

The Meaning of Dreams

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In the earlier part of the Victorian era, when rationalism was at its height and retained at least the traces of rationality, the phenomena of dreams were very much used in connection with the phenomena of religion. It was proudly boasted in those days by the hilarious sceptic that for the most part all the mighty Churches and arresting creeds of mankind could be traced to an origin so mean and obvious as that of dreams. Nowadays we may be inclined to ask whether they could be traced to an origin more mysterious or more sublime. For the truth is that there will always be religions so long as certain primeval facts of life remain inexplicable and therefore religious. Such things as birth and death and dreams are at once so impenetrable and so provocative that to ask men to put them on one side, and have no hopes or theories about them, is like asking them not to look at a comet or not to look out the answer of a riddle. Around these elemental acrostics human hypothesis has circled and will always continue to circle. Even in an empire of atheists the dead man is always sacred. The grave, like a tilled field, brings forth crop after crop of creeds and mythologies. If we adopt the too common modern theory that the history of man commenced with the publication of the *Descent of Man* we may be able to treat this whole tendency as superstition. But if we take a large and lucid view of the main history of mankind we shall be driven to the conclusion that nothing is upon the whole so natural as supernaturalism.

This sacredness is, as I have said, everywhere predicated to the dead man. It is a strange and amusing fact that even the

materialists who believe that death does nothing except turn a fellow-creature into refuse, only begin to reverence a fellow-creature at the moment that he has been turned into refuse. Now, by a very accurate parallel, a parallel enshrined in the old Greek saying about Death and his brother, men have come generally to this conclusion, that some portion at least of the sacredness of the dead man belongs to the sleeping man. Nor is this without a very real meaning. The greatest act of faith that a man can perform is the act that we perform every night. We abandon our identity, we turn our soul and body into chaos and old night. We uncreate ourselves as if at the end of the world: for all practical purposes we become dead men, in the sure and certain hope of a glorious resurrection. After that it is in vain for us to call ourselves pessimists when we have this trust in the laws of nature, when we let them keep an armed and omnipotent watch over our cradle. It is in vain for us to say that we think the ultimate power evil when every twelve hours or so we give our soul and body back to God without security. This is the essential sanctity of sleep, and the sound and sufficient reason why all tribes and ages have found in it and its phenomena a source of religious speculation. In this sudden and astonishing trance which we call sleep we are carried away without our choice or will and shown prodigious landscapes, sensational incidents, and the fragments of half-decipherable stories. Men have in all ages based a great many creeds and speculations upon this fact. With considerable confidence it may be said that they would have been great fools if they had not.

There is a great deal in dreams which is very beautiful, very happy, and even very triumphant. But, alike in happiness and in unhappiness, there is a peculiar element of thwarting and insecurity. We find marvellous things in dreamland—things often more precious and splendid than anything that is made under the sun. But the one thing that we never find is the thing we

are looking for. A strange strand of eternal pathos runs through dreams which comes from the very loom of life itself. Dreams are, if I may so express it, like life only more so. Dreams, like life, are full of nobility and joy, but of a nobility and joy utterly arbitrary and incalculable. We have gratitude, but never certainty.

Of course, an absolutely accurate view of dreams is impossible. For dreams are functions of the human soul, and the human soul is the only thing that we cannot properly study, because it is at once both the study and the student. We can analyse a beetle by looking through a microscope, but we cannot analyse a beetle by looking through a beetle. But, though in the last resort the discovery of the truth about dreams is as impossible as the whole science of psychology, it is possible to arrive at certain general underlying laws of dreamland.

One of the most widespread and fundamental elements in the dream-world, it seems to me, is the element of the divorce between the appearance proper to one thing and the emotions proper to another. In real life we are frightened of vipers and decorate ourselves with flowers. In dreams we are quite capable of being afraid of flowers and decorating ourselves with vipers. In dreams we think violets nauseous, sewers fragrant, toads beautiful, stars ugly, a street with three lampposts exquisite, a pole with a white rag horrible. It is a commonplace how we attribute emotional qualities to the things that happen in dreams, how we believe a string of idiotic words to be superlative poetry, how we permit a perfectly trumpery set of events to overwhelm us with indescribable passions. The real point is, as it appears to me, that all this amounts simply to the conclusion that in dreams is revealed the elemental truth that it is the spiritual essence behind a thing that is important, not its material form. Spiritual forces, abroad in the world, simply disguise themselves under material forms. A good force disguises itself as a rose in bloom, a bad force disguises itself as an attack of chicken-pox. But in the world of subconscious

speculation, where all superficial ornaments are shattered and only the essentials remain intact, everything but the ultimate meaning is altered. The spiritual forces, in their nocturnal holiday, have, like lovers on a Bank Holiday, changed hats.

All the outrageous topsy-turvydom of dreams is sufficiently represented by saying that angel and devil have changed hats, or, to speak more accurately, have changed heads. In a dream we love pestilence and hate the sunrise. In a dream we shatter temples and worship mud. The whole explanation is to be found in the conception that there is something mystical and undefined behind all the things which we love and hate, which makes us love and hate them. The metaphysicians of the Middle Ages, who talked a great deal more sense than they are nowadays given credit for, had a theory that every object had two parts: its accidents and its substance. Thus a pig was not only fat and four-legged and grunting and belonging to a particular zoological order, and pink and sagacious and absurd—beyond all this he was a pig. Dreams give a great deal of support to this conception; in a dream a thing might have the substance of a pig, while retaining all the external qualities of a boiled cod. The mediæval doctors, of course, applied this principle most strongly to the idea of Transubstantiation, maintaining that a thing might be in its accidents bread, while being in its substance divine. Whether it be reasonable or not for a waking man to worship a wafer of bread, it is quite certain that a dreaming man would worship a wafer of bread, or a pair of boots, or a sack of potatoes, or a pint of castor oil. It all depends upon what disguise the highest spiritual power took in appearing to him, the incognito in which the King chose to travel.