Forgetting Freud, Rediscovering Freud

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One of the pillars of Freud's thought was surely his view of dreams (Freud 1911, 1916-17). Dreams as the royal road to the unconscious and as the guardian of sleep are among the most widely shared concepts in psychoanalytic thought. Yet the approach to the interpretation of dreams has changed greatly, so that many — for example, Meltzer, in Dream Life (1984) — regard them no longer as puzzles to be decrypted, but instead as entities with which to enter into resonance so as to see what they arouse in us.

A. Dreams

Whereas, in the classical approach to working with dreams, free associations allowed the operations responsible for producing a dream (displacement, condensation, symbolization, etc.) to be retraced in the reverse direction, nowadays many would emphasize certain characteristics that dreams have in effect taken on day by day in the course of our daily work.

(a) Particular stress is laid on the transformational value of dreams, which are read as if by intuition, a great deal of space being assigned also to the manifest content.

Giulia's analysis, for example, was characterized by a succession of versions of the same dream, which gradually came to be modified in accordance with the changes occurring in her analysis. First, she dreams of going into the snake house at a zoo, where she is terrified by the snakes
she sees although separated from them by a pane of glass. Some time later, she dreams that she is in a psychiatric ward, in which she is separated from the “loonies” by a glass panel; she is very frightened but feels protected by the glass. After a further prolonged period of analytic work, Giulia dreams that she is in a neonatology ward with babies in cots, from which she is separated by a glass window; she is no longer afraid. When the analytic work is drawing to a close, she dreams that she is in a kitchen with glass jars, into which she puts her hands so as to get to the various ingredients (flour, sugar, salt, yeast, etc.), with which she cooks various good dishes and recipes.

These dreams in my view clearly illustrate the changes in Giulia's relationship with her own emotions (and with other people): at first the emotions are something dangerous to be kept at a distance and are potentially poisonous (the snakes); later they become loony-emotions, which, while less poisonous, give rise to containability problems; gradually they become things that can be taken care of, albeit with caution (the babies); and finally they are ingredients of her affective life which she can get at in order fully to experience them without excessive defences.

(b) Another line of development has been to consider the communicative level of a dream in the present, which immediately makes us think of its current, relational meaning; attention will then be devoted to the dream's associations, to everything the patient says before reporting the dream, to what he says afterwards, and finally to what the analyst thinks.

When Emotions Can Be Cooked

Some years have passed. Stefano is now more able to accommodate his own emotions and to experience them fully. There is a short separation between us, which coincides with a brief loss of emotional contact in the last session. When our sessions resume, Stefano tells me about his youngest daughter, who is two years old. One night, she came to sleep in her parents' bed and then, waking up in the morning and seeing her parents hugging, silently climbed out of bed and went to her own room. Stefano secretly followed her and saw her sitting on the carpet, looking dejected. The child had picked up her dummy and was looking round the room, appearing lost. Stefano then stepped in and, understanding her sadness, picked up his daughter and carried her back to the parents' bed, where she stopped looking sad and absent and gave him a big smile.

Immediately after telling me this, Stefano reports a dream of the same night. In it, he went to a party with his friend Tonio, who kept moving
away from him and eventually abandoned him, leaving him feeling angry and excluded. What made things worse was the autumnal climate — leaves were falling and he saw happy couples going home, whereas he was left alone, getting drenched by the rain. After a while, Tonio came back, but Stefano did not know how to behave — whether to show happiness at his return or to remain angry. He then tells me, after recounting the dream, that the evening before he had telephoned his father, who had not answered, perhaps because he was asleep.

Stefano has now become more able to experience his emotions and to tell and retell them in three different scenarios: that of his son, that of the dream, and that of his father. He had been feeling excluded, put to one side, owing to the imminent analytic break, but also because there had been a loss of emotional contact in the last session. This had provoked feelings of anger, jealousy, isolation, but then a possibility of remaking contact had presented itself. Once more, Stefano was able to experience his emotions and not to lose his relationship with me.

**The Capacity to Experience Emotions and to Maintain the Analytic Bond**

Stefano is now stably capable of accepting, and even making use of, my explicit interpretative activity, provided that it is modulated by simultaneous containment through narrative transformations. This is a kind of oscillation between a decoding, interpretative register and a containing, transformational one that employs the manifest level only.

With the long Christmas break drawing near, Stefano relates that he has bought a special saucepan which keeps stirring the polenta cooking inside it even if one is not physically present to do this manually, and then that he wants to buy a special kind of walkie-talkie that can transmit and therefore stay in contact even at a great distance. He also tells me he has bought four cases of oranges, which should last him for the whole of the Christmas break.

I feel able to say that the days when, during separations, he needed to plug in his Duracell batteries to assure himself of complete autonomy are long past: now he can equip himself with tools that allow us to stay in contact over the holiday period. At the same time he has the ability to build up supplies. He seems happy to accept this interpretative proposal — although he immediately begins to talk about his mother-in-law, whom he detests, and who had once entered his wine cellar without asking and uncorked some of his wine bottles (the meaning is not yet ready to be uncorked!). To make matters worse, his mother-in-law had been very
oppressive, talking to him relentlessly when his wife was at work (possibly another representation of the interpreting analyst?) and therefore not being able to look after their children, who cried endlessly for their mother.

If the uneasiness resulting from the intrusive presence of his mother-in-law is construed in a narrative sense, and if we deliberately abstain from interpreting the mother-in-law who uncorks meanings as the analyst, a new character is introduced … namely the mother, with an affectionate and well-timed phone call. Our journey is not over yet!

**B. Reverie**

The irruption of the concept of reverie on to the stage has greatly extended the oneiric spectrum in the analytic session. Reverie is seen as the dreaming activity performed by the analyst in the session which, by creatively transforming (often in a visual register) what reaches him from the patient, frequently in the form of projective identifications, allows the formulation of new meanings, the integration of scattered emotions and the opening up of new directions.

**(a) Reverie and the Construction of Meaning**

**But Where is the Tail?**

Luciano is a seven-year-old boy who has suffered for many years from an allergic condition that seriously cramps his style and causes him appreciable suffering. Upon our first meeting, seeing that he is fairly relaxed, I ask him to tell me something. He says: “I'll tell you about my Lucky.” Taking a sheet of paper, he tells me that he has had this little animal for a long time. While drawing, he says he keeps it in his father's “study” because, if he gets close to it and picks it up in his arms, he immediately goes red, first where Lucky touches him and then all over, and then … He goes on to describe the particular type of disabling allergy that afflicts him. As he continues to draw, I realize with surprise that something in the names is attracting my attention.

He tells me that the creature lives underground and that it digs out deep tunnels, in which it takes refuge. Luciano is very approachable and one cannot help liking him. As he continues to draw, I ask him a few general questions — for instance, why the first thing he always says is “What did you say?” This happens many times in succession. Lucky makes a powerful
impression on me, as he tells me that Lucky's breed is tailless, whereas there is another, very unruly and aggressive breed that does have a tail. At this point I have an overall vision: of Lucky Luciano “not hearing” because he is hiding in his lair, and, in particular, of the two long tails. So the drawing is transformed in my mind as if made up of a top part with Lucky and a bottom part with Luciano, with two great big animals that remained unknown prior to my reverie. In this way, the field is redefined on the basis of a hypothesis of mine about its meaning, which, while of course not being expressed to the boy, becomes an organizer of “thoughts” and “hypotheses” of meaning for me. I can then fantasize that Luciano is allergic to unknown parts of himself, which will need to be metabolized and transformed so as no longer to release the antibodies to which not-self parts continue to give rise.

(b) Reverie and Dreams: A Dialogue

The Curly-Haired Girl

I open the door to Francesco, a fine fellow aged about 30, and am for a moment disoriented when I see before me a tall, curly-haired, angelic-looking girl. I focus on the image and, a moment later, find my familiar Francesco again. Surprised and indeed utterly astonished at my sensory misperception, I impress on myself that it must be a kind of reverie, but cannot find anything to connect it with.
In the previous day's session, I had given strong interpretations of aspects of sex life — or rather of fantasies linked to Francesco's sexuality, the patient having had one dream in which he was piloting an F14 and another in which he was the Formula One magnate Flavio Briatore at the controls of an offshore racing craft. These images, although tending towards the manic, were indicative of new discoveries for Francesco, who had always seen himself as a respectful and sometimes deferential boy. He is in fact a very good boy, but as with anyone, that is not the whole story. The session continues with Francesco reporting a dream of a video game; then he comes to my consulting room, which is Room 360. I tell him that he seems to experience the analysis as a game, without forbidden angles or ones that cannot be explored — in other words, a 360-degree game.

With a surprised laugh, he says he is noticing lots of things that were inside him, which he did not know were there. He then tells me another dream: a male nurse with bad intentions goes up to a tender, delicate girl, perhaps wanting to attack her. Only then do I remember my initial reverie, of the nice, curly-haired girl, and am able to tell him that, perhaps, what I said about sexual fantasies yesterday, while on one level opening up hitherto inaccessible angles, on another had rather scandalized him. He fully concurs, saying that it isn't easy to discover oneself to be more like a Gérard Depardieu than one of the seven dwarfs as he had always thought. I answer that it is not impossible for even one of the seven dwarfs to have sexual fantasies about Snow White. He bursts into loud and liberating laughter.

However, while the “transformational” space mediated by a conversational style is one of the main engines of analysis, interpretation is nevertheless sometimes the factor that opens up new horizons.

This group of sessions was preceded by one in which Francesco tells me how pleased he was at some successful achievements of his in the endocrinology department where he works. A close friend, Giuseppe, whom he had told about this, had poured, or at least tried to pour, cold water on his pleasure by pointing out some suspicious, worrying and perhaps even catastrophic situations to which his successes might have given rise. A change of scene follows, in which Francesco tells me about the work he and his father are doing at their country house. A pine tree was taking up a lot of space and casting excessive shade, so they had decided to fell it; although pines do not have very deep roots, it had not been a simple undertaking. The father had made a wedge-shaped cut in the pine's trunk, while he himself, standing at a safe distance, had pulled on a rope tied round the top of the tree, which had come down incredibly easily. This had cleared the way
for new spaces and let in the light, so that what used to be in shadow was now brightly lit again, revealing the hedges and flowers in all the detail that could not previously be discerned.

To replace the pine, he and his father had decided to plant a plane tree — just one, a robust tree with roots that go straight down, and Napoleon’s preferred tree.

Only then do I ask him: “What is a possible pet name for Giuseppe?” “Pino” he answers, “but why?” “Because,” I tell him, “it seems to me that you’ve given me a fine description of a kind of ‘paranoid’ response to your achievements at work, and of how you then succeeded in uprooting this Giuseppe-Pino-paranoia plant, which prevented Giuseppe-Pino from having new thoughts.” In this way the “rope” and the “pine [pino]” became part of our familiar vocabulary, helping us to emerge from the minor persecutory situations that arose every so often. In particular, I remember an occasion when Francesco was overcome with persecutory anxiety at a comment by one of his teachers, Professor Boschi: I needed only to ask whether the boschi were pine woods to help him see the situation in the correct light.

Removing something to make way for something else seems to me to be one of the aims of analytic work — in my view not only with our patients but also as regards our theories, which, when obsolete, take away the space needed for new vistas.

I forgot to mention the second part of my interpretation, when I added that, in the place of the old pine of persecution, there could now be the plane tree of awareness of himself and of his own value; after all, a napoleon was also an ancient coin, and there was no reason to be afraid of his legitimate aspirations.

C. Waking Dream Thought

However, something else has further enlarged the space occupied by the oneiric element in psychoanalysis, whereby it has come to be seen as the linchpin of the whole of human mental functioning — namely the idea that dreaming is a constant feature of our mental life even when we are awake, which I believe to be the central concept in the thought of Bion (1962, 1963, 1965, 1992). From this follows his notion of the a-function,

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1 [Translator’s note: Pino is also Italian for pine.]
2 [Translator’s note: Italian for woods.]
which constantly transforms the sense data and proto-emotions arriving in our mind into images (a-elements). Freud's postulated model of the mind has thereby undergone a profound transformation.

The following diagram summarizes what happens in a sufficiently well-functioning mind or in a well-functioning analysis. It reflects Bion's thoughts on the matter and my own developments of his conception.

Sensations → proto-emotions → b-elements

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 a-function
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Sequence of a-elements

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a  a  a
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Narrative derivatives

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ND1
ND2
ND3
NDn
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The earliest activity that sparks the “big bang” — the switching on of the human mind — is the baby's massive evacuation of proto-sensory or proto-emotional states. If these evacuations (b-elements) are taken in, contained and then transformed by a mind which absorbs and metabolizes
them (a-function), they will gradually be transformed into meaningful pictograms (a-elements).

The mind that brings about this transformation not only transforms the proto-sensory and proto-emotive chaos into affectively meaningful representations but, through the constant repetition of this mental work, also transmits the “method” whereby this is done (the a-function).

The continuous repetition of this transformational cycle — so to speak, a mental Krebs cycle — also has other effects: the interplay of projection, introjection, reprojecion and reintrojection allows differentiation of concave space from convex space, receptive space from full space, and in a word, the container (+) from the contained (>). The earliest interaction of “projective identification” with “reverie” is in fact the first sexual relationship of one mind with another, and forms the foundation of man's creative capacity (Rocha Barros 2000). From then on, a-elements constitute “waking dream thought”. Direct access to this dream thought is usually unavailable. We can obtain information about “waking dream thought” through its “narrative derivatives”, including drawings and play (Ferro 2002). For example, the proto-sensory and proto-emotional stimulations that underlie such states of mind as irritation, anger and cheering up could be transformed by the a-function into the following affective pictograms:

A stinging nettle  A roaring lion

This sequence of previously inaccessible a-elements could generate an infinite number of narrative derivatives in a variety of different literary genres, drawing or play.

In other words, it could become an associative chain that could be expressed through:

- **A childhood memory**: “When my father's friend came to dinner and told him he had bumped into me in the street while I was supposed to be at school, I felt very annoyed and would have liked to hit him, but my father's calm face reassured me.”

- **A scene from everyday life**: “Yesterday I saw some kids harassing an immigrant and I felt very angry. I was about to go and remonstrate with them, but then a policeman came and broke it up.”
A scene from a film: “I remember a film sequence where the hero is visibly enraged when he sees his wife, with her back to him, hugging another man. He is about to tear the two apart when he realizes that she is actually hugging their son, who has just returned from military service. How he'd grown!”

A sexual scene: “Having just got back from a long trip, I fancied making love to Carla but she wasn't having any, which made me angry and want to go away again. But then I discovered that our friends had organized a surprise party for me and were waiting in the lounge.”

To these narrative derivatives we could add others, which are expressed through play, drawing or even movement and action — for example:

- a game in which the big Red Indian chief gets angry with the paleskin general, who has failed to bring the supplies he had promised. The chief digs out his battle-axe, but then realizes that the delay is due to a sudden fall of snow;

- a drawing in which a wolf, enraged by a thorn in his leg, tries to attack anything that comes near him, but then recognizes David the Gnome (a cartoon character), who is a well-known vet in the forest;

- an instance of acting out in the session: after his session is cancelled, a boy bumps his head on the consulting room door and starts to cry and kick it; he only calms down when the analyst tells him they can reschedule the missed session.

Many other examples would be possible, but I should like to add dreams to the list of narrative derivatives, because in my view they are not only the royal road to the unconscious but also narrative derivatives of the sequence of a-elements, when seen in the context of the narrative at the time of narration. The above scene could therefore also be told as follows:

- “I dreamt of being stung by something that in the pitch darkness I thought was a scorpion. I was furious at everyone who had assured me I would have a safe journey, but then realized it was only a thorn.”

So there may be a large number of narrative derivatives (ND1 … NDn) of the waking dream thought sequence. It is not easy to describe all the transitions that are often necessary to lead from the manifest text of the patient's narrative to the final interpretative formulation, which is the end-product of the mental interaction between patient and analyst.
An initial level might be to gather together and syncretize what the patient has said. A second level might add the possibility of emotional implications. A third level could define and name the relevant emotions — say, jealousy and anger. On a fourth level, the analyst could reflect with the patient on whether these feelings of “jealousy” and “anger” might also shed light on what happens between him and X when… (using the patient's narremes). A fifth level could involve the transference. A sixth level might locate the previous interaction within the patient's internal world. A seventh level might be historical reconstruction. Finally, an eighth level could relate to intergenerational transmission.

In this way, the oneiric element has become the foundation of our mental functioning and analytic work, especially in terms of a psychoanalysis that, in progressing towards more serious pathologies, takes less account of the contents of the history or of the mind than of the tools for generating or managing contents — that is, a psychoanalysis which focuses on the development of the a-function and of the container.

My customary approach to analytic work is to deconstruct a patient's communication of events of external reality, starting from our very first meetings (or a supervisee's communication about the text he brings me of one of his analyses). I can then consider what this seeming reality conveys to me about the patient's mental functioning and his relationship with me and the analysis.

(a) A Paradox of Analysis: Narrative Derivatives

Given a sufficiently well-functioning analyst, a patient who is physically present, and an adequately functioning setting, there is nothing that can be said, narrated, drawn or played in the analyst's consulting room that cannot be deemed a “narrative derivative of waking dream thought” or of what remains of it. Communications cannot be divided up according to whether they are external, internal or transference-related: there is nothing in the analysis that does not pertain to the “consulting room”.

I realize that it is not easy for us to use a frigid wife, an angry husband, a son with problems, an absent mother, and so on, to relieve us of responsibility, burdens and accusations. However, as Melanie Klein taught us long ago, the internal world is just as real as its external counterpart, and it is only the former that we are called upon and competent to deal with as analysts.

The foregoing would of course no longer apply if any one of the three components of analysis were lacking.
With the Christmas holidays approaching, Erminia arrives for her session in a miserable state, reporting that her father-in-law has committed suicide by putting a bullet through his head. A few days before, he had said he could not bear the forthcoming holiday period when everyone was happy, whereas for him there would be only pain and longing. The day before his suicide, he had gone to visit his wife's grave in the cemetery, where he had been overcome with despair and rage. This death has other implications for Erminia: she had been thinking of separating from her husband, but now realizes that he needs her. In addition, her husband is in line to inherit a not inconsiderable sum, which may make him feel more sure of himself.

Such a communication cannot of course be received other than on the manifest level of pain, suffering, guilt and rage. However, if we are talking about analysis, there is also something more. Indeed, at the risk of oversimplifying somewhat for the sake of clarity, it is only this “something more” that concerns us as analysts. Just as a surgeon cannot operate outside the operating theatre on a patient with peritonitis, so too we can operate only in the present and “inside” our analytic consulting room. Even if, as in the case of Erminia, we cannot explicitly relate these emotions to the transference (because to do so would be inappropriate and foolish), we can extend the boundaries of the consulting room so that they include every narration, every character, every story and every emotion. We shall take it that the patient has found a “narrative derivative” that is extremely effective for signalling her mental state to us: she is unwittingly talking to us about her own despair, pain and loss — about how our absence makes her feel like Hans Christian Andersen's Little Match Girl. She is discovering a world of needs that “everyone” has (never mind if we call it the “husband”). And she understands that there is also a gain, a development, in this pain.

We can certainly not interpret in these terms, but can be in unison with the patient, sharing her emotions which are officially accommodated in other scenarios, but which are actually bound be relevant to the analysis.

Had this tragic event not occurred, she would have found other narrative derivatives as carriers for the emotions in the field; it might then have been the story of a film, a newspaper article, a childhood memory or even a dream that staged the drama presented by her dream thought in silence but in search of someone to share it with.

(b) The Analytic Session as a Dream

By way of the arrival of various characters (the husband who takes her for a walk, the mother who does not understand her, and the friend
who criticizes her), Liliana signals to me that the quality of my interpreting, while to my mind appropriate and mild, is not so to hers. I admit this view of hers inside me and make it the key to finding an interpretative style and timing that will hopefully be more in line with the patient's needs. So I regard what she tells me as a narrative derivative of her waking dream thought that allows me to monitor the field constantly.

Towards the end of the session, I find the right words to tell her that something I said, and perhaps, even more, the way I said it, may have wounded and irritated her. Next day Liliana reports that, on a visit to her mother's house, she saw a very nice “iron vase” and asked if she could take it with her. Her mother said yes, and her father asked her if she knew its history. On hearing that she did not, he told her that it was originally an “iron shell” that an uncle who had fought on the Turkish front had subsequently fashioned into a vase. He had brought it home with him on his return from the war and it had then been handed down to them. Her parents said they were happy that it could now be hers.

When she told her husband this story, he said that this was a “conversion” of something ugly into something beautiful, and the patient told him that it was actually a transformation. However, where did this transformation take place? It comprised a number of stages — from my receptive listening to the patient's view, via the transformation of interpretative style that took place in my mind, to my actually changing my style, and finally to the patient's receptivity in regard to this transformation. The transformation, starting from myself, ultimately belongs to her too, in the form of the possibility of listening to me in a more accepting way and of accommodating my words in the “vase”, which is now also hers. I do not interpret all this to the patient, but merely mention that there used to be a famous song entitled “Put flowers in your cannons”. “Yes,” the patient replies, “one of my favourite groups was Equipe 84.” I reflect that 84 was also the house number of my previous consulting room. During the session, I mention in passing, following up something the patient said, that her mother too seemed to have changed her attitude to her, and only at the weekend do I comment that she seemed to be wanting to tell me that she had also noticed my new way of being with her — namely, abstaining from explicitly interpreting the “iron” [ferro in Italian — i.e., the analyst's name] shell/vase as two ways of listening to me (and in turn of being herself) so as not to rekindle her irritation.

I wish to emphasize that the above is an instance of what Corrao (1991) calls “narrative transformations” and I myself (Ferro 1996) describe
as “transformational narrations”. However, it is of course “affective transformations” that underlie these.

(c) A Type of Transformation: Dream Work

Stefano dreams that he is standing high up on a landing in a museum and sees some Egyptian mummies get up and walk about below. He thinks he must find a way of “letting them out”. In the same session, he had seen things he thought he had never noticed before in my consulting room (although they had always been there), and at the same time he says he does not know whether he would rather have a life à la Gérard Depardieu or a life “with a minimum of possible upsets”. The dream is plainly presenting in the form of images the demummification and awakening of new feelings and emotions inside him, as well as the fact that he is facing the problem of letting out and expressing these emotions, which were previously interred in the sarcophagi of the Egyptian Museum.

A number of questions arise at this point: What is a patient talking about? To what time and space does it refer? How is a dream to be interpreted?

These communications could of course be seen in other ways, which might perhaps risk violating the criterion of the “economy” of interpretation as opposed to exploring all possibilities of interpretative drift, as Eco reminds us. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that, from a Bion-inspired vertex, a dream is the product that is richest in a-elements and, in a way, the one least in need of decoding.

Having reached this point, we could say that since everything is a dream, the specificity of actual dreams has been lost. However, it is precisely here that we return to the genius of Freud's intuition about the central importance of dreams. This is because, notwithstanding our thoroughly Bionian theory of mental functioning, night dreams are inevitably the fruit of a process of redreaming of all the a-elements produced in the waking state — whether we postulate the existence of a “super a-function” that acts on all the a-elements produced in waking life and gives rise to a kind of “super a-elements”, or content ourselves with a mere “director's function”, performed by an “internal director” who edits, cuts and pastes the huge volume of a-elements stored during waking life. Seen in this light, night dreams are a second level of the oneiric process, which is more elaborate than the continuous daytime weaving of dreams. In this sense, night dreams are more precious and richer in communicative value in both intrapsychic and relational terms.
Night dreams can be seen as the result of a kind of squeezing out and editing of a-elements, so that they constitute a highly processed and communicative type of material. They are so refined — made up as they are entirely of reprocessed a-elements — that they need virtually no interpretation, but should instead be treated as pure “poetry” of the mind; and nothing kills off poetry (or painting) more effectively than arid, one-way interpretation, which would be tantamount to giving a single, once-for-all answer to the question of the Mona Lisa’s smile! Dreams are intuited and returned to the dreamer by way of this intuition to allow the development of new horizons of constantly expanding thought.

In conclusion and by way of summary, then, there are two types of dream work. One is performed by the a-function, which constantly transforms proto-sense data into pictograms (a-elements) and is normally inaccessible. Of this activity, we can know only the “narrative derivatives”. Night dreams can be regarded as a kind of second and even more precious type of oneiric activity, which already works on the products of the work of the a-function, producing what I have called “super a-elements”. Dreams are thus enriched and expanded, thus again becoming the royal road not only to a knowledge of the unconscious but also to its construction — not only the guardian of sleep, but also the digestive apparatus of our mental life, which enables us to construct the fundamental building blocks for feeling and thinking.

In this way we move on from a content-oriented psychoanalysis to one that considers the tools for producing contents. I believe that the development of such tools is one of the principal aims of psychoanalysis.

Let me end with two dreams that demonstrate how it is possible but still difficult for our species — precisely because these tools are not always sufficiently developed — to get in touch with our emotions and to manage, contain and fully experience them. In the first dream, Tommaso covers the entire distance from his house to my consulting room, a couple of kilometres, by walking in a straight line along a rope stretched out in the road. He inspects everyone from top to bottom (intelligence has always been his preferred approach to life). However, he explains, the real reason is to avoid the cars speeding past, which might run him over. Or, it immediately occurs to me, emotions, which have so much kinetic energy that they could run him over. Keeping at a safe distance from any proto-emotion saves him from being knocked down and losing all capacity for thought (so he “keeps in line”).

The meaning of a second dream, another of Tommaso’s, which followed a few months later, is immediately even more transparent to me: he
is the captain of a galleon in which everything must proceed absolutely perfectly; on board is a gang of men from the crew who are perpetually doing the rounds to make sure that the sails are in perfect trim, that the vessel has not sprung the slightest leak, and so on. In these circumstances, the whole voyage is plain sailing. But if anything is even minimally out of place, catastrophe will ensue. The sails will tear, and the tiniest leak will cause the ship to sink. He will then inevitably be court-martialled, reduced to the ranks and perhaps sentenced to death.

In Tommaso's life, everything has to be perfect — his work, his children's marks at school, and invitations from friends — and the slightest blemish is a prelude to catastrophe; but why? The reason, which we construct together, is that imperfection arouses emotions, which are unmanageable; in other words, on board his ship, he lacks a gang to manage and tackle emergencies and the emotional winds or waves they generate. The trouble he takes to ensure that everything is perfect is indeed enormous, but is nothing compared with what would be necessary should new and unforeseen emotions be aroused. The a-function and night dreams are at work, but we must not demand too much of them!

What I have tried to say is perhaps admirably summed up by Bion in Cogitations (1992: 43), in the entry of 27 July 1959:

But Freud meant by dream-work that unconscious material, which would otherwise be perfectly comprehensible, was transformed into a dream, and that the dream-work needed to be undone to make the now incomprehensible dream comprehensible [...]. I mean that the conscious material has to be subjected to dream-work to render it fit for storing, selection, and suitable for transformation from paranoid-schizoid position to depressive position, and that unconscious pre-verbal material has to be subjected to reciprocal dream-work for the same purpose.

References


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