

Dream Codes

Part 1 – Background and Origins

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....the ultimate cradle of biosemiotics rests, if tacitly, in antique medicine.... the earliest Greek theories of signs originating in medical diagnostics ...detecting signs of the body that express disease....Codes, in summary as defined by the Oxford and Webster's dictionary consist of a 'systematic set of laws of signals or symbols, whose meaning is arbitrarily chosen, used for secrecy, brevity, or.... processing of information.

Paul Cobley (2010) citing Thure (son of Jacob) von Uexküll, p.114

Beginnings are wonderful; they hold such promise, such èlan! And it is a real privilege to be part of this one especially because if Vienna was the birthplace of psychoanalysis, Paris was the 'boudoire' of its conception!

We are gathered here to reconstitute a platform for the unifying ideas that guided our interests in biosemiotics an interdisciplinary community pulled apart by a fundamental disagreement over what defines "semiosis" in its modern amplified form as the natural origin of life itself. It is clear, at least to me, that any attempt to impose "interpretation" as the defining criterion for a sign not only collapses into quasi-absurd anthropomorphizing when applied to molecular processes but may seriously jeopardize the whole prospect of a universal 'semiotic' paradigm. (As though "interpretation" were not itself merely a man-made word created to define a concept of *inter-action*. A 'sign' becomes a sign as we denote some-thing as such!) Not only must an amplified, more precise, definitional concept replace it, but a much deeper understanding of "meaning" must soon follow.

This thornier issue, in my opinion, will eventually require a systematized typology defining different *kinds* of meanings, forms of reference, and *how* these are obtained, from codes and signals, all the way to the most conceptually abstract *symbolic* meanings attached to systems of signs that are generated and used only by humans. A universal 'semiotics' will have to account for and incorporate many different forms of information-transmission along such a continuum. These areas of study, I would add, have been anticipated and recommended by some of the finest minds such as A. N. Whitehead, B. Russell in philosophical logic, and N. Goodman, in the philosophy of language (to name just a few), Ogden and Richards in their classic "Meaning of Meaning", while the general unification of science and the humanities --- to which a universal semiotics lends itself --- is today advocated by E. O. Wilson.

Regardless of the nature of the disagreement thanks to T. Khun we understand such ideological rifts to be symptoms of paradigm fracture or disturbance. That this split should have occurred so quickly in so young and newly formed a scientific community, attempting to amplify the study of semiotics, is disappointing, but not surprising. Paradigm shifts implicitly arouse strong resistances especially from communities with entrenched beliefs tugging regressively at the progressive thrust of those that challenge their doctrines.

Rifts notwithstanding, in his exhaustive dictionary of semiotics, the authoritative P. Cobley (2010), writes that since the 1920's the field of 'semiotics,' in its spread through interdisciplinary discourse into a

“universal” semiotics as the *essential attribute of life*, refers to; “The study of biological codes,...nowadays..more commonly designated *biosemiotics*—a term independently coined in recent decades in the US and elsewhere....” (p.180) A rose by any other name....!! “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose”!!

The definition of a *semiotic* system in this community is that of two independent worlds connected by the conventional rules of a code, the field of ‘Code Biology’ devoted to “*the study of all codes of life, and in particular of the codes that appeared after the genetic code and before the codes of culture.*”(Barbieri, letter to Editor of Nov. 2013, *my italics*).

As a theoretical psychoanalyst, with a background in the humanities and the arts, embedded in the interpretive study of higher semiosis, and *no knowledge of biology whatsoever*, I had some serious thinking to do in order to justify my presence, and potential value, here. I found it; first, in the deep ‘biogenetic’ origins and psychobiological strains of our founding theories, but even more relevant to semiotic study in the pictographic language, a special “mode of thought” that, though heavily camouflaged, was decoded and presented by Freud (1900) in his groundbreaking, “The Interpretation of Dreams.” In psychoanalysis our object of study is the human mind, with its conscious and unconscious worlds, a singular mind that is both code-maker *and* adaptor, creator *and* translator of meanings that are hidden and unknown to ourselves: Freud began, and we continue, to deepen this study through a methodology that is primarily a *dialectical dialogue* that generates reflective processes that serve both to look into others’ as we also take ourselves as subjects of study.

Barbieri’s model also identifies two distinct molecular mechanisms underlying organic codes; “transcription and translation” or copying and coding.” These primary mechanisms at the core of life may be generalized and carried over into higher levels of semiosis particularly to the dream, a phenomenon lying on the border between biological and psychical processes. Accordingly I operate under the assumption that natural biological coding mechanisms originate and may serve as templates for mental processes working through the human central nervous system that are normally associated with cerebral functioning, an inquiry that will involve sensory, mnemonic, cognitive, motor and emotional systems, all feeding into the multidetermined configurations of dream imagery.

The “Dream” in psychoanalysis, is not only the originating source-point of the Freudian metatheoretical canon, foundational pillar of his first model of mind and paramount instrument of clinical insight, but is now an undervalued, endangered species in our field, of which, therefore, I make special use by crowning it as the centerpiece of my practice and theoretical focus. Not even so much for its avenue as the “royal road” to the unconscious, a veritable MRI of a dynamic psychical moment of subjective experience, but for its value in disclosing semiotic meaning-forms that predate, anticipate, and underlie, language with its linear syntax, and restrictive vocabulary. Due to the complexity of the topic and the many strands of knowledge required to fully understand the extraordinary amount of psychical information contained in ‘dream codes’ (which has continued to expand) I will be covering the topic from a variety of historical, theoretical, clinical and revisionary perspectives, beginning today, at the very beginning,

I am interested in looking for points of continuity between biological and socio-cultural semiotic processes along broad evolutionary lines as well as in social and psycho-cognitive phenomena, an inquiry that requires bold new generalizations that supersede outdated separatist foundations. Exposing the roots of natural coding mechanisms and extending this template to higher level signal, sign, and symbol systems, provides a model for a universal semiosis from which to form and test hypotheses across disciplines and species. Although semiosis and psychoanalysis share common originating roots in ancient diagnostics they have, strangely, developed in separate domains; I will be tracing the course of the path by which their natural unity is restored.

Today I present a broad historical picture of the scientific atmosphere, especially in areas of medical-neurology and psychiatry, but also in evolutionary biology and embryology, sexology and anthropology, existent at the time that Freud began uncovering unconscious meanings behind symptoms and dreams, insisting that, “in the psychical field, the biological is in fact the underlying bedrock” (*paraphrased*, Freud, 1937, 252) And so to the very beginnings:

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Biologically dream-life seems to me to proceed directly from the residues of the prehistoric stage of life (one to three years), which is the source of the unconscious and alone contains the aetiology of the psychoneuroses: the stage which is normally obscured by an amnesia similar to hysteria...

Freud, letter to Fliess, March 10th, 1898

It's autumn of 1885 and the 29 year old Freud is here in Paris on a six-month travel fellowship to continue his research in neuro-pathology and study with the great Jean- Martin Charcot at the famous Salpêtrière! In his report to his College of Professors at the University of Vienna he underscores the large assemblage of valuable material in neuropathology he found here and his admiration for Charcot's teachings in the French school's novel approach to hypnotism in relation to hysteria, all new and unfamiliar to him. Now in his sixties, Charcot had been at the hospital for 17 years and his charismatic lectures, of such "perfect form," as Freud comments, dramatic public demonstrations, his liberal and dispassionate attention to all comments, along with his flamboyant soirées, draw many young foreign students infecting them with enthusiasm. Freud became an unqualified admirer, partly mesmerized by the accessibility of this "great man" but also swayed by Charcot's belief that the theory of organic neurological disease was complete and the real new frontier lay in uncovering the law like mystery of hysterical symptomatology. Freud arrived October 13th, 1885, a neuro-pathologist, and left in late spring of 1886, completely transformed, with a new path, a new passion, a new profession, and a new mission!

While in Paris he had already written a paper differentiating organic neuro-pathological paralysis from hysterical conversion symptoms that mimic it. He even found time to translate a book of Charcot's lectures, a feat he later repeated in record time, when visiting Bernheim in southern France, of the 'Nancy school' of hypnosis. The facility and speed with which the busy Freud accomplished these copious "translations", in my opinion a too little noted factor, foreshadows his later capacity to decipher, understand, and transcribe "another" far more obscurely coded language, that of dreams.

Returning to Vienna he joined his teacher the physician J. Breuer in the bedside treatment of the mysterious symptoms of the little understood disease of hysteria, mostly in females. This collaboration yielded the famous "Studies in Hysteria" 1895, in which a preliminary model of unconscious determinants was proposed and a "talking cure" initiated: hysterics suffer mainly from 'reminiscences' producing psychogenic symptoms that are compromise-formations; Verbal abreaction with emotional recall seemed at first to obliterate each symptom, one at a time. This was known as the 'cathartic' method. Hypnosis was used as a means of overcoming a defensive resistance to tapping memories that were kept 'repressed' whose dynamic charge expressed itself via symptomatic signs that held specific hidden meanings. But relief was only temporary; a more lasting treatment was necessary. As Freud continued developing his "talking method" a preliminary model was quietly taking shape.

This same year 1895 Freud wrote but soon discarded his "Project for a scientific Psychology:" Peppered with Greek symbols this was an attempt at constructing a neuro-physiological model of mind based on quantitative energetic principles that might satisfy the scientific requirements of his exacting medical community. Although there is as yet little of what will unfold through his empirical 'method' this early organismic endeavor emphasized homeostatic constancy placing a pleasure/unpleasure *principle* at the heart of motivation, hence the centrality of the "wish" in fuelling dreams. Abandoning these physiological strictures freed Freud to move ahead with his own observation of latent meanings behind the manifest signs of "motivated forgetting", "suffocated affects," and a mind split into conscious and unconscious levels, kept divided by a defensive "repression barrier."

With the seeds of what he was gestating written out in a prodigious correspondence with his influential friend W. Fliess, Freud settled into his practice and began "listening" in a unique evenly suspended, non-judgmental, loose way, to a spontaneous free-associative narration by patients who soon began telling him their dreams. Having discovered that conversion symptoms expressed unconscious meanings he surmised that dreams, likewise, were compromise solutions, resembling neurotic symptom-formation, and that they too held interpretable meanings. In mid August 1897 Freud began his own self-analysis, a solitary feat in

which he labored to uncover memories, conflicts, complexes, and, via elaborate labyrinthine free associations, to interpret his own dreams.

An avid reader and prolific writer, well indoctrinated in the scientific *Weltanschauung* of his day, Freud was at the avant guard of late 19th century science and literature, embedded in and profoundly influenced by the new findings in human evolution, sexuality, embryology, and neurology, of his time. In addition to Meynert, Fechner, and Charcot, major influences were; Darwin's depiction of life as a struggle for survival driven by self-preservative and procreative instincts (hunger and sex) which looms large over Freud's early and later motivational vision, first in a dual-drive theory and ultimately in the abstract "Life and Death" instincts; Jean-Baptist Lamarck's "inheritance of acquired characteristics" idea; Ernst Haeckel's fundamental biogenetic law "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" and Stanley Hall's recapitulation theory: by J. Hughlings-Jackson's epigenetic neurology and doctrine of psychical 'dissolution' of the nervous system, or 'regression,' in turn influenced by the evolutionary philosophy of Herbert Spencer: the emergent 'sexologists' notably Albert Moll, R. Krafft-Ebing, and Havelock Ellis; and by T. Lipps, and the ascendance of developmental/evolutionary approaches in scientific circles.

Against the backdrop of this medley of ideas Freud begins to shape a truly psycho-analytic model of mind grounded in three fundamental processes: **regression, repression, and the pertinacity of early impressions**. Briefly: there are three kinds of **regression**, topographical, formal and temporal; in sleep this implies a return to more archaic *modes of thought*, earlier *forms experience*, and early memories. There are two kinds of repression, a primal organic, occurring over millennia of evolution (involving upright posture and a move away from olfaction), that predisposes to a secondary *pathogenic* repression, the cornerstone of neurotic misery. The imprinting impact of *early experiences*, because these are not yet fully represented, will yield the theory of infantile 'amnesia,' of the first five years.

These three central ideas, and the later polarized "Life and Death" instincts, ground psychoanalysis in bio-genetic principles along two causal tracks: the distal-phylogenetic, and proximal-ontogenetic, yielding dynamic processes that fuel the formation of neurosis, jokes, common parapraxes, and, most fundamentally, dreams. With the dream, Freud has moved out of etiology and medical territory and into that of normal universal psychical phenomenon, a step that leads directly to his first *general* (topographical) theory of mind. Between 1895 and 1900 Freud has developed a psychobiological model of mind built on a psycho-Lamarckian biogenetic paradigm of human development that will soon also underpin his model of phases in psychosexual evolution.

Why is this all so important?

Because these key premises, embedded in a dynamic model of a multilevel mind kept divided, are the soil from which Freud identifies the structural properties and motive force of dreams as he deciphers the grammatical/syntactical mechanisms of their primary-process code. These foundational ideas are fundamental to understanding dream structure and the full span of 'meaning-forms' that emerge from their compositional processes of signification. In 1900, Freud's "Interpretation of Dreams" bursts in on the scene commanding a combination of awe, scorn, and ridicule. Yet it is here, in chapter 7, that the full measure of Freud's powers of observation, translation, and conceptual synthesis, combined with his stalwart independence of thought-- all of which have been developing in these 5 gestational years - deliver a work of inspired insight that, "falls to one's lot but once in a lifetime" (Freud, Vienna, March 1931, Preface to third Ed., 1900) and will impact the science of mind forever.

The Dream in psychoanalysis is a portal and bridge at the bio-semiotic border; a silent gateway that telescopes back phylogenetically to earlier, more archaic modes of presentation, acting as a prism that refracts multiple condensed meanings from a palate of current impressions, fears, desires and problems, as well as backwards ontogenetically attaching it's emotional impetus to distant fragments of personal memories and experiences from early childhood. In a two-tiered structure the dream-code grammar, or its *form*, is created by condensation, displacement, reversals, and symbolic camouflage, through distorted perceptual snapshots of places, events, and characters from past and present, forming pictographic compositions in a narrative woven out of sensory-emotional cloth that depicts a "*psychic reality*" more powerful, by far, than reality itself. But every dreamer constructs an idiosyncratic private vocabulary for the elements of *content* so that only the dreamer's many personal associations will lead to its hidden meanings and core ideas.

Yet something important is missing?

What is missing is semiosis: although works on symbolic forms were certainly available, only a short inclusion of symbolism, attributed to W. Stekel, in the 1911, third edition of the *Dream book* appears in Freud's writing. This is because its study was then the province of metaphysics and philosophy, not yet within the purview of a scientific psychology. Furthermore, Freud was intent on strengthening, not loosening, the biological foundations of mind, as a 'bulwark' (his word) against mysticism. Yet the dream as 'another 'mode of thought' remains stubbornly obscure without a semiotic analysis; it emerges from less, even un-differentiated, proto-semiotic recesses of human experience where language has yet to penetrate or assign significance to what *has already been apprehended by the senses*. It turns P. Bissoua's statement, "meaning makes sense" upside down, as in dreams it is "the senses that make meanings." By unlocking the key to their interpretation within a discourse-semantic of unconscious forms Freud's methodology opened a window into the evolution of the epistemologies of the human mind.

To be continued.....

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