Nightmares: the Navel of Freud’s Dreaming

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Freud’s theory of dreams stands among his most formative, significant and enduring writings. Nightmares, the repetitive dreams of trauma such as those resulting from experiences of war, are considered as exceptions to his dream theory. This conceptual dilemma is explored, taking into account the development of his theories of dreaming, the pleasure principle, trauma, and war neuroses. Possible contextual and personal explanations for this curious anomaly are considered.

The Interpretation of Dreams is the first of Freud’s solo publications concerned with psychoanalysis, and the ideas described within it remain recognisable, repeatable, and relatively untouched from 1900 to the end of his life in 1939. That is, despite many updates and additions there are no major revisions to its core through forty years of Freud’s dream work. Freud regarded dreams as ‘the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious’ (1900b, p. 608) and they served as sources of insight, inspiration and confirmation for his theories about the mind. Yet curiously, the problem of nightmares and whether they can be fitted within his dream theory is never resolved. Actually the term ‘nightmare’ is not a term used at all by Freud, apart from a single reference (Freud 1900a, p. 34). In this work, the term for nightmares will be understood to refer to dreams which are marked by very high levels of unpleasant emotions and repetitions of familiar scenes and themes. Freud referred to these as ‘the repetitive dreams of traumatic neuroses’. These nightmares are the types of dreams that are commonly associated with wars, disasters, injuries, abuses, and distortions of more ordinary childhood experiences, experienced by the dreamer as trauma.

How Freud brings together his thoughts regarding these types of dreams is to be seen most clearly in ‘Revision of Dream-Theory,’ from the New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis written in 1932:

The first of these difficulties is presented in the fact that people who have experienced a shock, a severe psychical trauma—such as happened so often during the war and such as affords the basis for traumatic hysteria are regularly taken back in their dreams into the traumatic situation. According to our hypotheses about the function of dreams, this should not occur. What wishful impulse could be satisfied by harking back in this way to this exceedingly distressing traumatic experience? It is hard to guess (1933 [1932], p. 28).

Freud considers the function of the dream fails because the anxiety generated in the dream
awakens the dreamer, and the dream stops. Freud regarded traumatic neuroses, particularly war
related traumatic neuroses, and anxiety, as challenging to his theory of dreams. Even in his last
major psychoanalytic work, written in 1938, he refers again to anxiety dreams, considering
whether or not these dreams can actually be fitted within his theory (1940 [1938], p. 171). This
was the same question he had raised in The Interpretation of Dreams, back in 1900, and it is a
curious qualification of his theory. I became intrigued with understanding why Freud made this
exception. My first thoughts initially were that I had misunderstood what was written. This
paper will take you through some of the highlights of my search to track and make sense of this.

**Dreams as Wish-Fulfilment**

Freud’s earliest description of dreams is actually to be found in the *Project for a Scientific
Psychology*, where he describes for the first time the characteristics of dreams, including the lack
of physical movement during dreaming, the seemingly nonsensical connections and
displacements of ideas, and the regressive, hallucinatory nature of the dream thoughts which
nevertheless awaken consciousness and are experienced as if they were real during the dream.
Further, he argues that the aim of dreams is wish fulfilment, and that dreams are usually poorly
remembered on waking. Even when remembered, the psychical processes act to conceal the
meaning of dreams (1950 [1895], p. 338). It is this aspect of dreams as wish fulfilment that needs
to be considered first, since this is the ostensible reason given by Freud for nightmares not fitting
into his theory.

The idea of the dream as wish fulfilment is one that actually traces dreams to wishes, and further
traces wishes to the primary process. That is, they take the form of a mental function by which
wishes can be immediately satisfied through hallucinatory experience as happens in dreams
(Freud 1900a, p. 129 and Wollheim 1991, p. 66). Thus, if the dreamer has a wish to go on the
lake, then the dream has as the content ‘I am going on the lake’. That is, the content of the
dream identifies the wish. Freud clearly holds to this thesis. Further, he says it is not possible to
ensure a dream is completely interpreted since distortion and condensation result in layers of
meaning superimposed one on the other (p. 279). Thus a single image may refer back to a whole
series of unconscious thoughts and may involve several wishes. At the base of it, not necessarily
accessible, is the fulfilment of a wish dating from earliest childhood (p. 214). This Freud regards
as the navel of the dream, the ultimate point beyond which it is impossible to understand the
meaning concealed within (1900b, p. 525).

Internal images, whether hallucinatory, imaginary, phantasy or dreaming, have happened, no
matter how briefly. Thus the wish is fulfilled, and with it the unconscious desires it represented.
The dream is the wish-fulfilment, no matter what its form. Yet Freud seems to lose this
generalised view of wish over time. He moves through his writings from initially seeing primitive
wishing as primary process, to something closer to reason, motive or rational thought, concealed
and distorted, waiting to be recovered through dream analysis.

He considers even dreams of punishment as fulfilling wishes, despite the distress aroused by
them, explaining that these can occur because the dream work has not completely succeeded
since the dream thoughts are actually far more distressing than the dream constructed. However
he still considers these to be genuine dreams (1916–1917, p. 215). His view is that there can be
pleasure even in repressed or evil repudiated wishes (p. 216). Wish fulfillment may be disguised by the punishing or unpleasant aspects of the dreams (p. 219). Nightmares could easily be described as punitive because they are extremely distressing. Yet Freud never considers this in relation to the dreams of war neuroses. Why does he stop short of including traumatic dreams such as nightmares? It is difficult to make sense of this exception.

The Enigma of Anxiety and Affect

Let us look a little more closely at the anxiety generated in these dreams. Freud begins the section on anxiety in *The Interpretation of Dreams* by describing how dreams being formed from unconscious wishes link up with the day’s residues through transference to connect with groups of memories, some of which exist only as visual images. Finally the dream acquires characteristics making it suitable to be represented in perceptual form and then comes to the attention of consciousness. Sleep makes the sensory aspect of consciousness more receptive to these characteristics (1900b, p. 574). ‘A dream is an awakening that is beginning’ is the beautiful French quote that Freud uses to describe how dreams are more than just brief moments prior to waking (p. 575). The quote also captures the sense of a multitude of unconscious wishes being potentially awakened and expressed through dream associations.

Freud also observes that unconscious paths of thought, and emotions such as humiliation, can be re-experienced in exactly the same way even thirty years later. There is no fading of memory and no fading of emotions in the unconscious (1900b, p. 578). He proposes dreams have a ‘safety valve’ function for the mind which is aborted when the dream jars violently, is broken off and the dreamer wakes up (p. 580). This certainly can happen in anxiety dreams and nightmares. However, the dream can also continue, unpleasant and awful though it might be, which Freud does not acknowledge. Instead, in his writings he moves away from the issue of anxiety, except for an observation he makes that to me is significant. He says: ‘It is dozens of years since I myself had a true anxiety-dream’ (p. 583). It was a childhood dream, a dream of his mother dying. He describes himself being about seven or eight years old when he had this dream, yet he makes no further attempt to associate to, or elaborate, this dream any further.

Dreaming Beyond the Pleasure Principle

So what stopped Freud from extending his dream theory to include anxiety dreams and the repetitive nightmares of traumatic neuroses—war based or otherwise? We need now to turn to another of Freud’s significant, and perhaps controversial, writings—*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). The final phase of Freud’s metapsychological writings is seen to begin with this paper since it signals a new picture of the structure of mind that dominates all of his later writings. It is a curious paper in many ways, for instance its close resemblance to some parts of the then unpublished *Project* (1950 [1895]). It contains clear references to his biological understandings as a neurologist, to some of his ex-colleagues such as Breuer, Fliess, and even to Jung and Adler. It also contains an oblique reference to the recent and unexpected death of his daughter Sophie. It was written just after the war, which had caused great hardship to Freud and his family and it is as though Freud is involved not just in a theoretical review, but also in a review of his life and the developing psychoanalytical movement as well. Perhaps these things are significant in how he
formulates his theory with respect to a number of issues.

*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920, p. 7 onwards) begins with Freud reviewing the meaning of the pleasure and the reality principles which govern how the mind functions. He then moves to the traumatic neuroses which follow accidents and disasters involving a risk to life, and observes that The terrible war which has just ended has also given rise to a great number of illnesses like these (p. 12). He sees that the symptomatic picture of traumatic neurosis is similar to hysteria, yet also resembles hypochondria or melancholia, and it results in much greater mental and physical disturbances. As he says: ‘No complete explanation has yet been reached either of war neuroses or of the traumatic neuroses of peace’ (p. 12). He describes ordinary traumatic neurosis as having two characteristics—the factors of surprise and fright. He also proposes that wounds or injuries generally prevent neurosis from developing.

Freud turns to dreams, a ‘most trustworthy method’ for investigating deep mental processes, noting that the dreams which accompany traumatic neuroses repeatedly bring the patient back into his trauma, from which he wakes up in another fright. This he finds astonishing, but he attributes it to fixation on the trauma. Freud notes that these patients do not seem preoccupied during the day with memories, and expresses surprise that their dreams take them back into these events at night. He considers it would be more reasonable to expect the dreams to show the patient pictures from a healthy past or a hoped for cure (p. 13).

These are both extraordinary observations, since they appear to rewrite clinical experience rather than challenge his theses about the nature of dreams. Should the theory fit the observations, or should the observations be made to fit the theory? Freud moves to argue that traumatic neurosis upsets the wish-fulfilling tenor of dreams. He then leaves this ‘dark and dismal subject of the traumatic neurosis’ to examine instead children’s play, one of the mind’s earliest normal activities (p. 14), thereby possibly giving the impression of something he is reluctant to think about further.

However, at this point Freud is slowly preparing the reader for something else, so traumatic dreams are not really the key focus of his attention. After considering aspects of children’s play and their propensity for repeating experiences, Freud turns back to the clinical situation and observes that making what was unconscious conscious has clinically been found to be limited by resistance and transference. The patient repeats the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of remembering it as belonging to the past. This compulsion to repeat, whether it is in child’s play or in traumatic dreams, recalls past experiences and overrides the pleasure principle. Hence he considers it to be an even more primitive, elemental aspect of mind (pp. 22–23). His thoughts then turn to anxiety and trauma, and it is clear that he still believes that being prepared for anxiety will overcome the effect of shock, and he appears unaware that this is not necessarily the case. Certainly at this point he seems confused between the notions of pain, trauma, and anxiety, although he accepts that even when memories are finally ‘tamed’ by thoughts strong enough to inhibit repetition they can still generate pain.

*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* continues with Freud regarding the repeated return of trauma in dreams as attempts to master the trauma retrospectively (1920, p. 32). He continues to ignore the reality of nightmares in which the dreamer does not wake. His attention turns to the death instinct: ‘an urge inherent in organic life’ (p. 36) to bring about death. The compulsion to repeat then is not seen as concerned with mastering trauma. Instead it becomes something which cannot be explained by conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. Freud
never brings the death drive and dreaming into relationship with each other in any way, despite both being important to his work.

Do traumatic dreams negate the dreamwork? This is what Freud's argument in separating out repetitive dreams and nightmares implies. Yet a closer look at traumatic dreams, examples of which will given in the next section, reveal that they are not exact replications of the original experience, nor is every repetition of a dream identical. Usually there are particular images, experiences, or scenes that form repeated dream content. However, careful attention to these will reveal temporal thematic variations as well as the familiar elements of condensation and displacement. Dream-work is taking place in nightmares.

**Freud and the Untamed Memories of War**

What were Freud's experiences and ideas of traumatic war neuroses? Ernest Jones' biography of Freud provides details of Freud's personal experience of military service, which began in the summer of 1879 when he was called up for a year's service. Jones remarks that this was an experience 'far less strenuous in those days than now' since medical students could continue to live at home, and had no actual duties apart from attending at the hospitals (Jones 1955a, p. 55). The greatest hardship was the boredom. There were also a couple of follow-up camps, one just before he was to be married, and another after he was married. At no time did he actually experience active duty. Throughout his early life Austria was involved in minor battles and ongoing struggles with various European nations, so this was accepted as part of normal life. Jones notes that Freud's response to war being declared Svas an unexpected one' of 'youthful enthusiasm, apparently a re-awakening of the military ardors of his boyhood' (Jones 1955b, p. 171). Perhaps in this sense Freud's personal experiences in no way prepared him for the intensity and horror of the First World War. Perhaps too, since Germany was the aggressor, and Austria was part of this aggression, there may be a level of denial or a desire to not know too much, despite his own sons serving, a source for him of pride and reason for concern.

**What was the First World War, the Great War, like?**

Some selections have been taken from Denis Winter's *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War*, which is based on extensive research (1978). Winter describes how during and after the war the individual voices of the soldiers were lost in the collective picture. There was talk of campaigns and battles and places, but not of what it felt like to be in the front line, or in a base hospital. For a number of years after the war, there were memoirs published, but then the public perception changed, to a belief that the war surely must have been exaggerated, that it could not have been so black. Yet, as Winter so eloquently points out through his quotation from the Crimean War: The man is the first weapon of battle. Let us study the soldier for it is he who brings reality to it' (p. 13). He observes that the harsh treatment of traumatised soldiers seemed to increase inversely to the distance from the battlefield (p. 201). Certainly there is a sense of Freud being distant from this reality despite, or perhaps because of, his own sons serving. Winter
argues that even after all allowances have been made, the Great War was different from any other war. It was the first time that young men of all social classes were to die over such a prolonged period. Death was sudden and unfair, with about three-quarters of the deaths being due to shelling (pp. 204–5). Winter also includes descriptions of the nightmares reported by soldiers after the war:

When I was demobbed,’ wrote Drinkwater, ‘I used to have bad nightmares. I used to wake up in the middle of the night bathed in perspiration. It was an incident when we were caught in no-man’s land. Bullets were striking the ground all round us.’ For Andrews the nightmares were more varied. Buried by shells, surprised by gas, a solo bayonet duel—all the great fears in fact of the front-line man. Despite the fact that he had burned all his letters, the faces of dead comrades still came to him in these dreams. Abraham was troubled into the 1930s by one recurrent nightmare. He saw himself alone in a sunny, silent trench surrounded by a stealthy enemy. He had been forgotten in his company’s withdrawal and left with orders not to move. This dream had no connection with his actual war experience. Hyder’s single recurrent dream was firmly connected to his past. Having raided and taken a pillbox in Ploegstraat Wood, he had heard with growing intensity and for some time the sound of a wounded man dragging himself down the tunnel entrance of the pillbox. Not knowing what was making the sound, he had shot the man dead before finding him to have been a harmless and wounded German. This was twelve years ago and still at night comes a sweat that wakes me by its deadly chill to hear again that creeping, creeping’ (p. 248).

These descriptions are the realities of war, the experiential ingredients of the traumatic, repetitive dreams of war neuroses.

War neuroses actually make their appearance quite early in Freud’s writings, in the Psychopathology of Everyday Life (1901), with a reference to the misreading of a poem by a soldier while he was being treated in hospital for a traumatic neurosis during the war (p. 114). However this example was actually added in 1917. Max Eitingon, a German psychoanalyst stationed at a military hospital during the war, supplied the example to Freud. Eitingon described the tremors, apprehensiveness, tearfulness, proneness to fits of rage, convulsive movements and vomiting suffered by traumatised soldiers. Freud makes it clear he regards these symptoms, particularly the last one, as contributing to the secondary gain from the illness, the gain being the possibility of remaining unfit for active duty. He gives no consideration to the possibility of extreme anxiety or even terror as explanation for these severe symptoms. The echoes of this remain throughout the few further references that Freud makes to traumatic war neuroses.

No doubt there were cases of traumatic neuroses being used to advantage. However Freud’s perspective prevents him from examining more closely the possible connections and implications for his theories. Freud concludes that war neuroses are due to a conflict in the ego between the soldier’s old, peaceful ego and his new, warlike one. This conflict arises soon as the ego realises it could lose its life ‘owing to the rashness of its newly formed, parasitic double’. Further, the soil that nourishes the precondition of war neuroses would seem to be a national [conscript] army; there would be no possibility of their arising in an army of professional soldiers or mercenaries’ (Freud 1919, p. 209). Perhaps here he shows his lack of real contact with those affected in this way. As he observes elsewhere: ‘It is in fact greatly to be regretted that not a single analysis of a traumatic neurosis of any value is extant’ (p. 129). Yet others had worked with shell shock using psychoanalysis, including Ernest Jones (Maddox 2006, p. 121), whose regular
communications with Freud over the years are well documented, including correspondence on ‘war shock’ (Paskauskas, 1993, p. 334–5). Jones had also written and published material about nightmares as early as 1910, which he had also communicated to Freud on more than one occasion (e.g. pp. 67, 81, 110).

Clearly Freud was ambivalent about what he considered to be the explanation for war neuroses. A form of detachment seems to characterise much of his thinking about war trauma, and is nowhere more apparent than in his report on the deterrent use of electric shock treatment on soldiers with traumatic neuroses during the war. There is a chilling memorandum on the treatment of war neuroses for a commission set up by the Austrian War Ministry in 1920, but not translated into English until 1955. Freud describes in it how some of these treatments were so brutal that they resulted in death. He seems to accept, even approve of the use of this brutal method despite its limited value. He glosses over the possibility of deaths in Viennese clinics and makes an opportunistic claim for the analytic treatment of such men, had the war not ended. The final sentence illustrates most graphically his lack of exposure to the horrors of war and to the nature of real traumatic neuroses: ‘But with the end of the war the neurotics too, disappeared—a final but impressive proof of the psychical causation of their illnesses’ (p. 215).

A model existed within Freud’s thinking which could have been adapted to understand both the effects of early and later trauma, particularly as not everyone who experiences trauma develops traumatic neurosis. This is the concept of deferred action, a phenomenon described quite frequently by Freud, whereby experiences may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or changing stages of development. The experiences then can be given not only a new meaning, but also gain psychical valency at this later time. It is not possible here to explore this concept very far, except to highlight that it is specifically those experiences that were impossible to fit into a meaningful context in the first instance that came to be revised. Psychic content is clearly not limited to the material reality of trauma.

What is confusing about war neuroses is why Freud did not consider the model of deferred action to explain traumatic responses. Not all soldiers who had horrific experiences suffered from traumatic neuroses and traumatic neuroses could be associated with a wide range of actual circumstances. Traumatic dreams, as already shown in the examples of nightmares, can also vary widely. An explanatory model already existed that had already been applied to obsessions, compulsions and phobic responses. What prevented Freud from extending this further?

It is not until towards the end of his life that Freud returns to the concept of trauma in Moses and Monotheism (1939 [193438]). Here he comes to see trauma in a much more complex way than he had in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. It seems that it is not until Freud himself has experienced sufficient uncontrollable and terrifying happenings in his own life that he can give more weight to trauma in his search for aetiological attribution. Finally he sees that external events can play a part in addition to the internal disposition. An extract from one of Freud’s last letters illustrates graphically the terrible events of his last years. The letter was sent to an English paper, after he and his immediate family had been able to move to London to escape the Nazi persecution of Jewish people.
I came to Vienna as a child of 4 years from a small town in Moravia. After 78 years of assiduous work I had to leave my home, saw the scientific society I had founded dissolved, our institutions destroyed, our printing press taken over by the invaders, the books I had published confiscated or reduced to pulp, my children expelled from their professions (1937–38, p. 301).

Towards the end of his life, and perhaps because of his own experiencing of uncontrollable traumatic events, Freud finally moves towards restoring the external aetiological factors to the foreground of his thinking again. Yet despite this, he still continues to maintain a distinction between events from the outside world and innate dispositions that can operate as traumas (1940 [1938]: 184). His last discussion in ‘Dream Interpretation’, does not mention traumatic dreams, but does raise the dilemma of anxiety dreams. Again he focuses on anxiety dreams that waken the dreamer, rather than how his theory of dreams could more comfortably accommodate this reality. Thus his final words on this, possibly the most significant of all his theoretical developments, ends ‘...there are occasions when that excellent fellow the night-watchman, whose business it is to guard the little township’s sleep, has no alternative but to sound the alarm and waken the sleeping townspeople’ (p. 171).

Beyond the Navel of the Dream

So why was Freud reluctant to incorporate trauma, anxiety, and nightmares within his theory of dreams? What other explanation might be found for his reluctance? One thing we could consider is the centrality of his self-analysis for his emerging ideas. His self-analysis was used to confirm a number of his explanatory concepts—the Oedipus complex; infantile sexuality; his theory of the superego; and the theory of dreams. There is a complex interplay between theory and observation, and their relationship to evidence and confirmation is inherently problematic.

Jacques Lacan (1998) draws attention to the dream with which Freud begins the last chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud himself describes it as a ‘model’ dream.

The preliminaries to this model dream were as follows. A father had been watching beside his child’s sick-bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child’s body was laid out, with tall candles standing around it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat beside the body murmuring prayers. After a few hours sleep, the father had a dream that his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm, and whispered to him reproachfully: ‘Father, don’t you see I’m burning?’ He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child’s dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them (1900b, p. 509).

The dream shows the moments of sleep gained by the dreaming as allowing the father to experience the child for a moment as though alive again. Yet Lacan describes this dream as belonging to a category of its own and notes Freud’s next section, on the forgetting of the dream. Lacan sees Freud in some senses as deflecting attention away from this intensely powerful dream.
It can be asked: what is it that Freud might burn with in recounting this dream? One answer is to be found in the next two pages of his theorising. He remarks on the need ‘to pause and look around, to see whether in the course of our journey up to this point we have overlooked anything of importance’ (1900b, p. 511). There is a hint of dismissal in this response to an extraordinarily poignant dream. The dreaming of father and son, son and father gives way abruptly to theorising, to distancing, almost to a denial, but of what? Perhaps aspects of Freud’s own unconscious experiences have emerged briefly, only to disappear again? Freud goes on with a very enigmatic remark: ‘as soon as we endeavour to penetrate more deeply into the mental process involved in dreaming, every path will end in darkness’ (p. 511).

Listening to this with evenly suspended attention, adopting an analytic listening stance, it seems as though something urgent is awakened and then put quickly back to sleep. Is this the painful father-son relationship of Freud and his recently dead father, even though ostensibly the dream is not Freud’s? Is it one of the glimmers of something unaccountable in Freud’s theory so far? Is it his desire to have nothing put in the way of this monumental testimony? This is a dream, opened up and quickly closed. The first section, which follows a brief introduction, is on the forgetting of dreams including the idea of the dream navel. Freud explains:

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure, this is because we come aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream’s navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought (p. 525).

Freud says that almost all dream-thoughts are recognisable to the dreamer, except for the thought that the dreamer refuses because it is strange or repellent. Recognisable thoughts are actually more conscious ones, whereas the unacceptable thought, ‘this one impulse is a child of the night; it belongs to the dreamer’s unconscious and on that account it is repudiated and rejected by him’ (1933, p. 18). Yet this impulse ‘...is the true creator of the dream; it produces the psychical energy for the dream’s construction’ (p. 18). What thought of Freud’s then might be beyond the navel of his dreaming?

The  were written just before and after the death of Freud’s father. The preface to the second edition of  includes his acknowledgment of the realisation of the significance of his father’s death as ‘...the most poignant loss, of a man’s life’(1900a, p. xxvi). In many respects,  represents more personal detail, more self-exposure, than his actual autobiography, written carefully and selectively many years later. The pain of this loss is very apparent in one of Freud’s letters to Wilhelm Fliess. Written in 1896, shortly after the death of his father, this letter describes the father’s death as affecting Freud deeply. ‘By the time he died, his life had long been over, but in [my] inner self the whole past has been reawakened by this event. I now feel quite uprooted’
Salomon Resnik begins *The Theatre of the Dream* (1987) with this letter to Fliess, where Freud writes about his feelings for his father and about a dream he had the night after his funeral, a ‘pleasant’ dream. In the dream Freud is in a barber’s shop, and reads the sign you are asked to close the eyes’. Freud himself continues on, seeing the sign as having a double meaning: that he should do his duty to the dead, and the actual duty itself, with the dream touching a sense of self-reproach. Resnik comments that he was resisting facing reality by not opening his eyes, not acknowledging the absence of his father. The refusal to see is a way of denying death and the duty of mourning. Resnik describes this as a superegoic self criticism of Freud’s that makes him feel guilty for shutting his eyes to the reality of the loss. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud describes the dream again. Here the scene as recounted to Fliess is different. One of the changes is that the dream is described as occurring before the funeral (pp. 6–7).

It seems *The Interpretation of Dreams*, written in 1899, is an act of reparation for the death of his father. Resnik considers Freud’s interpreting of his own dreams is a way of re-creating a paternal image, a guide that points the way in order to provide understanding and to give meaning to his internal relationships (1987, p. 9). However there is another interpretation possible: that the eyes to be closed are not Freud’s, but rather the eyes of his father. It signifies many things to close a person’s eyes after death has occurred. It is possible Freud wanted his father’s eyes to remain open, to go on witnessing Freud proving his worth, proving he had not ‘come to nothing’, his father’s remark so painfully remembered from his childhood (1900a, p. 216). Perhaps Freud felt he had not yet met, let alone surpassed, his father’s expectations. There is a primitive desire, an Oedipal wish to better the father, thereby destroying him. This emerges as the central theme of *Moses and Monotheism*.

Use Grubrich-Simitis, in writing about *Moses and Monotheism*, among the last of Freud’s writings, observes from this text that Freud was ‘rent by inner tensions’ (1997, p. 12). Her view is that an inner crisis acts again as the spur for the final insightful development of his theory, as a direct outcome of his search for self-understanding in the last years of his life. She proposes that he had progressed in his self-analysis with respect to his relationship with his father. Coupled with his deep concern about whether his life’s work and his family would survive Nazi persecution, and the recognition of his own impending death, this gives his self-analysis a sharper focus. Grubrich-Simitis uses the term ‘concealed autobiographical communications’ and suggests that the book should be read ‘as a kind of daydream generated under traumatic conditions of extreme distress’ (p. 60). She considers this work allowed Freud to recognise and extend the range of traumas including narcissistic injuries to the young ego. This brought with it a realisation of the pathogenic significance of the failure of early emotional relationships.

However, Grubrich-Simitis is also of the opinion that Freud preferred not to delve into the phenomena of the very earliest stages of mental functioning. She speculates that he found this confrontation too threatening for him personally. She notes that the biographical picture Freud presented of himself as a happy child remained unquestioned for years. Yet she considers his drive for self-analysis and his deep longing to be successful and creative, raise questions about his very early life. She observes that with respect to his self-analysis, he must have met ‘with impenetrable resistances on this primary level of early traumatisation’ (p. 67). Significantly, Grubrich-Simitis adds that there is no evidence for her reconstruction of Freud’s beginnings. However when Freud discusses regression in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He describes how infantile scenes can function like models for the contents of dreams, and comments ‘I cannot produce any good example from my own experiences of an infantile memory producing this kind
of result’ (1900b, p. 546). There is little sense from Freud’s writings on dreams that he was at all in touch with his own infantile or early phantasy life. He may have chosen to keep it well concealed. It is the sort of material that generally emerges during a long psychoanalysis, an experience that Freud himself did not have, and is often more readily apparent in the transference material than in the patient’s history.

Grubrich-Simitis draws attention, as indeed do other writers, to the possibility of reading Freud’s texts themselves as a dream or a free association. Just as we would interpret a dream by being guided by the meaning of the words and by noticing gaps, disturbing repetitions and obvious contradictions, so we would regard these as revealing things which were not consciously intended to be communicated. When this approach is applied to The Interpretation of Dreams, while there is little evidence of influence of early traumatic experiences, there is sufficient material to draw attention to the intensity of Freud’s relationship with his parents, especially with his father. By turning to this method, might we extend our understanding of Freud’s reluctance to incorporate traumatic dreams into his overall theory? Taking note of the fact that Freud himself used and made available his own dreams in constructing his theory, and that he never moved from his thesis of dreams as revelations of unconscious processes, I will reevaluate the ‘father I am burning dream’ with this question in mind.

The dream of ‘father I am burning’ could express a wish to experience the remorse of a father at the death of a son, and which points to profoundly unconscious meanings for Freud as already discussed. This dream, coupled with the only anxiety dream that Freud could remember, which was the childhood dream of his dead mother being carried away, form punctuation marks, bookends perhaps, to his psychological theorising with respect to dreams. Viewed in this way, they seem to indicate the limits of his own analysis, and similarly signal the limits to the depth of his theoretical understanding. Perhaps too, it is something about his self-analysis both concealed and revealed within The Interpretation of Dreams, that he unconsciously and vehemently protects by not making any significant changes to the theory of traumatic dreams over the course of his lifetime. He cannot even accommodate traumatic neuroses, particularly war-related neuroses, with their repetitive nightmares.

Concluding Thoughts

The fundamental postulate of Freud’s theory of dreams is that dreams are the fulfilment of wishes. Freud establishes the universal nature of this hypothesis, and demonstrates its validity in all cases, the only exception being the dreams of traumatic neuroses. Yet there seems to be insufficient reason for this. Beyond the Pleasure Principle raises the dilemma of the repetitive dreams of traumatic experiences, these nightmares, which leads Freud to assign to them a more primitive role than wish-fulfilment. He appears to be suggesting another mechanism of mind beyond the primary process, yet this is not actually explored or developed in any way throughout his writings. Apart from the death instinct, he proposes nothing to explain these types of dreams. Indeed there is very little modification or alteration to his theory of dreams, despite the rest of his theories undergoing significant development throughout his lifetime.

Freud had a very limited understanding of the overwhelming nature of the trauma of war: experiences that can put a mind out of action, as demonstrated in repeated nightmares. At the heart of trauma is an intense emotional experience which traumatic dreams attempt to represent.
Do nightmares negate the dream-work? I argue that they do not, that there is insufficient reason to separate them out from the theory of dreams, despite their repetitive nature. Freud uses the question of repetition in Beyond the Pleasure Principle as part of his explanation for justifying the existence of the death instinct. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to know how he might have developed this argument if his experience of war neurosis and trauma had been different. The untamed memories of war appear to have been viewed quite negatively by Freud, and it is possible that his conceptualisation of trauma and its place in the aetiology of neurosis may have emerged differently had this not been his perspective.

If Freud had held a different view of war neuroses and trauma, what might have been the future impact of this? The course of history cannot be changed retrospectively, however it is possible that the diagnosis and treatment of war neurosis and posttraumatic stress may have become popular much sooner than late last century. If Freud had focused more on the nature of the repetitive nightmares rather than the question of their functional fit within the wish-fulfilling aspects of dreams, we may have been rewarded with better clinical insights much earlier. Freud’s theories developed from both his clinical observations and his self-analysis. Yet we know that any persistent form of introspection will always encounter resistances and blind spots, beyond which it is impossible to see.

The theory of dreams emerged for Freud from the interpretation of his own dreams. Perhaps this reflected a need to recreate and to understand his relationship with his dead father, and with himself. The navel of the dream is the deep unknowable aspect of dreaming. To wrestle with the meaning of dreams is to wrestle with our own associations, reflections and understandings, albeit in the guise of understanding the dream of the other. The curious thing is that even our own dreams are always the dream of the other, the other consciousness. Traumatic neuroses, particularly the war neuroses, were Freud’s navel. This was the point beyond which he could not move in his self-analysis, let alone in his theorising. Was it due to the limits of his own narcissism? Was it due to the human fear of beyond death? Was it due to the punitive nature of his superego? Was it due to the dead father who could never be impressed or surpassed? Was it the infant child, so long forgotten? To analyse someone in his absence is not very useful, let alone verifiable. Only our own preoccupations are to be exposed by such an exercise—such is the Janus-like quality that never leaves the psychoanalytical endeavour. The language of the dream is personal and specific, and it is a discourse privileged to the dreamer.

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