



Laurence M. Porter

The  
Literary  
Dream  
in  
French  
Romanticism

A Psychoanalytic Interpretation

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A Psychoanalytic Interpretation

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### **A Note on Translations**

Statements by foreign psychologists and critics, and quotations from the non-fictional writing of the authors treated, have been provided in English translation only. The French texts of the fictional works analyzed are given, together with a translation, in the main body of the text whenever the original contains expressive nuances difficult to suggest in a translation. All translations are mine. I have respected the deliberately stilted quality of Ducasse's prose. I have also preserved the distinction between the elevated tone of philosophical musings and the more colloquial tone of dialogue and narration which characterizes all four of our authors.

## INTRODUCTION

Before romanticism, many French writers like Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, Marivaux, and Diderot had proven themselves keenly aware of the existence and activity of involuntary, unconscious mental forces. Indeed, the author of the earliest French literary monument, *La Chanson de Roland*, may well have been thinking of the psychopathology of everyday life when he had Roland ask, at the central *laisse* of the poem, whether his best friend Oliver had hit him with a sword on purpose.<sup>1</sup> But for a long time the portrayal of involuntary mental forces and their effects was limited to isolated incidents or to popular fantasy literature.

Then, during the course of the eighteenth century, Empiricism, Hume, and Kant cast doubt on whether man's five senses and his faculty of reason could guarantee an accurate perception either of the external world or of the self. In serious literature of the latter half of the eighteenth century, authors' intuitive understanding of the unconscious became the central subject of certain works. Diderot's *Rêve de D'Alembert* and *Le Neveu de Rameau*, and Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux*, employed the dreamer, the madman, and the devil as major characters, thus challenging the Cartesian dichotomy of conscious self and unconscious world which had put all mental states other than waking rationality beyond the pale of humanness. But incidents in the plot remained linked by a logical continuity of temporal sequence and of cause and effect, or at least by a

comprehensible pattern of free association. The latter, notably in Diderot and in his master, Sterne, shifted the metonymic chain of cause and effect from externality to the protagonist's mind, suggesting the relativity of knowledge deriving from its subjective source in our perceptions. Yet the persistence of the metonymic chain revealed the confident assumption that our psychological mechanisms can be traced and rationally explained, however irrational are their outward effects.

Finally, the revolutionary turmoil at the end of the eighteenth century called into question Europe's social, political, and religious institutions, together with the confident rationality which had created or justified them. Society seemed unable to improve itself; reason seemed unable to explain the world. Writers began to seek the basis for a new order in the supernatural realm, and they tried to apprehend this order with the non-rational faculties. The physical settings of late eighteenth-century literature provided a convenient way to hint at the existence of a subterranean mental life. The English Graveyard School of poetry and the descriptive "poetry of ruins" suggested the ghostly persistence of a vanished past amid present experience. Archeological investigation, rapidly expanding during the neoclassical revival of 1770 to 1820, had the same effect when described in literature.<sup>2</sup> Active volcanoes in Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* or Chateaubriand's *René* symbolized the repressed instinctual life. The secret compartments, basements, and passageways in the mansions, castles, and convents of the Gothic novel created a topographic image of a mind much of whose essential content is concealed. All these motifs occurred in French romanticism frequently from Chateaubriand and Lamartine onward, together with numerous other elements serving to represent a displacement of the normal conditions of perception: journeys, theaters, changes of lighting, metamorphosis, animism, and the intervention of supernatural beings.

Nodier, Nerval, Flaubert, and Lautréamont exploited all these devices in their fantasy literature—as did Balzac, Dumas, Gautier, and Mérimée—but they went further. In their literary dreams, the concept of a personal and of a collective unconscious began to affect narrative structure. Nodier's *Smarra*, *Trilby*, and *La Féé aux Miettes*, published from 1821 to 1832, were the first works of French prose fiction convincingly to simulate the apparent discontinuity of dream structure, and to anticipate the theories of Freud and Jung. Nodier's immediate precursors, most noteworthy of whom was Cazotte in *Le Diable amoureux*, treated the *états seconds*—mental states other than that of rational waking consciousness—with far less subtlety and penetration. Before Nodier, literary characters yielded passively to ecstasies which had no lasting

effects upon their character and insight,<sup>3</sup> or they identified reality as the source of the perceptions of rational waking consciousness, and illusion or evil as the source of the perceptions in *états seconds*. But Nodier's most original *contes fantastiques* neither sink into nor condemn the unconscious. Like present-day Jungian critics, Nodier considers the unconscious as morally neutral, having potential for either good or ill; he attempts to reconcile it with the waking self. Narrative discontinuity, inspired by the model of the oriental tales popular in the eighteenth century, results from abrupt changes of subject, time, place, or identity, as the protagonist struggles to repress threatening thoughts from the unconscious (the three ceremonies of exorcism in *Trilby* represent the most primitive way of depicting such repression: they create discontinuity by banishing the disturbing influence—the fairy Trilby—from the scene). More subtly in later dream narratives, such shifts combined with the layering of narration (ABCBA) reflect our authors' intuitive understanding of the "layer cake" model of the psyche in which earlier mental states coexist with later ones. The adult psyche overlays the infantile psyche, which although lost to conscious awareness, remains dynamically active throughout life. The inner narrative layers correspond to archaic mental states of infantile regression, helpless dependency, or megalomania.

The greatest romantic dream literature treats mimetically the unconscious forces affecting human behavior, transforming fictional discourse through abrupt changes of subject, the layering of narration, the splitting and doubling of characters, and the archetype of Inversion (a peripety accompanied by a sudden reversal of values). These devices create dissociative effects similar to the influence on rational consciousness of the ego defense mechanisms of denial, regression, repression, psychic projection, and rationalization.

After Nodier, and thanks in large measure to his direct influence on Balzac, Dumas, Hugo, and Nerval, the dream narrative became one of the more common vehicles of French romantic prose fiction. It combined the romantic fascination with the irrational with the introspective stance of the confessional novel inherited from Rousseau, and with the prophetic voice of mystical lay philosophers like Bonnet, Saint-Martin, and Ballanche. The romantics did not clearly distinguish the dream per se from madness, fantasy, prophecy, or from the irrational in general. Each romantic dream by our four authors must be interpreted both rationally, as psychopathology, and mythically, as an anagogic progression toward the realization of a new spiritual order.<sup>4</sup> Often the romantics attempt to mediate between these two positions through the use of a



sympathetic but relatively level-headed frame narrator, who witnesses, sanctions, and makes respectable the manifestations of the irrational in the inner layers of the story. In Lautréamont and Nerval, the frame narrator at times becomes the protagonist: he plays two separate roles. Flaubert can dispense with the frame narrator because his exhaustive historical documentation itself creates an adequate interface between subjective impressions and the external world.

A review of the explicit positions of Freud, Jung, and Erikson allows one to recognize those psychic phenomena which the romantics dramatized in their non-discursive literary dreams, in anticipation of modern psychoanalytic theory. Literary as well as real dreams can be said to have a "latent content," and certain psychoanalytic theories concerning real dreams may be appropriately applied to the analysis of literary dreams.<sup>5</sup> My admittedly controversial use of the term "psychoanalytic" to characterize literary criticism implies a belief that the effects of the protagonists' involuntary mental processes, and at times the persistent influence of their childhood experience as the author imagined it, are detectable in the texts and provide the best clues to their meaning.

In invoking psychoanalytic authorities, I am pluralistic, drawing upon what I hold to be the most enduring contributions of each of several figures. I rely upon Freud to explain the *mechanisms* of dream and fantasy production; on Jung to identify and describe the *symbolic vehicles* of dream narratives; and on Erikson to define the *dynamics of personality development* and its crises throughout the life cycle. I believe that dreams, although involuntary, are a creative mental process arising from the interplay of compulsions and strivings for self-realization. They provide an imaginary theater in which unacceptable or even disastrous potential responses to life's problems can be acted out without material risk. The archetype of Inversion characteristically resolves romantic dream narratives. What seemed bad (disgrace, insanity, or death) proves potentially good: even though the drama consumes the hero, it hints at a constructive reorientation in the personality of the eyewitness narrator.

My critical stance of "interpretation in the subjective mode" is governed by the hypothesis that all events, descriptions, transitions, and secondary characters in certain literary works may be interpreted as reflecting insights, trends, attitudes, and conflicts in the psyche of the protagonist. Such a heuristic principle works best for lyric poetry, fantasy, and the confessional novel. It is usually less effective for analyzing other forms of prose fiction, or theater. Interpretation in the subjective mode focuses on the personality of the protagonist rather than on the personality of the author. Thus it shifts psychoanalytic inquiry

## *Introduction*

away from biographical speculation to the close reading of texts. Interpretation in the subjective mode helps the critic to avoid reductive rigidity, to respect the organic unity of an individual work of art, to illuminate details which might otherwise be neglected, and to reveal the anagogic dimension of the literary work. If one adopts this interpretive method, the narrative discontinuities which characterize major romantic fantasy can be made to provide clues to repressed emotions of the protagonist—particularly yearning, pride, anger, and fear—which, although frequently overlooked by readers, are the dramatic movers of the story.

From this viewpoint, the seven romantic works to be discussed in detail each correspond to one of the three major solutions to the problems of human development, as they are experienced by the irrational archaic psyche active in the deeper layers of dreams. Self-doubt stimulates either repression, regression, or self-glorification: "I am not," "I am less than," "I am more than" the undesirable self-image. In working out these inadequate solutions, the protagonist is overtaken by madness or death. But the more profound romantic dreams depict the apotheosis of the protagonist together with his failure. Such dreams are never simply an unfair fencing match between phalluses and prohibitions, nor are they mere theosophist tracts. The authors knowingly present two mutually exclusive but coexisting interpretations of experience, as they work toward an impossible reconciliation of id and superego.

# **I**

## **The Dream in Psychology and Literature**

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# CHAPTER 1

## Dreams Real and Literary

Why do we dream? Before romanticism, the dominant answers were either mechanistic or religious. Some believed that the gods spoke to them in dreams. Others, although they believed that dreams might afford moments of intuitive insight unavailable at other times, attributed such insights to the automatic functioning of a combinatorial, associative faculty in the brain. Still others dismissed the effects of dreams, if any, as inconsequential, and were content to identify their cause: physiological stimuli, the need to provide an outlet for the pointless activity of the sleeping mind, or a drive to work through fragmentary and suppressed waking thoughts.<sup>1</sup>

The romantics developed a richer, more nuanced, conception of the dream than had been found (with rare exceptions) earlier. Frequently they combined earlier ideas with anticipations of twentieth-century psychoanalytic theory regarding the function, materials, and structure of dreams. Most important of all, they considered dreaming to be a distinct, autonomous mental process—a notion corroborated in the 1950's by observations of REM brain waves. They believed that dream materials derived both from personal memory traces (Freud) and from a

repository of the inherited collective wisdom of humanity (Jung). They knew that dreams had manifold and often simultaneous functions: to give vent to compulsions, to try to solve problems, and to communicate transcendent revelations. Beyond the ostensible discontinuity of dream imagery, they saw a concealed but explicable order.

Real dreams consist of a series of images. Their sources are the residue of thoughts from the previous day, earlier memories, "screen memories" (stylized, composite constructs unconsciously elaborated in childhood to represent the child's sense of relationships with the world, and his sense of self), and personal and universal symbolism. Words heard, read, or thought, and entire conversations, may be associated with these images. At times the series of dream images forms a dramatic whole as coherent as a story or a play. It then can be analyzed with the familiar, conventional techniques of literary criticism. At other times, however, the series of dream images appears discontinuous or disjointed. Then dream structure is diaphoric, to borrow Phillip Wheelwright's useful term. It juxtaposes events often widely separated in time or space, or both, "producing new meaning by juxtaposition alone."<sup>2</sup> Such discontinuity may result from repression, when a threatening thought risks becoming too obvious. On the other hand, it may result from the purgation of the dreamer's anxiety, moral scruples, fear, and disgust by a first, symbolically disguised reenactment of a troubling fantasy. This allows the fantasy to appear, in its second incarnation, in a more nearly recognizable form. Two discontinuous images may represent two features of a composite attitude presented separately (in dreams "either-or" means "both-and," Freud pointed out). The juxtaposition of images may represent the dreamer's perception of an analogy between two different situations. In any event, each image provides an implicit commentary on its neighbors.

Hidden or ostensible, the underlying pattern of dream images often follows what in rhetoric is called emphatic order: a progression from the unimportant to the important, from the emotionally neutral to the intense. Jung's analysis of thousands of dreams led him to comment:

There are a great many "average" dreams in which a definite structure can be perceived, not unlike that of a drama. . . . The EXPOSITION . . . indicates the scene of action, the people involved, and often the initial situation of the dreamer. In the second

phase comes the DEVELOPMENT of the plot. . . . The situation is somehow becoming complicated, and a definite tension develops because one does not know what will happen. The third phase brings the CULMINATION or *peripeteia*. Here something decisive happens or something changes completely. . . . The fourth and last phase is the *lysis*, the SOLUTION or RESULT produced by the dream-work. . . . The last phase shows the final situation, which is at the same time the solution "sought" by the dreamer.<sup>3</sup>

The dream drama has a collective as well as an individual meaning. Both Freud and Jung considered myth to be a sort of collective dream, and Freud analyzed myth as such in *Moses and Monotheism* and in *Totem and Taboo*. Moreover, both Freud and Jung believed that the latent content of the dreams of an individual could contain collective as well as personal elements. Regarding the notion of a "collective unconscious," Freud declared: "I fully agree with Jung in recognizing the existence of this phylogenetic heritage."<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere he explained that the experiences of individual egos could be inherited if they recurred frequently, strongly, in many individuals, and in successive generations. He believed that such ego experiences were transformed into id experiences, which could then be transmitted by heredity. Thus the id preserves the residues of countless past egos, Freud claimed. He speculated that the ego might form its superego out of the id by resurrecting impressions derived from egos of former generations.<sup>5</sup>

So it is not the concept of a racial unconscious in the individual which distinguishes the theories of Freud from those of Jung. Freud simply claimed that Jung was too prompt to appeal to the collective unconscious in the course of psychotherapy—that he overlooked many explanations for elements of a patient's fantasy life which could be found in his personal experience. Unlike Freud, Jung and the romantics gave primacy to the manifestations of a collective unconscious in the dreams of individuals, as well as in ritual and myth. I believe that Freud's objection to Jung's interpretive method is valid in the domain of psychotherapy, but not in the domain of literary criticism. Books are more completely the products of tradition, of a collectivity, than are people. All the observable existence of books has to be mediated through language and literary genres, both of which are systems of conventions.

Today it has become widely recognized that dreams serve not only as catharses for repressed impulses but also as creative efforts and



attempts at problem-solving. It has become a commonplace in psychotherapy to interpret dreams as implicit comments on the progress of the therapy and on the patient's relationships with his present-day associates, and to assume that a cycle of dreams constitutes a repeated approach to the same conflict through trial and error.<sup>6</sup> The hypothesis that dreaming may involve creative thinking is borne out by physiological evidence that dreaming involves the higher cerebral centers: patients who have had lobotomies do not dream, except for occasional visions which consist in direct wish-fulfillment.<sup>7</sup>

To stress the problem-solving dimension of dreams is to reintegrate them into the total spectrum of mental activity rather than to consider them as aberrant and anomalous phenomena; "at all levels of cognitive [as distinguished from instinctual] activity we seem to operate by setting up and testing hypotheses, by problem-solving and selecting strategies."<sup>8</sup> Dreams attempt to find a suitable stance to adopt in the face of circumstances and of the facts of one's own personality. They result from the struggle between compulsions and regressive forces, on the one hand, and strivings for self-realization on the other—strivings to establish a mature identity appropriate for the phase of life the dreamer is presently in or is entering. Dreams seek *an avenue of approach* toward self-acceptance and social adjustment, whereas the problem-solving of waking life deals primarily with the *techniques* of such adjustment. In Erikson's terms, dreams help synthesize an ego identity and a self-identity from "abandoned and anticipated selves." He defines ego identity as our perceptions of our relationships to the outer world and society, and self-identity as the repertory of ideas, images, and configurations of the mind, and the perceived attributes of our physical organism.<sup>9</sup>

Erikson, in a classic essay, effectively synthesized the wish fulfillment and the conflict-solving interpretations of dream function. He agrees with Freud that a "latent infantile wish . . . provides the energy for a renewed conflict, and thus for the dream," but he goes on to say that this wish "is embedded in a manifest dream structure which on every level reflects significant trends of the dreamer's total situation. Dreams, then, not only fulfill naked wishes [an infelicitous wording by Erikson, since the whole point of Freud's studies is to show how dreams *clothe* wishes] of sexual license, of unlimited dominance and of unrestricted destructiveness; where they work, they also lift the dreamer's isolation, appease his conscience, and preserve his identity each in specific and instructive ways."<sup>10</sup> Freud himself knew full well that dreams may deal with current problems in the life of the dreamer.<sup>11</sup>