Art and Psychoanalysis

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FIVE

Dreams, Delusions, and Art

This chapter reviews the similarities between the mechanisms of dreaming and artistic techniques. Because such similarities exist, the analysis of dreams and other pictorial productions of the mind can contribute to iconographic analysis. It must be said at the outset, however, that Freud was careful to distinguish between dreams and art,[1] which differ in important ways. The mechanisms by which dreams are formed are not creative in the artistic sense because they are not given aesthetic form. They make no judgments, and reach no conclusions. Themes and motifs may be repeated by an individual dreamer, but they do not address an audience, as do works of art. Memories and daydreams are pictorial, and screen memories of the kind Leonardo reported are composed of particularly vivid images. Delusions and hallucinations, although sometimes auditory, are more usually visual. Even certain symptoms are pictorial insofar as they are metaphors for conflicting ideas.

For example, a woman who was fired from her job without warning became convinced that she had developed an obstruction in her throat that disrupted her ability to swallow. Numerous medical examinations failed to identify any physical cause. In this case, the symptom proved to be nothing more than a "picture" of the woman's difficulty in "swallowing" her unjust treatment.

FREUD ON DREAMS

Because dreams are the most significant and universal psychic images, Freud called them the "royal road to the unconscious."[2] There have been

no significant theories of the psychology of dreaming since Freud. His first publication, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in 1900, was followed by a shorter summary, "On Dreams," in 1901. Aside from subsequent footnotes, Freud stuck to the principles of dreaming which he discovered early in his career. Dreams, he wrote, are "disguised fulfillments of repressed wishes."[3]

Freud identified three classes of dreams in 1901—wish fulfillments, anxiety dreams, and dreams in which the content is disturbing but the feeling is not. Despite these distinctions, all three types, according to Freud, are motivated by a wish. In the first category, the disguise is successful and the dream proceeds undisturbed. In the second, the disguise is absent or insufficient; the forbidden wish emerges, causes anxiety, and the dreamer wakes up. The third category accounts for a particular kind of dream in which the wish is particularly well disguised by a misalliance of content and feeling.

Freud's only significant addition to the principles of dreaming came in 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.[4] Having treated World War I shell-shock victims who psychically reexperienced their traumas in repeated nightmares, Freud could not sustain the view that all dreams have a wish-fulfilling motive. He amended his theory to include the newly discovered "repetition compulsion," which he related to the death instinct. In dreams, the compulsion to repeat is essentially an unsuccessful attempt to return to a previous trauma and try to "solve" it.

The Mechanisms of Dreaming

Dreams are primarily pictorial; they have been changed from ideas, thoughts, feelings, and impressions, which can be expressed verbally. According to Freud, a dream is triggered when a thought or impression of the previous twenty-four hours (the "dream-day") connects with an impression from the past. The memory and report of the dream are its "manifest content," and the underlying dream-thoughts, accessible by interpretive means, are the "latent content." The latent content is the result of what Freud called "primary process," or unconscious thinking. The manifest content is the conscious memory of the dream and its revision into logical thought; it reflects "secondary-process thinking," which determines "secondary revision," that is, the waking description of a dream.

With the formulation of the structural theory[5] dividing the mind into id, ego, and superego, latent content was assigned mainly to the id, the superego was the censoring agency, and the ego created the defenses. In

the context of the structural system, the dream is a compromise among the latent, unconscious, wishes of the id, the requirements of the superego's censor, and the ego's defenses. The wishful latent content is thus transformed, remembered, and described.

Dreams obey the laws of visual rather than verbal representation, because the dreamer regresses from words to pictures. As a result, dreams, like primary-process thinking, are without logic—such as "if . . . then" and "either . . . or"; what is expressed in words in waking life is translated by the dream into concrete, visual form. Conflict, for example, which is abstract, can be represented pictorially in a dream by the inability to move. Likewise, many of the puns in dreams are the result of a concrete, visual representation of sound.

Puns in Dreams

An eighteen-year-old man, who was the youngest of ten children, dreamed that he killed his father by hitting him over the head with a rake. His dream expressed his anger at his father's "rakishness" and the wish that his father not have any more children (which he could not do if he were dead).

A businessman dreamed that his alarm clock said $6.30 instead of 6:30 A.M.—an illustration of the adage that "time is money."

A woman asking for an unreasonably high divorce settlement dreamed that her leg became weak and would not support her. Aside from many other meanings, the dream reflected her awareness that she "didn't have a leg to stand on."

A graduate student's dream of overeating while outlining his Ph.D. dissertation expressed the abstract idea of "food for thought."

A man dreamed of defecating on the floor after a lengthy phone call from his compulsively verbal mother, thereby depicting the notion of "verbal diarrhea."

A single mother who had been arguing with her son about repeatedly getting into trouble with the law dreamed that she was trying to boil crabs. The crabs kept jumping out of the pot and crawling around on the floor. The dreamer reported that her son had been particularly "crabby" the night before. In the dream, the boy had become the crabs, which "represented" the idea of in and out of trouble with the police, as in and out of "hot water." Another feature of unconscious thinking and dreaming illustrated by this dream is the absence of temporal sequence. Dreams depict repetition visually as multiples—in this case, several crabs and repeated action.

A sixty-year-old anthropologist doing fieldwork in Africa dreamed that

he saw a distorted face appear through an opening in his tent as he slept. An arm reached over to the anthropologist and gently lifted off his watch. He awoke in terror. Three weeks later, the anthropologist had a serious heart attack and required double by-pass surgery. The dream was an internal warning that someone was trying to steal his "ticker," a reference to time and the dreamer's watch as well as being a slang term for the heart.

Each of these punning dream episodes could be shown to have multiple dynamic and symbolic meanings for the dreamer. As such, they, like Leonardo's screen memory and all artistic images, are overdetermined.

Freud identified four mechanisms of dreaming—the "dream work"—which effect the translation from verbal to pictorial. These are conditions of representability, condensation, displacement, and symbolization. The last three mechanisms satisfy the first and also create the disguise required to elude censorship. The physiological purpose of the dream is to preserve sleep; when the censor is disturbed because the wish is unmasked, as in anxiety dreams, the dreamer wakes up. Forbidden wishes are allowed some expression in dreams because the condition of sleep inhibits action. To counter the opposing views of dreaming, Freud pointed out the lengths to which a dream will go to keep the dreamer asleep; he cited the instance of a dreamer hearing a carpet being beaten. Instead of waking up, the dreamer turned the sound into the dream image of an audience clapping.[6]

In condensation, one or more images or ideas are superimposed or conflated. The businessman condensed $6.30 with 6:30 A.M., and the eighteen-year-old man conflated the two meanings of "rake"—a roué and a garden tool. Verbal "mistakes," whether in dreams, jokes, or slips of the tongue, can also be effected by condensation. For example, a female partner in a law firm, who was concerned about a power play by three male colleagues, dreamed that they had created a "triumpherate." The dreamer had condensed "triumph" with "triumvirate."

Displacement, which is a process of putting one element in the place of another, often facilitates condensation. In the crab dream, the unpleasant behavior of the dreamer's son was displaced onto the crabs. In the businessman's dream, a dollar sign had been placed before the number six, and a period had taken the place of the colon.

Symbolization works by pictorial analogy. Long, thin objects regularly represent the phallus, and concave objects, vessels, and containers represent the vagina. Although there are vast numbers of symbols, the things symbolized are small in number. By and large, they are restricted to

people, body parts, and bodily functions.[7] In the crab dream, the crabs symbolized the boy as well as his crabbiness, and, since crabs move sideways, they also represented his inability to be "straight."

The pot symbolized the mother herself, and her action of dropping crabs in hot water was her attempt to control her son by keeping him home instead of allowing him to go out and get into trouble. Staying home, of course, meant staying home with her, which is "hot water" of another kind. Turning her son into a crab put him down on the evolutionary scale and symbolically infantilized him. In and out of the pot depicts the ambivalence of both mother and son individually, as well as their ambivalent relation to each other.

The capacity to symbolize assists not only representability, but also condensation and displacement. In the verbal-diarrhea dream, the verbal functions of the mouth were displaced downward, and the anal functions were simultaneously displaced upward. Here, therefore, the dreamer joined the symbolic connection of useless, rapidly flowing words and loose feces with the operations of upward and downward displacement by virtue of condensation. The space of the torso, between mouth and anus, was eliminated, or condensed, and the two orifices were superimposed to create the image of "verbal diarrhea."

In the "triumpherate" dream, the three letters "phe" were displaced onto the "vir" of "triumvirate," thereby condensing triumph and triumvirate. The substitution expressed the woman's sense that she had been excluded, and triumphed over, by three men. Having studied Latin, she knew that *vir* is the Latin word for "man"; the number three in dreams usually has phallic significance, because the male genital organ has three easily observable parts. By consonance of sound, "phe" equals "fe," the first two letters of "female," and depicts the dreamer's wish that women (phe) triumph over men (vir).

EXAMPLES OF "DREAM WORK" IN ART

Condensation

Castagno's *David* of c. 1450 [10] is a good illustration of condensation used consciously as a pictorial device. David is about to launch the stone that will slay Goliath; but Goliath's decapitated head indicates that he is already

dead. Castagno has thus condensed time; he has depicted the before and after of Goliath's death simultaneously and within the same space.

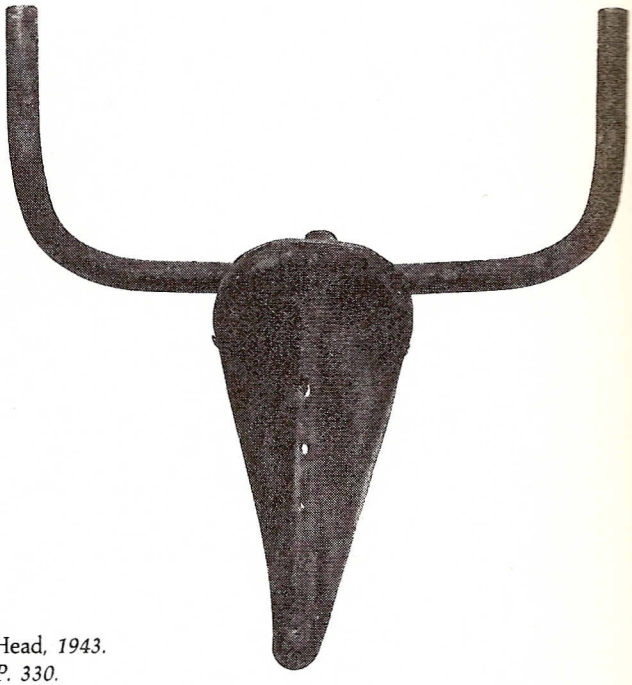
Condensation of time is one of the most persistent, and conscious, pictorial techniques in Christian art. It permitted contemporary personages, often the picture's donor, to seem present at a past event. The reverse could also be true—that is, the donor or other contemporary figure could appear to have conjured up the past event as a devotional image. In Masaccio's *Trinity* [15], for example, the donors stand outside the barrel-vaulted sacred space. The ambiguous relation of the donors to the event—Are they meant actually to be there? Or is the scene "imagined" by them?—is served by temporal condensation.

Condensing time was particularly appropriate for typological images. By virtue of the typological system paralleling figures and events of the Old and New Testaments, Christian writers incorporated the Old Dispensation into the New. Everything that had preceded the era of Christ, including classical antiquity, could be shown to have "prefigured" Christ's coming as part of a grand cosmic plan. Christ was the new Adam and Mary, the new Eve; Adam and Eve were "types" for Christ and Mary. The story of Jonah and the whale "typified" Christ's death and resurrection, both requiring an interval of three days. Old Testament prophets and ancient sibyls were reinterpreted as having prophesied the coming of Christ. Eventually, later historical figures and events, often having contemporary political significance, were paralleled with biblical characters and events. The typological system was thus an elaborate revision of history, designed to demonstrate the all-embracing and universal nature of the Christian Church. This historical revision determined many iconographic programs, including the Sistine Chapel, where the left wall is decorated with Old Testament scenes and the right with New.

In individual paintings, typology is illustrated by temporal condensation. A work such as Fra Angelico's fifteenth-century *Annunciation with Expulsion* [36] refers to the "beginning of time" by including the Expulsion of Adam and Eve in the distance. This iconography parallels the Annunciation of Christ's birth with the Expulsion as the redemption of original sin. Although both scenes occupy the same picture plane, the Expulsion is smaller and in the background.

Perspectival developments in the Renaissance increased the range of condensation. Fra Angelico's Expulsion is small and distant, to denote temporal distance from the larger, foreground scene of the Annunciation. Viewers are reminded of the typological connection between the two

36. Fra Angelico, Annunciation with Expulsion, *fifteenth century. Gabinetto Fotografico, Soprintendenza Beni Artistici e Storici di Firenze, Florence.*



37. Pablo Picasso, Bull's Head, *1943. Musée Picasso, Paris. M.P. 330.*

events by the condensation of real time and spatial separation; past is pictorially distinguished from present by size and location. The Annunciation also refers to future time. Mary's gesture, crossing her arms as she leans toward Gabriel, is a visual reminder of Christ's Crucifixion and her foreknowledge of it.

With the development of new approaches to artistic media in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the possibilities for condensation expanded further. In collage and assemblage, for example, spaces between the literal components of the media are manipulated by the artist differently from more traditional paintings and sculptures. Picasso's *Bull's Head* of 1943 [37] is a case in point; it was made by "assembling" a bicycle seat and a pair of handlebars. The expected space between them was eliminated in the service of condensation. In contrast to the condensed elements of a dream, however, those in an artistic assemblage, such as the *Bull's Head,* are juxtaposed rather than superimposed.

That the metaphorical aspect of the *Bull's Head* requires condensation is clear if the logical steps preceding its creation are followed. They would presumably go something like this: "If the seat and handlebars of a bicycle

are detached, the seat turned one hundred and eighty degrees and attached directly to the handlebars, and if the whole thing is cast in bronze, the resulting object will resemble the head of a bull." Picasso's metaphorical style of thinking has, in this instance, led him to assemble the parts of a modern mechanical object (the bicycle) in a way that formally suggests the traditional motif of the bull. The result is a witty and unlikely combination that "works"—like a good joke—because it carries intellectual and formal conviction.

Displacement and Symbolization

Displacement in the visual arts can reflect the unconscious symbolic relationships between parts of the body. Such displacements are familiar in popular language. The riddle that asks "Why do men think so much and women talk so much?" with the answer "Because men have two heads and women have four lips" expresses the respective upward and downward displacement of genitals and face.

Roman masks whose tongues are phalli [38] illustrate the unconscious equation of tongue and phallus. A related metaphorical expression of this equation informs the Christian characterization of Christ as "God's word made flesh." The fecundating power of the "word of God"—explicit in certain Annunciation scenes (see Chapter 9)—necessarily equates tongue and phallus.

38. Roman Drinking-Bowl Mask with Phallic Tongue, *first century* A.D.

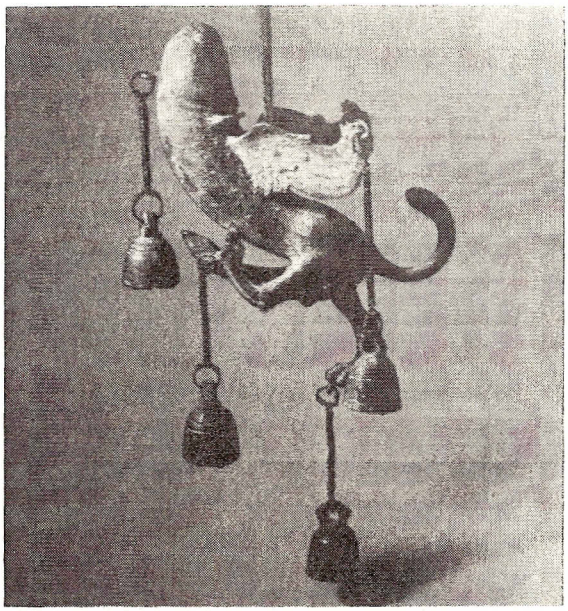
The eye/phallus equation, which explains the self-blinding of Oedipus as upwardly displaced castration,[8] appears in a Greek vase painting fragment [39]. Two eyed phalli seem to peer over the edge of a pot and through a cloth, as if trying to see out. This equation was particularly significant in antiquity, as the phallus was believed to protect against the evil eye; herms (statues with erect phalli) guarded entrances and roadways. A curious first-century B.C. Roman terracotta statue shows a phallic figurine sawing through an eye, apparently to demonstrate the power of the phallus to counter the evil eye.[9]

The unconscious association of the entire body with the phallus appears in a tiny Roman bronze body/phallus now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts [40]. The image corresponds to a fantasy that has been described by psychoanalysts[10] as usually found in vain, narcissistic characters with unresolved castration fear. In order to defend against that fear, men overcompensate by turning their whole bodies into what they unconsciously fear losing, and women, into what they fear they have already lost.

Works of art from antiquity elaborate the numerous symbols derived

39. Flying Angel Painter, Girl with Winged, Eyed Phalli, *500–475 B.C. Louvre, Paris.*

40. Bronze Body/Phallus, *Roman. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Donated by E. P. Warren, Res.08.320.*



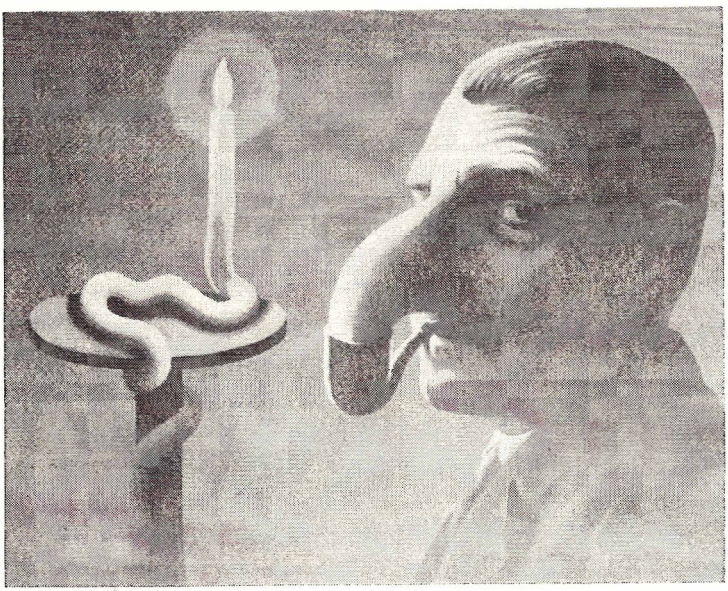
41. Winged Phallic Tintinnabulum with Lion Feet, *from Herculaneum, first century* B.C.*–first century* A.D. *National Museum of Naples, Raccolta Pornografica no. 27835.*

from the human body. A widespread transformation of the phallus in art, as in popular language, is the bird—which determined Freud's interpretation of Leonardo's vulture/kite as the phallic mother. On the base of the large marble phallus at Delos, for example, is the relief sculpture of a bird whose neck and head are changed into a phallus. In the vase painting fragment in Figure 39, the girl holds a winged bird phallus. Many ancient Roman bronze tintinnabula are in the shape of winged phalli [41]; their purpose, like that of the herms, was to guard entrances against the evil eye.

The mechanism of displacement in art is most explicitly sexual in the ancient world and in Surrealism. Fra Angelico's *Annunciation with Expulsion* [36], on the other hand, could be said to have displaced the Expulsion forward into the time of the Annunciation. Raphael's *School of Athens* [28] displaces figures of antiquity into a Renaissance architectural setting. And Castagno's *David* [10] displaces Goliath's decapitated head backward in time to before his death. One result of all these displacements is temporal condensation; past and present coexist in the same space—as they do in the unconscious.

42. René Magritte, The Rape (Le Viol), *1934. Menil Collection, Houston.*

43. René Magritte, The Philosopher's Lamp, *1935. Private collection.*



In Christian art, transformations of sexual symbols are rather more implicit than explicit. The most ubiquitous example of the bird/phallus association is the dove representing the Holy Ghost.[11] The dove's phallic role in the Annunciation scene is in its mission as the bearer of God's spirit. Its angelic counterpart is Gabriel, also winged, who delivers God's message verbally (see Chapter 9). Both figures have a phallic, impregnating character whose elaboration illustrates the artistic capacity for metaphorical transformation.

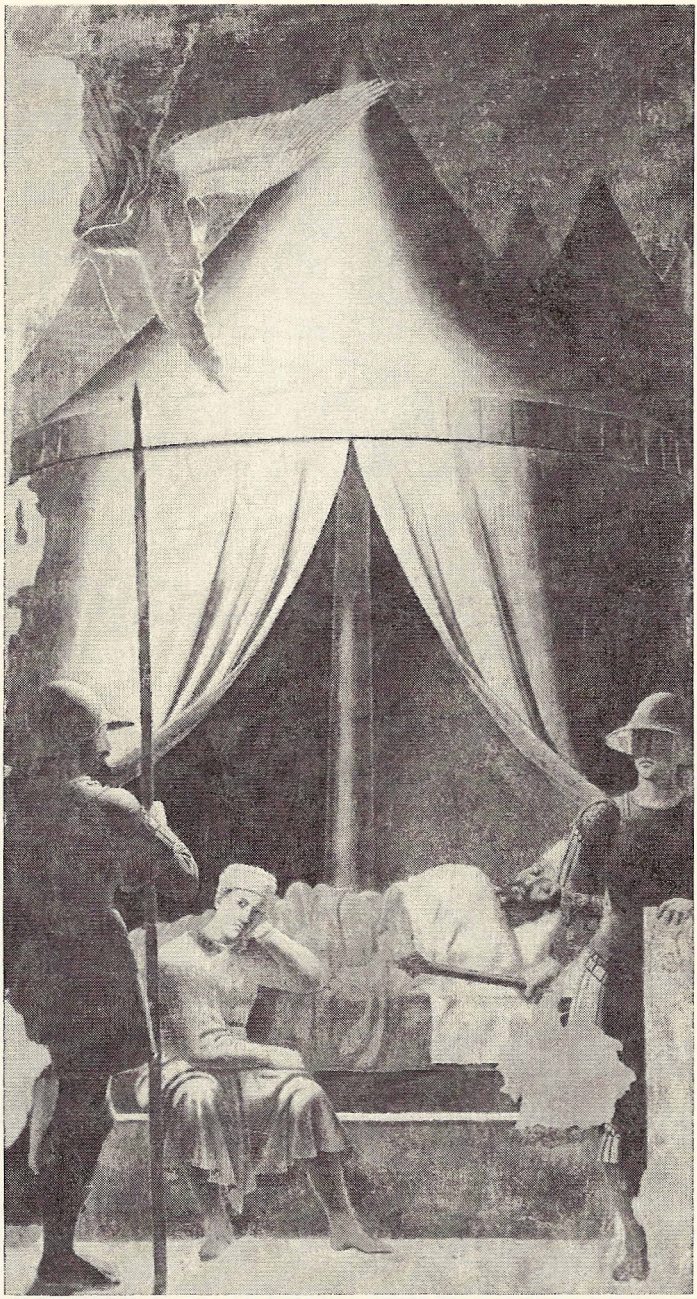
Many Surrealist artists consciously illustrated the unconscious dream mechanisms described by Freud. Magritte's *Rape* [42] is a witty example of the face/torso equation in the female body.[12] His *Philosopher's Lamp* of 1935 [43] relates the nose to phallic elements—pipe and candle—that are not part of the body. Both contain various implications, including the erotic significance of smoke and fire.

At the same time, however, the pipe is sexually ambivalent, because it combines a phallic stem with a concave (and receptive) bowl. The nose curving into the bowl is an image of upwardly displaced sexual intercourse. Echoing that image is the candle, which is at once an erect vertical rising toward a flame and also a limp, serpentine form slithering away. The candle's formal shift makes an erotic joke of the behavior of a phallus before and after the sexual activity symbolically taking place between the nose and the pipe bowl. In this painting, therefore, Magritte uses all the dream mechanisms described by Freud.

The Dream as a Subject of Art

As a subject of art, the depiction of dreams depends on the changing historical perception of their nature and significance as well as on the artist's style. Dreams, as in the Sumerian account of Gudea's dream (see Chapter 4), were first represented as external phenomena sent by God. Gradually the true character of dreams became better understood, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the depiction of dreams changed.

Piero della Francesca's fifteenth-century *Dream of Constantine* [44] takes place at night; Constantine is asleep in his tent, which is guarded by two soldiers. At the upper left an angel carries a tiny cross illuminated with holy light to alert Constantine to the power of the cross. The texts (for example, *The Golden Legend*) known to Piero describe this event as a waking, nocturnal vision; but Piero has changed it into a dream. The



44. Piero della Francesca, The Dream of Constantine, *c. 1450. Bacci Chapel, Church of San Francesco, Arezzo.*

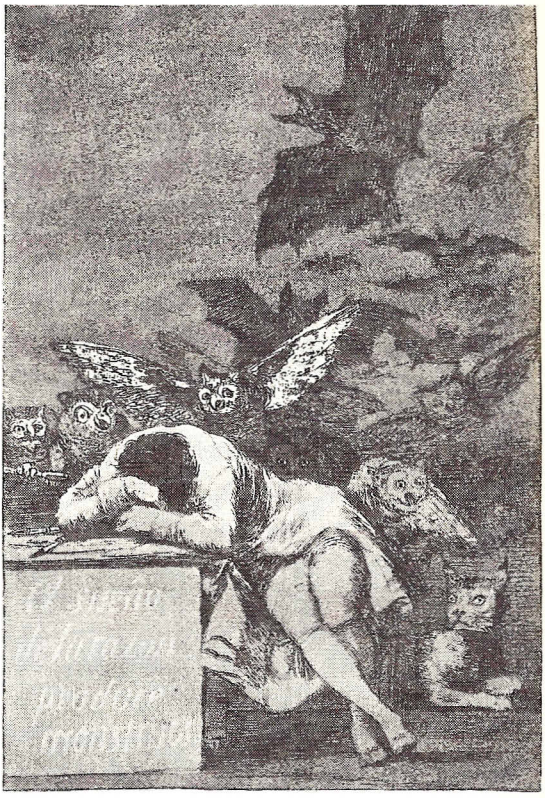
contrast between Constantine's sleeping state, typically associated with ignorance and sin in Christian art, and the cross's light heralds the en*light*enment it brings. "In this sign, you conquer"—"In hoc signo vincis"—is God's explicit message. Constantine's subsequent victory suggests that dreams were believed to be truthful, because they were sent by a "higher power." Projecting the psychological "truth" of dreams onto a greater intelligence than the dreamer's is consistent with the greater power of the unconscious as compared with the conscious mind.[13]

In the course of the nineteenth century, as psychology developed into a distinct discipline, the representation of dreams in art changed accordingly. At the turn of the nineteenth century, in 1799, Goya created his famous etching and aquatint *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* [45]. It shows the sleeping artist and reveals the contents of his dream images to be frightening nocturnal fliers—bats and owls. A wide-eyed lynx counters the artist's hidden face and state of sleep. The message of Goya's dream can be construed to convey political or social meaning—for example, monstrous things happen when reason loses control or goes to sleep.

But the dream also has an internal, psychological meaning. The bats and owls seem to come from a distance. As they alight around Goya's form, their wings flapping, they create an arc of staring faces. Their "monstrous" nature is at once regressive and sexual. Bats and owls, as flying creatures of the night, are phallic; in being small and less evolved than the adult human dreamer, they are childlike. The anxiety accompanying these figures is enhanced by their repetition, the motion of their wings, and their intent gaze. Although Goya remains asleep, his dream is clearly driven by an anxiety that crowds in on him—for if Goya's dream is read psychologically, its message defines the very nature of dreaming: when reason—the reality ego—sleeps, unconscious, primary process material—the "monsters"—emerges from the id.

Gauguin's *Reverie* of 1891 [46] leaves no doubt that the dream, which is in fact a *day*dream, is an internal phenomenon. The painting thus conforms to the aims of the Symbolist movement, with which the artist was associated. Gauguin's daydreamer reclines in a long diagonal, her pose a version of the traditional reclining nude Venus, implying that her daydream has an erotic cast. She holds a cloth over her vagina, which is a motif used elsewhere by Gauguin to denote a figure's symbolic reference to Eve's Temptation. This, in itself, suggests that the daydream is a sexual one; the dreamer, in effect, is "imagining" her own "Fall."[14]

Her abstracted gaze informs the viewer that her thoughts are else-



45. Francisco José de Goya, The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Los Caprichos, *plate 43: "El Sueño de La Razon Produce Monstruos"), 1799. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of M. Knoedler and Co., 1918, 18.64(43).*

where, as happens in the construction of a daydream. The pictorial nature of her dream is reflected in the inclination of her head toward the painting in the upper left, which is like a "thought balloon." The picture within the picture is a metaphor for the pictorial daydream and reflects, in symbolic terms, its erotic content. Landscape, in sleep dreams, generally represents the female body, as does architecture. The daydreamer's sexual fantasy in Gauguin's painting is symbolized by both: the doors of the house and the landscape itself are "open," denoting the sexual availability of the dreamer.

Rousseau's *Dream* of 1910 [47] followed the publication of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* by a little over ten years and exemplifies the conscious use of dream work to depict the text of a dream. The nude dreamer participates in her own dream; she sits upright on a French bourgeois divan, pointing anxiously at the oddly tame wildlife surrounding her. It is clear that, by the mechanism of displacement, she has been transported from "civilization" to the jungle, thereby condensing time and