

THE RHETORIC OF DREAMS

by *Bert O. States*

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Reviewed by Gerald J. Gargiulo

Bert States, professor of dramatic arts at the University of California, has written a provocative, erudite, yet clinically naive book on dreams; a text modeled, in more than a passing way, on Freud's *On Dreams*. His primary tools of investigation are the classic tropes, that is, metonymy, synecdoche, metaphor and irony—read within a phenomenological framework. This approach is particularly manifest in his critique of the Freudian approach to dream interpretation, with its basic reliance on the concept of repression and with what the author characterizes as an homunculus understanding of the unconscious. The dream, States says, is the reported dream, via language; it is what is manifestly says, an example of "involuntary poetry" so to speak. We can, it is argued, dispense with the ideas of censor and of repression as unnecessary postulates, but not with the need to read the figures of speech and the significance of images used.

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Early in the text we are told that the author is "interested only in the question of whether dreams are the manifestation of repressed desires or whether they may be explained, *as I believe they can* as aspects of expressive thought..." (p. 20; italics added) of a form of thinking that the author states is probably most free of repression. Although not speaking in terms of "primary process thinking," States discusses condensation, displacement, as well as reversal and symbolism as they are manifested in the various major tropes. His rationale is as follows: "One of my assumptions is that we have only one brain and that the operations of the dream must therefore have a considerable kinship to those of conscious thought" (p. 59). The author, impressively conversant with Freud's writings, rejects the traditional application of the usefulness of the concept of symbolism in dream interpretation and the ubiquity of repression particularly as operative with "latent" sexual subject matter. This position, far from being a naive denial, is worked out in great detail through States's reading of man's complicated and artistic language patterns and qualities of "dramatic" image making.

To return to the phenomenological understanding of the unconscious, the text presents some interesting and potentially revitalizing reflections. For example, States raises such questions as, is the unconscious merely the operations of imageless thinking, the substratum to our consciousness? Or, is the unconscious a reality that has only psychoanalytic meaning—that is, a strategic approach for the analyst's use? Is the concept of the unconscious a particular perspective, similar to other philosophical postulates, which one can bring to the text of human experience or dreams? But a model which is *au fond* used by the reader but not in the text or "in" the dreamer? "It is not the voice which commands the story: it is the ear" in Calvino's (1974) words. These are worthwhile epistemological questions for analysts to reflect upon. The author's position is clear: a mature understanding of operations of human language and the structure and function of images explains most, if not all, of what analysts conceptualize under the categories of the unconscious or repression. Distortion, for

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example, is spoken of as "simply the process of symbol formation taking place beneath articulated speech and meaning where polysemantic and dystaxic structures are perfectly normal" (p. 44).

Dispensing with the need for secondary revision, a concept closely tied to the model of a repressed unconscious, the author speaks to the issue of the Unconscious/Conscious in the following manner: "...a dream is the unified act of a synergic system (the body) in which the state we call consciousness is simply the fine-tuning of its self awareness. The creation of a dream is simultaneous with its appearance" (p. 84); and its appearance is due to an instantaneous ("artistic") creation of the mind. Denying repression of affect or memory as a primary or even necessary prerequisite for dream interpretation, the author states that "within the dream there is no way to know whether the image has produced the feeling or the feeling the image" (p. 123).

In asserting the expressive over the repressive theories of dreaming, States has amassed a great deal of interesting theoretical observations. He is familiar with the classical analytic tradition from Freud to Jones to Ricoeur to a number of contemporary authors representing the range of neurobiological to poetic and rhetorical theorizing. This range of scholarship alone makes the text a worthwhile pursuit. The author's understanding of the unconscious in dreams is clear: it is a structural component of language, implicit in any mature reading of the major tropes. It is not a topographical place to hold material that is repressed. Part for whole equation, synecdoche, for example, or metaphorical images "are such stuff that dreams are made on" and are ways of revealing relationship and meaning as well as condensing and eclipsing meaning.

If we keep in mind that Freud was concerned with the psychical representatives of the drives and not with biology or ontology, we can understand States's emphasis on language. In stating that the unconscious can be understood as no more than that, the author is providing analysts with the opportunity to address their occasionally "reified" manner of

speaking about the unconscious. Basically we all recognize that the concept of the unconscious is not a religious shibboleth, but a model to be employed if useful.

The text is useful for the dialogue between the classical and phenomenological approach to dreams. Unfortunately it is very weak in clinical application (only a few of the author's dreams are presented). It is a study, however, that any serious student of dreams, particularly those familiar with the work of Ella Freeman Sharpe (1961), would benefit from.

REFERENCES

- Calvino, I. (1974). *Invisible cities*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
Sharpe, E. F. (1961). *Dream analysis*. London: Hogarth.

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