 'ego', then I shall not be basing my position upon psycho-analysis, I shall not have accepted its conclusions - and I shall perhaps be taught better by the criticisms of my fellow-men, by the disturbances in my actions and the confusion of my feelings. I shall perhaps learn that what I am disavowing not only 'is' in me but sometimes 'acts' from out of me as well.

It is true that in the metapsychological sense this bad repressed content does not belong to my 'ego' - that is, assuming that I am a morally blameless individual - but to an 'id' upon which my ego is seated. But this ego developed out of the id, it forms with it a single biological unit, it is only a specially modified peripheral portion of it, and it is subject to the influences and obeys the suggestions that arise from the id. For any vital purpose, a separation of the ego from the id would be a hopeless undertaking.

Moreover, if I were to give way to my moral pride and tried to decree that for purposes of moral valuation I might disregard the evil in the id and need not make my ego responsible for it, what use would that be to me? Experience shows me that I nevertheless do take that responsibility, that I am somehow compelled to do so. Psycho-analysis has made us familiar with a pathological condition, obsessional neurosis, in which the poor ego feels itself responsible for all sorts of evil impulses of which it knows nothing, impulses which are brought up against it in consciousness but which it is unable to acknowledge. Something of this is present in every normal person. It is a remarkable fact that the more moral he is the more sensitive is his 'conscience'. It is just as though we could say that the healthier a man is, the more liable he is to contagions and to the effects of injuries. This is no doubt because conscience is itself a reaction-formation against the evil that is perceived in the id. The more strongly the latter is suppressed, the more active is the conscience.

The ethical narcissism of humanity should rest content with the knowledge that the fact of distortion in dreams, as well as the existence of anxiety-dreams and punishment-dreams, afford just as clear evidence of his moral nature as dream-interpretation gives of the existence and strength of his evil nature. If anyone is dissatisfied with this and would like to be 'better' than he was created, let him see whether he can attain anything more in life than hypocrisy or inhibition.

The physician will leave it to the jurist to construct for social purposes a responsibility that is artificially limited to the metapsychological ego. It is notorious that the greatest difficulties are encountered by the attempts to derive from such a construction practical consequences which are not in contradiction to human feelings.²

(C) THE OCCULT SIGNIFICANCE OF DREAMS

There seems to be no end to the problems of dream-life. But this can only be surprising if we forget that all the problems of mental life recur in dreams with the addition of a few new ones arising from the special nature of dreams. Many of the things that we study in dreams, because we meet with them there, have nevertheless little or nothing to do with the psychological peculiarity of dreams. Thus, for instance, symbolism is not a dream-problem, but a topic connected with our archaic thinking - our 'basic language', as it was aptly called by the paranoid Schreber. It dominates myths and religious ritual no less than dreams, and dream-symbolism can scarcely even claim that it is peculiar in that it conceals more particularly things that are important sexually. Again, it is not to be expected that the explanation of anxiety-dreams will be found in the theory of dreams. Anxiety is a problem rather of neurosis, and all that remains to be discussed is how it comes about that anxiety can arise under dream-conditions.

The position is just the same, I think, in the matter of the relation of dreams to the alleged facts of the occult world. But, since dreams themselves have always been mysterious things, they have been brought into intimate connection with the other unknown mysteries. No doubt, too, they have a historic claim to that position, since

in primaeval ages, when our mythology was being formed, dream-images may have played a part in the origin of ideas about spirits.

There would seem to be two categories of dreams with a claim to being reckoned as occult phenomena: prophetic dreams and telepathic ones. A countless multitude of witnesses speak in favour of both of them, while against both of them there is the obstinate aversion, or maybe prejudice, of science.

There can, indeed, be no doubt that there are such things as prophetic dreams, in the sense that their content gives some sort of picture of the future; the only question is whether these predictions coincide to any noticeable extent with what really happens subsequently. I must confess that upon this point my resolution in favour of impartiality deserts me. The notion that there is any mental power, apart from acute calculation, which can foresee future events in detail is on the one hand too much in contradiction to all the expectations and presumptions of science and on the other hand corresponds too closely to certain ancient and familiar human desires which criticism must reject as unjustifiable pretensions. I am therefore of opinion that after one has taken into account the untrustworthiness, credulity and unconvincingness of most of these reports, together with the possibility of falsifications of memory facilitated by emotional causes and the inevitability of a few lucky shots, it may be anticipated that the spectre of veridical prophetic dreams will disappear into nothing. Personally, I have never experienced anything or learnt of anything that could encourage a more favourable presumption.

It is otherwise with telepathic dreams. But at this point it must be made quite clear that no one has yet maintained that telepathic phenomena - the reception of a mental process by one person from another by means other than sensory perception - are exclusively related to dreams. Thus once again telepathy is not a dream-problem: our judgement upon whether it exists or not need not be based on a study of telepathic dreams.

If reports of telepathic occurrences (or, to speak less exactly, of thought-transference) are submitted to the same criticism as stories of other occult events, there remains a considerable amount of material which cannot be so easily neglected. Further, it is much more possible to collect observations and experiences of one's own in this field which justify a favourable attitude to the problem of telepathy, even though they may not be enough to carry an assured conviction. One arrives at a provisional opinion that it may well be that telepathy really exists and that it provides the kernel of truth in many other hypotheses that would otherwise be incredible.

It is certainly right in what concerns telepathy to adhere obstinately to the same sceptical position and only to yield grudgingly to the force of evidence. I believe I have found a class of material which is exempt from the doubts which are otherwise justified - namely, unfulfilled prophecies made by professional fortune-tellers. Unluckily, I have but few such observations at my disposal; but two among these have made a powerful impression on me. I am not in a position to describe

them in such detail as would produce a similar effect upon other people, and I must restrict myself to bringing out a few essential points.

A prediction had been made, then, to the enquirers (at a strange place and by a strange fortune-teller, who was at the same time carrying out some, presumably irrelevant, ritual) that something would happen to them at a particular time, which in fact did not come true. The date at which the prophecy should have been fulfilled was long past. It was striking that those concerned reported their experience not with derision or disappointment but with obvious satisfaction. Included among what had been told them there were certain quite definite details which seemed capricious and unintelligible and would only have been justified if they had hit the mark. Thus, for instance, the palmist told a woman who was twenty-seven (though she looked much younger) and who had taken off her wedding-ring, that she would be married and have two children before she was thirty-two. The woman was forty-three when, now seriously ill, she told me the story in her analysis: she had remained childless. If one knew her private history (of which the 'Professor' in the lounge of the Paris hotel was certainly ignorant) one could understand the two numbers included in the prophecy. The girl had married after an unusually intense attachment to her father and had then had a passionate longing for children, so as to be able to put her husband in the place of her father. After years of disappointment, when she was on the brink of a neurosis, she obtained the prophecy, which promised her - the lot of her mother. For it was a fact that the latter had had two children by the time she was thirty-two. Thus it was only by the help of psycho-analysis that it was possible to give a significant interpretation of the peculiarities of this pretended message from without. But there was then no better explanation of the whole, unequivocally determined chain of events than to suppose that a strong wish on the part of the questioner - the strongest unconscious wish, in fact, of her whole emotional life and the motive force of her impending neurosis - had made itself manifest to the fortune-teller by being directly transferred to him while his attention was being distracted by the performances he was going through.

I have often had an impression, in the course of experiments in my private circle, that strongly emotionally coloured recollections can be successfully transferred without much difficulty. If one has the courage to subject to an analytic examination the associations of the person to whom the thoughts are supposed to be transferred, correspondences often come to light which would otherwise have remained undiscovered. On the basis of a number of experiences I am inclined to draw the conclusion that thought-transference of this kind comes about particularly easily at the moment at which an idea emerges from the unconscious, or, in theoretical terms, as it passes over from the 'primary process' to the 'secondary process'.

In spite of the caution which is prescribed by the importance, novelty and obscurity of the subject, I feel that I should not be justified in holding back any longer these considerations upon the problem of telepathy. All of this has only this much to do with dreams: if there are such things as telepathic messages, the possibility cannot be dismissed of their reaching someone during sleep and coming to his knowledge

in a dream. Indeed, on the analogy of other perceptual and intellectual material, the further possibility arises that telepathic messages received in the course of the day may only be dealt with during a dream of the following night. There would then be nothing contradictory in the material that has been telepathically communicated being modified and transformed in the dream like any other material. It would be satisfactory if with the help of psycho-analysis we could obtain further and better authenticated knowledge of telepathy.