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Recommended Citation

Criticism and Lacan: Essays and Dialogue on Language, Structure and the Unconscious, ed. Patrick Hogan and Lalita 'Pandit (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990)

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“All Dreams Follow the Mouth”: The Dream-Interpreter as Prophet

KEN FRIEDEN

Freud's “talking cure” and methods of dream interpretation have occasionally been understood in the context of Jewish traditions, yet the nature of this association remains a matter of dispute.¹ Without making any claims concerning influence or continuity, this essay attends to some resonances between Talmudic, Freudian, and Lacanian thought, which no doubt merit a full-length study.

The language of dream interpretation, one aspect of Talmudic attention to the signifier, receives extensive treatment in the Babylonian Talmud.² Tractate Berakhot, recorded in about 450 C.E., is strikingly relevant to studies of both Freud and Lacan: more than any other pre-modern theory of dreams, the Talmudic discussion insists on the power of interpretation and the associated role of language itself. While there can be little question of discovering a direct line of influence, Freudian and Lacanian theories may become considerably clearer by comparison with precursors.

Freud carefully distinguishes his practices of dream interpretation from those of ancient times, which viewed dreams as the prophetic messages of supernatural beings.³ Since he rejects transcendent explanations, Freud replaces the divine apparatus by mechanisms of the dream work. Dreams thereby become expressions of individual wishes, and lose their potential significance as prophecy. According to ancient beliefs, dreams are primarily concerned with the future, but Freud understands them as expressions of past and present desires. The dream is a symptomatic moment in personal history. Freud's “Traum und Telepathie” (1922) and “Die okkulte Bedeutung des Traumes” (1925) explicitly consider and repudiate the notions that dreams foretell the future or telepathically perceive distant occurrences.

Yet Freud protests too much. He insists that his dream interpretations have no bearing on future events, and only reconstruct dream thoughts which are re-presented in the dream. Thus the analyst need not be disturbed by the suspicion that dreams are influenced by “suggestion.”⁴ Freud grants that the manifest content of dreams may be influenced by the analyst, but he denies all influence on the latent dream thoughts or on the mechanism of the dream work.⁵

Freud discounts the claims of interpretive suggestion by describing two distinct phases of dream interpretation: translation and evaluation.⁶ While the dream work transforms the latent dream thoughts into manifest content, the dream interpretation moves in the opposite direction, translating from manifest to latent content.⁷ Freud subsequently evaluates the personal meaning of the latent content, implying that this content is not altered by interpretation. There are, however, hints that the process of translation from one language to the other is itself the most essential feature of the dream.⁸

Lacan writes that “the dream work follows the laws of the signifier.”⁹ In its broader context, this recognition complicates Freud's methodological assumption that a pre-existing dream thought is the basis of the dream. Individual desires remain central, but are partially determined by linguistic systems. Like Talmudic dream interpretation, then, psychoanalysis comes to acknowledge the interplay between signifier and psyche, dream and interpretation.

Berakhot 35a informs us: “A dream that is not interpreted is like a letter that is not read.”¹⁰ The prophetic meaning of dreams is contained as if in code; it remains to be determined whether the message is favorable, and whether an interpretation should be attempted. Yet later developments suggest that the message of a dream is not fixed, and depends on the interpretation it receives.

The decisive Talmudic statement runs: “All dreams follow the mouth.”¹¹ This assertion gestures toward the ambiguous and variable character of dream interpretation.

“All dreams follow the mouth” may first be understood: the meaning and consequences of dreams follow the interpretation given to them by qualified interpreters. Bar Hedia is one such interpreter, who appears to influence the lives of Raba and Abaye by interpreting their dreams: “to one who paid him he gave a favorable interpretation, and to one who did not pay him he gave an unfavorable interpretation.”¹² Even when Bar Hedia

interprets identical dreams, he gives distinct, and yet equally prophetic, interpretations. This tale points to the power of dream interpretation to create its own truth and influence events.

"All dreams follow the mouth" may also mean that dreams follow the mouth of the dreamer, whose retelling is the creative source from which interpretation begins. In a related, but not identical vein, Freud himself recognizes that the processes of secondary revision must be counted as part of the dream work, which is in turn the essence of the dream.¹³

"All dreams follow the mouth" may mean, moreover, that dreams and their meaning follow the structures of language. The Talmud seeks to ensure that dreams will be given meaning in proper scriptural contexts: "One who sees a river in his dreams should rise early and say, *Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river* [Isaiah 66:12], before another verse occurs to him, *for distress will come in like a river* [Isaiah 31:5]."¹⁴ By choosing favorable scriptural allusions, the Talmud promises positive results. The meaning of a dream is not contained in the psyche of the dreamer, but in an intertextual relationship.

Freud and the Talmud both refer to numerous instances in which dream contents are based on linguistic transformations.¹⁵ This aspect of dream interpretation was, of course, especially important to Lacan. Condensation (*Verdichtung*) is one typical example. Freud dreams of an "Autodidasker," which he then analyzes into the components, "Autor," "Autodidakt," and "Lasker."¹⁶ In Berakhot, a sectarian dreams that his father has left him money in Cappadocia. The city's name breaks down into "kapa" and "deka," signifying the tenth beam (from Aramaic *kopa* and Greek *deka*), where the dreamer subsequently finds money.¹⁷ "Once more it is confirmed that the dream work follows the laws of the signifier," Lacan observes in another context.¹⁸ But since the meaning of dreams depends on intertextual context, the play of the signifier culminates in the work of the dreamer and of the interpreter.

When Lacan refers to "the laws of the signifier," he does not differentiate between competing systems of language. The Talmudic interpretation of Cappadocia brings together Aramaic and Greek resources. To the extent that the Hebrew Bible is supposed to be the blueprint for reality, this linguistic hybrid poses a potential threat. If all languages and linguistic expressions bear such hidden meanings, then the priority of God's signifiers is challenged. Freud's insistently secular interpretations powerfully pose this threat, in each case deciphering an individual dream code on

the basis of the patient's free associations. Freud discerns virtually infinite meanings in every dream and thus decenters the claims of Scripture: all human expression attains significance. Only the regular operations of the dream work, "laws of the signifier" that form the dream and inform its interpretation, remain constant.

Freud and Lacan take a giant step beyond the Talmud when they point to the multilayered quality of dream significations, depending on the translation of various concealed codes. But the Talmudic text threatens to subvert the scientific pretenses of modern psychology, to the extent that it reveals the active power of the interpreter who, by offering meaning, casts himself in the role of prophet.

Freud presumes to work objectively when he translates the manifest contents into latent contents or dream thoughts. The Talmud recognizes a tendency toward arbitrariness in the processes of interpretation, which does not prevent prophetic interpretations from being fulfilled. The overdetermination of dream contents prevents Freud from claiming a definitive interpretation, and yet he hesitates to admit that dream interpretation may follow arbitrary patterns; Lacan presses further by observing that psychic structures are predetermined by language.

"All dreams follow the mouth": the dream work is ultimately indistinguishable from the interpreter's work, and both are made possible by the drift of signifiers.

Notes

This essay, written in 1984, represents the author's earliest statement of ideas that are more fully articulated in his book entitled *Freud's Dream of Interpretation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

1. See, for example, David Bakan, *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (1958; reprint, Boston: Beacon, 1975), and Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses* (Albany: State University of New York, 1982), 129-62. A brief discussion of Talmudic dream interpretation is contained in Erich Fromm's *The Forgotten Language* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1951), 127-30. Two seminal articles on dreams in the Jewish tradition are: Adolf Löwinger, *Der Traum in der jüdischen Literatur* (Leipzig: M. W. Kaufmann, 1908), and Chaim Lauer, "Das Wesen des Traumes in der Beurteilung der talmudischen und rabbinischen Literatur," in the *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse und "Imago"* 1 (1913): 459-69. See also Alexander

Kristianpoller's collection of texts, *Traum und Traumdeutung*, in *Monumenta Talmudica* 4, no. 2 (Vienna: Harz, 1923).

2. The parallel passage in the Jerusalem Talmud (Ma'aser Sheni 4, 6) is less important.

3. Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, in the *Studienausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1972), 2: 30. This passage was added to the edition of 1914; compare the beginning of chap. 2.

4. Sigmund Freud, "Bemerkungen zur Theorie und Praxis der Traumdeutung," in the *Studienausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1975), supplementary volume, 263.

5. *Ibid.*, 264. Freud also presents this argument in the fifteenth lecture of the *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, in the *Studienausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1969), 1: 240.

6. Freud, "Bemerkungen zur Theorie und Praxis der Traumdeutung," 261.

7. Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 280.

8. *Ibid.*, 486n.

9. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), 512.

10. *The Babylonian Talmud, Seder Zera'im*, vol. 1, ed. I. Epstein, trans. Maurice Simon (London: Soncino, 1948), 337; translations are modified slightly from this edition. Further references to tractate Berakhot cite both the traditional page number and that of the English edition.

11. Berakhot 55b, p. 341.

12. Berakhot 56a, p. 342. Freud's patients, alas, could not depend on such predictable results.

13. Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 470–87.

14. Berakhot 56b, p. 348.

15. See Saul Lieberman, "Rabbinic Interpretation of Scripture," in *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950), 47–82.

16. Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 299–301.

17. Berakhot 56b, p. 347.

18. Lacan, *Ecrits*, 512. Compare Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967), 309.

The Feminization of Christian Doctrine in Twelfth-Century France

HENRY SULLIVAN

One aspect of the obsessional structure as adumbrated in Lacan's teachings bears a striking resemblance, I believe, to the profile of the early Christian saint and martyr. In many cases, the early Christian saints were the Fathers of orthodox doctrine, and the character of their religion was ascetic, severe and intensely patriarchal. The combination of the Master discourse with male obsession led to a relegation or repression of the feminine in this system (unlike Hinduism), making early Christianity more similar, therefore, to Old Testament Judaism or Islam than to Medieval or Modern Catholicism.¹ The hypothesis I wish to advance in this paper is that out of strongly male obsessional tendencies a phase of religious invention emanated from France in the twelfth century which profoundly affected Roman Catholic doctrine as it had evolved up to about 1100, leading to that rise of woman the childbearer and/or consort which we term Marianism. This somewhat surprising claim needs to be clarified, in the first place, by a series of definitions. By "religious invention," I mean the appearance of new Catholic phenomena such as the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception first articulated between 1121 and 1130; the roughly contemporaneous elevation of Mary to a seat amongst the Trinity at the right hand of God; the spread of the Albigensian heresy (see below) in Languedoc between 1145 and 1155; and the creation of the mendicant Orders—Dominican and Franciscan—which sprang up to combat the Albigensian heresy.

In the second place, I mean by the "structure of male obsession" what Ellie Ragland-Sullivan understands by it. In order to clarify the structure of obsessional neurosis, Ragland-Sullivan uses the formula Lacan designated in 1972 to characterize academic discourse. She states: "I shall pro-