REGARDING THE 'STUFF' OF WHICH DREAMS ARE MADE—THE PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGICAL BASIS OF DREAMS

By

F. PARKES WEBER, LONDON

'We are such stuff as dreams are made on.'—(Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act IV., Scene 1.)

IN his recent great work on the interpretation of dreams Dr. W. Stekel,* of Vienna, again emphasizes the importance of the examination of dreams from the psychoanalytical point of view, as enabling the patient, mostly with the help of the interpreting psychiatrist, to 'know himself'—the ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ of one of the seven wise men of Greece. Dr. Stekel also lays stress on the 'anagogic' as well as the 'katagogic' tendencies of the individual (individual psyche), which an analysis of his dreams reveals. The dreams reveal not only tendencies of the lower animal instincts, which are often more or less antisocial and 'katagogic,' but they reveal also, even in the individual's dream life, the presence of a certain amount of reasoning, and even moral control, and upward or 'anagogic' tendencies or strivings of the psyche.

Now it is obvious that dream pictures, dream thought and dream sensations of all kinds can only be derived (directly or, in an artistic or 'poetic' sense, indirectly) from the past experiences of the dreamer—whether in fact or in thought—what he has himself gone through, what he has seen or heard (experiences of others) represented in theatres, cinemas, books, etc., what he has thought of, and sometimes even what he has previously dreamed of (recurring dreams). Therefore, dreams must necessarily to some extent reveal the past history of the dreamer, including his past thoughts and instinctive feelings and tendencies, whether recognized by himself or not. In fact, it is literally true, in a limited sense, that 'we are such stuff as dreams are made on' (Shakespeare), for everything in our dreams must be derived from, or suggested by, incidents in our past life, past experiences and knowledge, or past thoughts. *But, of course, we are not merely 'such stuff as dreams are made on.'* In fact, voluntary, reasoned, thought, not dream thought, is what 'makes the man,' when it is associated with adequate will power, or (may I say) free-will.

* Wilhelm Stekel, *Fortschritte und Technik der Traumdeutung*, Vienna, 1935.

Dream thought (conscious or subconscious) is a primitive function of the brain lasting from birth to death, as I think and, as I understand, Dr. Stekel and others maintain. It persists, though hidden, as a background to (higher) voluntary thought and voluntary actions. It constitutes, in fact, a chief manifestation of the life of the brain-matter in human beings and animals. In *Some Thoughts of a Doctor* (1935, p. 13) I wrote that I had made use of my day dreams and 'pleasure-fancy' in writing some of the essays. By that, all I meant to imply was that I had often watched the play of my dream thought or day-dream thought and to some extent directed or controlled it, in order to obtain here and there hints and pictures which I could use to illustrate my more conscious purposeful thought. On such occasions I was myself standing in a kind of 'no man's land' between purposeful and dream thought, though ever ready to move to higher, purposeful, thought so as to exercise better control and see more clearly.

That dreams may be excited, determined, directed or 'coloured' by extra-psychical agencies—such as the position of the body or parts of the body, surrounding temperature, abdominal, especially gastrointestinal, disturbances—I have no doubt*; in fact, I think that some nightmares may be regarded as representing the incorrect interpretation of organic, abdominal and other disturbances by the temporarily disordered sleeping brain. But into this large subject I do not wish to enter here.

What I wish here to point out is that many ordinary dreams of ordinary individuals, of the types that are usually quickly forgotten, do illustrate the above remarks regarding the sources and nature of dreams—the 'stuff' of which dreams are made.

Wish-dreams, in which instinctive or other desires of the individual are fulfilled ('Wunscherfüllungsträume') or not fulfilled, may of course be regarded as 'ordinary' dreams, because their very existence depends on present or past, reasoned or instinctive, desires of the dreamer. I would add that ordinary dreams of ordinary healthy individuals are mostly pleasant (though mostly hardly worth remembering)—for the simple reason that most normal individuals live a kind of life, which within their means and moral limitations is calculated (though sometimes incorrectly calculated) to bring them individually the greatest possible amount of happiness. This holds good even though an onlooker might think that the individuals in question are spoiling or throwing away their life in the unnecessary and perhaps useless service of others, or on some apparently unintelligible hobby. Ordinary pleasant, unimportant dreams of adults are, in fact, intimately related to wish-dreams, in so far as the dreamers are mostly individuals who voluntarily live, what seems to them, as pleasant a life as they can, under their necessary limitations.

* See F. Parkes Weber, 'Nightmares and Freudian Explanations,' in *Some Thoughts of a Doctor*, 1935, p. 60.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

To illustrate the above remarks I shall now refer to some of my own dreams, which I believe are of no interest, excepting in as far as they confirm what I have stated in regard to the explanation and origin of the 'stuff' of which ordinary dreams are made. Recently (July, 1935) just before awaking in the morning I dreamed that for some reason or other (I think it was to visit a sick relative) I was making a journey in France, or at any rate, in a French-speaking country. I arrived in a simple inn or restaurant near to a railway station in the country. Two middle-aged women of the house and two guests (French commercial travellers) as well as myself were in the refreshment room. There were one or two French journals lying about and there was a general friendly discussion going on about some subject, perhaps an article in one of the journals. The talk was nearly over, when I added the remark: 'C'est pour la patrie.' But I quickly corrected myself: 'C'est pour faire la patrie.' Soon afterwards, when the commercial travellers had left, I looked at the bill of fare, but did not see, or rather did not take the trouble to see, what was written on it, but asked: 'Est-ce qu'il-y-a de ragoût de mouton?' and, with the agreeable sensation of hearing that this dish was ready for me, I woke up.

The little dream illustrates various points. It was obviously suggested by my past experiences. I once had to make a journey through France to see a sick relative. With the exception of the cause of the journey the dream was, on the whole, a pleasant one; there was an interesting conversation and I was just going to eat some ragoût de mouton when the dream ended. About 1892 and some years later I travelled a good deal about the country of France, seeing especially objects of archæological or of medical (balneological) interest. At that time at almost any country railway station, at almost any hour of the day, one could obtain a 'repas pour 1 fr. 50 c.,' consisting often of ragoût de mouton, with soup, and a little wine. This modest meal was always very welcome to me. I often had little conversations, but at that time I never ventured to say anything about 'la patrie.' My dream-phrase, 'pour faire la patrie,' was almost certainly inspired by recent casual political considerations concerning the views of Mussolini, Hitler, etc. The being able to make an improvement on what I had said, before anyone else took up the thread of the conversation, gave me definite pleasure in my dream—such as I should feel at a medical discussion in London if I were allowed to make a correction about something I had stated after once sitting down. But, above all, this correction in my dream illustrates the presence of a certain amount of reason and control in my dream-thought.

Another moderately pleasurable type of dream is that about being able to assist someone in some way or other. It is certainly related to 'wish-dreams,' as almost everyone likes to be of service to anyone in distress. But in my case any satisfaction is apt to be mixed with doubt whether I can be of any real use and whether it is worth while bothering.

Amongst 'know thyself' dreams I would include some former ones of mine in which I have fancied myself suddenly in a difficult or dangerous position and in which I have shown cowardice in getting out of it. It seems as if my controlling reason did not come to help me, but allowed my ordinary instinct to get me out of the acute danger in an inglorious fashion. I certainly was not the hero that I should have liked to fancy myself. As Dr. Stekel says: 'Know thyself, know thyself from thy dreams!'

Amongst pleasurable dreams connected with wish-fulfilment I would likewise include a recurring dream that I have had from time to time. I dreamed that I was walking with friends in a flowery garden or meadow in which there were many butterflies which I had never seen before, unless in pictures or collections. But I had no butterfly-net with me to catch any of these rare and exotic specimens differing from any butterflies met with in England. I was once an enthusiastic collector of butterflies, and this seemed in my dream to be a wonderful occasion for study or for obtaining rare specimens, though I had given up collecting long ago and no longer even possessed a butterfly-net to carry with me. Something almost like this actually happened to me recently in real life. I was (July, 1935) on the high mountain path leading from the Schafberg (Pontresina) to the Muottas Muraigl, when I noticed several butterflies of a kind that I had never to my knowledge seen before. They turned out to be the males of *Melitæa cynthia*, not rare in that locality. *Melitæa cynthia* is said never to be met with at an altitude below 1,500 metres above sea-level, and so of course I had not seen it in England. It is interesting for various reasons, notably as a good example of sexual dimorphism, though not as striking a one as the common 'Vapourer moth' (*Orgyia antiqua*) in Hyde Park (London), the female of which cannot fly, as her wings are rudimentary, though the male is a bright-coloured flyer, dancing merrily in the sunlight in search of the female.

I obtained information about *Melitæa cynthia* from a Munich surgeon, a keen amateur entomologist, who was taking his holiday at Pontresina. I should mention that he apparently did not use an ordinary plaster of paris and potassium cyanide killing-bottle, similar to that which I formerly used. A few nights afterwards I had a very ordinary kind of dream, beginning with pleasurable holiday hotel conversation, but ending with a difficulty. In the dream, somehow or other, together with things of no importance, a bottle containing potassium cyanide was left in my charge. I did not know what to do with it, and was worried with the trouble I must have to seek out the people who had left the bottle with me, and explain to them the responsibility they had in regard to a bottle with such dangerous contents. Then I awoke. In that dream there was nothing about butterflies, but when I awoke, I remembered that I had recently been telling someone about a disagreeable incident in regard to a cyanide of potassium killing-bottle. In the first week of September, 1878, I was with my father and mother on a holiday in the Black Forest, and on a certain day I was collecting butterflies,

whilst my father was engaged in conversation with Professor Burdon-Sanderson, who was walking with us. Unfortunately I broke the killing-bottle and thoughtlessly threw away the broken bottle in an open ditch. When I told my father of my loss, he was rather disturbed, but, after consultation with Professor Burdon-Sanderson, it was decided not to retrace our steps in a probably futile attempt to find the broken bottle. That same evening or the next morning Professor Burdon-Sanderson kindly obtained a substitute for the broken killing-bottle, but it was not made with potassium cyanide and was not convenient. After a day or two my father and a local chemist succeeded in making me a new killing-bottle with a mixture of plaster of paris and cyanide of potassium. But from time to time I have naturally thought of this incident, though it occurred fifty-eight years ago. This dream had again reminded me of a thoughtless inconsiderate action, and had thus, in a kind of way, 'reminded me of my knowledge of myself,' if I may put it thus, as I suppose that Dr. Stekel and others would put it.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, I think that these views regarding the origin and nature of the 'stuff' of which dreams are made, are confirmed by examination of ordinary dreams, as well as those of neuropathic individuals, and I believe that what Dr. Stekel stresses about 'anagogic' as well as 'katagogic' mental tendencies revealed by dreams is important. A priori, I would argue that as 'anagogic' tendencies manifest themselves in the life of everyone they must manifest themselves also in dreams, which after all to some extent reflect (and are certainly derived from) the past life.

This short note of mine deals, I would say, with the psychophysiological side of dreams, whereas Dr. Stekel's great work deals mainly with the psychopathological side, that is to say, with the interpretation of dreams from the psychopathological and psychiatric points of view.

ADDENDUM.—I will here take the occasion to mention that 'The Storming of the New Jerusalem' which I described as a dream in 1932,* was really a pseudo-dream, as I presume Dr. Stekel recognized when he included his analysis of it in his book (pp. 278-282). I do not think this in any way affects Dr. Stekel's criticism of it. In fact, it was a kind of day-dream, for it all came into my mind one afternoon during the five minutes it took to walk (there was not much traffic in the streets to disturb my thoughts or day-dream) from my flat to my consulting-room. I had, however, long been meditating the subject and had thought that if Dr. C. A. Mercier had been still alive, he would have criticized some of the extreme Freudian writings in an interesting and amusing way. My article in question was intended as a substitute for what Dr. Mercier would doubtless have written more logically and convincingly had he been alive.

* F. Parkes Weber, *Med. Press and Circ.*, 1932, 184, 217.