"No one sleeps in this room without the dream of a common language."
Adrienne Rich, *Origins and History of Consciousness*

Dreams in the Common Language

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To hear Freud tell it, our souls go into hiding during daylight hours only to resurface during the time that we lie in bed, unconscious. In the confusing thoughts and images that come to the surface during R.E.M. sleep, our most heavily censored desires take the shape of innocuous everyday people and objects. The unconscious, then, is not only a master of disguise, but is also a remarkably adept and concise narrator. As anyone who has ever tried to relate a dream understands, even the simplest element serves as a nexus for several different meanings. Lacan takes Freud's general framework a step further by examining how the desires we try so hard to disguise arise, and why they take the condensed, symbolic dream-forms that they do. In the course of examining the assumptions underpinning Freud's theory, Lacan proves that, far from being indicators of our truest, innermost selves, our most profound desires actually arise from a fundamental alienation from our "real" selves. When Lacan claims that "the unconscious is the discourse of the Other," he is therefore referring to two different aspects of Freud's theory. Lacan claims that not only does the origin of the unconscious lie in our recognition of the Other, but that the means that the unconscious uses to express its awareness of that split is not, as is sometimes believed, a unique, preverbal, and individual voice, but a construct adopted from the outside world. The unconscious, in other words, both comes from and speaks the language of the Other.

Before we examine Lacan's claim in detail, we should clarify what both he and Freud mean when they refer to the unconscious. Freud maintains that dreams center on wish-fulfillment; hence, the unconscious, from whence these

dreams arise, is the repository of those oft-unacknowledged wishes. As Freud states in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "dreams are given their shape...by two...forces; one of these constructs the wish, while the other...brings about a distortion in the expression of the wish."[1] Like a political writer who is trying to slip a critique past the censors, the unconscious both voices and disguises its desires through the medium of dreams. In a sense, the unconscious could be thought of as akin to instinct. After all, one *unconsciously* flinches before a blow; similarly, if one goes to bed hungry, one will often *unconsciously* appease that hunger with a feast in one's dreams. In this example, it is clear that the unconscious is the realm of desires. Some of them make it through our internal filters more or less intact; no one has to be ashamed of wanting to fill an empty stomach. On the other hand, our waking minds find some of our desires more disturbing, and refuse to let those wishes pass through to our conscious minds unaltered; many people occasionally wish their siblings would die and leave them as the only child, but fratricide remains a pretty rare crime. Only in dreams can such wishes make themselves known, and only then by cloaking themselves in less threatening guises. Hence, one could say that Freud designates the unconscious as the collection of all one's unsatisfied desires.

Lacan takes this interpretation of the unconscious a step further. He argues that the important thing is not what the disguised desire is, but how it chooses to disguise itself. As his colleague Slovoj Zizek puts it in his paraphrase of Freud in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, "we must get rid of the fascination

[1] Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Avon Books, 1998)

in this kernel of signification, in the 'hidden meaning' of the dream– that is to say, in the content concealed behind the form of a dream– and centre our attention on this form itself, on the dream-work to which the 'latent dream-thoughts' were submitted."[2] In other words, it is the cloaking mechanism that a given desire uses to slip past one's moral filters that reveals the nature of the unconscious. Therefore, the language the unconscious uses to dissemble is every bit as important as the illicit desires that it tries to cover up.

One aspect of Freud's theory that later becomes important to Lacan is the fact that dreams operate at a very symbolic, condensed, and abstracted level. This first came to Freud's attention when he noted that "dreams are brief, meager, and laconic in comparison with the range and wealth of the dream-thoughts."[3] This is largely because any one actor or object in a dream is often host to a number of connotations. For instance, Freud relates how, in his dream of Irma, "she became the representative of all those other figures [i.e. people, memories and associations] which had been sacrificed to the work of condensation, since [he] passed over to her, point by point, everything that reminded [him] of [the other figures]."[4] His unconscious substituted another image for his "anxiety about [his] eldest daughter," in much the same way that language condenses by substituting one word for a chain of others.[5] As he noted of dreams in general, there is "nothing superfluous in [them], every word [is] a symbol."[6]

[2] Zizek, 14.
[3] Freud, 313.
[4] Freud, 327.
[5] Freud, 327.
[6] Freud, 411.

Every element of a dream, in other words, can be translated into an emotion, an anxiety or a hope. This makes a dream both an eloquent and limiting way for the unconscious to speak. One cannot simply dream of one's raw anxieties or frustrations; in order to be articulated, those desires have to attach themselves to some other symbolic form.

Part of Lacan's assertion that the unconscious is the discourse of the Other addresses the claim that the unconscious makes itself known through such a parade of symbols. Jameson states that Lacan believes that "the intellectual elaboration of the symbol cannot disalienate [the symbol]."[7] There are two facets to this statement. Firstly, Lacan claims that using symbolic, instead of imaginary, tools to unravel "the meaning and the desire that the [dream] subject had hidden within it" invariably fails because dreams are primarily composed of images, not of words. In order to unearth dreams' underlying meanings, one should accordingly use the language of images to conduct the analysis. Secondly, Lacan argues that the symbols we see in our dreams are fundamentally divorced from our desires, regardless of how readily a Freudian analysis links those symbols to our hidden wants and fears. As Jameson points out, "for Lacan, the apprenticeship of language is an alienation for the psyche."[8] Put differently, the structure of dreams, in addition to the language we use to relate those dreams to others, is not of our own making: it comes from the big Other. When we speak, we don't directly speak our minds: we funnel our thoughts through the framework of a specific language, such as French or

[7] Jameson, Fredric. *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, 351
[8] Jameson, 351

Swahili. Similarly, when we dream we use sanitized symbols to slip our desires past our own internal filters. Those symbols lend an illusory and respectable distance to topics we try to study and pretend to control, in part because they don't entirely capture the uniqueness and urgency of our individual desires. In this way, dream symbols clearly constitute a language imposed on us by others.

More fundamentally, however, Lacan argues that the desires that form the foundation of the unconscious are themselves products of the Other. It's no coincidence that 'to want' can mean 'to desire' as well as 'to lack'; one can only desire that which one does not already have. The Oedipal conflict provides an example of this, as the young boy desires– and cannot possess– Father's place in Mother's heart. While Freud argued that the young child's awareness of lacking what Father has is one of the primary traumas of childhood, Lacan argues that the Oedipal conflict is merely an echo of the alienation resulting from the Mirror Stage. This is when a child first becomes aware that there is a side to him of which he may not have previously been aware, but that nevertheless plays an important role in how he fits into society. It is a little jarring for a child to see himself reflected in a mirror for the first time: he has been judging the rest of the world at face value for all of his short life, but it has never occurred to him that he, too, has a face, and that the appearance of this face may not entirely match up with what lies under its forehead. This realization leads to a fragmentation of the ego; as Lacan states, it both "symbolizes the mental permanence of the I, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination."[9] In other words, the

[9]Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits*, 2

reflection provides proof of the child's existence, but only at the cost of splitting him into two parts: the visible reflection and the "real" person, complete with all its internal thoughts and sensations. In that moment, the child has to try to reconcile the image he sees in the mirror with the person he knows himself to be. Lacan writes, "it is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other."[10] For a few seconds, the child sees himself as others see him, and the rest of his life is spent trying to bring that image into line with the person he thinks he "really" is. The ability to look out at the world through the eyes of others both alienates him from himself and lets him compare himself to others to discover in what areas he is wanting. Thus, a person can only begin to desire when he realizes he is lacking. That realization only comes about as a result of being able to identify with others, which is in turn dependent on being able to dissassociate from one's self. In this second, more basic way, therefore, the morass of desire we refer to as the unconscious is directly descended from identification with the Other.

If one asks the average person on the street to define what the unconscious is, the most common response will likely point to some uncontrollable, incomprehensible thing that directs peoples' dreams and makes men more likely to marry women who resemble their mothers. On some level, dreams, along with the unconscious they supposedly represent, are perceived as direct windows onto a one's psyche. This view seems to be supported by Freud's *The Interpretation*

[10]Lacan, 5

of Dreams, which lays out a method for sorting through dreams to uncover the hidden, often repulsive, desires they try to fulfill. On closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that the unconscious does not provide a direct link to whom we "really" are. There are two aspects of Lacan's philosophy that prove the unconscious to be a creature not of one's own making. First, the unconscious speaks in symbols. While this abstracted language makes the myriad desires and connections at work in one's mind easier to represent in a dream, it also necessarily omits some details. Thus, the unconscious can provide only an approximation of whom one is. More importantly, however, Lacan points out that all of our desires stem from a fundamental alienation from ourselves. Only by taking the viewpoint of the Other are we even able to notice what we lack, and therefore what there is for us to desire. Even though it initially seems like the unconscious is shaped by the core of what we are, the very opposite turns out to be true.