

Oriol Corbacho : The Flavour of Nightmare : 30th November 2019 (LRO 195)

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References:

-[The Interpretation of Dreams: 1st November 1899 \(published as 1900\): Sigmund Freud](#) : Information & availability [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=655) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=655> or www.Freud2Lacan.com

- [Seminar X: The Anxiety \(or Dread\): 1962-1963: begins 14th November 1962: Jacques Lacan](#) See [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=212) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=212>

- p61 of Adrian Price's translation = Seminar X : 12th December 1962 : pV 41 of Cormac Gallagher's translation quotes : Ernest Jones (1910) : 'Pathology of the Nightmare' : Reprinted in Ernest Jones, 'On Nightmares' , International Psycho-analytical Library, The Hogarth Press, 1931. : See [On Nightmares : 1931 : Ernest Jones](#) or [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12453) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12453>

Quote Seminar X : 12th December 1962 : pV 41 : To jump to a completely different order, I would evoke here the most massive, unreconstituted, ancestral experience, rejected onto the obscurity of ancient times from which we are supposed to have escaped, a necessity which unites us with these ages which is still current and which very curiously we speak about only very rarely: it is that of the nightmare. One asks oneself why for some time, analysts interest themselves so little in the nightmare.

I introduce it here because it is going to be necessary all the same for us to remain on it this year for a certain time and I will tell you why. I will tell you why and where to find the material, because if there is already on this question an already established and very remarkable literature, to which you should refer, it is - however forgotten it may be on this point - it is namely Jones' book on the nightmare, a book of incomparable riches. I recall to you the fundamental phenomenology. I am not dreaming for a moment of eluding the principal dimension: the anxiety of the nightmare is experienced properly speaking as that of the *jouissance* of the Other. The correlative of the nightmare, is the incubus or the succubus, it is this being who weighs with his whole opaque weight of alien *jouissance* on your chest, who crushes you under his *jouissance*.

Well then, to introduce ourselves from this important angle into what the thematic of the nightmare will bring us, the first thing in any case which appears, which appears in the myth, but also in the phenomenology of the nightmare, of the nightmare as experienced, is that this being who weighs down by his *jouissance* is also a questioning being and even properly speaking, one who manifests, deploys himself in this complete, developed dimension of the question as such which is called the riddle.

The Flavour of the Nightmare

Oriol Cobacho

In 1977, Jorge Luis Borges delivered a talk called "The Nightmare"^[1] at the Teatro Coliseo in Buenos Aires, the same city where the AMP Congress will be held in April. In that conference Borges concentrates on the nature of dreams by using references that go from Boethius, through Dante to Sir Thomas Browne. With this, Borges highlights the special difficulty faced by those who want to examine dreams, since anything that can be said about them is based on the memory that the dreamer has of them. The dream, he adds, should be thought of as a work of fiction that continues to be fabled at the moment of waking up and also when, later on, it is told to someone. His first words are "Dreams are the genus; nightmares are the species"^[2].

Although Freud is not quoted at any point, Borges' interest and way of thinking about the dream might almost seem a passage from *Die Traumdeutung*. Borges' attention to detail strikes us when he brings up an example of his own nephew. He observes that children do not differentiate between wakefulness and sleep, as if everything happened on the same plane. He draws a line from the child to the mystics, even to the poets, for whom it is not impossible for the vigil to be a dream, as Calderón de la Barca wrote with his "life is a dream". The anecdote went like this: his five-year-old nephew had a habit of telling him his dreams every morning. One morning Borges asked him what he had dreamed. The boy, encouraged by his uncle's peculiar hobby of being interested in his dreams, replies: "Last night I was lost in the forest, I was afraid, but I reached a clearing and there was a white wooden house with a ladder that went all the way around and with steps like a corridor, and also a door. Through that door you came out". The boy suddenly stopped and added: "Tell me, what were you doing in that little house?" Thanks to children and poets we can suspect that there is only one dreamer and that that dreamer is each one of us. As the Austrian poet Walter von der Vogelweide beautifully puts in verse: *Ist es mein Leben geträumt oder ist es wahr?* (Did I dream my life or was it a dream?).

Towards the final part of his lecture, Borges turns to something darker: the nightmare. He is interested in the actual word "nightmare", tracing its etymological variations through different languages. On this basis he realises that there is a coincidence in a demonic being that would provoke the nightmare. As an example, *Alp* is the German word for 'nightmare', which means 'the elf'. It would be the elf who would inspire the nightmare. In Greek, *efialter* is a very strong term: it is the devil himself. If we go to the Latin, *incubus* is also the demon that oppresses the sleeper and is again here a source of inspiration for the nightmare. The English language seems to be the most moderate. The word 'nightmare' is found in Shakespeare's work at least a couple of times as follows: 'I met the night mare' and 'the nightmare and her nine foals'.

Although dreams are an aesthetic work, Borges tells us that in the case of the nightmare there is a peculiar kind of horror. A person who appears dead or someone who leaves us, are not reasons that would appear in a real nightmare. This has a

singular horror and is expressed with something Borges calls the flavour of the nightmare. In order for us to get a taste of that flavour, Borges presents us with a nightmare of Wordsworth's that was highly praised by De Quincey. He tells us that Wordsworth was once worried about some kind of cosmic cataclysm that would end the Arts and Sciences. In his dream all the elements of the nightmare are present: physical discomfort, persecution, and the element of horror, of the supernatural. Wordsworth was in a grotto facing the sea, it was noon and he was reading Don Quixote. Borges tells us that Wordsworth commented: "I put down the book, I started thinking; I thought precisely about the subject of the Science and the Arts and then the time came: sleep took hold of me and I entered the dream".

We have here then Wordsworth, who has fallen asleep in a grotto, facing the sea, among the golden sands of a beach. He then has the dream: the sand surrounds him. He is in the middle of the desert (when one is in the desert, we are always in the centre, Borges reminds us) and is horrified, thinking what he can do to escape, when he suddenly sees that there is someone by his side. Strangely, this is an Arab from the Bedouin tribe, who rides on a camel and has a spear in his right hand. Under his left arm he has a stone; and in the right hand a seashell. The Arab tells him that his mission is to save the Arts and Sciences, and brings the seashell to his ear, a seashell of extraordinary beauty. Wordsworth tells us that, in a language that he did not know but that he understood, he heard the prophecy: a kind of passionate ode, prophesying that the Earth was about to be destroyed by the flood that the wrath of God would send. After that, the Arab tells him that it is true, that the flood is coming, but that he has a mission: to save the Arts and the Sciences. Then, he shows him the stone and the stone is, curiously, Euclid's *Geometry*. Following that, he brings the seashell and it turns out to be a book as well: it is the one that has said those terrible things to him. The seashell is also all the poetry of the world. The Bedouin says: "I have to save these two things, the stone and the seashell, books both of them." He turns his face back and there is a time when Wordsworth sees the Bedouin's face change, it is filled with horror. He looks back as well and sees a great light, a light that has already flooded half of the desert. It is that of the waters of the flood that will destroy the Earth. The Bedouin walks away, and Wordsworth sees that the Bedouin is also Don Quixote and that he is not at the same time; duality that corresponds to the horror of the dream. Wordsworth, at that moment, wakes up in a cry of terror, because the waters are already reaching him. End of the dream.

Wordsworth's is, according to Borges, one of the most beautiful nightmares in literature. Not a simple matter of taste. Lacan, in his Seminar *Anxiety*, wonders why analysts have been so little interested in the nightmare. "I'll just mention the experience that is the heaviest, which is never reconstituted, an ancestral experience, flung back into a darkness of ancient times from which we're supposed to have escaped, but which bears out a necessity that unites us to these times, an experience that's still current, and which, most curiously, we don't speak about any more except very rarely - the experience of the nightmare^[3]."

[1] Borges J.L., "Siete Noches", *Obras Completas*, Emecé, Buenos Aires, 1989

[2] *Ibid.* p. 221

[3] Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X, Anxiety*, transl. A. R. Price, Polity Press, Cambridge / Malden, 2014, p. 61

Image: John Henry Fuseli - The Nightmare

