

# The Error of Thinking that the Picture of Actual Dreams can be Used in only one Way

José María Ariso, Madrid

In 1914, the Spanish novelist, dramatist, poet and philosopher Miguel de Unamuno published one of his well-known works, *Niebla*. Unamuno allows that his characters speak and speak although they say nothing at all: in this way the author begins believing he takes his characters by the hand, but in the end becomes his characters' fiction. And not only does Unamuno give free rein to his characters' dialogues but describes thoughts and feelings in great detail too; as a matter of fact, he uses expressions of the kind of (Unamuno 1996, 180) "*si Augusto hubiera podido leer en el espíritu de Rosario*" ('if Augusto could have read in Rosario's spirit'), or (ib, 204) "*¡Oh, si pudiesen verme por dentro, Víctor, te aseguro que no dirían tal cosa!*" ('Oh Víctor, if they could see inside me, I am sure they would not say such a thing!'). Up to this point there is nothing special about *Niebla*, but before committing suicide, Augusto decides to consult Unamuno: that is, the main character has a meeting with the author. But as soon as Augusto begins to tell his life and misfortune, Unamuno invites his character to save himself such a work because "*de las vicisitudes de su vida sabía yo tanto como él*" ('I [Unamuno] knew the ups and downs of his life as well as Augusto himself'). Unamuno proves his words quoting Augusto's secrets; so the character, absolutely terrified, trembling and as if he were in front of an unbelievable being, murmurs: "*usted parece saber sobre mí tanto como sé yo mismo, acaso adivine mi propósito*" ('since you seem to know about my life as much as I do know, maybe you should guess my intention').

One of the most appealing qualities in this novel is that its author stresses time and time again the fact that he can read his characters' minds as if they were open books. It certainly seems Unamuno knows everything we could expect to know about Augusto's mind; however, it is a mistake to say Unamuno 'knows' what is crossing his character's mind: since the author is the one who dictates such contents, his testimony is the last court of appeal, so there is not room for ignorance, doubt, or error. Although it could be said Unamuno has no interests beyond individual immortality and transcendence, I think we can take *Niebla* out of its original context to exemplify something which at first sight seems to be only a scientific fantasy: seeing inside other minds in order to get a first-hand picture of people's thoughts. At the very best those scientists could try to guess other people's thoughts, but they could try to know other minds even better than the individuals themselves: I am referring to peculiar mental events of the kind of dreams, so scientists would look for pictures of actual dreams. If researchers knew some day the functions (if any) and the neurological patterns of dreams, we can expect one of their next aims would be to guess the contents of dreams: if science could get such a thing and were beyond a mere guess, that is, if it gave an account even of the dreams or the parts of dreams we forget or misremember, it would make sense to wonder if our memory deceives us when we report a dream after waking.

Anybody can write a novel telling a character's whole dream for adding later the contents this character remembers upon waking: such a thing might be an interesting resource for a novelist in the psychoanalytic style who tried to show how repressions condition our lives, but although

this is a suitable literary resource, it lies outside the scope of science because we cannot know in principle whether someone had a dream he cannot remember at all. Anyway, and bearing in mind that Daniel Dennett (Dennett 1977, 233) even pointed out the possibility that researchers could be able in the future to obliterate the "veridical" dream memory and substitute for it an undreamed narrative, we might imagine a tribe where people should say upon waking "I have dreamt A", but after having visited the witch doctor's tent, they should specify "I know I have dreamt B because the witch doctor has told me so". Of course A might fit in with B, but only 'might': it goes without saying this does not mean that the witch doctor's account would be pointless unless it serve some particular purpose, e.g. natives might think a sin is forgiven if and only if the witch doctor says the sinner has dreamt a deed which pays for his mistake. It is true such a believe could explain why witch doctor's accounts are appreciated, nevertheless there is no reason why this 'objective' report (I mean 'objective' inasmuch as it is taken as the unquestionable reference) has to be necessarily justified: since this custom or ritual belongs to the view of the world and the way of life shared by the tribe in question, there is no room to say it is a useful or a pointless ritual just as there is no room to say it is a right or a wrong ritual either. It is only a different one and nothing more.

Those dreams written by the novelist and the ones told by the witch doctor are good examples of what I call 'actual dreams', that is, dreams which will probably not sound familiar to dreamers themselves although the existence of such dreams has been certified by an individual who is an unquestionable authority on the corresponding context. This picture of actual dreams may look something of a literary or even surrealistic resource very distant from our use of language; in fact, I think Norman Malcolm tried to eradicate the influence of this picture when he wrote *Dreaming*, his well-known monograph. This author (Malcolm 1967, 79) denounced the erroneous picture of the concept of dreaming which emerges from "the subjective report of the dreamer", the phrase William Dement and Nathaniel Kleitman (Dement and Kleitman 1957, 339) chose to show the contrast between the subjective recall of dreams and the objective measurement of dreaming provided by rapid eye movements: Malcolm remarked Dement and Kleitman took for granted that the distinction 'subjective-objective' applies to dreams, but as I shall comment later, Malcolm thought it makes no sense (in the sense of impossibility of verification) to consider "a 'subjective' report which may or may not agree with 'objective' fact".

Trying to guess the contents of other people's dreams, some researchers considered sleep-talking as a window to actual dreams: in a sense whoever listens such a talk would be witnessing other people's dream at the same time. So if we find some individual puts his arms up to shield his face and shouts "No!! No!! No!!" while he is asleep, we immediately think this individual dreams that he is being attacked by someone or something; in the same way, if we hear somebody in the next room is having a telephone talk and we find he is not on the phone but asleep, we conclude the person in question is dreaming

his talk at that precise moment. Leaving aside the fact that sometimes it is not at all clear how we can distinguish a mere movement or noise from a genuine case of sleep-talking, we should not forget that those soldiers with combat neuroses who relive battle scenes in sleep mentation shouting and showing other psychomotor accompaniments of fighting recount battle dreams of the night before in the morning on awakening; however, as Arthur Arkin (Arkin 1981, 108) points out, the possibility nevertheless remains that the battle dreams and battle speeches could have occurred at separate times (just as an actual enuretic episode and a dream about accumulating moisture or water are now known to occur at two different times of the same night). Be that as it may, since there is someone who states the existence of another person's dream, sleep-talking allows the possibility of speaking in terms of 'forgetting a dream', but only "allows": after all, what sleep-talkers say while sleeping is often completely gone out of their mind when awakening. If we remember that from time to time we are not able to distinguish if a certain event happened or was dreamt, doubts regarding whether we have really dreamt should not surprise us. So I may wake up sad in the morning because my neighbour told me his mother has lung cancer, but as soon as I get up, I might begin to doubt whether it was only a dream: I remember vaguely a brief chance meeting with him last night and nothing more. My neighbour could state whether he talked me about his mother's cancer, but if my neighbours suddenly move, I shall probably doubt indefinitely whether I dreamt a certain thing. But if my neighbour denies that he said such a thing, I might convince myself (or not) to 'accept' I dreamt it; however, Malcolm (Malcolm 1967, 51) holds that if this incident did not occur, it necessarily follows that I dreamt it.

In my opinion, narrative consistency is one of the necessary characteristics whoever is held captive by the picture of actual dreams may wait to find in dream reports: we should not forget that many people fill those parts of the dreams they cannot remember with additions they consider coherent. It goes without saying that in this point psychoanalysts would bring up Freudian repression: in fact, the 'repression hypothesis' is considered by David Cohen (Cohen 1979, 158) as one of the three general hypotheses regarding access to the dream via the dream report. As everybody knows, this hypothesis holds that defensiveness with respect to inner experience interacts with the content of dreams, and this may affect dream recall and/or reporting. On the other hand, the 'salience hypothesis' states that dream recall is positively correlated with neurophysiological arousal during REM, imagery, ability, emotional impact of the experience, i.e., factors that are more likely to heighten consciousness and attract attention during the dream. Finally, the 'interference hypothesis' holds that dream recall will be inversely correlated with events during dreaming, during awakening and after awakening which interfere with the consolidation or retrieval of memories associated with the dreaming experience. As we can see, these three hypotheses presuppose in a sense the picture of actual dreams we hardly remember due to different factors.

The fact that the use of the three general hypotheses commented by Cohen is so widespread shows that the picture of actual dreams influences not only the ordinary man but scientists too. However, I believe Malcolm (Malcolm 1967, 122) tried to eradicate the influence of this picture pointing out that "dreaming is not to be conceived of as something logically independent of dream reports": he thought our primary concept of dreaming has for its criterion not the behaviour of a sleeping person but his

subsequent testimony. In fact, Malcolm ends *Dreaming* remembering Harry Stack Sullivan (Sullivan 1953, 332) remarked it is impossible to deal directly with dreams: this author added we deal only with recollections pertaining to dreams, so how closely these recollections approximate the actual dream is an insoluble problem because "there is no way to develop a reasonable conviction of one-to-one correspondence between recollections of dreams and dreams themselves". Since there is not correspondence with waking life, Malcolm states that a truthful report of a dream would be the criterion of the occurrence of that dream, but we should not forget sleep-talkers may or may not accept having had a dream by another person's testimony. The sleep-talker who either listens to the report made by someone who witnessed his gestures and words, or watches his own behaviour and monologue in a video recording, may reject to have dreamt such a thing because the characters, events, places, etc., quoted in the testimony do not sound familiar to him; nevertheless the sleep-talker may decide he had that dream and besides, he may regard that testimony as a part of an actual dream.

When Ludwig Wittgenstein (PI, 184) wonders whether a dream really took place during sleep, he points out that it depends on the use of the question, i.e., on what we intend; so if we want to understand the sense of this picture we must explore how it is to be used: it will be then that we will understand the sense of what we are saying. Since the picture already points to a particular use, it seems to spare us this work, but Wittgenstein warns us "this is how it takes us in": this means pictures can be used in different ways, so I agree with Sybe Terwee when this author remarks (Terwee 1985, 412) Malcolm's *Dreaming* is not an exercise in Wittgensteinian philosophy because "Wittgenstein never gave prescriptions of any kind in his analysis of the dreaming". By the way, if Freud had considered the variety of situations on which the expression 'dreaming' occurs and gets a meaning, I think Wittgenstein (LC, 48) would not have criticized him for his desire to find the essence of dreaming in such a way that the father of psychoanalysis "would have rejected any suggestion that he might be partly right but not altogether so".

## Literature

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