

SOME DREAMS OF DESCARTES'

A LETTER TO MAXIME LEROY

(1929)

On considering your letter asking me to examine some dreams of Descartes', my first feeling was an impression of dismay, since working on dreams without being able to obtain from the dreamer himself any indications on the relations which might link them to one another or attach them to the external world - and this is clearly the case when it is a question of the dreams of a historical figure - gives, as a general rule, only a meagre result. In the event my task turned out to be easier than I had anticipated; nevertheless, the fruit of my investigations will no doubt seem to you much less important than you had a right to expect.

Our philosopher's dreams are what are known as 'dreams from above' ('Träume von oben'). That is to say, they are formulations of ideas which could have been created just as well in a waking state as during the state of sleep, and which have derived their content only in certain parts from mental states at a comparatively deep level. That is why these dreams offer for the most part a content which has an abstract, poetic or symbolic form.

The analysis of dreams of this kind usually leads us to the following position: we cannot understand the dream, but the dreamer - or the patient - can translate it immediately and without difficulty, given that the content of the dream is very close to his conscious thoughts. There then remain certain parts of the dream about which the dreamer does not know what to say: and these are precisely the parts which belong to the unconscious and which are in many respects the most interesting.

In the most favourable cases we explain this unconscious with the help of the ideas which the dreamer has added to it.

This way of judging 'dreams from above' - and this term must be understood in a psychological, not in a mystical, sense - is the one to be followed in the case of Descartes' dreams.⁴

The philosopher interprets them himself and, in accordance with all the rules for the interpretation of dreams, we must accept his explanation, but it should be added that we have no path open to us which will take us any further.

In confirmation of his explanation we can say that the hindrances which prevented him from moving freely are perfectly well known to us: they are a representation by the dream of an internal conflict. The left side represents evil and sin, and the wind the 'evil genius' (animus).

The different figures who appear in the dream cannot of course be identified by us, although Descartes, if he were questioned, would not have failed to identify them.

The bizarre elements, of which, incidentally, there are few, and which are almost absurd - such as 'the melon from a foreign land', and the little portraits - remain unexplained.

As regards the melon, the dreamer has had the - original - idea of seeing in it 'the charms of solitude, but presented by purely human inducements'. This is certainly not correct, but it might provide an association of ideas which would lead to a correct explanation. If it is correlated with his state of sin, this association might stand for a sexual picture which occupied the lonely young man's imagination.

On the question of the portraits Descartes throws no light.⁵