



Dreams

1 How do you conceive of the function of dreams? Do you distinguish dreams as a result of trauma from other types of dreams?

Response by **Elias Mallet da Rocha Barros (São Paulo)**

I would like to explore dreams as part of one of the very many functions that the mind is capable of performing while the person is asleep where defences are not operating fully: that is, *how dreams function as a form of unconscious thinking*, a private theatre where meaning is generated and transformed. The dreams of our patients can be viewed as playing the part of a playwright who brings to light a very private theatre of the patient's psychic reality and shows the way in which it has come into being and has been transformed since early childhood. It is therefore my contention that the psychical working out function performed by dreams is a form of unconscious thinking which *transforms affects into memories and mental structures*. It also comprehends a process through which meaning is apprehended, built and transformed at an expressive non-discursive level, based on representation through pictorial images. In this process fresh symbols are created which widen the capacity of the person to think about the meanings of his emotional experiences.

The notion of psychical working out comprehends the concept of working through as a special kind of mental *work* resulting from the analyst's interpretations or from life experiences that can be closely followed by looking at our patients' dreams. In discussing this subject I am implicitly attempting to clarify the way in which meaning is built and transformed in mental life.

The emotions are not only indicative of mental states. Above all, they represent kernels of meaning. These kernels are constituted of internal objects which, as structures of the ego, function as complex magnetic poles which organize emotional experiences. Attraction in these kernels is exerted by similarity of meanings and emotional function. These structures operate as internal unconscious moulds or templates that attribute meaning to other affective experiences. In order to become thinkable and communicable, the emotions must go through a work of transformation and thus acquire adequate symbolic form. In this way emotional experiences are also transformed as in the new symbolic form present in dreams different experiences and new connections are evoked.

My focus will be therefore on what happens to feelings in dreams in connection to its meanings as a *result of* and an *expression of* the several stages in the process of working through. In relation to the waking state, the dreaming state is more enabling for the process of working through to occur because the mind continues to function in dreaming while not distracted nor influenced by external stimulation.

The dream world itself is the setting where the mind engages in an initial attempt to deal with conflicts *by giving expressive pictorial representation to the emotions involved in a conflict: a first step towards thinkability*. J. Lear writes: "The concrete images of primary process may be *preconceptual*, but they are also *protoconceptual*. They are *that from which* concepts emerge" (1998, p. 85).

It is from this perspective that dreams play a central part in the process of the working through of emotional experiences. When dream work fails in performing this function, the capacity to form symbols is affected.

I would also like to conjecture that the working-through function of dreams is performed by a process of progression in formal qualities (Meltzer, 1978, p. 73) of the representations made available by dreaming in the form I have called *affective pictograms* mainly in response to interpretations. Therefore the visual images used in dream work “increase in complexity, sophistication and level of abstraction”. This growth “increases the *generality* of mental formulation and thereby increases the specificity of the uses to which it can be put” (Meltzer, 1978, p. 73).

It is through this medium (progression in formal qualities of the representation) that the thinking capabilities of the affective life develop and become part of the process of what we could call metaphorically the *metabolization* of emotional life. This *metabolization* takes place through migration of meaning across various levels of mental process. Interpretation by the analyst seeks to find the *law* that structures the pattern with all its dialectic tensions and contradictions.

I suggest that the action of a dream is first organized on the basis of affective experiences that mobilize unconscious fantasies built up around one or more kernels of meaning. Because of these basic structures, human beings organize their emotional experiences not by chance, but by unconsciously complying with certain structuring patterns that are partially innate and mainly moulded by experience.

As the unconscious operates through images we need to follow the process of working through by paying attention to changes in pictorial representation.

I use the concept of *pictogram* specifically, to refer to a very early form of mental representation of emotional experiences, the fruit of alpha function (Bion, 1962), that creates symbols by means of figurations for dream thought, as the foundation for, and the first step towards thought processes. Strictly speaking, however, pictograms are not yet thought processes since they are expressed in images rather than in verbal discourse and contain powerful expressive–evocative elements. A pictogram is neither choice nor free creation but the result of the laws that govern the activity of representation. Through pictorial representation dreams do not name but *exemplify* kinds of experiences which show how the subjective experience of a feeling can be objectively expressed. We believe that by examining changes or expansions in meanings of symbols present in dreams we can better understand how semiotic transformations (Solomonsson, 2007) operate in the ego. These processes can be better observed when taking place in dreams as they are the privileged domain of visual representation or figurability (presentational symbolism) in their pure form. I am also suggesting that meanings are broadened as they become related to other parts of the self due to the breakdown of barriers that prevent contact with other emotional experiences.

In my perspective the analyst's interpretations of dreams affect what linguists call transmutation of the symbolic basis, a process that is necessary to help the mind to improve its capacity to think.

In the analytic situation dreams might change; they can be communications to the analyst, performances for the analyst, gifts, acts of being obliging for the analyst and expressions of the working-through process in response to the analyst's interpretations. In this sense, dreams also reflect what is going on in the patient–analyst relationship at the transference level.

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Over the years between Freud's definition of a dream – firstly in the 'Project' (Freud, 1895) and then in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1899) – as the hallucinatory fulfilment of an unconscious repressed wish and the most recent contributions of the neurosciences on implicit memory and the so-called unrepressed unconscious, the psychoanalytic theory of dreams can be said to have travelled an immense distance along a path replete with transformations and developments.

With regard to the first question, on my conception of the function of dreams, it seems to me that, in clinical terms, dreams have a twofold potential for the analyst. On the one hand, they are an incomparable source of information on the affects prevailing in the analytic space; they can be the vehicle of choice for an analytic approach to the here-and-now of the transference relationship by means of interpretation; and they may in addition constitute an indispensable aid to the work of construction. On the other hand, dreams reactivate and can symbolize old emotions, stemming from sometimes traumatic experiences dating back to the earliest periods of relational life and to a phase of presymbolic, preverbal mental functioning, which are stored in *implicit memory* (Mancia, 2004, 2008; Sandler, 1987). From this point of view, dreams also open the way to the possibility of reconstructive work.

Turning now to the second question, I do of course make a fundamental distinction between dreams resulting from traumatic emotions and experiences and other types of dreams. My approach will involve forging a theoretical link between what Ferenczi (1931) called the *traumatolytic function of dreams*, which complemented his brilliant contribution to psychoanalytic

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