

Ophelia's Lament

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The yielding ripeness of Shakespeare invites license.
— Vladimir Holan, *A Night With Shakespeare*

"A woman who exists for but one night, no, for but a single dream, leaves us with the most tender regrets. She leaves us, trembling like a tree that passed the night inundated with moonlight, with a light gratitude."

Freud mused over these words of Jules Renard, as he began writing his *New Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis*, on this calm, moonless evening of May 1932. Freud winced at the thought of the recent publication of *Les vases communicants*, by that impertinent impostor André Breton, who berated him for having shied away from the erotic nature of his own dreams. As if Surrealism were nothing other than an erroneous footnote to psychoanalytic metapsychology!

In the light of this project, Freud reread his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in the first year of the millennium of dreams, 1900, the year where Nietzsche's death liberated Freud from his only equal, the same Nietzsche who wrote: "Nothing belongs to you in its own right more than your dreams. Subject, form, duration, actor, spectator – in these comedies, you are entirely yourself!" He thought again of those all-too-few pages he had devoted to the greatness that is *Hamlet*. These ideas were summed up in a phrase that he wrote in a letter to Fleiss, as early as 15 October 1897: "Every listener was once, in embryo and in fantasy, such an Oedipus." Had he really meant to say "such a Hamlet"? In any case, he was aware that his initial intuitions continued to be true, given the subtle interplay of recognition and repression in *Hamlet* – especially considering Hamlet's pronounced distaste for the erotic. Yet Freud wondered whether he might also need to consider the intellectual blockage of the libido as a separate process, a sort of "Hamlet

Complex”, now that he realized the independence of the death instinct, now that Heinz Hartman had convinced him of the existence of an autonomous ego function, and now that pest Karen Horney was hounding him to death about the existence of an essential femininity, apart from the exigencies of masculine sexual development. Would all of this make any difference to the metapsychology of dreams anyway?

He mistrusted his body these days, and feared that his physical deterioration was contagious, and would ultimately effect his mind. He often confused the lacerations caused by the dissenters in the psychoanalytic movement with his own physical malaise. His sleep, indeed his dreams, now always suffered an undercurrent of pain, a pain which nearly ruled his entire existence – with the major exception of his intellect. He also feared insomnia. The pain in his jaw increased at night, as if the lunar apparition augmented not only the level of the oceanic tide, but also that of his own torment – as if the light of the moonbeams falling on his disfigured face somehow mystically revived the terrible surgery, in a premature payment for his sins. Perhaps on this night, graced by a new moon, the pain would lessen.

He would have loved to find an exemplary dream, one which met the condition of instantiating all the great discoveries of the period of *The Interpretation of Dreams*: unconscious feelings of guilt, family romance, stages of sexual development, the power of repressed aggression, and the causal link between endopsychic mechanisms and mythological belief. But this was not to be. For the difficulty in describing dreams is linked to the vigilance of secondary revision, to the repressive and obfuscating powers of the intellect, which dissimulates the mysterious displacements of affect in the dreamwork. Rare, therefore, is the uncanny. Ever rarer, indeed, after the year 1900!

Sleep, nevertheless, arrived...



Ophelia floats, dead, in a pond still as the cosmic void and illuminated like a stage set designed by Bocklin. She is surrounded by wreathes of flowers, and bathed in the late summer music of insects, with perhaps the seductive tones of Pan’s pipes trilling in the distance. Sirius dominates. She dreams... *Whilst rank corruption, mining all within, infects unseen, from my fair and unpolluted flesh may violets spring! So shall you hear of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts, as hell itself breathes out contagion to this world, a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors, like life in excrements. Though I have no tongue, I will speak with a most miraculous organ, as I must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words, a rhapsody of words, though these words are not mine! The rest is but silence. Doomed for a certain term to walk the night, there with*

fantastic garlands did I come, a breeder of sinners, my clothes spread wide, to squeak and gibber in the Roman streets, awaiting, as patient as the female dove, the perfume and suppliance of a moment. In the dead vast and middle of the night occurred such encounters, wondering always who's there, wondering always whether this thing appeared again tonight, wishing for the uncertain unction of a mountebank. If thou hast any sound, or use of voice, speak to me, when in your motion you are hot and dry. Burn out the sense and virtue of mine eye, as you would pluck the heart of my mystery! This is the very ecstasy of love, a savageness of unreclaimed love, which could tear a passion to tatters. So lust, though to a radiant angel linked, is most foul, strange and unnatural, a fault against the dead, a fault to nature. But our cold maids, blasted with ecstasy, do dead men's fingers favor. But in a fiction, one that would circumvent God, in a dream of passion, every god did seem to set his seal, as stars with trains of fire, and dews of blood. Now, being a god kissing carrion, could I drink hot blood from god's wounds. So how is it that the clouds still hang on you, sick almost to doomsday with eclipse? What is this quintessence of dust? Wormwood, wormwood! Help, angles!



Freud awoke, nauseated by a slight feeling of anguish, mixed with disappointment, regret, and the distant, cold memory of sexual stirrings. He could already hardly remember the jumble of words that had coursed through his head, yet his first concrete thought was one of strong empathy with Hamlet, who certainly instantiated the most prevalent form of degradation in erotic life. The Prince's refusal of Ophelia somehow explained to Freud why he could never have even considered the existence of an "Ophelia Complex" – even though some had suggested this as a solution to the etiological mysteries of certain types of female neurosis. Woman, not *un homme manqué*? Ophelia, Thanatos, incarnate? Dreams, the symbolic body politic?

"Ophelia complex indeed," he snarled in a silent voicing of his disgust, "she was nothing but God's whore, even more so than that poor devil of a psychotic Schreber!" No, he wouldn't change anything in his new presentation of the mechanism of dreams.



In his journal for the year 1901, Jules Renard wrote, "The dream neither creates anything nor even warms us. It is a dead thing which, like the moon, arrives in space without the slightest freedom."