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Are We Such Stuff as Dreams Are Made On? Narrative and the Oneiric Imagination

Abstract:

This essay examines dreaming as a challenge to the dichotomy between narrative and episodic conceptions of the self. Drawing on Sartre's phenomenology of the imaginary, it argues that dreams elude both accounts: dream consciousness is episodic and pre-reflective – reflective awareness that one is dreaming would annihilate the dream – yet dreams are experienced, on Sartre's insight, as “a story that I am reading or being told.” Refining this claim through Genette's distinction between *récit* and *histoire*, the essay proposes that a dream is a non-narrative storied phenomenon: a wordless *récit* without plot, author, or narrative distance, experienced in the “pure belief” of a consciousness closed upon itself. Upon waking, the dream solicits narrative configuration, though a fissure persists between the dreaming “me” and the remembering “I.” Literary works by Proust, Queneau, Schnitzler, and Han Kang illustrate this entanglement of dreaming, storytelling, and selfhood.

Keywords:

dreaming, narrative, consciousness, Sartre, personal identity, the self

Dreams, as we all know, are very queer things: some parts are presented with appalling vividness, with details worked up with the elaborate finish of jewelry, while others one gallops through, as, for instance, through space and time.

— Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*

A few days ago, I was dreaming while preparing these reflections that now sit before you, and now stand behind me. All too comfortably reclining on my living room sofa, wondering about the entanglement of dreams and storytelling, I sat with book in hand and pencil in the other, as creeping tendrils of slumber entwined my eyes. Valiant efforts to read a few more pages notwithstanding (a deadline threateningly loomed before me), imperceptibly, I fell asleep. Meandering thoughts wandered on their own, shadowy somnambulists, no longer in deference to my thinking. And so it was, I was dreaming about dreams, not surprisingly, given the industry with which over past days, I had been preoccupied with formulating what to say about the relation between dreaming and storytelling. A carnival of images looped around an enigmatic statement once read from the fourth century Babylonian dream interpreter in the Talmud Bar Hedya: “Does the dream follow the mouth or does the mouth follow the dream?”¹

Literature across diverse cultures attests to the entanglement of dreams and storytelling. In Ancient China and Mesopotamia, dreams were seen to have various meanings: portending the future, divination, communication with deities and spirits, symbolism in need of decipherment, journey to immortal lands or visitations of the dead. The classic Chinese dream manual from the eleventh century BCE *The Duke Zhou’s Interpretation of Dreams* is divided into sections with headings such as “Dragon and Snakes,” “Food and Drink,” “Spouses, Childbirth, Pregnancy, and Sex,” among others. Under “Food and Drink,” it is said that “seeing yourself dressed in white is a sign of others plotting against you.” The celebrated Zhuangzi’s Butterfly Dream – Zhuangzi dreamt that he was a butterfly, wakes up, but does not know if he was Zhuangzi Zhou who dreamt that he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that he was Zhuangzi Zhou – encapsulates a Daoist understanding of the relation between life and death, the

1) Tractate Berakhot 55b–56a.

relativity of sensible perception, and the transformability of all things. Pu Songling's "Liaozhai's Records of the Strange" from his collection *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* and Yuan Mei's supernatural tales in *That Which the Master Does Not Speak About* are each populated by dreams as messages from deities and liminal channels of escape with immortals. Aside from such typical oneiric motifs, these literary accounts of dreaming carry another dimension of meaning directly connected with the protagonist of the stories. Dreams reveal *something*, a hint or solicitation of meaning, that escapes the grasp of the dreamer.² In the Western heritage, dreams in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* possess a variety of meaning and function. In the "Dream Tablet," Gilgamesh experiences a sequence of puzzling dreams. Unable to make sense of these apparitions, he turns to his mother, Ninsun, who interprets these dreams as announcing the arrival of his soon to be companion and friend in his quest for immortality, Enkidu.

"One day, Gilgamesh got up to interpret his dream
and said to his mother:

"Mother, in my dream tonight
the stars of the skies blazed up
and one of them fell to the ground like a meteorite.
I tried to pick it up, but it was too heavy,
I tried to push it over, but it would not budge.

"All of Uruk was there.
The whole country flocked to it,
they thronged around in crowds.
The young men rushed to kiss its feet, like a baby's.

"I wrapped my arms around it
and loved it like a wife,
then I picked it up and set it at your feet.
And you declared it my equal!"

2) See Lucas, "Disguised Subjectivity." See also Lucas, *Rêves de la littérature*.

“Gilgamesh’s mother was clever and wise,
she knew everything. She spoke to her son.
The goddess Ninsun, the aurochs, was clever and wise,
she knew everything. She spoke to Gilgamesh:

““The stars of the skies blazed up
and one of them fell to the ground like a meteorite.
You tried to pick it up, but it was too heavy,
you tried to push it over, but it would not budge.

““You picked it up and set it at my feet,
and I declared it your equal.
You wrapped your arms around it
and loved it like a wife.

““A strong ally is coming, a friend in times of need,
a man all muscle, the mightiest in the land,
as mighty as a meteorite fallen from the sky.

““You will wrap your arms around him
and love him like a wife,
and mighty as he is, he will save your life.’

“He had another dream. He got up
and went to his mother, the goddess.
Gilgamesh said to her, to his mother:

““Mother, I’ve had another dream!
In the streets of Uruk the Marketplace
there was an ax, and people gathered round.

““All of Uruk was there.
The whole country flocked to it,

they thronged around in crowds,
and the young men rushed to it.

“I picked it up and set it at your feet,
I wrapped my arms around it
and loved it like a wife.
And you declared it my equal!’

“Gilgamesh’s mother was clever and wise,
she knew everything. She spoke to her son.
The goddess Ninsun, the aurochs, was clever and wise,
she knew everything. She spoke to Gilgamesh:

“My son, the ax you saw is a man.
You will wrap your arms around him
and love him like a wife,
and I will declare him your equal.

“A strong ally is coming, a friend in times of need,
a man all muscle, the mightiest in the land,
as mighty as a meteorite fallen from the sky.’

“Gilgamesh said to her, to his mother:
“Oh mother, let it be so! By the will of Enlil!
I will have a friend and adviser,
a friend and adviser all mine.’

“That is what he saw in his dreams.”
When Shamhat had told Enkidu about Gilgamesh’s dreams,
the two of them began to make love again.³

3) Helle (trans.), *Gilgamesh*, 12–14.

It is telling that dreams were incorporated into the earliest known narratives across cultures, written as well as orally transmitted. Dreams are not only worthy, and in need of telling to others, as with Gilgamesh's omen dream. In the telling of a life, dreams play a significant role in expanding the scope of self-understanding but just as much in demarcating a liminal space of experience, beyond which resides an enticing vastness of no-self-understanding, an obscurity within one's own self-understanding. Telling of the existential significance of storytelling is that stories occur in dreaming, or so we tell ourselves, when recalling, however fitfully, what we dreamt last night. The wick of dreaming, in its incandescent luminescence, seems to be consumed by the gentle flame of its story. The many ways in which dreams figure in literary narratives further accentuates the nocturnal conspiracy between dreams and storytelling, and, as tellingly, suggests a cavernous connection between narrativity and selfhood. To live or to tell, that, for dreams, is perhaps not the question, but rather to live *in* the telling, and to tell *in* the living. Gilgamesh recounts his dream to his mother and with this telling, solicits an understanding of his dream, which, in turn, inflects a plot point in the unfolding of his life-narrative – his quest for immortality. In the *Arabian Nights*, Shahrazad (or Scheherazade) recounts a story, time and again, to forestall death. Storied nights must continue for us to live. Of what stuff are dreams made on? Of what stuff is a life made on?

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Numerous accounts have been provided for a narrative conception of the self: McIntyre, Arendt, Ricoeur – to name a few. Within the constellation of phenomenology, Hermann Lübbe admonished classical phenomenology for its ostensible commitment to Platonism with his counterproposal that selfhood is constituted through a consciousness of one's own unique biography and narrative accommodation of life's contingencies. Wilhelm Schapp proposed that "histories" or "stories" (*Geschichten*) should be seen as an "original phenomenon" (*Urphänomen*). In the evocative title of his work *In Geschichten Verstrickt*, human existence is enmeshed and entangled in stories, historical as well as biographical. As Charles Taylor likewise writes, "the basic condition of making sense of ourselves [is] that we grasp our lives in a *narrative*" and thereby come to understand our lives "as an unfolding story."

Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* cogently argued that a human life looks to possess a narrative form in search of meaning. As she writes: “The chief characteristic of this specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, established biography; it is of this life, *bios* as distinguished from mere *zoe*, that Aristotle said that it ‘somehow is a kind of *praxis*.’”⁴ The specificity of having a life, not merely to be alive biologically, consists in the possibility of narrating a life – telling stories about oneself much as stories are told by others about one’s own life. This narrative constitution of a life – to both be subject and author of one’s life-story – is intimately bound to the pursuit of meaning. A human life has the form of an open question as its sense and significance. The focal point for the sense of what it means to be, and hence, have a life, gravitates around the meaning of one’s action. As Arendt writes: “The revelatory character of action as well as the ability to produce stories and become historical, which together form the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence.”⁵ This emphasis on action, that life occurs in doing, lends a dramatic character to the demand of narrating the sense in which life *happens*. Bound as we are to temporal succession, and hence, the unrepeatability of the beginning and the inevitability of the end – the finitude of life – we are not however bound to its rigidity. The unity of action and its meaning can be (re)-configured in different ways. There is no end to the ways in which an action can be reconfigured narratively, as with the multiple accounts in Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*, based on two stories by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, “Rashōmon” and “In a Grove.” In Aristotle’s classic account, narrative emplotment – what he terms *muthos* – renders intelligible the course of actions, lending coherence and intelligibility, not only in terms of the question, “what happens next?” but in terms of “what is the meaning of an action in view of other actions?” Narrative form does not only render intelligible action in configuration of (meaning) of life. It is also, pace Arendt, an integral manner in which we appear, or become manifest, to each other. In telling a story about myself, or in having a story told about me, I become manifest to others. Narratives are forms of self-manifestation. By the same token,

4) Arendt, *Human Condition*, 97.

5) *Ibid.*, 324.

a narrative can also be a form of concealment, or “non-appearance,” disappearance, or appearance in certain manner, of how I want to be seen, or others want to see me, or not seen, or appear.

Various iterations of the basic claim that, in the words of Marya Schechtman, “we constitute ourselves as selves by understanding our lives as narrative in form and living accordingly,” have been advanced, and here is not the occasion to review or engage in depth and detail the full ranger of this spectrum.⁶ Equally vocal as well as varied are those who argue in favor of a so-called “minimal self” (Dan Zahavi) or insist on the episodic nature of the “minimal subject” (Galen Strawson). Within the phenomenological constellation, Husserl’s conception of inner time-consciousness represents an especially robust view of a temporal constitution of the self-consciousness that is not intrinsically narratively structured. Narrative configuration of experience presupposes reflective consciousness (as well as the narrative attitude and intent), and hence, assumes an original pre-reflective inner time-consciousness. On a comparable footing, for Sartre, being-consciousness (in contrast to consciousness of oneself being conscious) is “pre-reflective,” and in this minimal sense, episodic. On Strawson’s definition:

If one is Episodic, by contrast, [E] one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future. One has little or no sense that the self that one is was there in the (further) past and will be there in the future, although one is perfectly well aware that one has long-term continuity considered as a whole human being. Episodics are likely to have no particular tendency to see their life in Narrative terms⁷.

Among experiences that texture a human life, and hence, different forms of consciousness, dreams would seem to epitomize episodic self-experience. The episodic character of dream experiences is further underlined by the fact that dreams cannot be imbued *in media res* with reflective consciousness. Awareness when dreaming is pre-reflective;

6) Schechtman, “The Narrative Self,” 394–415.

7) Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” 430.

if I were reflectively self-aware *that* I am dreaming, I could no longer be asleep, and hence, dreaming, but awake, and hence, no longer dreaming. Awareness in a dream is not tantamount to awareness of dreaming. One dreaming knows not in the moment that one is dreaming. The sense of oneself dreaming, where as a spectator or protagonist in a dream-experience, does not figure oneself, reflectively considered, as a self, as “something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future” – to import here Strawson’s characterization of the episodic self. A dream from last night is an experience of the human being that I am, but it does not follow that I experienced this dream as having happened to me in the sense that I have no significant sense that I – the I who remembers the dream or the I who now considers this question – was there in the past of my dream. And yet, if dreams speak in favor of the episodic self, or at least, exemplify the episodic self, it could justly be said that dreams equally speak in favor of a narrative self, given the ubiquity with which dreams are recounted as stories or experienced for the telling, whether to oneself or others. Is dreaming a storied experience or an episodic experience from which a story is made? Could it be that dreams are episodic *and* narratively formed, thus giving the lie to the presumed alternative, and hence, debate between episodic and narrative conceptions of the self?

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When I awoke from this rummaging of images, my consciousness struggled to discover where I was, and before my wakefulness had been fully set into motion to recover what I had been thinking and reading prior to slipping away into sleep, a thought flashed upon, a sudden realization that dreams elude conventional accounts of both episodic and narrative views of the self. Sartre’s account of dreaming in *The Imaginary* struck me as exceptional in this regard among phenomenological treatments of this nocturnal phenomenon. Aside from scattered remarks in Husserl’s manuscripts, a compressed discussion in Eugen Fink’s *Presentification and Image*, and occasional observations by other phenomenological thinkers (Jean Héring and Theodore Conrad), Sartre’s discussion stands apart. Dreaming appears at the end of *The Imaginary* as a consciousness entirely absorbed, isolated, and decoupled from any sense of the real. The experience of dreaming plays itself out within a self-enclosed imaginary without wakeful openness and responsiveness to the real. On the heels of Husserl’s insight that the

imaginary (what he terms *Phantasie*) possesses a form of intentionality, Sartre begins his own discussion of the imaginary with a rejection of what he terms the illusion of immanence. In its various manifestations, the imaginary does not involve a mental image or picture-like representation lodged in consciousness. Neither the objects of perception nor the objects of the imaginary are contents in the mind. When imagining a unicorn or Madame Bovary's eyes, it is neither an image of a unicorn nor an image of her eyes that appears to me. Her eyes, the unicorn, as imagined, appears to me. I can describe what I envision as features of an imaginary unicorn, and not, as features of an image of a unicorn. The image-character of the imaginary does not refer to the "what" of the imaginary object, but to the way in which ("the how") the imaginary-object is given. An imaginary object is a transcendent object whereby the image-character refers to the relation between consciousness and its imaginary object. An image is nothing other than a relation. In this sense, imaginary-objects are transcendent objects, albeit objects not comparable or conflated with the transcendence of perceptible objects such as the chairs in the room in which I am presently imagining an unicorn or Madame Bovary's seductive eyes. Whereas the perceptual object is real, the imagined object is "irreal."

Perception and imagining are two forms of consciousness. Although structurally irreducible, perception and the imaginary can become implicated with each other. Perceptual experience implicitly involves the possibility of and motivation for the imaginary. Perceptual experience harbors, or initiates (*l'amorce*), an "infinity of images at the price of the annihilation of perceptual consciousness." As Sartre observes, although the imaginary takes exception to the perceptual world of the real (I can imagine what is not real and, indeed, suppress the real in view of the imaginary), the imaginary manifests itself against the dimmed and receded backdrop of the world. Being-in-the-world remains the condition for the imaginary. The imaginary is, on Sartre's thinking, positioned between thought and perception. Thoughts can enter into consciousness reflectively as cognitions and conceptualizing – "thinking" – but also in pre-reflective manner as images, or what Sartre styles as "degraded knowledge." Much as there are imageless thoughts, there are image-thoughts as well, whereby the qualification "degraded" describes the reproductive character of the imaginary. When I imagine a unicorn, its features (the horn, the shape of the body, etc.) materialize an already formed, or acquired, knowledge. I can only imagine what I already know or

vary the knowledge I already have. Nothing of the world can become *known* through the imaginary, other than what and how I have already come to know the world. The imaginary is imbued as well with a quotient of affectivity, or, in other words, an emotional charge. Sartre defines the image as the “synthesis of affectivity and knowledge” of non-reflected thinking (*une pensée irréfléchie*) that, given its pre-reflective character, *possesses* consciousness. Imaginings are experienced, on the other hand, in “quasi-observation.” When imagining a unicorn, I *seem* to see a unicorn, not, however, in the mode of an illusion, since I do not, when in the attitude of imagining, take, or “posit,” the unicorn to be real. If, in the noematic dimension, the imaginary object is said to be “irreal,” in the noetic dimension, the imaginary act of “seeing” a unicorn is for its part as well, differently and distinctly, “irreal.” When I hear in my mind’s ear, as it were, riffs from my favorite Dinosaur Jr. song, or, more annoyingly, when “I can’t get that song out of my head,” that schmaltzy Journey song, the imaginary-object is given to me, indeed, produced by consciousness, without any relation to the real: it is constituted, or “played,” in the imaginary. Although I do not actually hear the song – it is not playing on my stereo – to imagine a song is to produce it, that is, imagine hearing it.

Unlike actually hearing a song on my stereo or in my earbuds, the imaginary object – the song – as well as my imagining it, the quasi-observation of hearing, is spontaneously produced in my consciousness. In perceptual experience, although I am aware of myself as perceiving this table, I do not consider myself as having created this table; it is given to me in intuition, that is, by direct acquaintance. With the imaginary, consciousness *gives to itself*, namely, sustains the givenness of the imaginary object. This self-production of consciousness is two-fold: consciousness imagines the object as well as the imagined “seeing” of the object.

The imaginary-object is posited, on Sartre’s formulation, as a “nothingness” with different modulations: as absent, as elsewhere, as non-existence, as neutralization. An imagined unicorn is an “irreal object” sustained by the spontaneous positing of “nothingness,” there not being a real unicorn before me. During wakefulness, an imaginary consciousness is implicitly aware of a constitutive difference between an envisioned imaginary unicorn and the perceptual world. The imaginary object, on the basis of this differentiated consciousness that to imagine is not to perceive, nor be fooled into perceiving, the imaginary object is not taken to be a reality, as with hallucinations.

The imaginary, on this account, is thus marked by an “essential poverty” vis-à-vis the perceptible experience of the world. Nothing of the world becomes discovered in the imaginary, other than what I already know about the world, or how I produce variations from my acquaintance with the world. This essential poverty of the imaginary attests to its peculiarly seductive force. As with *Madame Bovary*, the imaginary can at times effortlessly supplant and suppress the real. We can live ensconced in the imaginary, and this freedom, avoid, deny, or otherwise circumnavigate the contingency and constraints of the real. The freedom of the imaginary is not only the freedom of taking exception to the world; it is the freedom of ensconcing oneself from the world.

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Of the different types of the imaginary discussed in *The Imaginary*, what distinguishes dreaming is the condition of sleep. In preceding analyses of the imaginary in its diverse manifestations, Sartre identified “quasi-observation” as one of the four aspects of the imaginary (intentionality, quasi-observation, unreal positing of nothingness, spontaneity). With the temporary loss of wakefulness, consciousness becomes abandoned to itself, when dreaming, and to such a degree that consciousness has abandoned consciousness of being (“that I am conscious”) without an abatement of being-conscious (“experiencing a consciousness”). A phenomenological account of dreaming needs to account for its distinctive form of consciousness. Sartre restricts his analysis to the “intentional affirmation constituted by the dreaming consciousness,” but leaves aside from his consideration the symbolic function of dreams.⁸ Sartre insists that dreams are not to be taken as hallucinations or illusions, or, indeed, any kind of perceptual experience. As Sartre writes, “the consciousness that are dreams is essentially deprived of the faculty of perception. It does not perceive, nor does it seek to perceive, nor can it even conceive what a perception is.”⁹ As with any form of consciousness, the experience of dreaming is founded on “non-thetic,” or “pre-reflexive,” consciousness. Whether perceiving or imagining, the sense of oneself as experiencing is intrinsic to what it is for me to experience (i.e., to be conscious of oneself perceiving or imagining).

8) Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 160.

9) Ibid., 165.

This sensing oneself conscious does not form a relation of consciousness to itself, whereby consciousness becomes an object for itself, either through reflection, or when I become conscious of myself as seen by others. The intrinsic sense of being oneself conscious does not have the form of reflective consciousness. In Sartre's expression, consciousness-(of)-self (*conscience de soi*) should not be conflated with knowledge of self (*connaissance de soi*). Pre-reflective consciousness-(of)-self does not accompany perceptual acts of consciousness, but *just is* one's consciousness, its manner of being, not a perception of myself, but oneself perceiving.

Dreaming occurs in the abatement of perceptual experience, and hence, the imaginary objects in dreaming cannot on any account be comparable to objects imbued with intuitive givenness. And yet, what distinguishes dreams is a combination of their detail (a specific object or situation) and compellingness *in media res*. Perceptual acquaintance with objects in the world is revelatory. I discover the world and apprehend directly ("intuition") objects as other than me. When I perceive a table in a room, the table stands there before me. To perceive a chair is not to believe that the chair is there in front of me; it just is to perceive the chair, to sit on it, and so forth. There is strictly speaking no belief involved in seeing that a table is there. Sartre's employment of the terms *croire* and *croyance* does not convey, as with the English "belief," the attitude of taking something to be true, but expresses instead an opining or subjective degree of doubt or presumption. In perception, I do not apprehend the table standing before me as questionable ("is that really a table?"), as probable ("maybe that's a table?"), or otherwise modalized with hesitancy or caution. Asking myself whether there is in fact a table before me, or doubting if this is a table rather than some other kind of thing, involves both a circumstance and a motivation to adopt a belief about what I perceive: "is it so, could it be so, maybe it is not the case," and so forth. The intuitive presence, or evidence, with which I perceive a table standing there before me precludes an attitude of belief, unless somehow provoked by experience itself. Perceptual experience is fundamentally characterized as the way the world is discovered. It is only in perceptual experience that objects are genuinely *encountered* in the sense that they are given with various forms of evidence. Sartre's insight is *not* that perception is a form of knowing that excludes belief, but rather that belief in the service of perception can only be persuasive (true or false) in terms of appeals to evidence, that is, ways in which the world does (or does not) show itself as being thus and so.

By contrast, Sartre writes, “all that passes in a dream, I believe” given that “the objects are not present in person to my intuition.”¹⁰ Sartre stresses that the experience of dreaming does not involve “belief in images *as realities*.” What Sartre terms the “pure belief” of dreaming consciousness is categorically unlike the kinds of motivated beliefs that animate perceptual experience. Beliefs about the world are defeasible or confirmable by experience itself. To believe that the table is not in fact in front of me is a state of affairs *open* to confirmation or correction. Something of the world must speak for or against what I believe to be thus and so. Dreaming consciousness, however, cannot *but* believe from the start, since the givenness of dreaming consciousness is itself given along with the givenness of dream-imaginings. One need not have been persuaded to believe the dream. What renders the operative kind of belief in dreams “pure” is that it is “non-persuasive,” for or against which no evidence speaks. As soon as we take our dream images to be realities, we awake, as strikingly the case with nightmares that press, or impinge, all too closely upon forming a reality. The threshold of reality is only broached with the intrusion of reality itself, when awaking in a cold sweat, and reassuring oneself: “it *was* only a dream.”

A further distinguishing feature of dreaming from perceptual experience is that in the former instance, there always remains a defining gap between pre-reflective dreaming consciousness – experiencing a dream – and the reflective consciousness *that* I was dreaming. One can never pronounce while and when dreaming I am dreaming, but only, after the fact, I had been dreaming. In perceptual experience, a reflective certitude that I am perceiving is always possible while and when perceiving. Reflective consciousness within wakefulness does not annihilate or otherwise collapse pre-reflective consciousness; I do not suddenly fall asleep, or stop being awake, when reflectively aware that I am awake. By contrast, Sartre ascribes a “fragility” to dreaming consciousness. Any reflective consciousness that I am dreaming breaks the spell of dreaming. As Sartre writes, “every appearance of the reflective consciousness corresponds to a momentary awakening, although the weight of the consciousness that dreams is often such that it annihilates the reflective consciousness at once [...]”¹¹ Sartre would in this regard consider lucid dreaming or wisping dream images during

10) Ibid., 163.

11) Ibid., 161.

insomnia, as with Proust's narrator, as examples of the "meta-stable" condition of liminal dream states. As Sartre adds: "reflective consciousness destroys the dream by the very fact that it posits it for what it is, whereas in the case of perception it confirms and reinforces the reflected consciousness." A dreaming consciousness is not only in this manner closed upon itself, entirely immanent to itself, but as significantly characterized by a modally exhaustive single-mindedness. Dream experiences foreclose the space for concurrent imagery, mind-wandering, and, most importantly, *distraction* – the openness that defines wakefulness.¹² What it is to be awake to the world is to be open to the possibility of concurrent – and different – kinds of directedness toward objects and corresponding forms of consciousness. Dreaming consciousness always returns to the world temporality suspended. As Sartre writes: "a consciousness that dreams is always nonthetic consciousness of itself as being fascinated by the dream, but it has lost its being-in-the-world and recovers it only on awakening."¹³ A dream's fascination underscores and underwrites the dream as "pure belief." It is as if consciousness has cast a spell on itself, captivating and capturing itself within its own self-conjured imaginary consciousness. Freedom here expresses itself as the freedom of self-capture, and hence, a self-conjured *unfreedom*. As Sartre explains: "This is the kind of fascination without positing existence that I call belief. Consciousness is not only conscious of itself as enchained, but is also conscious that there is nothing it can do against itself."¹⁴ The dream is "the perfect realization of a closed consciousness. That is to say an imaginary that one absolutely cannot leave and on which it is impossible to take any external point of view."¹⁵ Being-in-the-world is effectively suspended, not abolished.

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Even if I can only know that I was dreaming after-the-fact, even if I remain confused about the meaning of the dream, reflective awareness that I was dreaming is not confused that it was *me* who dreamt, thus implying that the dream experience, as

12) McGinn, *Mindsight*, 78 ff.

13) Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 170.

14) *Ibid.*, 168.

15) *Ibid.*, 165.

a consciousness, was imbued with a sense of myself dreaming, even if, the ascription of the “me” who experienced the dream and the “I” who has been dreaming remains marked by a fissure, not necessarily uncertainty or doubt, but a sense of episodic eccentricity, as if the dreaming me remained outside of myself. The pronouncement “I was dreaming” marks the question: *who* is dreaming? Who is the “me” dreaming? Who is the “I” who ascribes to itself that it was me dreaming? As Blanchot observes: “Do we not preserve the memory of an irreducible distance, a distance of a peculiar sort, the distance between me and myself, but also the distance between each of the characters and the identities – even certain – that we lend them, a distance without distance, illuminating and fascinating, which is like the proximity of the remote or contact with the faraway?”¹⁶ Blanchot formulates a signature experience in Proust’s numerous descriptions of sleep, dreaming, and wakefulness in ways that resonate with Sartre’s account of dreaming consciousness. In sleep, consciousness experiences a different sense of self, episodic, than when awake. In Proust’s descriptions, awareness of oneself in the present, namely, as existing in particular moment, or now, is inseparable from perception of one’s embodiment in the world. Dreaming consciousness, as well as transitions from sleep to wakefulness, are characterized by the loss of any sense of emplaced embodiment. “When I awoke in the middle of the night,” Proust in the *Recherche* writes, “not knowing where I was, I couldn’t be sure at first who I was.” Indeed, when awake and “plunged in the time of the waking,” we have, as Proust continues, “deserted” the time, that other time, of sleep and dreams. More than another suspended time, it is emphatically for Proust another life, or sense of one’s own life, that has been deserted. The pleasures one might have experienced while dreaming – “the pleasure I was on the point of enjoying,” the narrator recounts, when imagining “born during my sleep” – do not figure in the current account of life. *Je est un autre* when dreaming; to the point that the recovery of myself when awake is compared by Proust to a resurrection of a self who temporarily “died” during sleep. We recover ourselves from the time before sleep, and hence, dreaming, through remembrance. Memory, as Proust describes, “would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me out of the abyss of non-being, from which I could have never escaped myself [*in sleeping*].”

16) Blanchot, *Friendship*, 142.

The fissure between dream consciousness and waking consciousness is not without transitional mentation. In the twilight of consciousness, hypnagogic images – a term first coined by Alfred Maury from the Greek *ύπνος*, sleep, and *αγωγός*, conductor – are isolated and fleeting. Dreams, by contrast, articulate an unfolding of images. Hypnagogic images are “up in the air,” while dreams possess chrono-topic (temporal and spatial) dimensionality. As Sartre writes: “the person of the dream is always *somewhere*, even if that place is figured schematically as in Elizabethan theatre.”¹⁷ Within the dream experience, “everything is seen from a superior point of view, which is that of the sleeper representing a world, and at the same time from a relative and limited point of view, which is that of the imaginary-me plunged into the world.” Dreams are also organized as a hodological space or environment of the dream-world with “vectors” and “tensions” of phantasized movements (“I am flying,” for example) in relation to an imaginary body. This disembodied sense of “somewhere” in the space of dreamtime can phenomenologically be understood as involving a decoupling – to speak Husserlian – of the material sense of embodiment (*Körper*) from the *Leib* as a system to kinesthetic movements. In the imaginary, I can imagine myself negotiating a maze or, when dreaming, have a sense of falling or flying without any actual movement of my physical limbs. A sense of “somewhere” (coupled with a sense of “some time”) is indissociable from a sense of *happening*, that consciousness experiences the dream as an event or action. No one, it is safe to presume, dreams of merely staring at a wall. Boredom does not exist in dreams. The time in which a dream occurs to consciousness is in the occurring time of dreaming consciousness itself. The time in which a dream occurs is the happening of the dream itself. A dream occurs as “adventures of the dreamer.” Hence the fright or terror often experienced with nightmares or anxiety dreams, or, conversely, the felt sensuality of erotic dreams. In this sense, on Sartre’s thinking, “a consciousness cannot ‘be-in’ in an imaginary world, unless it is itself an imaginary consciousness.”¹⁸

Whether implicated spectator or elaborated protagonist of the dream, the identification with a personage in the dream, or responsiveness (for example, anxiety or pleasure) in the dream, does not amount to an identification with the self that, in

17) Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 166.

18) *Ibid.*, 170.

reflection, I am for myself. The episodic condition of dream consciousness and the implicit sense that the dream is occurring to me, the sense of myself in the dream, is unmoored from wakeful consciousness. As Sartre elaborates:

I do not feel myself to be *him* [a dream protagonist] in the intimacy of my consciousness, as I can in the wakeful state feel myself to be the same as yesterday, etc. No, I *feel* myself to be him, outside, in him: it is an irreal affective quality that I grasp on him [...] He is therefore, in a sense, *transcendent and external* since I still see him running and, in another sense, *transcendent without distance since I am irreal present in him*.¹⁹

When dreaming, consciousness is both inside and outside of the dream-figures. Hence, the sense in which we experience dreams as visitations or appearances from afar, even as we are intimately affected, indeed, fascinated from the inside, spell bound. A dream is an articulated sequence of imaginings; “every dream image appears with its own world.” By contrast, for Sartre, “there is no hypnagogic world; pre-oneiric visions have no past, no future, there is *nothing* behind them or alongside them.”²⁰ Within the unfolding of a dream, although there is temporal sequence (I can in the light of day remember and recount “this happened, then this happened” in my dream last night), there is nothing comparable to the temporality of lived experience in the world, where the experience of the now is set against a horizon of possibilities and anticipations, as well as anchored in an emplaced embodiment of here. There is no sense of possibility within a dream nor a sense of the dream occurring otherwise. The dream unfolds in the sheerness of dreaming in the sense that there is a temporality to the dream and yet no sense for or orientation within the dream to “possibilities” – the now of the dream cloisters the unfolding of past, present, and future, within itself, such that within self-enclosed dream consciousness there is no distance, indeed, time to ask, “what comes next?”

Unlike other manifestations of the imaginary, the dream, as “pure belief,” is not imagined in the “sense in which consciousness imagines when it presentifies some-

19) Ibid., 171–72 (my italics).

20) Ibid., 166.

thing through an analogon. It is as imaginary world, the correlate of *belief*, the dreamer *believes* that the scene unfurls in a world.”²¹ When a child plays at being a knight, the plastic sword, helmet, and shield are “analogons,” or props, with which the child “irrealizes” themselves; the child imagines itself as being a knight by acting “being a knight.” Dreams, however, lack any material underpinning, or prop, as with the make-believe of being a knight or other comparable manifestations of the imaginary based on “analogons.” At this juncture in Sartre’s analysis, with this claim that the dream imaginary is not based on an “analogon,” a semantic shift occurs with the proposition that many dreams (including his own, as he observes) are given as a “story that I am reading or being told.”²² In speaking of “many dreams,” Sartre’s contention that dreams are stories is not categorical. Within the run of Sartre’s thinking, this contention proves to be pivotal for specifying the sense in which the dream-imaginary entails “pure belief.” As Sartre writes: “The sole fact that the dream is given as a story (*histoire*) should permit us to understand the kind of belief that we can attribute to it.”²³



Even when not specifically characterizing the dream experience, reading involves the imaginary. We read during our waking hours. We read, or are read to, in the slumbered time of dreams. Earlier in *The Imaginary*, Sartre described the act of reading as involving the spontaneous production of the meaning based on perceiving words on a page. The meaning of (written) words is a transcendent object. Reading engages the imaginary in transcending signs (written words) toward the apprehension of meaning. With fictional narratives, it is not merely meanings that are apprehended on the basis of words; imaginary, fictional, objects become entertained imaginatively. Fictional objects apprehended when reading, for example, *Madame Bovary*, enjoy a virtuality beyond the act of reading per se. As evidence, Sartre notes that imaginings gained through reading can be recalled or re-imagined independently, as when I call to mind *Madame Bovary* from Flaubert’s novel, or discuss finer points of inter-

21) Ibid., 167.

22) Ibid., 166.

23) Ibid., 168.

pretation regarding her behavior and motivations. Reading produces a *savoir imag-eant* in the sense that words can either function as signs *or* as images. Words on the page, when apprehended from an appropriate fictional attitude and under a fictional operator, are cues and prompts to induce the imaginary in the reader. A word functioning as an image no longer functions merely as a sign; it is a word that has become of the imaginary, imbued, as it were, with a magical power of incantation. When words function as images, as with novels, reading supports and sustains the fascination of the imaginary in which “a world in its entirety appears to me in images through the lines on the page.” This fictional world captivates and captures reading consciousness with its single-minded focus of fascination. In reading a novel, absorbed in the prose of its fictional world, consciousness retains the possibility of reflective consciousness, as well as alternating from the readings of words as either signs or as images. Words on the page, composed by an author, serve as “analogons” on the basis of which the reader constitutes the transcendent irreal object of the imaginary.

Whereas reading a novel, attending a theatrical performance, and viewing a film depend on an underlying perceptual act on the basis of which an imaginary world becomes conjured (the words or signs serve as material “analogons” for the “irreal-izing” consciousness of the imaginary), dreaming consciousness experiences a storied *imaginary without* supporting “analogon.” When Sartre speaks of dreams as “a story that I am reading or being told,” the sense of “reading” is here markedly special: there are no words perceptually given “to be read.” Indeed, earlier in *The Imaginary*, when distinguishing between perception and the imaginary, Sartre argued that one can never truly *read* in the imaginary (although reading is itself an act of the imaginary). As he writes: “If I give myself in image the page of a book, I am in the attitude of the reader, I *look at* the printer lines. But I do not *read*. And, at bottom, I am not even looking because I already *know* what is written.”²⁴ When one reads a book, consciousness *follows* an unfolding storyline without knowing ahead of time what will happen next. When I imagine, that is, visualize a book, or imagine to be reading a book, no story becomes disclosed to me, since, on this contention, there is no discovery of meaning in an imaginary act of reading, as opposed to actually reading a book. A storied dream is not making-believe (imagining in this sense) that I am reading; it

24) Ibid., 10.

is a reading that happens to me. I am told of a story in the conviction of its occurrence; the story is not merely read, it happens to dreaming consciousness in its telling. I do not experience *in media res* the dream as a story I have made-up for myself, since the story is “told” without any narrative intention, or deliberation, to have a story told to, or read by, me. When falling asleep, I do not intend to tell myself a story, that is, to dream thus and so (setting aside, however, the intriguing phenomenon of dream incubation). Dreaming involves an involuntary act of the imaginary. I do not already know “what will happen,” and hence, the sense in which a dream is a “story that I am reading or being told” cannot be comparable to merely *imagining* that I am reading. Unlike actually reading a novel, where I am following a story, the storied dream becomes “read” with neither a sense of following the storyline (one never asks: what happens next?) nor knowing, or anticipating, what will come next. When dreaming, consciousness finds itself within a story, and does not imagine a story, even though the dream is of the imaginary. The storied articulation of the dream is without narrative distance. One does not follow the unfolding of a dream in the same manner as one follows a story unfolding across the pages of a novel. One does not follow what is happening; it happens, one follows.

In another celebrated discussion of reading, Sartre recounts in *The Words* how, as a young child, he was jealous of his mother’s ability to read, and thus decided one day “to read” on his own, although he could not read. He steals away with book in hand – Jules Verne’s *Tribulations of a Chinaman in China* – to a storeroom: “There, perched on a cot, I pretended to read. My eyes followed black signs without skipping a single one, and I told myself a story aloud, being careful to utter all the syllables.” The young precocious Sartre pretends to read; it is neither a storied dream nor actually reading. Sartre eventually learns how to read, and quickly becomes enthralled: “The library was the world caught in a mirror. It had the world’s infinite thickness, its variety. I launched out into incredible adventures.”²⁵ In books, Sartre encountered the world: “assimilated, classified, labelled, pondered, still formidable.” Books inculcated an idealism: “I confused the disorder of my bookish experiences with the random course of real events.”²⁶ This primal idealism of reading translates into Sartre’s concep-

25) Sartre, *The Words*, 48–49.

26) *Ibid.*, 51.

tual ecology the primal addiction to books, and hence, the imaginary, exemplified by Don Quixote, who, absorbed in the imaginary worlds of chivalric literature, decided to turn himself into an adventurous knight errant. Every book is an imaginary world in which, as Sartre writes, to exist was to have an “official title somewhere on the infinite Tables of the Word.”²⁷ The object gets “tangled up in the signs” and language promotes the “most persistent illusion – to catch living things in the trap of phrases. Books possessed a realism, a childlike realism.”²⁸

In yet another celebrated passage on reading, Sartre paints a portrait in *Nausea* of the Self-Taught Man, or autodidact, who “plunges his nose into his book and became absorbed by his reading.”²⁹ The protagonist of Sartre’s novel, Antoine Roquentin, prompted by this scene in Bouville Library’s reading room, reflects on the abyss separating living and telling. One much choose, he reflects: “live or tell.” For the human is a teller of stories: “for the most banal events to become an adventure, you must (and this is enough) begin to recount it.” We are, however, fooled by the stories we tell ourselves: “a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story.” The paradox “live or tell” hinges on the banality of living – “scenery changes, people come and go, that’s all” – in need of meaning, and the meanings given to our lives, through our stories, that imbues life with a sense of purpose and adventure, and hence a truth about who we are, “as if there could possibly be true stories; things happen one way and we tell about them in the opposite sense.”

★ ★ ★

The intrigue of whether dreams are experienced as stories only became more alluring with the various senses in which reading and story-telling figured, fugue-like, in Sartre’s writings. To live or to tell. With dreams, on Sartre’s own insight, there is a telling that is lived, experienced, without distance or difference, without a sense of there being a difference between living and telling, where the sense of “living” and

27) Ibid., 181.

28) Ibid., 183.

29) Sartre, *Nausea*, 38.

“telling” has become reconfigured, transformed, from the sense in which we live to tell and tell to live under conditions of wakefulness. Dreams are stories (*histoire*), neither symbols nor signs.³⁰ The storied manifestation of dreams is read, not observed. A dream is an articulated sequence of actions and scenes, of the imaginary, that calls upon the participation of dreaming consciousness, much as reading calls upon the participation of the reader to transcend the given words and signs on the page toward the imaginary, thus opening “worlds upon worlds” of fiction. For Sartre, there are two attitudes of reading: reading the words as signs, or signifiers, that name and refer to meanings and reading words as images that solicit, or trigger, the imaginary. Words are cues to imagine a world and, through this figuration, “see” what words mean. The imaginary remains, as fictions, bound to words (i.e., the words, or word-bound fictions, forming the novel *Madame Bovary*), and yet the words take possession, or hold, of the consciousness and deploy their enchantment on the level of the imaginary, including both affectivity (I am moved by *Madame Bovary*’s tragic end) and knowing, albeit in a “degraded” form, since although the fictional *Madame Bovary* is an object with which I am, in reading, acquainted, “she” does not exist out there in the world for me to know. Participation, in reading, forms a movement of self-transcendence into the imaginary (and not a reading of words as signs with a reference) marks a point of commonality with the reading involved in dreamtime, but unlike reading a novel, or imagining a page, or pretending to read, as with the precocious young Sartre, the participation of the imaginary in reading the storied phenomenon of dreaming does not have the form of a transcendence in immanence (as with the transcendence toward meaning based on the “analogon” of words, or, as with an imagined page, a misfired transcendence, or with pretending to read). Instead, the dream is an immanence *in* transcendence. Consciousness imagines immanently, that is, dreams, within itself, as dislocated and decoupled, from any possible sense of being elsewhere, as is the case when reading a book, imagining a page, or pretending to read in the light of day. Unlike reading a book, the dream as a story I am reading cannot involve the “analogon” of words, and hence, a transcendence of signs toward the meaning (imaginary objects). The sheerness of the dream is wordless; it is a telling in images, and of images that are telling. Dreaming is pantomime.

30) Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 211.

A dream-story in this respect is comparable to how Sartre describes the imaginary in painting. Whereas a writer fashions together into a fictional object words with significations, the painter remains mute; she does not speak, and does not direct the imaginary of the viewer with significations (signs). As Sartre writes: “The novel does not provide things, but rather their signs. With these signs alone – words that point into the void – how is one to construct a world that holds together? For a book is nothing but a small pile of dry leaves – or else a vast form in motion: the act of reading.” A writer captures and conducts the imaginary of the reader, yet it is the reader who must constitute the imaginary of the novel in a movement of self-transcendence. A painter, however, does not “trace signs on a canvas, he wants to create a thing.” With Tintoretto’s *Crucifixion* in mind, Sartre writes: “Tintoretto did chose this yellow tear in the sky above Golgotha to *signify* anxiety, nor to provoke it; it *is* anxiety, and a yellow sky at the same time. Not a sky of anxiety, not an anxious sky; it is anxiety made into a thing (*c’est une angoisse faite chose*).” Poets as well create things with words, rather than employ words to signify. The silence of the painter, or poet, in making “things” manifest in paint or words “presents” the thing (anxiety in Tintoretto). As Sartre writes: “The painter is silent: he presents you with a hovel – that is all; it is up to you to see in it whatever you wish. This garret will never be a symbol of misery; for that, it would have to be a sign, whereas it is a thing.”³¹ In a comparable sense, the dream is a story-thing. A dream strictly speaking, does not *say* anything, and yet, it is a story that can be said to be in search or need of a narrative, that is, a plot, or storyline, obscurely absent, waiting in the thing itself.

The story, what Sartre calls *histoire*, can fittingly be understood as a *récit*. Inspired by Gerard Genette’s distinction between *récit* and *histoire*, admittedly here differently developed, a dream is *récit* – telling dream images – that tells a story that does not match, indeed, lacks, a *histoire* in the sense of a chronological structure. Whereas when reading a novel, a fictional narrative followed in the imaginary configures, as “presentification” in the Husserlian sense of *Vergegenwärtigung*, an action into a unified beginning, middle, and end, organized around plot, or storyline, with the storied manifestation of a dream, the action is the telling, or *récit*, of the dream

31) “Le peintre est muet: il vous présente *un* taudis, c’est tout; libre à vous d’y voir ce que vous voulez. Cette mansard ne sera jamais le symbole de la misère; il faudrait pour cela qu’elle fût signe, alors qu’elle est chose.”

itself. The story calls attention to itself and captivates dream consciousness; hence, Sartre's terms "incantation," "magic," "spellbound," and "fascination" to characterize senses in which a dream story is an event. The dream-story captivates and captures dream consciousness, as implied in Sartre's allowance of both "reading" and "being read to" in his description of the dream experience. The dream-story, or *récit*, calls attention to itself entirely in terms of non-thetic or pre-reflective consciousness, as much as Proustian *mémoire involontaire*, or with the currant "Eat Me!" on the cakes in Alice in Wonderland.

The dream-*récit* does not possess a discernible beginning or end. What distinguishes the experience of reading the story of a dream is that it is a story occurring to the dreaming consciousness. Dreaming consciousness is not merely "entangled" in a story; it is entrapped, fated to undergo the story, or sequence of actions and events, without possibility of escape, other than awakening. To remember and recount, narrate, the dream from the vantagepoint of wakeful life is to ascribe and appropriate the dream, but always with a fissure between the dream-story and form of narration and remembrance imposed upon it to fathom its meaning, or significance. Dream interpretation takes on a form of narration, and yet every narration is haunted by the gap, or fissure, between *récit* and narrative, between dream as thing and dream as symbol, interpretation, and "meaning." What characterizes a dream is the opacity of its meaning, and yet, the suggestiveness that there is a meaning, namely, that it puzzles the dreamer, and asks implicitly a question: what have I just experienced, what does it mean, and this accounts for the solicitation or "motivation" to be recounted and formulated, configured into a narrative; what occurs in the passage and transformation from the dream as a storied phenomenon to the dream as configured into a narrative? The task of interpretation takes on the form-finding task of narrative configuration from the vantage point of wakeful consciousness. A dream is a storied thing that seeks to be narrated.

Sartre's phenomenology of dreaming offers a unique perspective on two intersecting themes of analysis. The distinction between episodic and diachronic, or transient and enduring, senses of self, namely, between "myself" and "I," does not capture the complexity, or better: intrigue, of dreaming consciousness. For on the one hand, Sartre holds that consciousness is intrinsically imbued with a sense of self that is episodic and, in his terminology, pre-thetic. This pre-reflective being-myself-consciousness is

not a consciousness *of* myself (an internal relation between subject and object), but an immanent sense of myself as now experiencing. This transient sense of myself is always renewed, or refreshed, and it does not, as a minimal self, or subject, possess a narrative form nor a diachronic form of enduring self. On the other hand, Sartre equally holds that we are surrounded, and in this sense, entangled, or enmeshed, in stories: we live to tell and tell to live in the dual, or often conflicting sense, that living incites us to telling and we live the things we tell about ourselves. Telling, or forming our lives into a story, allows for a configuration of living into articulations of meaning, or “adventures,” with a distinctive beginning and ending, and structures action. Narrative is the linguistic “modelling” or “shaping” of action and establishes a diachronic structure, and turns, as it were, sense of myself into the sense of a life, the passage from episodic sense of myself to having a life, me as a “human being.”³² Sartre interestingly considers dreams to be episodic experiences: there is a sense of myself dreaming without reflective consciousness *that* I am dreaming. Dream consciousness possesses an episodic sense of myself – myself dreaming – and this is the condition for remembrance: I remember myself as having dreamt, and hence, remembrance is here a reflective self-objectification. Setting or staging our lives into narratives is a form of objectification: it is how I appear to myself as an “object” and how I appear, and want to be seen, by others, but by the same token, I become the object for the regard of others through the stories others tell about my life. What makes Sartre’s position interesting is that dreams are episodic – it is also the case that I am often at pains to identify with the dreaming-ego. This is the sense in which I experience the dream as happening to me, even if the me that remembers does not fully identify with the me to whom the dream occurred; in dreaming, it is not a loss of consciousness, but that consciousness loses me. Dreams are episodic, and yet, on Sartre’s conception, dreams are stories; the dream is a non-narrative storied phenomenon. The storied nature of the dream is not a narrative; it is a *récit* that calls attention to itself, and a story in which we find ourselves outside and before narrative attitude, without any sense of following the narrative. What distinguishes the storied phenomenon of dreaming is that it is a story in search of a plot, that is, to say, a story in search of narratives. A dream is a storied thing wanting of narrative.

32) To adopt Galen Strawson’s distinction.



A dream is a *récit* not only without a transparent plot. It can be said to be in *want* of a narrative configuration that would render transparent a meaning for the life of the consciousness to whom the dream, as *récit*, has occurred. The desire to recount and tell others, as well as ourselves, about the storied dreams of nocturnal wandering is a desire to assimilate the contingency of dreaming. Hence, the sense in which dreams are often experienced as incoherent, fragmented. Might we say that in want of a plot, and hence, narrative, the *récit* harbors a solicitation to be told, and hence, allowed to appear in the world to others, as with Gilgamesh who recounts his dream to his mother. If a dream is a *récit*, and dreaming consciousness the reader, who authors the dream? What of this disconnect between the author and the reader of the dream? The author is not the me dreaming, to whom the story is told, who reads. What is striking about the storied phenomenon of dreaming is *detail* of figures, scenes, and objects that show up in the dreamscape. One might think that this textured articulation of dream-stories implies, however obscure and unreachable, an intention and *choice*, indeed, a deliberation and intent to tell a story. The question, however, of “who” authors the dream is both misplaced and mis-formulated within the frame of Sartre’s thinking if the authoring function is ascribed to “censor” that both straddles and keeps separate “consciousness” and “unconsciousness.”

Sartre remained a fervent critic of the Freudian unconscious, or at least, a certain interpretation of the Freudian theory, that “cuts in the psychic whole into two agencies, the ego, or consciousness that I am, and the unconscious, or Id, that I am not.”³³ The truth known only to the unconscious remains hidden from me, my consciousness; the censor establishes a line of mis-communication between both so as to have it both ways: the unconscious drive is fulfilled and hence expressed, yet I am shielded from this fulfilment through the disguised dream-content that *safeguards* me from awakening to my true, unconscious nature. The dream, as Freud notes, is the guardian of sleep. As Sartre comments in *The Imaginary*: “If consciousness can never grasp its own worries, its own desires except in the form of symbols,

33) Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 94.

it is not, as Freud believed, because of a repression that obliges it to disguise them: it is because it is incapable of grasping what is real in the form of reality.”³⁴ At first glance, it would seem that Sartre clearly avoids a similar kind of division between the authoring function (the intelligent agent who designs the dream narrative: the censor in cahoots with the unconscious) and the audience function of dreaming consciousness, who might also enter into the dream, but who is always lost among a forest of signs. The “splitting” of consciousness in Sartre’s account of dreams does not replicate a division between *two* distinct forms of (un)-consciousness (or between two distinct ontological entities: the brain and the mind); it marks instead a division internal to a single consciousness that never coincides with itself, that, in other words, is incapable of grasping its own real situation *in the world*. Sartre’s account of dreams nonetheless runs the risk to remaining beholden to *another* kind of dualism between the imaginary dream-consciousness and consciousness of the real. Even if Sartre argues that in the dream, “I have projected all my knowledge, all my preoccupations, all my memories,” it still stands that “I have projected all of this, but in the imaginary mode, on the image that I presently constitute.”³⁵ To image is to apprehend the real in the mode of irreality. The real as related to in an imaginary manner. As such, the imaginary, as the positing of the nothingness, or absence, places itself beyond the real of the real world. Even if the singular motivation for the imaginary, and hence for the dream, is the world, the imaginary perspective – and thus what I see and am in seeing thus and so – is *external* to the world: it negates the world in order to conjure its own form of “seeing.” As with the voyeur in *Being and Nothingness* who spies through the keyhole, the dream is a form of voyeurism that beholds a spectacle behind closed doors – in this case, the self-enclosed theatre of dreaming-consciousness.

There is no hidden author behind the dream story, as with Freud’s censor, who authors the sequence of images and thoughts – even though for Freud the dream is not a story; it becomes narrative in analysis and interpretation. Paradoxically, the dream story has a reader and yet no author, even though it is produced “anonymously” by consciousness; it is the spontaneous production, or positing, of nothingness, including,

34) Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 168.

35) *Ibid.*, 182.

the nothingness, or irrealization of the dreaming consciousness itself. If the dream is a story in search of narrative, or plot, it is equally a story in search of an author. *There is* the dream story; it has been “written,” and the form-finding function of narration is to find an author for the story that has been given. How does one understand this? The fissure between the I of the dream and the person to whom, upon waking and remembrance, one ascribes this I (I ascribe to myself the I of the dream when I say: I was dreaming), but this ascription preserves and carries forth into the light of day the original fissure. We “greedily and hastily take possession of the dream,” as Blanchot writes, upon waking up with “a certain feeling of usurpation,” and we “preserve the memory of an irreducible distance,” and hence, the dream, when remembered, when I say “I was dreaming” brings to it an intrigue and a questioning, which, for Blanchot “refers us to an experience often described of late: the experience of the writer, when, in a narrative, poetic, or dramatic work, he writes ‘I,’ not knowing who says it or what relation he maintains without himself.”³⁶ Blanchot implicitly recasts Sartre’s proposition that dreams are stories that are read (to us or by us) when he writes: “I dream, therefore it is written.” Indeed, we can say that we have the ambiguity of reading/writing: dream consciousness is fated to undergo a story, and in this sense, it is written; the dream consciousness does not intervene, and yet, the dream consciousness is afflicted by the passivity of its own spontaneity. The kinship between dreaming and writing is entailed in the kinship between dreaming and reading, of which Sartre writes. We awake, and say to ourselves: I was dreaming, and become animated by a desire to talk about our dream, to ourselves, to others, to commit to a dream-diary. We recount our dreams to find an author and audience; and make them part of the life we are, or better, are yet to be, or might have been. The dream is a story in search of a plot or narrative, different narratives can be configured from the dream-story. However, closed and cloistered within itself is the dream, it is open as a narrative to be told. The dream is the story that solicits and tempts to be narrated. A dream is a story in search of an author whereby the source of the dream emerges from the latency of the imaginary within the light of day, or what Merleau-Ponty termed the “oneirism of wakefulness.” As Sartre explains: “the concrete situation of consciousness in the world must at each moment serve as the singular motivation for the constitution of

36) Blanchot, *Friendship*, 141.

the unreal. Thus the unreal – which is always double nothingness: nothingness of itself in relation to the world, nothingness of the world in relation to it – must always be constituted on the ground of the world that it denies.”³⁷

★ ★ ★

At the beginning of Proust’s *Swann’s Way*, the narrator’s description of how he would often fall asleep while reading in bed, slipping into a liminal state of reverie, is redolent of how I often would fall into a bewildering rummage of telling images, gravitating around the alluring question: “Does the dream follow the mouth or does the mouth follow the dream?”³⁸ As I had been thinking, while asleep, about these literary examples of the entanglement of dreams and stories, it seemed to be that I myself became the subject of these reflections, now sitting before you, and now standing behind me, in the sudden realization that dreams are telling in ways that bespeak us without entirely speaking for us.

In Raymond Queneau’s *The Skin of Dreams*, the protagonist, Jacques L’Aumône, who, as a child, was fascinated by the cinema, and imagines himself as the heroic figure in films, and sees in turn himself, imagines, as star of his own life, and this dream-time of the cinematic experience folds into reveries in which he imagines, dreams, multiple lives that are inscribed within the everyday existence. “His mind paraded before him all the embryos of social entities that he had non-realized, like miniatures of perfectly formed fetuses” – “a captain in the Royal Netherlands army, a plant manager, attaché to the embassy in Peking,” and so forth. The “onion” construction of Queneau’s narrative folds and unfolds dreams from life, and life from dreams; each of his daydreams about what or who he wants to be pulls him from the profession and specialized careers that he has chosen for himself, and eventually joins a traveling circus of performers. In Queneau’s *The Blue Flowers*, the Duke of Auge (*Auge* – “eye” in German) wakes up one day in the year 1264 in his castle, and takes a panoramic view of the world around him, and while riding on horse to inspect construction of the Notre-Dame cathedral, falls asleep. The scene shifts to a certain Cidronin, who

37) Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 186.

38) Tractate Berakhot 55b–56a.

lives in barge on the Seine in Paris, and who has just awoken from a bad dream: “But where on earth was I going like that, riding a horse? I can’t remember. Anyway, that’s typical of dreams; I’ve never ridden a horse in my life. I’ve never ridden a bicycle in my life, either, but I never rid a bicycle in my dreams and yet I do ride a horse. There must be an explanation, that’s obvious.” Cidronin lives in 1964. Merging of dream and reality, and dream within a dream, or two dreams of a dreamer, or the storied dream of one becomes the narration of the other. Queneau’s narrative moves from the historical narrative of the Duke of Auge to the contemporary narrative of Cidronin; is each the narrative configuration of the storied dream of the other? The transition between this diptych is when one falls asleep, the other awakes; when one character wakes up, the other character falls asleep, and the narrative passes from one to other. Is the Duke the dream of Cidronin? Is Cidronin the prophetic dream of the Duke? Who tells the story of whom? The idling days of Cidronin on a moored barge, and the enterprising days of the Duke; the narrative switches when one falls asleep, and this occasionally occurs in between sentences. They cross paths; but are both dreams of an unnamed, invisible sleeping consciousness – signaled teasingly perhaps with the epigram from Plato’s *Theatetus*: “He heard a dream for a dream.”

In Arthur Schnitzler’s *Traumnovelle*, dreams become entangled with the narratives that we articulate to ourselves and to each other during our wakeful hours. *Traumnovelle* begins with an opening portrait of an apparently normal bourgeois family framed through a clear distinction (in a manner recalling Sartre’s basic premise in *The Imaginary*) between fictional immersion in a story (the child’s fairy tale evoked at the beginning of the novel) and an extended conversation between Fridolin and Albertina – a conversation already under way prior to bedtime for the child. Returning to their conversation, each narrates their respective experiences at a masquerade ball attended the night before, and in probing each other’s reactions to the apparent sexual attraction and missed opportunities each felt that evening with other guests, the novella opens onto a sequence of confessions, confrontations, and revelation exposing an underlying ambivalence and sexual tension in their marriage. Beginning with narratives of their summer holiday in Denmark the year before, in her first story, Albertina recounts how she by chance exchanged gazes with a mysterious young officer and felt sexually aroused, spending the rest of that day “lost in dreams” and tempted by the possibility of adventure. Fridolin confesses a similar story as

the novella narrates a contrasting set of Albertina's dreams and Fridolin's nocturnal adventures that progressively blur any clear distinction between dream and reality, as indicated with Schnitzler's deliberately ambiguous – yet seductive – expression: *die traumhafte Realität*.

Albertina's dreams are incubated, as it were, in sensuous (in the sense of both perceptual and desire, i.e., sexual) encounters during her wakeful life (one finds comparable descriptions in Proust) crystallized around punctuating moments of ambivalence. This sedimentation of an oneiric consciousness within wakefulness is the unconscious – not as a separate agency within consciousness nor as the product of any mechanism of repression, but as the crystallization of *possibilities* from the insoluble ambivalence that textures our wakefulness: do I truly love my wife? Am I sexually attracted by this other woman? If we recall Sartre's double-function of imagining consciousness, the motivation underlying dreams is some kind of refusal or denial of the world, but one might inflect this insight into a general claim that it is an ambivalence within my being-in-the-world that already provokes the flight of the dream imaginary. The world is perforated with *holes*, or *entanglements*: the unknown, risk, resistance to my projects, desires of others, and so forth. As Sartre describes in *Being and Nothingness*, the presence of the Other is akin to a "drain-hole" *toward which* the world slips away, organized around *her* projects, intentions, and desires, and hence in perpetual tension with my own. The imaginary, seen from this ontology of entangling holes that defines Sartre's thinking, attempts to fill holes produced by the Real itself: I miss my beloved and wish to hold her again and so imagine her in my arms; I place a religious icon close to my heart, and so forth. At the end of *Traumnovelle*, after Fridolin has finally returned home from a second night of nocturnal adventures, and after another of Albertina's revelatory dreams, and after an extended night of Fridolin recounting "everything," as dawn now breaks, Fridolin asks: "What shall we do now, Albertina?" She replies: "I think that we ought to be grateful that we have come unharmed from all of our adventures, whether they were real or only a dream." Silently, they lay close to each other in sleep, dreamlessly together (*So lagen sie beide schweigende, beide wohl auch ein wenig schlummernd und einander traumlos nah*). To possess a life that would be *traumlos nah* – toward oneself, toward others, toward the world – would be a world of silence and peace, a world experienced with eyes wide open, unencumbered by either light or darkness.

In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, the husband of Yeong-hye surprisingly finds his wife at 4:00 am standing silently in the glow of an open refrigerator, apparently fascinated, or absorbed, by what it is she sees. When pressed by her annoyed husband, she only replies: "I had a dream." This dream of hers, or sequence of dreams, is told, or recounted in her own voice; it is the thing that dramatically propels the narrative. Yeong-hye's husband returns home later that evening to find his wife discarding any meat in the refrigerator, and from this point of no returned, haunted and impelled by the mute imperative of the dream – a dream she never interprets or explains, but only states: I had a dream – Yeong-hye "decides" without any clear or discrete act of decision, or rationalization, or, indeed, justification to her angry husband, family, and in-laws. This transformation of her life or existence, impelled by the Real of the dream, the ruptures her inscription in the imaginary and the symbolic. The dramatic confrontation with her husband and family crescendos with the violence of her abusive father who forces her to eat meat. The catalyst for Yeong-hye's transfiguration to vegetarianism and beyond to become a tree was not the only dream that exerted a narrative force. Likewise, a dream amplified her husband's violent repulsion at this wife's becoming-tree and estrangement. As he recounts, it "as though I was seeing [her face] for the first time,' all because she had said, 'I had a dream.'" Yeong-hye's dream is described – the only manifestation of her own voice – in fragmentary parts; he bleeding body, her "chewing on something that felt so real, but couldn't have been, it couldn't," and "that strange, horribly uncanny feeling." In the final – third section – of the novel, years have passed after he divorce from her husband and erotic liaison with the husband of her sister. Her sister's marriage has on account of this, failed as well. And she visits Yeong-hye at a psychiatric hospital tucked away in the mountains. Yeong-hye wastes away, desiring to become a tree, and only living on water. Her sister registers Yeong-hye's voice as the narrator describes, "Yeong-hye's voice, which came to her while she was suspended in that halfway state between sleep and wakefulness, was low and warm at first, then innocent like that of a young child, but the last part was mangled, inaudible, a distorted animal sound." The arc of transfiguration from "I had a dream" that impelled her to become a vegetarian to becoming a tree, as those surrounding the psychiatric facility to which she has been committed. "What seemed to be happening was that Yeong-hye was retreating from herself, was becoming as distant to herself as she was to her sister. A forlorn face, behind a mask of composure."

Her sister, who has also been afflicted by a haunting dream of her son, whom she has abandoned, accompanies Yeong-hye's departure of the psychiatric ward in the mountains for a hospital in Seoul, as she is in need, in her wasting away, of more urgent care. Yeong-hye is inarticulate to the entreaties of her sister, who leans to her:

“What I’m trying to say [...]” she whispers to Yeong-hye. “Perhaps this is all a kind of dream.” She bows her head. But then, as though suddenly struck by something, she brings her mouth right up to Yeong-hye’s ear and carries on speaking, forming the words carefully, one by one. “I have dreams too, you know. Dreams [...] and I could let myself dissolve into them, let them take me over [...] but surely the dream isn’t all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don’t we? Because [...] because then [...]”

And then the narrative ends, as the ambulance passes by trees on the side of the road, “blazing, green fire undulating like the rippling flanks of a massive animal, wild and savage.” The story of Yeong-hye still remains untold, the thing itself, dark and insistent.

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