

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Aug 18, 2022

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/a-nightmare-to-man-poetry-psychoanalysis-and-dreams/>

Duane Rousselle

A Nightmare to Man: Poetry, Psychoanalysis, and Dreams

Summary:

This is a transcript of a talk that was supposed to be delivered to the “Toronto Cultural Hub” Afghan community on September 5th, 2021. Dr. Mir Mahdavi’s invitation for this talk came just two weeks before the North Atlantic Alliance withdrew from Afghanistan, effectively clearing a path for a return to Taliban rule. Thus, this presentation was originally meant to discuss psychoanalysis, poetry, and dreams, but has transformed into a discussion of psychoanalysis, poetry, and nightmares.

It is an honour to be speaking to all of you. Thank you, especially, to Dr. Mir Mahdavi for the invitation.

I cannot tell you why to my ears the word ‘invitation’ sounds similar to ‘interpretation,’ ‘intervention,’ ‘invention,’ and ‘equivocation.’ Obviously, these words do not mean the same thing. But it is not at the level of meaning that I group them together. There is something about the way these words sound. I cannot therefore justify placing them into a group except by claiming that it is because they resonate, which means that they form a group not by *reasoning* but by *resonating*. This serves the basis for my initial equivocation: I hope to work through this group of words, ‘invitation,’ ‘interpretation,’ ‘intervention,’ ‘invention,’ and ‘equivocation.’

Let’s begin.

I have heard that practicing psychoanalysis is about listening, about remaining silent. But is this true? We know at least that the psychoanalyst, either by invitation or else as an intervention, is also often compelled to speak. And when the psychoanalyst *does* speak, it is often, though not exclusively, through interpretive equivocations. Lacan, in 1975, said: “interpretation is not interpretation of meaning, but a play on equivocation” (Lacan, 1975, 177). In other words, the psychoanalyst often speaks in ways that will make you scratch your head. I cannot claim that this approach is always justified.

We should admit that this is also true of many poets.

I was reminded recently by an influential Canadian thinker that poetry invites the reader to do the work of interpretation. The work of the reader of a poem is often to decipher it. This is perhaps even what most distinguishes a poem from an academic essay. Against the hardening or ossification of discourse that we find in the university, psychoanalysis takes the side of the poem. Hence, when the psychoanalyst speaks it can often come across a bit like poetry. A reader of a poem will say: ‘what Charles Baudelaire meant here was ...,’ just as, in the field of psychoanalysis, you might hear one say ‘what Sigmund Freud meant was ...’ The reader of a poem is a bit like the patient in a psychoanalysis. I am reminded that to read means ‘to guess’ (McLuhan, 1975); reading involves guess-work, just as psychoanalysis involves dream-work.

It might surprise some of you that this ‘guess-work’ was named by Jacques Lacan, *transference*, or, in Arabic, *takhvil*. Transference in psychoanalysis occurs when the patient has fallen in love with knowledge, that is, with meaning. It is a love of the knowledge that we expect to find there within the speech or gestures of the psychoanalyst and his or her utterances. Or, perhaps, it is a love of the beauty that we see in our psychoanalyst. Lacan said it plainly: “transference is first of all a love of knowledge” (As cited in No Subject, 2021). Perhaps, for example, it is a love of the knowledge that we suppose in the speech or gestures of our psychoanalysts. The patient is confronted by a series of enigmatic, evocative, and ultimately equivocal interventions and interpretations. Therefore, when all is said and done, interpretation is on the side of the patient — not the psychoanalyst — just as ‘poetic license’ is given, finally, to the reader of a poem.

I imagine ‘poetic license’ to be authorization to drive recklessly amongst the mountains and rocks of a poem’s meaning. I’m sure you know that a license only grants permission to drive within a particular jurisdiction; there are many countries in the world that do not recognize your right to drive. Perhaps they will ask you to obtain new or supplementary training or documents. The psychoanalytic clinic is like a country that refuses to recognize your license to drive along the path of your meaningful interpretations. We revoke your license to drive.

What does this imply?

Allow me to provide a few examples. We are informed in Surah 36,69 that the Quran is not a poem: “we have not taught the Prophet poetry, nor could he ever have been a poet” (Holy Quran, 36,69). Of course, a poem seems to be an invitation for you to interpret; in other words, a reason to squabble with your brothers and sisters, a reason to fight and form groups against one another. *That’s* transference. But what, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, can we say about this resistance to poetry within the Quran?

Before going further, I will state up front: I am not providing you with interpretations of the Quran. This is not my intention.

It seems to me that there is something that most blatantly resists interpretation within the Quran, something that cuts holes in our meaning: *al-maqaata’at*. You probably know better than I do that these are the mysterious, enigmatic, and evocative letters that exist at the beginning of numerous surahs. They are literally without meaning, pure symbolic inscriptions; not words with meaning but letters from the real. Eric Laurent writes that “a letter makes meaning topple over” (Laurent, 2020). It is fitting that the name *al-maqaata’at* translates into English as ‘the cuts.’ It is on the basis that we can distinguish the so-called interpretations of the psychoanalyst from the interpretive joys of the patient: the former makes use of interpretive cuts, holes, spaces of lapsus, disjuncture, and so on. Laurent notes that the psychoanalyst used to interpret through translation, that is, transference, with the unconscious, but now, we recognize that interpretation works through cuts.

This hasn’t stopped people from endlessly trying to make sense of the cuts. One of the most popular interpretations has claimed that the cuts represent black tear drops, the ink, of God, beginning with a point, and then with *Alif*, the first letter (Baha’u’llah, 1857-8). It is only a slight transmutation to obtain the full *al-maqaata’at*. In surah *Al-Qalam*, the ‘pen,’ which, I remind you, is the instrument for writing, something interesting happens. I shall risk reading it: ‘by the pen and what it inscribes [...] you are not insane’ (*Holy Quran*, 68,1-2). This is addressed, of course, to the prophet. The letter seems to have some sort of therapeutic quality, an essential one.

In any case, the cuts are also sometimes referred to as *fa-wah-tih*, which means, I believe, ‘opening.’ The letters are openings. In what sense is a cut an opening? Well, the interpretive cuts that come from the psychoanalyst, these equivocations, are made to open the patient up to the real; or, put differently, to wake the patient up to his or her real. And perhaps a good poem also wakes us up.

Into what?

... into a dream of the poem's intelligibility, its beauty, its aesthetic appeal, its meaning. The cut is a wake-up call. Therefore, the psychoanalyst 'cuts' sessions, often without forewarning. To cut a session is to put an end to the interpretations that go on within the clinic.

But doesn't the psychoanalyst provide some meanings to the patient? In fact, there is some truth to this classical conception. The psychoanalyst introduces interpretive cuts that are uninvited, but also, sometimes, meaning: we call that a construction. A construction is on the side of the psychoanalyst, interpretations are on the side of the patient. A construction is fabricated knowledge, it is built, invented, manufactured, and put in place where the patient was already prepared to go, an area that was already being explored. Perhaps the patient is driving along the mountains and rocks of his or her interpretations, and the psychoanalyst suddenly clears a path.

It is important to point out that interpretation involves ciphering and deciphering, and it occurs not just consciously but also unconsciously. The unconscious ciphers meaning, weaves it around, using metaphor and metonymy, or what Freud called condensation and displacement. These are defenses, and one could be excused for using them since the alternative is a total nightmare. The patient interprets from behind his or her own back, from 'another scene,' another side. This aspect of the unconscious is like a well-oiled machine: it can interpret all day and night, even when you are not sleeping. In fact, the most convincing dreams are the ones you have when you are awake. We typically call that *reality*, but reality, like any other dream, is entirely convincing.

We all know by now that our dreams have some relation to our unconscious. We basically all today understand the point made by Freud in his book on the interpretation of dreams. But there is nonetheless some confusion added there: if we admit that we have an unconscious all of the time, even when we are not sleeping, then what does that tell us about our dream-world? Lacan said the following: "the unconscious is exactly the hypothesis that we do not dream only when we are sleeping" (Lacan, 1979). We couldn't have known this unless Freud invented the concept of the unconscious and then set us all to work constructing beautiful stories about it. Freud, of course, claimed that dreams were the 'royal road to the unconscious.' It means that he cleared a path for those before him who were already stumbling around in the mountains and rocks. But Sigmund Freud — his first name means 'joy' — was very much a dreamer. He showed us, essentially, the joy of unscrambling the puzzles of the dream-work without recognizing the extent to which this was itself part of the dream-work of our waking lives.

The poets were at the same time utilizing the tools of psychoanalysis: metaphor, metonymy, among others. However, psychoanalysis begins with the presumption that we are written rather than writers of poems. For Freud, the dream, and hence the unconscious, was poetry that writes itself into the fabric of our everyday lives. The clinic was a space of living poetry, a space of weaving and unweaving. Lacan famously said: "I am not a poet, but a poem, a poem that is being written" (Lacan, 1964, vii). It is important that Lacan said "written" and not "spoken." The clinical poem is not spoken, it is written. This goes against the popular view, particularly within the university, which presumes that the poem of the unconscious must be deciphered and read. It justifies an approach that compels the scholar to write another book, interpret another film, and so on.

I maintain that this remains a popular misconception about psychoanalysis.

Freud, despite himself, already noticed a problem with all of this. He admitted that there was a point against which, within the psychoanalytic clinic, interpretations fail. They inevitably reach a limit, an impasse; while driving along quickly within the mountains and the rocks, the patient crashes into what Freud called 'the hard rock of castration.' He was wrong to give it substance: it is not a rock, it is a clearing. It is a desert there where you expect mountains, green grass and trees, blue sky, and so on. It is a space where we can make no sense, and we are alone; alone in the world, alone to face the dark world. Freud, not Lacan, called this 'the *real* unconscious.'

So, we scratch our heads and confront a serious confusion. At this point of the dream-work, we are forced to wake up. There is no other choice. The weaving, the cipher stops working. There is no more work, no guess-work, no dream-work. For example, there is the following poem constructed by the well-known poet Rumi:

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty,

And frightened. Don't open the door to the study

And begin reading. [...]

Let the beauty we love be what we do.

[...] Don't go back to sleep.

[...] Don't go back to sleep.

[...] I would love to kiss you.

The price of kissing is your life (Rumi, 1131-9/2021)

Any cipher in this poem is a consequence of the difficulty to remain in the emptiness and fear of waking up. He therefore turns toward a beautiful (but deadly) kiss. It declares, after the panic of waking up: 'let there be beauty!' I quote it again: 'we wake up, empty and frightened.' This is the shock, the trauma, the nightmare. We are tempted after such a shock to immediately run to beauty: to the dream books (which offer us a means of deciphering the symbolism of the dream), to the scholars (or to become one ourselves), we run to study, to the library or to google, or even to our psychoanalysts. In other words, we run away *toward* our interpretations.

I once had to memorize the entirety of Ecclesiastes 12, a lengthy and intense poem, from which I shall tear only a small piece:

Meaningless! Meaningless! Says the Teacher.

Everything is meaningless!

Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted
knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out
and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to
find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright
and true.

The words are wise and provoke, their collected sayings like

firmly embedded nails — be warned, [...]

of making many books there is no end, and much study

wearies the flesh, it is a weariness of the body. (*New International Bible*, 1973/2021)

It is important that these lines occur in the poem long after the world has gone dark. The beauty of the trees and sky become a total nightmare. The whole world collapses, nothing and nobody works anymore. Hence, we are told that there are no longer any grinders in the streets, no workers building anything. I quote:

When the keepers of the house tremble

And the strong men stoop

When the grinders cease because they are few

And those looking through the windows grow dim. (*New International Bible*, 1973/2021)

They witness the nightmare of the world, the world, everything they knew in it, all that was beautiful, has come crashing down. They witness this through a small opening, a window. Rumi's lesson also came during the nightmare, during a moment of fright and solitude. Our immediate temptation is to refuse this nightmare that woke us, to flee toward beauty. In other words, we wake up, only to continue dreaming. This was Lacan's claim. If, for Freud, we seek to avoid waking up from the dream-world, because it provides us with satisfaction, then, for Lacan, we wake up back into a dream-world. Lacan said: "Unlike Freud's dreams, mine are not inspired by the desire to sleep, it's rather waking up that stirs me" (Lacan, 2019, 100-1). Or, as Marie-Helene Brousse and Cyrus Saint Amand Poliakoff have put it: "we are eternally dreaming in everyday life. Dream, fantasy, and delusion are our familiar living environment. Our nightmares [...] wake us up, literally. They are our window, open at night, to the real" (Brousse & Poliakoff, 2021).

Let us plot this distinction between Freud, the dreamer, and Lacan, the nightmare.

Freud reasoned that the space of dreams desired to preserve its satisfactions, its joys. He claimed that we get the satisfactions in our dreams that we could not obtain in our waking life: dreams are expressions, therefore, of wish-fulfillments. There is the famous analysis of the dream of a father who, within the dream, saw his child standing in front of him speaking: 'father, don't you see that I'm burning?' Of course, in reality, the boy was dead in a coffin in the other room, and there was, in reality, a candle that fell onto his arm, lighting him on fire. The dream allowed the father to avoid all of this nightmare: so, in the dream, the boy was not dead but alive, and speaking. Lacan admitted that he has had dreams like this: he dreamed that an alarm clock was going off so that he wouldn't have to wake up to the alarm clock actually going off. This permits one to go on dreaming.

But for Lacan, we wake up into another dream, a deeper dream. How did the Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran put it?

How often have you sailed in my dreams.

And now you come in my awakening,

Which is my deeper dream. (Gibran, 1923)

We wake up into a more convincing dream, but, nonetheless, there was, if only for a moment, like a lightning flash, a small awakening.

What is this small awakening?

It is a small opening. It is like we are looking through a small hole, a window, and outside there is darkness: the grinders have stopped grinding. I like the word used in the 13th century by ibn Khaldun: *Maqadimmah*, which means, 'opening,' or 'awakening.' It is a word that sounds — to my ears only perhaps — close to the Arabic word *al-maqatta'at*. I think it is for a good reason, and not just resonance, that 'cut' and 'awakening' are brought together here. The opening, the awakening, are all interventions from the real; they happen without invitation. Freud also had a name for this: he called it 'the navel of the dream.' The navel of the dream is a clearing of the mountains and rocks of interpretation, it is the space, within the dream-world, where you are cast out into the desert. You are deserted. It is a place of nonsense, a place where something is ripped away from the world.

Incidentally, I am reminded of a verse from the famous French poet [Stephane] Mallarme. He wrote it in French, but I will translate it into English: “We are touched by the verse” (Mallarme, 2015).

The English translators and editors of Mallarme’s complete collection of poetry wrote that this line “demonstrates the way the poet’s language [...] resists translation [but nonetheless] demands interpretation” (quoted in Mallarme, 2015). Ruzanna Hakobyan writes that “what remains difficult to access in a foreign language is poetry. The music of a poem is not that of meaning, it is beyond meaning” (Hakobyan, 2021, 163). Well, this resonates for me because the line that I just translated into English has elsewhere been translated as “poetry is under attack.” Or, if you like, poetry is a space where we are attacked or touched. Well, the *touche* of French could mean touched, or it could mean hit or attacked; it could also mean *touche*, which, in English, means that the other person has made a clever point that we were not expecting. It was also an important word for Aristotle, who used the Greek *tuche*, which always seems opposed to *automaton*: *tuche* disrupts the repetition of signifiers. Lacan took this word ‘*tuche*’ from Aristotle to discuss a different sort of repetition: the repetition of that which *never ceases not writing itself*, that is, the real: a space of absence and failure.

We are indeed touched by these absences, cuts, nightmares, and so on. I’ve literally woken from nightmares and felt my body shake, jolt, as if I were, suddenly, falling into a black hole: only to wake up hitting the bed. I could imagine a good poem doing that, maybe. There is one poem that certainly did that for me — a poem by Charles Baudelaire, titled *to a woman passing-by*. I won’t get into why it hit my body like a nightmare. There is something in poetry that is capable at times of doing the same, of shaking us to our core.

During these moments we are touched by the verse, which means, touched by the *verso*, by the other side, the backside, touched from some place that Freud called ‘another scene,’ namely the unconscious. We are even touched violently upon our backs.

This reminds me of some verses from a surah, one named after a figure whose name I myself have adopted: Yusuf. It begins, of course, with the following: ‘these are the verses of a clear book.’ I assure you that I’m not interpreting the Quran, and I’m not treating it as modern poetry. This is even what justifies my approach as a Muslim scholar. You perhaps know it better than I do, but Yusuf was endowed with the gift of dream interpretation. There are important reasons for this, but I cannot get into it now. In any case, he encountered, as many of you know, a woman who declared her love for him. She was in love with him – *real* love. So, she acted, it would seem, inconsistent, and erratic. They were in a room and she attempted to seduce him. It was a total nightmare.

He ran away, and, as he ran away, she reached out for him and tore his shirt from the backside, from the verso. This means that she was behind him, outside of his good senses, in another scene. I just recently discovered that her name was Zulaikha, which means ‘brilliant beauty.’

I do not want to take liberties with any of this, I believe that I am merely sharing the facts with you – *literally*.

For that reason, I’d like to approach some sort of an ending to this presentation by sharing my poem with you. It was a poem that came to me uninvited during the last part of my psychoanalysis. It goes like this:

Woman is a nightmare to man.

He wakes up

Into a dream of her beauty.

Now, if we were in the university this would be instantly interpreted to mean that I think that all women are terrible creatures, etc. Not at all! Note that I did not claim that *the* woman is a nightmare to man. If I did, if I used the definite article, then this would group all women into an identity, uniting them. Psychoanalytic

experience teaches something different: *a* woman, that is, any particular woman, can be a *real* for the man. She is ‘not-all,’ which means that a genuine confrontation with her will be a total nightmare.

The courage of love is to face this nightmare. It is also the courage of a psychoanalysis. However, I would not claim that it is the courage of the poet, though it is certainly the courage expressed in my poem. The poem can transmit what Eric Laurent calls ‘a letter without sense,’ but it cannot transmit our experience of it. I will return to this point in just one moment.

For now, I want to quote Lacan:

These forcings by which the psychoanalyst can sound out something else, something other than meaning [...] [is also found] in what one calls poetic writing, where you have a dimension of poetic interpretation which [...] Chinese poets cannot do otherwise than to write (as quoted by Laurent, 2020).

If I may, I’d like to make a somewhat similar remark about the Arabic language. Jacques-Alain Miller used the word ‘jaculation,’ which he borrowed from Jacques Lacan, to name the ‘letter of the real,’ without meaning. We have already admitted that there are ‘poetic jaculations.’ But what in Arabic writing already lends itself to this?

When I was in the middle east I remember seeing a restaurant whose name was onion or pomegranate or something similar. The name of the restaurant was written in Arabic script in such a way that it seemed to take on the figure of a pomegranate. The text itself became, literally, the figure of a pomegranate. But we have to be careful: this is not an image, and when the script does this we are not at all talking about images, about idols, and so on. We have to be very careful because the image that we see is in all actuality the letters, the script, of Arabic. I later discovered that this practice is pervasive and has been going on for a very long time in the middle east. Today, it is a common business practice, it is used by Arabic poets on Instagram, and graffiti artists use it as well.

It might seem to non-native readers that this is similar to the Chinese and Japanese languages in certain respects. But is it really? I do not think so: the Chinese language begins rather from the image, and then constructs from symbolic inscription as it continually modifies the nuances of the image. But the Arabic does not begin there, it begins with the cuts, the black ink, the *Alif*.

Naturally, I could not help but be moved by the beauty: I entered into the dream of the restaurant.

Laurent wrote that “Lacan had already used this term ‘jaculation’ to account for the power of a poetic text” (Laurent, 2021). Therefore, jaculation is not the exclusive privilege of the psychoanalyst since it is also found in poetry. This is why the poet writes and does not speak: the power of a poem has little to do with the meanings that are woven together through metaphor and metonymy. It rather has to do with jaculation, the point at which its letter cannot be deciphered.

Finally, we can begin to distinguish the poet from the psychoanalyst. Laurent writes that “the psychoanalyst’s use of metaphor and metonymy does not have the same aim as the poet who aims at an aesthetic effect that liberates [meaning]” (Laurent, 2021). The poet desires to return to the beauty of the world while the psychoanalyst suspends us from this moment of haste. The psychoanalyst favors the courage of facing our nightmares, of remaining there within the moment when the world comes crashing down. Finally, Laurent’s conclusion: “the new poetry that Lacan brings to light through interpretive [cuts] [and jaculations] is not linked to beauty but touches [trauma]” (Laurent, 2021). It is for this reason that I speak of the courage of psychoanalysis and not of the courage of the poets.

This does not imply that there is no courage for the reader, for the patient, who, at some points, refuses to bow to the beauty of the world. When you face a nightmare directly, as we are all doing today, we do not bow to the beauty of the world. You face it in solitude. You stand as alone as you ever were, while the rest

of the beautiful angels bow to the world: you stand, alone, in grief, in despair, in confusion.

I am told that the Arabic work for grief, despair, confusion, is *iblis*.

I'll cut it here.

Bibliography:

Holy Quran (Ali, S. Y. Trans., & T. Griffith, Ed.). (2001). Wordsworth.

Baha'u'llah. (1857-8). *Commentary on the isolated letters (Tafsir-i-hurufat-i-Muqatta'ih, also known as Lawh-i-Ayiy-i-Nur, Tablet of the light verse*. Unknown Publisher.

Brousse, M. & Poliakoff, C. (2021). Wake up to keep on dreaming. *The Lacanian Reviews Online*. As Retrieved on September 2nd, 2021 from <<https://www.thelacanianreviews.com/wake-up-to-keep-on-dreaming/>>

Gibran, K. (2019). *The prophet*. Alfred A. Knopf. (Original work published 1923) As Retrieved on September 2nd, 2021 from <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/58585/58585-h/58585-h.htm>>

Hakobyan. (2021). Spoken languages in the analytic cure. *The Lacanian Review: Nightmare*. No. 8.

New International Bible. (2021). Ecclesiastes, 12. (Original work published in 1973). As Retrieved on September 2nd, 2021 from <https://web.mit.edu/jywang/www/cef/Bible/NIV/NIV_Bible/ECC+12.html>

Lacan, J. (2019). The third (P. Dravers, Trans.). *The Lacanian Review*, No. 7 (Summer 2019): 100-101.

Lacan, J. (1979). *Le Seminaire, livre XXV: Le moment de conclure, ornica?* [The seminar, book XXV: The moment to conclude, Ornica?], No. 19: 5.

Lacan, J. (1975). *La Troisième* [The third]. *Lettres de l'Ecole Freudienne*, Vol. 16: 177-203.

Lacan, J. (1998). *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis, seminar XI*. W. W. Norton & Co. (Original work published 1964)

Laurent, E. (2020). Interpretation: From truth to event. *New Lacanian School*. As Retrieved on September 2nd, 2021 from <<https://www.nlscongress2020.com/nlscongress/the-orientation-text>>

Mallarme, S. (2015). *Azure: Poems and selections from the livre*. (B. Bronson-Bartlett and R. Fernandez, Eds., Trans.). Wesleyan University Press.

McLuhan, M. (1975). Reading and guessing. New York Public Radio [December 16, 1975]. As Retrieved on September 2nd, 2021 from <<https://www.wnyc.org/story/reading-and-guessing/>>

No Subject. (2021) Transference. As Retrieved on September 2nd, 2021 from <<https://nosubject.com/Transference>>

Rumi. (2021) Spring giddiness (Coleman Barks, Trans.). (Original work published 1131-9) As Retrieved on September 2nd, 2021 from <<https://genius.com/Rumi-spring-giddiness-annotated>>

Bio:

Duane Rousselle, PhD, is a Professor of Sociology and Psychoanalysis. His recent books include *Real Love: Essays in Psychoanalysis, Religion, Society* (Atropos, 2021), *Gender, Sexuality, and Subjectivity: A Lacanian Perspective on Identity, Language, and Queer Theory* (Routledge, 2020), *Jacques Lacan & American Sociology: Be Wary of the Image* (Palgrave, 2019), *Lacanian Realism: Political and Clinical Psychoanalysis* (Bloomsbury, 2018), and *Post-Anarchism: A Reader* (Pluto Press, 2012).

Publication Date:

November 30, 2021