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The politics of the dreamscape

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Conclusion

It might seem peculiar that something as ephemeral and “unreal” as the dreamscape would play such an important role in the history of narrative construction and power from the ancient world until today. Yet, as I have shown in the previous chapters, dreams structure the book of Genesis and many other ancient Mesopotamian and Near Eastern texts, like the Legend of Sargon and the Gudea Cylinders. Dreams also play a central role in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Ancient texts from other parts of the world add to the overall picture of the centrality of dreams to narrative construction. Canonical texts of Buddhism and Taoism contain key dream scenes, like Queen Maya’s “White Elephant Dream” or Chuang Tzu’s “Butterfly Dream,” which I discuss in the Introduction. Dreaming continues to occupy a central place in modern times, with dreams often coming at key points of narrative transition. I have demonstrated how concepts of dreaming function politically in a range of literary texts, from William Blake’s *Job* and Robert Frost’s “Apple-Picking” to works by Kafka, Roth, and Rhys, as well as in psychological or neurobiological accounts by Freud, Jung, and Hobson.

The history of dreaming and dream analysis, of course, goes far beyond the material covered in this study. My goal has emphatically not been to provide a chronological or encyclopedic account of dream interpretation but to propose a structure for situating the dreamscape politically, particularly in relation to persistent attempts to assert interpretative and narrative control over it. Answering the theoretical or speculative question of what the politics of the dreamscape are or could be requires a conceptual framework. The one I have developed here is based on what I call, following Donna Haraway’s concept of an “ironic faith” (see Chapter 1), an origin myth of the dreamscape. In this origin myth, the dreamscape emerges as a negative to the order and hierarchy of creation—as an anarchistic space placed, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, in juxtaposition to the territories of power that come to govern the postlapsarian world after the “fall” of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Eden. As such, it puts pressure on structures of power, operating as a disordering or dis-integrating force. I have referred to this force metaphorically as a “serpent”—the representative of the pre-creation “deep,” a zone beyond control, hierarchy, and delineated structures of power. The dreamscape, in this conceptualization, is the serpent in the garden of order and power, a force always present to unmake, to disorganize or disintegrate, and to dis-identify, to borrow Rancière’s terminology.

This makes the dreamscape's power an anarchic one in the sense of a rupture or disruption that calls into question the building blocks of authoritarian power. As I state in the Introduction and develop in Chapter 1, the anarchism of the dreamscape is mainly conceived of as a mode of critique that challenges notions of fixed identity, the naturalness of hierarchy and inequality, and the strictures of narrative logic that support power. Despite its fleeting and amorphous nature, the dreamscape has as an attribute a type of freedom that does not depend on qualifying statements or notions. Dream-subjects take part in this the zone of chaos.

The dreamscape's anarchic power, in its very mysteriousness and ephemerality, invites authoritarian incursions or conquests. These incursions aim to harness the anarchic force of chaos in the dreamscape and to transform the primal dreamscape into an authoritarian political territory. This transformation is achieved through the representation and interpretation of dreams—from Joseph to Freud, from Sargon to Neil Klugman in Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*. The vast majority of representations of the dreamscape—or what I call dream-texts—attempt to weave the dreamscape into an authoritarian logic. This is especially strong, as I argue in Chapter 6, in the neurobiological dream discourse, which attempts to conflate the dreamscape with physical properties of a specific sleep state in the brain, thereby denying the dreamscape its spatial dimensions. A countercurrent, which I have traced in texts by Jean Rhys and Franz Kafka, has sought to tap into the dreamscape's anarchic power, however partially. I have structured my readings of these anarchistic texts by aligning them with concepts from post-anarchist theory that stress: 1) the fluidity of the subject, created through performance, as opposed to rigid identities; 2) the inherent equality of subjects, together with the subject's responsibility to the other in the Levinasian sense; and 3) the pervasive nature of power, operating on the macro and micro levels, flowing into and out of subjects as a constant reciprocal force. While the current hyper-capitalist society attempts to exploit postmodern subjectivity as a basis for consumerism and as a distraction from growing inequalities and the deepening of authoritarian power, the anarchism of the dreamscape, as envisioned in these countercurrent texts, shows how ruptures in the daily flow of life can open up spaces for critique and repositioning—modes of escape from, and resistance to, the type of 24/7 consumer capitalist culture described by Jonathan Crary.

Beyond escaping or resisting the 24/7 assault of hyper-consumerism that currently plagues the world and its ecological health, it is imperative that a politics be developed or *imagined* that challenges the central pillars of authoritarianism. These include the tolerance for

(and celebration of) hierarchical structures throughout society—foremost in social institutions (especially the workplace); notions of fixed or rigid identity derived from categorizations based on nationality, religion, race, gender, etc. (categories that are deeply interwoven with the structures of hierarchy); the fixed or “natural” view of the “real” with corresponding attempts to delegitimize alternative concepts as “fantasies,” “delusions,” or “fictions”; and narrative logics that underlie notions of fixed identity and hierarchy, contributing to the apparent naturalness of categories and the “reality” of the “real.” The anarchic politics of the dreamscape seeks to break these pillars and to open up spaces for dis-identification, transformation, disintegration, and positive chaos—the conditions of freedom.

I would like to conclude this study with a brief discussion of Bob Dylan’s song “Mr. Tambourine Man” (1965), which thematizes the radical potentiality of the dreamscape and offers a bookend to my opening discussion in the Introduction of Paul Robeson’s performance of “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder.” Like Kafka’s “At Night,” Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man” presents a “waking” dreamscape; the narrator claims not to be sleeping, but seems to be in a zone with shattered boundaries between the three states of sleeping, wakefulness, dreaming. This in-between or blended state is presented in the first verse after the introductory chorus:

Though I know that evening’s empire has returned into sand
Vanished from my hand
Left me blindly here to stand but still not sleeping
My weariness amazes me, I’m branded on my feet
I have no one to meet
And the ancient empty street’s too dead for dreaming. (Dylan, “Mr. Tambourine Man”)

The first image points toward the entry into the dreamscape. The zone of wakefulness (“evening’s empire”) has crumbled “into sand”—sand being a typical indicator of passage into sleep and dream. The spatial elements of the song’s environment are strongly emphasized throughout the song and tend toward disintegration, blurring, emptying, receding, etc. The narrator’s statement about not being asleep makes sense, because the dream-I or narrator in the strict sense is not sleeping; the narrator is wide-awake in the realm of the dreamscape. Likewise, the narrator’s skepticism about the opening scene being “too dead for dreaming” points to an

uncanny “reality”—a street that is familiar yet strange, present yet ancient. This uncanny sense points to what is likely a hypnagogic image. This hypnagogic zone of an emerging dreamscape is “no place”— as the chorus repeats: “I’m not sleepy and there is no place I’m going to” (Dylan). As the dreamscape unfolds, the dream-narrator imagines an escape from this “no place” into the realm of an “anywhere”:

Take me on a trip upon your magic swirling ship
My senses have been stripped
My hands can’t feel to grip
My toes too numb to step
Wait only for my boot heels to be wandering
I’m ready to go anywhere, I’m ready for to fade
Into my own parade
Cast your dancing spell my way, I promise to go under it (Dylan, Mr. Tambourine Man”)

The loss or stripping of one’s “senses,” it seems, is a precondition for the escape, the move from the “no place” into the “anywhere.” This transition or journey from the initial hypnagogic “no place” into the imagined depths of the dreamscape requires a guide, the Tambourine Man. The Tambourine Man’s “swirling ship” seems to require the dreamer-narrator to “fade into” his “own parade,” something like a loss of self, or at the very least a loss of individuality understood as a self-sufficient singularity.

Up to this point, the song seems relatively comprehensible. The Tambourine Man, acting as a kind of Virgil figure, is being summoned to guide the narrator into another realm, access to which seems predicated upon the loss of, relaxation, or muting of one’s senses and consciousness. The next verse adds greater complexity:

Though you might hear laughing, spinning, swinging madly across the sun
It’s not aimed at anyone
It’s just escaping on the run
And but for the sky there are no fences facing
And if you hear vague traces of skipping reels of rhyme

To your tambourine in time
It's just a ragged clown behind
I wouldn't pay it any mind
It's just a shadow you're seeing that he's chasing

This most perplexing image seems to indicate a convergence between the Tambourine Man and the narrator. The Tambourine Man looks back and sees a “ragged clown,” who could be singing something in time with the playing of the tambourine. At the same time, this “clown” is also a “shadow”—and this shadow is also being chased by the clown, which implies that the clown might also be the dream-I or narrator. A concatenation is thus formed that runs like this: narrator—clown—shadow—Tambourine Man. These four figures are separate and connected, implying not only that the narrator is the clown and that the shadow might be cast from the Tambourine Man, but that the narrator and the Tambourine Man are somehow also merged—that they are both different and the same. The narrator, then, is potentially doubled—he is both silent and the maker of the song; both stilled and spinning, both stuck and capable of escape. The implications of this merging—this relinquishing of fixed identity as well as of spatial orientation—set the stage for the final verse:

And take me disappearing through the smoke rings of my mind
Down the foggy ruins of time
Far past the frozen leaves
The haunted frightened trees
Out to the windy beach
Far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow
Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky
With one hand waving free
Silhouetted by the sea
Circled by the circus sands
With all memory and fate
Driven deep beneath the waves
Let me forget about today until tomorrow

The dreamscape is spatially and temporally in-between. It is between here and there—existing as both “no place” and “anywhere.” It is between today and tomorrow—it is out of time, or “Down the foggy ruins of time.” The scene culminates in a kind of spiritual dance beside the sea—and here it seems that the narrator has indeed become the Tambourine Man, because while “one hand” is “waving free,” the other is likely holding the tambourine. This ritualistic dance is a dance of freedom, driving past and future away, escaping from the clutches of time and sorrow. It is a performance of liberation, similar to the ritual performance of freedom that the Israelites enact after crossing the sea and escaping Egyptian slavery. There, too, a figure (Miriam) with the tambourine leads a song and dance (Exodus 15:20-21). The central difference between the Exodus celebratory ritual dance and Dylan’s ecstatic dance of freedom is that the latter does not pay homage to God. The power to liberate, rather, comes from the song itself. The song is not the product of the consciousness of the musician—Dylan avoids the trap of seeing freedom as a product of individual genius. Rather, the song is authored by the four characters—or, rather, the four-in-one subjectivity—of narrator—clown—shadow—Tambourine Man.

The performance of freedom casts its resonance back on the chorus, especially on its final two lines:

Hey! Mr. Tambourine man, play a song for me
In the jingle jangle morning I’ll come following you

The “song” that the Tambourine Man is asked to play is also the narrator’s own song, the “following” is also a self-initiated journey. Most importantly, the freedom that is imagined in the scene of seaside liberation or total freedom is grafted into the imagined realm of wakefulness—the song will not be lost even amid the anticipated cacophony, the “jingle jangle” of the post-dream morning.

Despite this powerful representation of subjective freedom, there is a hitch. The song is one of longing—the figure in the dreamscape does not, in fact, go anywhere but remains, as so often in dreams, immobilized or “branded on my feet.” The narrator wants to hear the song, is ready to wander—to escape. The liberation scene on the beach is a fantasy within the dream. The dreamscape permits, can accommodate, and perhaps encourages just such dis-identification,

displacement, and disintegration. At the same time, it cannot, by definition, achieve anything—however ordered or chaotic—to completion. Dylan’s song thus proposes and performs an anarchic dreamscape while at the same time encasing it within a frame of longing. Here I think Dylan has something quite interesting to say—that the anarchist impulse must be both euphoric and melancholy, performed and longed for, dreamed and then somehow realized.

As I have demonstrated throughout this study, tensions between the dreamscape and its corresponding dream-text create fertile ground for analyzing the discursive practices and narrative structures of power. This is especially true at periods in the history of dream interpretation during which new modes of understanding attempt to push out and replace others. At these points, representations and interpretations of dreams seek to challenge and replace the older modes—and thus cut in both radical and authoritarian directions. This is the case with most of the biblical dream interpretation, which seeks to undermine competing polytheistic practices while cementing the special relationship between the Hebrew’s God and the “chosen” people as well as the authority and legitimacy of the patriarchs, priests, and kings. This is also the case with Freud and the psychoanalytic movement, which sought to overcome a diverse range of dream theories in order to locate the dream at the center of the individual’s psychological drama, as Freud understood it. Psychoanalytic innovators like Jung and Lacan venture to reimagine the dream in relation to their structural challenges to the Freudian system. J. Allan Hobson explicitly works to dismantle this psychoanalytic system in order to assert the neurobiological foundation of dreaming. In these cases—biblical dreaming, psychoanalysis, and the neurobiology of dreaming—discussions of dreaming are interwoven with concurrent discourses related to power and authority. This study has asserted that these dynamics of power are central to the understanding of the cultural position of dreaming.

If, as this study reveals, innovations in thinking about dreaming are bound to discourses of power, then it is also the case, as I have demonstrated, that certain representations of dreaming work to challenge authoritarian and hierarchical tendencies by attempting to capture the anarchistic attribute of the dreamscape. While these texts are politically powerful or radical, they are so only partially, often giving way to discursive structures of authoritarian power in one way or another—like Frost’s “After Apple-Picking” or even Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man,” which cannot fully commit to the reality of the dreamscape and instead grounds the dream in a context of longing. In rare cases, like with Rhys and Kafka, the creator of a dream-text channels the

chaotic, disintegrative energy of the dreamscape to rupture the discursive constructs and narrative strategies of waking life, the “reality” of which the dreamscape is fundamentally challenging.