

CPRS cycle de conférence  
**Psychanalyse et rêve où en sommes-nous aujourd'hui?**  
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**What Belongs To The Dreamer And What To The Dream**

(NB: le matériel clinique a été écarté de ce texte )

Over the last period – let us say 50 years – perhaps beginning with Bion's *Elements of Psychoanalysis*, there has been something of a preoccupation in the Kleinian tradition with how to characterise the phenomena that are the concern of psychoanalytic enquiry. More recently – let us say the last 25 years - one important strand in this has been the question of what exactly is meant by working in the here-and-now and why it is important. Most recently, the nature of the connections between working in the here and now and how we go about understanding unconscious phantasy (and therefore psychic reality and psychic truth) has occupied a series of London Conferences - the 2007 UCL conference, the 2008 Klein Trust Conference (both marking Hanna Segal's contribution) and then the 2008 UCL event (marking Betty Joseph's contribution). This paper was written for the 2009 UCL conference which marked Ruth Riesenber-Malcolm's contribution.

In 2008, Edna O'Shaughnessy in her paper *Where is here and when is now?* advanced an understanding of the idea which, in the eyes of many, succeeded in resolving many of the issues. By 'resolving' I don't mean that all differences were settled, but that the parts that comprise the Kleinian idea of the here-and-now were brought into focus and the way in which these hang together to make a whole was understood. For instance, psychoanalytic inquiry could be seen to be primarily concerned with objects whose existence is within a timeframe composed of an inner, psychological past, present and future. Much of this can be identified in the events and interactions which we can know in the hour and minute of the session; but its extensions go far beyond these limits.

Even though these advances are substantial, it seems to me that the technical approach required for this dual here-and-now, then-and-there quality to psychic reality has not been resolved to the same extent as our understanding of the concept itself. Before considering this further I first need to say a little about how we arrived at where we are now.

The generation of Kleinian analysts which has followed that of Hanna Segal, Betty Joseph & Herbert Rosenfeld - namely Brenman, Brenman-Pick, O'Shaughnessy, Riesenberg-Malcolm, & Spillius - has been responsible for an increasingly sophisticated understanding of how to talk to the patient as well as of what to talk to the patient about. Ruth Riesenberg Malcolm's<sup>1</sup> clinical approach was based on a conviction that phantasy material – including dreams – needs to be interpreted on the basis of imaginative inference, while also being articulated within a frame of evidence provided by the only material which is *directly* accessible to the analyst, namely the impact of the patient's presence and the subtleties of the patient's reactions in the sessions. The unresolved areas that I have in mind are full of the problem of integrating these two types of knowing. These problems exist whatever technical position is taken up, and whatever category of material we are dealing with. However, they are nowhere more evident than in relation to our theory and practice with respect to dreams. I think that the stance that best meets the challenge presented by these problems might be described as 'firm provisionality'. What I mean by this is an attempt on the part of the analyst to combine sureness of analytic insight with an appreciation of the insecurity accompanying all psychoanalytic hypotheses.

A few moments ago I suggested that the difficulties of combining these two ways of knowing were particularly evident in relation to dreams. The reasons why this is so are of great importance. First, dreams bring visual imagery of a kind not usually accessible to us through the verbal reasoning by which we normally characterise the processes of waking consciousness. Second, the relationship between the kind of consciousness we have in dreams and that which we have when awake perfectly mirrors the psyche's fleeting here-

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Riesenberg-Malcolm, 1986 on what she termed the 'the past in the present'.

and-now, then-and-there quality. We are faced with a task of translation, or perhaps better to say, with instances of metamorphosis, while the transformational rules continue to be unclear. As a result our problems with knowing whether what we say concerning the meaning of any particular dream is actually the case seem to be of a different order from those we encounter when we attend to the way the dreamer is functioning while awake, or upon what he or she is doing when telling a dream.

However, these characteristics, which pose such problems from the point of view of how we can know about them, are also a big part of why we feel that dreams are so important. As we all know, the representational images and sequences in dreams can possess a marvellous ingenuity. Particular dreams can seem to represent and link-up recurrences in our thought and behaviour which can be far removed from each other and otherwise unexplained. These recurrences point to the operation of some profound principle which we seek after. But dreams, like certain other aspects of the psyche, also manifest a quality of infinite extension which means that they will always be capable of going beyond what we have been able to grasp. These are the reasons why, even as we seek to work in the here and now, most of us continue to privilege dream material in and of itself. And these are also the reasons why when we use this material to further the analytic process our efforts are sometimes covered in glory, and oftentimes insecure or hesitant.

I have needed an organising principle to bring some order into the problems about the meaning of dreams that I think are inevitable in our line of work. This idea is implied in my title. It consists of regarding the relationship between the dreamer and the dream as a special case of that between container and contained. An important characteristic of container/contained relationships is that they are both two-way and reversible. When we examine clinical material I think it is possible to see how at times the dream should be looked at from the angle of the dreamer providing a container for aspects of a dream; at others from the angle of its providing a container for aspects of the dreamer. The analyst also may use the patient's dream as a vehicle for his interpretations, or the patient may project the dream into the analyst. Bion emphasised how relationships between container and contained are active ones. In normal developments, the kind of interaction that occurs

between container/contained can be likened to the processes set in motion by the implantation of an embryo in the uterus: growths and differentiations not otherwise possible ensue. In pathological developments, the interaction between the container and the contained may be blighted or mutually destructive. The same may be true of the relationships between the dreamer and his or her dreams, as well as of those between the analyst and the patient. Finally, should this container/contained model prove to be fundamental to what dreaming actually is, the implications for our theory of dreams and their function would be very considerable .

The material which follows illustrates how I find myself using and understanding dreams. It is something which has grown up almost by default. Examining material in this way is meant to point us towards the theories which underlie practice. Although the theories will prove to be familiar, I think that examinations like these raise central questions about what we know, or do not know about dreams and their function.

### **Clinical Material – Part I**

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In this material, it is I who first refers to dream material when I refer to a dream which he had brought about four months back. At that time, A's dream had shocked him. It had broken through a state of mind in which he seemed to feel little in the way of anxiety about his situation or the consequences of his actions. However, the insight to which his dream had led him was quickly lost. He was unable to contain it. Perhaps he was not ready enough, or maybe not willing enough, to hold on to this new awareness or its associated anxiety. I had already referred back to this dream a couple of times - usually when I had felt that I wasn't able to reach him. On this occasion, I could have spoken about his unreachability, but I felt he might use this masochistically. I hoped to use his dream like an *aide memoire* to remind him of his insight into the violence of what was going on inside him. Much of the original detail of this dream had been lost. However, it was on its way to becoming a motif in an analytic narrative somewhat in the way that so-

called literary dreams, such as Joseph's in Egypt, become a part of a nation's mythic history and identity. Later, I hope to return to some possible implications of this.

By whatever means, my reference to this old dream led A to a dream from the previous night. I felt that A's ability to have this dream had been connected with that slightest of shifts in the direction of something more co-operative which had occurred the previous week. In its turn, I had thought that this shift had been connected with some nascent insight into the sado-masochistic stalemate in which he and his objects were kept. I think the dream's imagery contained his insight. I felt on firm ground when I used the imagery of A's dream to signify the way he had been acting in the session. The many months in which I had gained first hand experience of the pulls and pushes of his oppositional and subversive way of proceeding provided the grounds for my sureness.

However, in respect of the significance of other elements in A's dream, most particularly the black woman with the round face, I was much more uncertain. Of course, she can be taken as myself. But the fact that there was a woman in A's dream seemed in itself new. I thought it was important to A when I drew attention to her. My remarks to the effect that, 'I don't know what your dream means' and 'We don't know why she was black' could be defensive in relation to the anxiety stirred up in me by the unknown quality attaching to these elements. What lead to made the unfamiliarity of this part of the dream was that it, unlike the obstruction and blocking, had not yet 'figured' – using that term in a rather literal way - as a recognised part in the analytic relationship.

In other times, I might have asked the patient for his associations. Alternatively, I could have just gone ahead on the basis that it represented both his recognition of his white mother and his anger with her, his devaluation of and hostility towards women, his impulse to enjoy someone forbidden, the anal quality attaching to all or any of these, and anyway what about the roundness of the face? Aside from the question of what such comments would have meant to him, there is the question of the means by which I might come to know that it is these issues rather than others that are actually those which his

dream represents. Or indeed that *issues* and dealing with them through representation in visual form have any part in dreams whatsoever.

The following material is intended to illustrate how the elements of dreams which are at first enigmatic or obscure may seem to disappear from view. However, they may re-surface at some later date in a form which is no longer restricted to what occurs in dream consciousness, but in forms which have become part of the patient's life and waking consciousness. They may have an interesting quality of being in some way more evocative and more easily understood in a symbolic way. As they gradually become more defined and evolved, waking consciousness correspondingly becomes less impoverished, and nullifying attacks on the complexity of consciousness less predominant.

### **Clinical Material – Part II.**

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When A mentioned the woman interfering in his view of himself in the mirror it immediately put me in mind of the dream of the blocking encounter with the black woman. Unresolved, this had somehow stayed with me. I had the same immediate feeling of recognition when at the end of the session he spoke of 'this black woman who sometimes sits opposite me in the library'. We may attribute such things to a long-extended kind of free association, or perhaps to an analyst's over-valued idea. But I don't think that these explanations do justice to the sinewy nature, the reverberative qualities, of all that had been going on between the dream and the dreamer, between the analysand and the analyst, and between analysis and A's life over the course of these few months.

A's first encounters with the woman had been at around the time of his dream which was a couple of months earlier. Given his state of mind at that time, I assume that the effect they had upon him was deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, I think she would have been a dangerous object against whom he prepared himself to fight. He would become tense and thin-skinned. On the other, I think there was evidence that a more positive view of her as someone who might be admirable was beginning to form. I think that this may have been a later part of the development that enabled A to have his dream in the first

place, to bring it and to leave it with me, while he continued to engage in the difficult but gratifying matter of sticking in a one dimensional life, full of concrete actions and without imagination. It seemed to me that this period was compatible with the idea that the dreamer was incubating, that is, was the container, of what already had been put through the visual biochemistry of a dream.

### **Discussion/Conclusions**

As early as 1899 we find Freud taking the view that not only does everything conscious have ‘an unconscious preliminary stage’ but that, ‘The unconscious is the true psychological reality.’ Already he was considering that unconscious mental functioning is vastly more extensive than waking consciousness. He writes, *‘in its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as incompletely presented by the data of consciousness as is the external world by the communications of our sense perceptions.’* This rather remarkable conclusion came towards the end of the *Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud’s italics indicate that he wanted to leave his readers in no doubt about the limitations of the view offered by waking consciousness. He was also stressing the existence of severe limits on the certainty of our knowledge of both internal and external reality.

This was one of the reasons why the interpretation of dreams was so important to Freud and why just a few pages earlier we will find him writing that, ‘The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind.’ In coming to his theory of dreams, Freud placed great reliance upon his method of free association. He was so sure of it that his conception of unconscious mental functioning was almost entirely modelled upon what he thought he had understood about dreams: displacement, condensation, mobility of cathexes, absence of negation, of doubt, of degrees of certitude, indifference to reality and exclusive subordination to the principles of pleasure and unpleasure were all held to be the determining characteristic of both dreams and unconscious mental functioning.

Although this route to a knowledge of the unconscious may be royal in some ways, we have also learned that the path to the interpretation of dreams is difficult to tread. Neither Freud nor we have any *direct* way of knowing the meaning of a dream, nor any *direct* way of knowing that dreams have a meaning at all. It was Freud's view that the meaning could only be reached indirectly through the medium of our free associations. These derive from our waking consciousness. It could be argued that we only find in them what we already know or suspect. According to this view, the object of knowledge is already in the waking consciousness of the dreamer, and is not really in the dream at all.

Subsequent developments, and not least Freud's own, have meant that our ideas about the nature of dreams have changed. In the 110 years since Freud's first account, the vast increase in our knowledge of the transference/countertransference relationship, and our discovery of the power and function of projective identification, mean that we have sources of information which were not available when Freud was beginning.

Because of these developments, and others outside psychoanalysis, the view that the main thing to understand about dreams was the way that primary process was thought to operate, including the disguised satisfaction of infantile libidinal wishes, has given ground. Rightly or wrongly, the procedures of defence and disguise which see the manifest dream in terms of a hypothetical latent content, so central to the first account, now meet with an internal scepticism. [However, the procedures in what Freud called hypocritical dreams continue to require explanation, and Freud's first theory addresses these more searchingly than anything produced since.] We now focus more upon the manifest dream. There is recognition of the importance in dreams of arousal, anxiety, fear, and problem-solving as well as of unconscious wishes. In clinical psychoanalysis in place of the classical account, there has developed a tacit view that dreams serve cognitive and emotional processes of a sophisticated and complex kind. But what is the nature and function of these processes?

Aside from the enormous value of dreams in making his psychoanalytic discoveries, in biological terms Freud saw dreams as having a function of a second order. Their purpose

was to guard a primary need, which was for sleep to continue. Somewhat in contrast to Freud's focus upon understanding dreams through free association, Bion based his conjectures about dreams and dreaming on the functional problems he encountered in patients who could not dream. He suggested that dreaming had a fundamental role in mental and cognitive development. And he also thought that, by processing, digesting or in some manner detoxifying, certain emotional difficulties arising in the course of daily experience, that dreams play a part in preserving sanity as well as being necessary to create a membrane between waking consciousness and sleep.

As we know, Bion's theory revolved around a hypothetical  $\alpha$ -function producing the  $\alpha$ -elements needed to make the raw data of sense impressions comprehensible. The occurrence of these hypothetical entities pre-supposes container/contained relationships of a kind which can tolerate growth. In places, Bion states that  $\alpha$ -elements cannot be observed; in others that they may be identical to dream images; but there is no doubt about the effects he attributes to their absence. Patients in this condition have to resort to the evacuation and denial of mental contents, and to attacks upon those parts of the ego which are needed if an individual is to be able to think and feel and learn from experience. Container/contained relationships in these patients will tend to be unproductive, and as a result they will persist in courses of action whose futility and misguidedness might seem obvious to others.

Taking A as a case in point, the line of thought I wish to suggest is that the dream represented an exceptional moment for him, and that his telling me of it represented an exceptional moment in terms of his relationship with insight. The reconstruction is along the following lines: A's encounter with the woman in the library gave rise to two types of reaction; the first a diffuse and unsymbolised arousal (not sexual, but the physiological reactions of fight/flight); the second of an interest tinged with hope which, if we want, we can call the  $\alpha$ -element; this provided enough of a good internal object to allow him to sleep to the extent that he could dream, and enough of a thought to allow him to remember the woman who stimulated his divided feelings; it could extend to an image of roundness; some of these elements could not be understood until further work was done

but after all we are dealing with a mental phenomenon which is capable of infinite extension.

The data we have currently is compatible with a hypothesis that there may be a containment process in dreams. This may make use of the fact that man's predominant sense is vision. As a result of its dominance the processing of visual experience is more automatic and routine than that required to process inter-personal relating, discern the meaning of words or read intentions. The visual images and scenarios generated through dreaming offer the kind of relief associated with something having happened, compared to the kind of anxiety which accompanies something which has not happened. As a consequence, and other things being equal, the primitive physiological reactions of fight/flight are dissipated or discharged on the one hand and symbolic thought generated on the other.

There have been enormous advances in the neuroscientific understanding of sleep and dreaming since Freud, and since Bion too. It will be evident from what I have just been saying that I am not one of those who think that this understanding is irrelevant to psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, any attempt to apply it would be premature, facile and reductionistic.

I will therefore close with a question. Why royal? It is surely significant that Freud's recommendation had regal and heroic connotations. It strikes a confident note about the possibilities of knowing the true nature of the unconscious. But perhaps there were Sophoclean ones also. Oedipus Rex was at first vocal about his determination to discover the truth but his enquiries began to point in a direction he had not anticipated. Do some of the resonances also convey Freud's awareness, even irony, about the difficulties which always lie on the road ahead?

**David Taylor, 2009**

