

MY CONTACT WITH JOSEF POPPER-LYNKEUS

(1932)

It was in the winter of 1899 that my book on *The Interpretation of Dreams* (though its title-page was post-dated into the new century) at length lay before me. This work was the product of the labours of four or five years and its origin was unusual. Holding a lectureship in Nervous Diseases at the University, I had attempted to support myself and my rapidly increasing family by a medical practice among the so-called 'neurotics' of whom there were only too many in our society. But the task proved harder than I had expected. The ordinary methods of treatment clearly offered little or no help: other paths must be followed. And how was it by any means possible to give patients help when one understood nothing of their illness, nothing of the causes of their sufferings or of the meaning of their complaints? So I eagerly sought direction and instruction from the great Charcot in Paris and from Bernheim at Nancy; finally, an observation made by my teacher and friend, Josef Breuer of Vienna, seemed to open a new prospect for understanding and therapeutic success.

For these new experiments made it a certainty that the patients whom we described as neurotic were in some sense suffering from mental disturbances and ought therefore to be treated by psychological methods. Our interest therefore necessarily turned to psychology. The psychology which ruled at that time in the academic schools of philosophy had very little to offer and nothing at all for our purposes: we had to discover from the start both our methods and the theoretical hypotheses behind them. So I worked in this direction, first in collaboration with Breuer and afterwards independently of him. In the end I made it a part of my technique to require my patients to tell me without criticism whatever occurred to their minds, even if they were ideas which did not seem to make sense or which it was distressing to report.

When they fell in with my instructions they told me their dreams, amongst other things, as though they were of the same kind as their other thoughts. This was a plain hint that I should assign as much importance to these dreams as to other, intelligible, phenomena. They, however, were not intelligible, but strange, confused, absurd: like dreams, in fact - which for that very reason, were condemned by science as random and senseless twitchings of the organ of the mind. If my patients were right - and they seemed only to be repeating the ancient beliefs held by unscientific men for thousands of years - I was faced by the task of 'interpreting dreams' in a way that could stand up against scientific criticism.

To begin with, I naturally understood no more about my patients' dreams than the dreamers did themselves. But by applying to these dreams, and more particularly to my own dreams, the procedure which I had already used for the study of other abnormal psychological structures, I succeeded in answering most of the questions which could be raised by an interpretation of dreams. There were many such questions: What do we dream about? Why do we dream at all? What is the origin of all the strange characteristics which distinguish dreams from waking life? - and

many more such questions besides. Some of the answers were easily given and turned out to confirm views that had already been put forward; but others involved completely new hypotheses with regard to the structure and functioning of the apparatus of the mind. People dream about the things that have engaged their minds during the waking day. People dream in order to allay impulses that seek to disturb sleep, and in order to be able to sleep on. But why was it possible for dreams to present such a strange appearance, so confusedly senseless, so obviously contrasted with the content of waking thought, in spite of being concerned with the same material? There could be no doubt that dreams were only a substitute for a rational process of thought and could be interpreted - that is to say, translated into a rational process. But what needed explaining was the fact of the distortion which the dream-work had carried out upon the rational and intelligible material.

Dream-distortion was the profoundest and most difficult problem of dream life. And light was thrown on it by the following consideration, which placed dreams in a class along with other psychopathological formations and revealed them, as it were, as the normal psychoses of human beings. For our mind, that precious instrument by whose means we maintain ourselves in life, is no peacefully self-contained unity. It is rather to be compared with a modern State in which a mob, eager for enjoyment and destruction, has to be held down forcibly by a prudent superior class. The whole flux of our mental life and everything that finds expression in our thoughts are derivations and representatives of the multifarious instincts that are innate in our physical constitution. But these instincts are not all equally susceptible to direction and education, or equally ready to fall in with the demands of the external world and of human society. A number of them have retained their primitive, ungovernable nature; if we let them have their way, they would infallibly bring us to ruin. Consequently, learning by experience, we have developed organizations in our mind which, in the form of inhibitions, set themselves up against the direct manifestations of the instincts. Every impulse in the nature of a wish that arises from the sources of instinctual energy must submit itself to examination by the highest agencies of our mind, and, if it is not approved, is rejected and restrained from exercising any influence upon our movements - that is, from coming into execution. Often enough, indeed, such wishes are even forbidden to enter consciousness, which is habitually unaware even of the existence of these dangerous instinctual sources. We describe such impulses as being repressed from the point of view of consciousness, and as surviving only in the unconscious. If what is repressed contrives somehow to force its way into consciousness or into movement or into both, we are no longer normal: at that point the whole range of neurotic and psychotic symptoms arise. The maintenance of the necessary inhibitions and repressions imposes upon our mind a great expenditure of energy, from which it is glad to be relieved. A good opportunity for this seems to be offered at night by the state of sleep, since sleep involves a cessation of our motor functions. The situation seems safe, and the severity of our internal police-force may therefore be relaxed. It is not entirely withdrawn, since one cannot be certain: it may be that the unconscious never sleeps at all. And now the reduction of pressure upon the repressed unconscious produces its effect.

Wishes arise from it which during sleep might find the entrance to consciousness open. If we were to know them we should be appalled, alike by their subject-matter, their unrestraint and indeed the mere possibility of their existence. This, however, occurs only seldom, and when it does we awake as speedily as possible, in a state of fear. But as a rule our consciousness does not experience the dream as it really was. It is true that the inhibitory forces (the dream censorship, as we may call them) are not completely awake, but neither are they wholly asleep. They have had an influence on the dream while it was struggling to find an expression in words and pictures, they have got rid of what was most objectionable, they have altered other parts of it till they are unrecognizable, they have severed real connections while introducing false ones, until the honest but brutal wishful phantasy which lay behind the dream has turned into the manifest dream as we remember it - more or less confused and almost always strange and incomprehensible. Thus the dream (or the distortion which characterizes it) is the expression of a compromise, the evidence of a conflict between the mutually incompatible impulses and strivings of our mental life. And do not let us forget that the same process, the same interplay of forces, which explains the dreams of a normal sleeper, gives us the key to understanding all the phenomena of neurosis and psychosis.

I must apologize if I have hitherto talked so much about myself and my work on the problems of the dream; but it was a necessary preliminary to what follows. My explanation of dream-distortion seemed to me new: I had nowhere found anything like it. Years later (I can no longer remember when) I came across Josef Popper-Lynkeus's book *Phantasien eines Realisten*. One of the stories contained in it bore the title of 'Träumen wie Wachen', and it could not fail to arouse my deepest interest. There was a description in it of a man who could boast that he had never dreamt anything nonsensical. His dreams might be fantastic, like fairy tales, but they were not enough out of harmony with the waking world for it to be possible to say definitely that 'they were impossible or absurd in themselves'. Translated into my manner of speech this meant that in the case of this man no dream-distortion occurred; and the reason produced for its absence put one at the same time in possession of the reason for its occurrence. Popper allowed the man complete insight into the reasons for his peculiarity. He made him say: 'Order and harmony reign both in my thoughts and in my feelings, nor do the two struggle with each other.... I am one and undivided. Other people are divided and their two parts - waking and dreaming - are almost perpetually at war with each other.' And again, on the question of the interpretation of dreams: 'That is certainly no easy task; but with a little attention on the part of the dreamer himself it should no doubt always succeed. - You ask why it is that for the most part it does not succeed? In you other people there seems always to be something that lies concealed in your dreams, something unchaste in a special and higher sense, a certain secret quality in your being which it is hard to follow. And that is why your dreams so often seem to be without meaning or even to be nonsense. But in the deepest sense this is not in the least so; indeed, it cannot be so at all - for it is always the same man, whether he is awake or dreaming.'

Now, if we leave psychological terminology out of account, this was the very same explanation of dream-distortion that I had arrived at from my study of dreams. Distortion was a compromise, something in its very nature disingenuous, the product of a conflict between thought and feeling, or, as I had put it, between what is conscious and what is repressed. Where a conflict of this kind was not present and repression was unnecessary, dreams could not be strange or senseless. The man who dreamed in a way no different from that in which he thought while awake was granted by Popper the very condition of internal harmony which, as a social reformer, he aimed at producing in the body politic. And if Science informs us that such a man, wholly without evil and falseness and devoid of all repressions, does not exist and could not survive, yet we may guess that, so far as an approximation to this ideal is possible, it had found its realization in the person of Popper himself.

Overwhelmed by meeting with such wisdom, I began to read all his works - his books on Voltaire, on Religion, on War, on the Universal Provision of Subsistence, etc. - till there was built up clearly before my eyes a picture of this simple-minded, great man, who was a thinker and a critic and at the same time a kindly humanitarian and reformer. I reflected much over the rights of the individual which he advocated and to which I should gladly have added my support had I not been restrained by the thought that neither the processes of Nature nor the aims of human society quite justified such claims. A special feeling of sympathy drew me to him, since he too had clearly had painful experience of the bitterness of the life of a Jew and of the hollowness of the ideals of present-day civilization. Yet I never saw him in the flesh. He knew of me through common acquaintances, and I once had occasion to answer a letter from him in which he asked for some piece of information. But I never sought him out. My innovations in psychology had estranged me from my contemporaries, and especially from the older among them: often enough when I approached some man whom I had honoured from a distance, I found myself repelled, as it were, by his lack of understanding for what had become my whole life to me. And after all Josef Popper had been a physicist: he had been a friend of Ernst Mach. I was anxious that the happy impression of our agreement upon the problem of dream-distortion should not be spoiled. So it came about that I put off calling upon him till it was too late and I could now only salute his bust in the gardens in front of our Rathaus.