

POETRY AND DREAMS

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Poetry and Dreams by F. C. Prescott

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F. C. PRESCOTT

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AND DREAMS**

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BY

revised by
F. C. PRESCOTT



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RICHARD G. BADGER

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Poetry and Dreams

POETRY is proverbially difficult to define and explain. The reason for this difficulty seems to lie partly in the subject itself and partly in our attitude toward it. The subject is indeed deep and complex. The production of poetry is still, as it has always been, a mysterious process, even to the poets themselves; while even the most devoted and enlightened readers of poetry still find mystery in its action and effect. Poetry, as Shelley believed, "acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness."¹ Many poets — for example Shelley and Wordsworth — in defining poetry resort to poetical figures; others, like our poet of democracy, avoid definition scrupulously. "Let me not dare," says Walt Whitman, "to attempt a definition of poetry, nor answer the question what it is. Like religion, love, nature, while these terms are indispensable, and we all give sufficiently accurate meaning to them, in my opinion no definition that has ever been made sufficiently encloses the name poetry."² Perhaps, however, mystery in the subject engenders superstition, and leads us to regard poetry with supine reverence and wonder. We should indeed worship our great poets, as the men of old did their bards and prophets; but not abjectly, as savages do their medicine men. We speak of the "divine" Shakespeare, perhaps knowing too little of this poet's life to recognize how much he shared our common humanity. We call poetry divine, which is another way of saying that it is still inexplicable to us. All things are of God; and in the subject of poetry, as in others, our increasing knowledge should lead us to clearer understanding. We need make no apology, then, for attempting to approach this mystery.

There is some resemblance and unexplained relation between poetry and dreams. The poet and the dreamer are somehow alike in their faculty of vision. This relation is

¹ *Defense of Poetry*, ed. Cook, p. 11.

² *A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads*.

indicated by the uses of language, which, spontaneously expressing the sense of mankind, often reveal psychological truth not otherwise readily discovered. The poets have traditionally been dreamers, from the "dreamer Merlin" to the latest youth who "dreams" and rhymes. The poet writes of "dreams which wave before the half-shut eye."¹ The word *dream* is thus constantly used by critics in describing the poet's work. "The true poet," says Charles Lamb, "dreams being awake."² Poetry is defined by Sully Prudhomme as "le rêve par lequel l'homme aspire à une vie supérieure."³ The poets themselves in different times and different countries testify to the same effect, seeing not merely a metaphorical resemblance but an essential relation between dreams and poetry. Hans Sachs, an inspired poet, thus speaks of the poet's inspiration:⁴

"Mein Freund, das g'rad ist Dichter's Werk
Dass er sein Träumen deut' und merk',
Glaub mir, des Menschen wahrstes Wahn
Wird ihm im Traume aufgetan:
All' Dichtkunst und Poeterei
Ist nichts als Wahrtraum-Deuterei."

"The happy moment for the poet," says Bettinelli, "may be called a dream—dreamed in the presence of the intellect, which stands by and gazes with open eyes at the performance."⁵ "Genius," according to Jean Paul Richter, "is, in more senses than one, a sleepwalker, and in its bright dream can accomplish what one awake could never do. It mounts every height of reality in the dark; but bring it out of its world of dreams and it stumbles."⁵ Goethe, using the same word, speaks of writing Werther "unconsciously, like a sleepwalker," and of his songs he says: "It had happened to me so often that I would repeat a song to myself and then be unable to recollect it, that sometimes I would run to my desk and, without stirring from my place, write out the poem from beginning to end, in a sloping

¹ Thomson, *Castle of Indolence*, i, 6.

² *Essays of Elia*, "The Sanity of True Genius."

³ For development of this admirable definition see *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Oct. 1, 1897, "Qu'est que la Poésie?"

⁴ *Die Meistersinger*. Quoted by W. Stekel, *Dichtung und Neurose*, p. 2.

⁵ W. Hirsch, *Genius and Degeneration*, p. 32.

hand. For the same reason I always preferred to write with a pencil, on account of its marking so readily. On several occasions indeed the scratching and spluttering of my pen awoke me from my somnambulistic poetizing."¹ Hebbel, after recording in his *Journal*, having actually dreamed an exceedingly beautiful but terrible dream, says: "My belief that dream and poetry are identical, is more and more confirmed."² Lamb, who was in spirit even more than in accomplishment a poet, believed that "the degree of the soul's creativeness in sleep might furnish no whimsical criterion of the quantum of poetical faculty resident in the same soul waking."³ Such expressions suggest that dreaming and poetizing, if not identical as Hebbel believed, are more than superficially related. If we wish to understand poetry, a clue like this, given us by the poets themselves, is worth following.

Unfortunately, however, dreams are as little known to us in their true nature as poetry itself. Though they are as old as history — probably as old as mankind — they are still obscure in their cause and significance and their relation to the ordinary mental processes. The people, in all countries and from the earliest times, have clung to the belief that they are significant, particularly as foretelling the future. Their interpretation, however, has always been vague and uncertain. The theories of modern psychologists do not ordinarily go far or deep enough to be convincing or even interesting. Altogether the world of dreams has remained a mystery to us — a world in which we live a fantastic secondary mental life curiously unrelated to that of waking, from which we return puzzled by our fleeting memories.

A recent book of Professor Sigmund Freud promises to

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

² Quoted by Stekel, p. 2.

³ Essays, "Witches and Other Night Fears." In Lamb's original manuscript (in the Dyce-Forster Collection at South Kensington) the final paragraph of the essay reads as follows: "When I awoke I came to a determination to write prose all the rest of my life; and with submission to some of our young writers, who are yet diffident of their powers, and balancing between verse and prose, they might not do unwisely to decide the preference by the texture of their natural dreams. If these are prosaic, they may depend upon it they have not much to expect in a creative way from their artificial ones. What dreams must not Spenser have had!"

give us a better understanding of this subject of dreams.¹ According to Dr. Freud our dreams are an integral part of our mental life, with definite origin and cause; they can be definitely interpreted and brought into relation with our waking thoughts and feelings; they are in certain respects similar to other mental activities with which we are familiar; and they have a definite biological function which is important to our mental and physical well-being. This view of dreams forms part of an extensive and original psychological theory, developed by Dr. Freud, which is perhaps too new to be generally accepted — which, however, undoubtedly suggests new views, not merely in the direction in which it was first mainly intended to be applied, but in many others — notably in literature. When I had occasion recently to become acquainted with this theory of dreams I was at once struck by the fact that many portions of it were equally applicable to poetry, so much so, indeed, that it occurred to me that Dr. Freud might have first developed his theory from poetry and then transferred it to dreams. I have since learned that this was not the case, that in fact he first approached the subject from a very different direction. The relation to poetry, however, is striking.

I wish, then, in the first place to apply some portions of this theory to literary problems, in particular to transfer some of the conclusions in regard to dreams to the apparently related field of poetry, and to examine the evidence bearing on these conclusions which is supplied by literature. For the latter purpose I shall have to proceed mainly by quotation, even at the risk of trying the reader's patience. In fact, I do not wish to advance a new theory of poetry, or, for the most part, to express my own opinions; but rather to bring together and into relation some truths which have long since been expressed in poetry but have never been succinctly stated in prose.

Writing merely as a student of literature I shall have to assume the soundness of Dr. Freud's theory, though this may be still in debate among psychologists. Incidentally,

¹Die Traumdeutung, second edition, 1909. For summaries of Dr. Freud's theory of dreams, see *American Journal of Psychology*, Vol. XXI, pp. 283, 309.

however, I may be able to find some evidence bearing upon it in literature. New theories of this kind, if at all important, are seldom new in the sense that they have not been surmised and foreshadowed by poets and other imaginative writers. This is a part of the function of poets as prophets—to see truth imaginatively before it is grasped intellectually. It is one of the tests of new doctrines to ask if they thus find confirmation in literature.

Let us return to the parallel between poetry and dreams. Let us take into consideration also, for further comparison, besides dreams and poetry, two other mental activities which seem on similar evidence to be related—waking dreams or “day dreams,” and hysterical or neurotic hallucinations and illusions. That nocturnal dreams and day dreams have some relation is suggested by their common designation, while day dreams frequently pass into hallucinations. The word *dream* is supposed to be etymologically connected with the German *trügen*, to deceive, its fundamental idea being *illusion*. There is also apparent resemblance between the illusions of hysteria and the visions of poetic or prophetic rapture. The question is, What may these several kinds of mental activity have in common?

I

In a dream the scenes which we remember, with their grotesque figures and actions, and their curious emotional coloring, are called by Dr. Freud its “manifest content.” The manifest content is usually strange to us and cannot be intelligibly connected with our waking experience. Behind these appearances, however, is the “latent content”—the underlying thought of the dream—the impulses and ideas contributing to form it, of which underlying thought the remembered dream is a distorted, fictitious, or, one might almost say, dramatic representation. The dream is a group or series of significant symbols. Its interpretation is like that of a dumb-show or a charade; it is a matter of finding the meaning which lurks behind, actuates, and explains these strange appearances. And this meaning when found—the underlying thought—is no longer unintelligible; it fits

clearly into the dreamer's mental life, indeed it regularly concerns what to him is most personal and vital. These two things, the manifest and the latent contents, it is important that the reader should keep distinct and clearly in mind. The interpretation of dreams, of their manifest content, is a difficult matter, involving a knowledge of the so-called "dream-work,"—that is, of the strange processes by which the underlying thought is elaborated into the manifest content by the mind during sleep.

The relation thus indicated between the apparent and the underlying thought of dreams will perhaps seem less novel to those accustomed to analyze and interpret works of literature and the other arts. Behind every work of creative imagination—poem, painting, or piece of architecture—is the latent idea or motive impulse which inspires and explains it. The Prisoner of Chillon, for example, was the work of a man who passionately desired personal liberty and so devoted himself to the liberty of mankind. The Gothic cathedrals were inspired by the religious devotion and aspiration which dominated the middle ages. They were built, says Emerson, "when the builder and the priest and the people were overpowered by their faith. Love and fear laid every stone." Behind Marmion and Ivanhoe lay a love, contracted in childhood, for the medieval past,—which Scott spent his life in trying to realize and reconstruct. Scott's poems and novels were inventions—so to speak, dreams—having their key in Scott's ruling impulse, which expressed itself thus through the working of his imagination. In some similar way our ruling impulses are clothed in fictional forms by a play of the imagination in sleep.

Every dream, according to Dr. Freud—and this is one of the most important conclusions of the dream theory—has the same latent purport—to represent the imaginary fulfilment of some ungratified wish.¹ The underlying thought may always be expressed by a sentence beginning *Would that—*. In the dream proper this optative is dropped for the present indicative, or rather for a scene in which the wish is visibly represented as fulfilled. In dreams of children the wish is embodied openly; in those of adults it is commonly disguised

¹Die Traumdeutung, III, VII (c).