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The Dream Work

Now that analysts have become reconciled to replacing the manifest dream by the meaning revealed by its interpretation, many of them have become guilty of falling into another confusion which they cling to with equal obstinacy. They seek to find the essence of dreams in their latent content and in so doing they overlook the distinction between the latent dream-thoughts and the dream-work. At bottom dreams are nothing other than a particular form of thinking, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep. It is the dream work that creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming—the explanation of its peculiar nature.

(Interpretation of Dreams Footnote added in 1925. 649-650)

In this footnote, added twenty-five years after the original publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud is drawing attention to two kinds of mistake that

analysts make when interpreting dreams. The first (typical of the earlier days) is to attribute too much importance to the manifest content of dreams--to make too much of what is obvious. The Dream is a *disguise*, so that interpretation must dig beneath the manifest content to its symbolic core. However, the other mistake (more typical of later analysis) is to jump too quickly to some latent content--not visible on the surface but lurking below like the monster from the black lagoon. The point is to see the dream not simply in terms of either its manifest or its latent content. Rather it is to understand the *processes* by which the dream comes into being. That is, the analysis of dreams must come to grips with what Freud calls "the dream-work." Analysis is thus concerned with process, rather than content, as it is the process that reveals the workings of the unconscious. Freud locates four main aspects to the dream-work, the means by which the hidden wish becomes expressed. These four aspects account for how wishes and desires become structured and organized unconsciously.

The Four Aspects of The Dream Work

- * **Condensation:** condenses many different ideas into one.
- * **Displacement:** replaces a latent element by a well-concealed allusion to it, so the psychological emphasis is shifted from an important element to a relatively trivial one.
- * **Considerations of representability** (or "figurability"):

transforms thoughts into visual elements (“I was in a tower above the audience” might mean “I towered above the audience intellectually”).

- * **Secondary Revision:** makes something whole and more or less coherent out of the distorted product of the dream work.

These aspects of the dream-work transform a latent (unconscious) set of thoughts into the manifest content (the dream), which is a disguised version of those thoughts.

Condensation (Verdichtung.)

In a footnote to his often very dream-like poem, *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot describes the role of the “character” Tiresias. This is what he says:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a “character,” is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias.

The way Eliot describes these characters as “melting into” each other and the role of Tiresias as the one who unites all the rest, is directly reminiscent of the way

Freud describes the work of condensation. It is, in fact, exactly the situation one finds in dreams. The remark about all the women being one woman seems to me to correspond suspiciously closely to Freud's example of one of his own dreams that he uses in order to explain how condensation works. The dream is quite famous because it is the one he analyses as "a specimen dream" in *The Dream Book* and it has become known as "the dream of Irma's injection." This is what he says about it:

The principle figure in the dream-content was my patient Irma. She appeared with the features which were hers in real life, and thus, in the first instance, represented herself. But the position in which I examined her by the window was derived from someone else, the lady for whom, as the dream-thoughts showed, I wanted to exchange my patient. In so far as Irma appeared to have a diphtheritic membrane, which recalled my anxiety about my eldest daughter, she stood for that child and, behind her, through her possession of the same name as my daughter, was hidden the figure of my patient who succumbed to poisoning. . . . she turned into another lady whom I had once examined, and, through the same connection, to my wife. (399)

So Freud's explanation of the work of condensation shows that a single figure can be turned into a collective image, combining often contradictory elements. "Irma became the representative of all these other figures which had been sacrificed to the work of condensation" (399-400). It thus turns out that the manifest content of a dream is smaller than the latent one; it is a kind of abbreviated translation, much like Eliot's *Waste Land*, which was severely cut before publication. The unifying image (Tiresias or Irma) represents one of the points of intersection for many

otherwise hidden associative chains.

Condensation is brought about by latent elements that have something in common being combined and fused into a single unity in the manifest dream. Freud points out that the process is like constructing a new concept out of something that various people, things and places have in common. The new temporary concept has this common element as its nucleus. It is like a creation of the imagination that can combine things that do not normally belong together into a strange new unity. Freud says that the “creative” imagination cannot invent anything; it can only combine components that are strange to one another. The dream work puts thoughts (“which may be objectionable and unacceptable, but which are correctly constructed and expressed”) into another form.

So, by condensation, two quite different latent trains of thought can be combined into one manifest dream. But no simple relation will remain between the elements in the latent and the manifest dream. It is not a word-for-word or a sign-for-sign translation.

Displacement (Verschiebung)

“Dream-censorship only gains its end if it succeeds in making it impossible to find the path back from the allusion to the genuine thing.”

Those elements which stand out in the manifest content (the dream itself) are

usually not important with respect to the dream-thoughts (the distorted wish). The essence of the dream thoughts need not be represented in the dream at all.

Displacement refers to the fact that an idea's emphasis, or its interest, or its intensity, is liable to be detached from it and to be passed on to other ideas, which were originally of little intensity but which are related to the first idea by a chain of associations. The energy runs along pathways allowed by censorship.

We do not need a similarity of subject matter to make the kind of allusion that displacements follow. Allusions replace the original idea by unusual external associations such as similarity of sound, verbal ambiguity, and so on. The allusions used in displacements are connected with the elements they replace by the most external and remote relations and are therefore not always intelligible as such. When they are undone, Freud says, "their interpretation gives the impression of being a bad joke or of an arbitrary and forced explanation dragged in by the hair of its head." The allusions that facilitate displacements are like metonymic tropes, opportunistic with regard to accidental or proximal factors, making it all the more difficult to retrace the route back to the site of the worrying intensity. They operate a little like cockney rhyming slang. This coded use of English may have first been developed by criminals or inmates of prisons in an attempt to disguise what they were saying to each other when in earshot of prison guards or, outside the prison, when in the earshot of the newly instituted peelers--the prototype police force. The unconscious too is in its own way speaking in a disguised way in an attempt to evade the notice of the law. It is a little like a secret code, using English words that have no obvious relation to the words actually meant. There are two steps in the creation of a cockney substitution. First you take a pair of associated words (e.g. *fish-hook*), where the second word rhymes with the word you intend to

say (e.g. *book*). Then you use the first word of the associated pair to indicate the word you originally intended to say (*fish* can be used to mean *book*). As always on the metonymic axis context is everything, so some creative inference is demanded of the addressee. Take the following phrase: “ ‘Allo me old china - wot say we pop round the Jack.” This would mean: “Hello my old mate [*china-plate*], what do you say we pop around to the bar [*Jack-Tar*].” The word for *wife* is often *trouble* (from *trouble-and-strife*) and the *kids* are *teapots* (from *teapot-lids*). It sounds silly, which is just as well, for that is exactly how an unconscious displacement should sound, once you’ve unravelled it. The silliness is part of the disguise. A friend once reported a dream in which she was at her work place and met a fireman in the passageway where they began to kiss passionately. I suggested that it may have meant that she unconsciously desired to have an affair with one of her colleagues, whose name was Sam, on the basis of the arbitrary connection *Fireman Sam*, a popular children’s TV show. The fireman in the dream looked nothing like Sam, of course, and she flatly denied this. Not long after, however, the two did go out on a few dates (though the romance failed to develop). None of this would count as *psychoanalysis* as such, but it does point to the ways in which the dream-work functions through the substitution of tropes and to how our emotional lives are to an incalculable extent determined in similar ways.

Freud, in his *Introductory Lectures*, uses an anecdote to call up the way displacement produces the effect of “going astray”:

There was a blacksmith in a village who had committed a capital offence. The court decided that the crime must be punished; but as the blacksmith was the only one in the village and was indispensable,

and as on the other hand there were three tailors living there, one of them was hanged instead. (IL 209)

This story suggests that because there are enough tailors for the loss of one to be a relatively minor disaster for the villagers, one of the tailors can act as a replacement--a scapegoat substitute--for the only blacksmith, a person who, owing to his singularity, would be severely missed. Displacement works in an analogous way. The thought that the displacement escapes can be substituted for by any number of relatively unimportant yet numerous alternatives. Displacement, though difficult to track is grasped because of what Freud calls **overdetermination**. The term has a quite interesting history.

Overdetermination

Overdetermination describes Freud's unconscious as a "thought factory" on the analogy of an inexhaustibly productive team of weavers, the shuttle flying *over* here and *over* there.

Freud was by no means the first neurologist to refer to the fact that symptoms appear to have multiple causation. He does seem to be one of the few in the late 19th century to be making claims such that multiple causation is the rule rather than the interesting exception. In *Studies on Hysteria* he points out that:

There is in principle no difference between the symptom's appearing in a temporary way after its first provoking cause and its being latent from the first. Indeed the great majority of instances we find that a first trauma has

left no symptom behind, while a later trauma of the same kind produces a symptom, and yet the latter could not have come into existence without the co-operation of the earlier provoking cause; nor can it be cleared up without taking all the provoking causes into account.

Overdetermination refers to all the provoking causes of a hysterical symptom. There is a reference here to what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action)--by which a cause or provocation seems to be activated after the event, strengthened by a lesser, though similar, event that occurs later--and which seems rather profoundly to suggest a notion of time not subordinated to the present. The loss of a loved one might be traumatic and perhaps not fully recognized, yet the subsequent loss of a trivial possession might provoke the severest grief, perhaps reactivating the original provocation under the sign of the lesser tragedy.

The pattern is as follows: a trauma may have little or no effect at first yet a later trauma of a similar kind provokes a symptom by triggering off the provocation of the earlier trauma as well--a process which is continued repeatedly. It is also the pattern of the **repetition compulsion**, according to which a person is compelled to repeat situations that are harmful or distressing.

Later in *Studies on Hysteria* it is Joseph Breuer who first writes the actual word--although he does attribute it to Freud: "Such symptoms are invariably 'overdetermined,' to use Freud's expression." The word is *überdeterminiert*. When Freud employs a similar term at around this time it is *überbestimmt* (emphasizing the multiple causation as provocation). In the *Dreambook* the notion

is pretty much taken for granted. A parenthesis explains to the reader why it is possible to have more than one interpretation of a dream: “The two interpretations are not mutually contradictory, but cover the same ground; they are a good instance of the fact that dreams, like all other psychological structures, regularly have more than one meaning.” The notion of meaning here should be referred to the notion of “provoking cause.” But later he defines it in a famous statement derived from Goethe’s *Faust*. Analyzing a dream (his own) in which “botanical” is a nodal point (of condensations) he says: “Here we find ourselves in a factory of thought where, as in the Weaver’s masterpiece--

“ . . . a thousand threads one treadle throws,
Where fly the shuttles hither and thither,
[translation note: “*herüber hinüber*” over here, over there]
Unseen the threads are knit together,
And an infinite combination grows. (Trans. B. Taylor).”

The factory of thought, or the textile is explained thus: “The explanation of this fundamental fact can also be put another way: each of the elements of the dream’s content turns out to have been ‘overdetermined’--to have been represented in the dream-thoughts many times over.” In other words a plural and busy production team--actively producing, causing, provoking symptoms (like dreams and puns and jokes) ad infinitum--overdetermines the textile unconscious.

Considerations of Representability

Freud says, “Considerations of representability consists in transforming thoughts

into visual images. They comprise the essence of the formation of dreams . . . The dream-work reduces the content of the dream-thoughts to its raw material of objects and activities.” For instance, nonsense and absurdity are meaningful in dreams. They mean “this is nonsense” or “it is absurd that,” etc. If I had dreamed that a close colleague, who I greatly admire but with whom I sometimes compete, was talking gobbledegook--nonsense language-- I might have to face the fact that the dream was aiming to satisfy a rather unpleasant wish that my colleague talks nonsense. That is, his lectures are not lucid and his articles are half-baked--though that last one might have involved him taking uncooked bread from an oven--when in fact his work is excellent and clear.

Secondary Revision

Secondary Revision refers to the ways in which the dream work will utilise aspects of coherent narrative to help disguise the fact that there are contradictions--the film-like sequences (often taken straight out of part of the waking day) are patched in to get away from the otherwise contradictory material. In other words, it is a **second order** of disguise. The first order disguises the wish (displacement and condensation), the second order disguises the obviousness of the disguise. It is manifested in waking life by our failure, for instance, to catch all the typographic and spelling errors when we read through our own work--secondary revision will convince us that the errors are just not there.

Kettle Logic

Freud shows how a dream might offer contradictory statements that nonetheless make the same plea. The combinations of **condensation**, **displacement**, **representation** and **secondary revision** results in a kind of contradictory text, a text that makes too many contradictory claims towards the same purpose. He says that it is like:

The defense put forward by the man who was charged by one of his neighbors with having given him back a borrowed kettle in a damaged condition. The defendant asserted, first, that he had given it back undamaged; secondly that the kettle had a hole in it when he borrowed it; and, thirdly, that he never borrowed a kettle from his neighbor at all. So much the better if only a single one of these three lines of defense were to be accepted as valid the man would have to be acquitted.

For psychoanalytical interpretation it is not the contradictory argument that is interesting; it is the existence of a desire that the contradictory statements reveal.