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An Examination Dream

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One of my patients had fairly regularly, at intervals of two or three months, a dream about his matriculation examination. In the dream he was always doing a paper in Latin or mathematics. Invariably the dreamer lived through the last few minutes before the time was up. He had not yet begun to translate or to work out the problems, and the examiner announced that there would be five minutes more. His comrades held out their papers for him to copy and tried to prompt him, but he was incapable of even guiding his pen; the figures or letters became a blur, and he experienced the whole torment of the situation of not being able to perform or complete a task—only to awake with a sense of great relief and satisfaction at the thought that his school-days were long since over. So far, these dreams are typical and do not require any special mention; but the subject's previous history is worth noting from a theoretical point of view. In the *Traumdeutung* we read that a colleague had remarked to Freud that, so far as he knew, the matriculation dream only occurred in people who had passed the examination, and never in those who had failed in it.

Now the dreams in question are peculiar owing to the fact that the dreamer had never taken the matriculation examination.

Let me first give some analytical data in connection with the dream. The fact that the examination was always in mathematics or Latin is easily explained. The patient's father was a professor of mathematics; the Latin Professor at the time when the patient was a schoolboy was clearly a father-substitute.¹ The father and the Professor had certain qualities in common: both were one-sided and immersed in their own narrow scientific work, both were unsociable and delighted in books and astronomy, and both smoked pipes. The boy, who was otherwise very alert and of good intelligence, could make no progress in Latin, thus giving vent to his negative feelings towards his father. It was in accordance with the somewhat protracted duration of puberty that he retained his dislike of Latin right up to the highest form in school. The Latin Professor liked him. Every badly performed task was regarded by him as a personal slight from the patient, and thus he

¹ When he dreamt of an examination in mathematics the patient never saw the examiner, but if it was a Latin paper the examiner was always there.

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added to the negative transference. He saw to it that, in spite of the boy's defective knowledge, he was moved up every year to a higher form. With horror the patient saw his matriculation examination becoming more and more imminent. When he thought of this public examination, in which the gaps in his knowledge would inevitably be revealed, he was seized with violent anxiety. He was anticipating punishment for the many occasions on which he had neglected his tasks: that is to say, for the unconscious hate towards his father which had caused this neglect. The examination was anticipated as a punishment, so to speak, for his guilt in relation to his father.

Then came the War and with it the 'War-matriculation' [i.e. reaching the status of manhood without the test of a school-examination], and the boy eluded the anticipated punishment. Shortly after-wards the examination-dream occurred for the first time, and from then on it recurred regularly. The patient could not recollect that there was any connection between the dream and some responsible task which he was required to perform on the following day.

The analytical material associated with this dream shows that, although it was about an examination, it has not the characteristics which Freud ascribes to examination-dreams in general but must be placed in another category, amongst those which he calls 'punishment-dreams'. According to him 'punishment-dreams' fulfil the wishes of the critical institution in the ego (ego-ideal, censorship, conscience). The fact that in the dreams under consideration the father appeared as the examiner would accord with this view.² Only it is rather remarkable that this punishment-dream took the form of an examination-dream and had in it much of the mechanism which Freud discovered in the latter type of dream.

Thus we have here a mixture of two types: the examination and the punishment-dream. This is the explanation of the remarkable fact that anyone who had never stood for this examination should nevertheless dream of it in this typical way.

² Cf. Reik, *Geständniszwang und Strafbedürfnis*, p. 65.

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