Medard Boss

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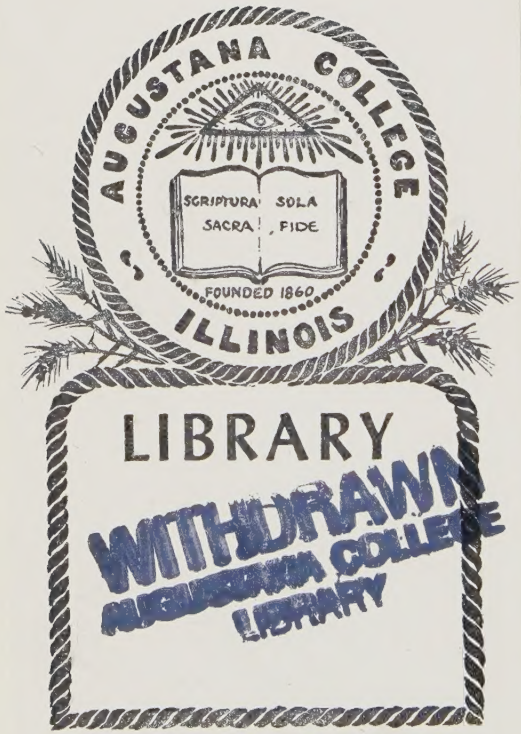
A New Approach to the Revelations of Dreaming — and Its Uses in Psychotherapy

INTRODUCTION BY PAUL J. STERN



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Translated from German by Stephen Conway

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Foreword

BY PAUL J. STERN, Ph.D.

In earlier works, Dr. Boss has demonstrated the power of the phenomenological method to illuminate large clinical areas, for instance, those of psychosomatic disease, of sexual deviance, and of schizophrenic disorders. To extend this approach to the realm of dreaming has, as the present book makes clear, far-reaching consequences. Dr. Boss' resolve to treat dream phenomena as largely autonomous and authentic, that is, as sovereign vis-a-vis the phenomena of waking life, leads him to reexamine, and redefine, the whole notion of *Reality*. And if Boss' phenomenological stance entails his taking dreams *for real* in a manner previously—if the pun may pass—undreamt of, it also enables him to discard, as irrelevant to the comprehension of dreaming, much that had been regarded up to now as the very core of the modern science of dreams.

Thus, to cite a particularly striking reversal, Dr. Boss has little if any use for the voluminous body of research on the neurophysiology and psychophysiology of sleeping and dreaming that has accumulated in recent years. The discovery of the multiphasic nature of sleep and the studies of REM- and NREM-states with multiple physiological correlates strike Boss, though he does not deny their anecdotal interest, as entirely beside the point where an

understanding of the nature of dreaming is concerned. The same holds true for the more strictly psychological findings produced by these investigations.[1]

The findings of psychophysiology, Boss states, "tell us almost nothing about what they purport to investigate. They do not bring us one step nearer to an elucidation of dreaming as a unique mode of human existence." These findings merely establish temporal correlations; they entitle us to assert only the simultaneity of certain patterns of neural activity and of psychic states during which dreams frequently occur, or are subject to recall. To go beyond such bare "if-then" statements, to assert for instance, as many investigators are wont to do, that specific neural states "cause" or "explain" dreaming, is to indulge in unwarranted metaphysical speculation, the illegitimacy of which is not mitigated by the philosophical innocence of its perpetrators.

Boss' dismissal of experimental psychophysiology as unfit to promote insight into the nature of dreaming does not imply that he concedes much greater relevance to extant psychological theories of dreaming based on clinical observations. With a nice even-handedness Boss points out that the most potent of these psycho-clinical theories, namely the Freudian ones, are riddled with incongruities and dubious metapsychology to a degree that severely compromises their power of illumination. Anyone with doubts on this score has only to peruse the papers by Zane and other authors that Boss cites. To highlight the shortcomings of Freudian theory Boss quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein's comments about the "deceptive" psychoanalytic practice of disfiguring a patient's "beautiful dream," by means of far-fetched associations, into something unshapely. The point is not that Freud's psychogenetic method is morally or esthetically reprehensible but simply that it is logically (and epistomologically) deficient: ". . . genetic explanations never get a hold (not even a partial one) of the experiential content of a thing."[2]

In order to get at the experiential content of dream phenomena, Boss holds, we must first set about the radical "destruction of theories" that impede our vision. Theories look forever *behind* the

phenomena instead of straight *at* them and thus estrange us from the directly observable. By downplaying what is given in immediate experience in favor of inferred "substrata" and quantifiable "processes," psychological theories based on the natural science paradigm overlook that "each thing is what it is, and nothing else."[3] Phenomology, on the other hand, seeks to apprehend as faithfully as possible what is actually there and to bare, with subtle accuracy, the internal and external articulations of the phenomenal world.

Boss introduces the reader to his phenomenological approach to dreaming by contrasting it with the widely known theory and practice of Freudian dream interpretation.[4] A major point of divergence concerns the psychoanalytic doctrine according to which most dream images are *symbolic*, a symbol being something that stands for something else but is in some way linked about what it stands for. The symbolic relationship, Freud held, is a vestige of a former archaic identity. He viewed the symbolic language of dreams as the primordial language of the psyche, which restores to words their full significance, their partly submerged original, and ultimately sexual, meaning. Freud derived this underlying sexual significance of language from a postulated common root of language and sexuality. For him, the word was sex, was vehicle of sexual desire, before it was anything else.

That the language of dreams is symbolic was for Freud such as self-evident assumption, supported by a widely held age-old tradition, that it hardly occurred to him to question its validity. Hence he marshaled his great powers of reasoning and persuasion mostly to prove that dream symbolism was basically *sexual* in nature and bolstered his case with clinical evidence he considered irrefutable.

Boss, however, questions not only Freud's narrowing of the realm of dreaming to preponderantly sexual themes (this criticism is hardly new) but also challenges the whole notion that symbolism is adequate or even relevant to the comprehension of dreaming. Dream phenomena, he holds, are not explained if we treat them as hieroglyphs and by means of ingenious cryptography strive to extract their *true* meaning. To understand dream phenomena we must,

rather apprehend them in the nexus of their multifold spontaneous references, in their array of actual and latent properties that define their possibilities of interaction. Is it not symptomatic of existential impoverishment, Boss asks, of living in a denuded, dehydrated world, if most objects are seen as "naked factualities," torn from their natural contexts, needing synthetic enrichment, through symbolism, if they are to yield a modicum of meaning?

To bring this esoteric debate down to earth, Boss reviewed and repeated, in slightly modified form, some of the hypnotic dream experiments that had been adduced by Freud as proof for the correctness of his views on dream symbolism.[5] Schrotter, for instance, an investigator cited by Freud, had hypnotized a number of subjects, asking them to dream about designated sexual events while in trance and then to relate their dreams. In the dreams induced in this manner, the subjects seemed invariably to rely upon the mechanisms of symbolic translation that Freudian dream theory postulates. For example, a hypnotized woman was asked to dream about lesbian intercourse with a woman-friend. Sure enough, in the ensuing dream she met up with this friend, who was carrying a travel bag with a label that read "For Ladies Only." It was self-evident for both Schrotter and Freud that this travel bag with its restrictive labels was a *symbol* for the friend's genital organs.

Boss, however, challenging this ready assumption of self-evidence, raised some searching questions. Why was it, he asked, precisely a travel bag that the dreamer chose to "symbolize" her friend's sexual organs? Why not, instead, some other *symbolic* object more closely related to the sexual-erotic sphere? Why not, for instance, a silk purse of the kind worn with evening gowns at formal dances where sexuality, so to speak, impregnates the air? Does not a travel bag in itself, if we shed symbolic preconceptions, evoke themes of arrival and departure, of coming together and leave-taking, of extending and closing distances—themes of which sexual intercourse may in its turn be a "symbolic expression" (if we want to indulge in this sort of terminology)?

To shed more light on this problem, and on his divergent phe-

nomenological approach, Dr. Boss devised some hypnotic dream experiments of his own, quite similar to those cited by Freud. He hypnotized five women—three healthy and two neurotic—and asked each to dream about a specific male friend who was in love with her and walking toward her, naked, aroused, with clear sexual intent. The three healthy women had dreams that corresponded in every detail to Boss' suggestion. Upon awakening, they related these sexual dream adventures without embarrassment, even with delight. The story was quite different for the two neurotic subjects; in them, Boss' suggestion induced anxiety dreams with markedly altered ("symbolically distorted," in Freudian lingo) content. Thus one of these women had dreamed that a uniformed soldier, a complete stranger to her, had come toward her, holding a handgun. While playing with his weapon, he had almost hit her; she had been so frightened that she woke up.

Now how does Boss, eschewing Freudian notions about symbolism, read these findings? The case of the healthy women is simple. Boss merely states that it was easy to *attune* them, by his hypnotic suggestion, to the theme of a loving sexual encounter; their dreams graphically presented these encounters, without disguises, symbolic or otherwise. As for the neurotic subjects, their hypnotic dreams also do not require interpretation as examples of symbolic cryptography. On the contrary, if we look at the dream reported above with open eyes, it reveals with stark clarity the infantile, narrow, fear-drenched world of the dreamer; such a world simply has no place for a sexually aroused, desirous lover; from within its confines, the approach of an adult man can be experienced only as intrusive, as a dangerous irruption. The extreme constriction of this world, the panic evoked by a man's approach, the perception of men as uniformed, intrusive, and faceless—these, according to Boss, are the relevant facts. What is gained, he asks, if we add that the gun actually symbolizes a penis? Very little. But by treating dreams as symbolic charades a great deal may be lost, namely the stark immediacy and the emotional charge of the phenomena that disclose themselves as we are dreaming.

An example that illustrates particularly well how Bossian dream interpretations differ from Freudian ones involves the dream of a psychology student reported by Boss.[6] This student had dreamed that the fiancee of a friend of his had just died of cancer. The dreamer had felt distant from this friend ever since the latter's engagement. The dreamer was shocked and saddened at the news of the young woman's death. After going to her funeral he found himself with other mourners in a self-service restaurant. He searched anxiously for some dessert or sweets but could not find anything of the sort. He felt discontent.

The dreamer had related this dream to a psychoanalyst whom he was seeing at the time. Predictably, the analyst had interpreted part one of the dream as an expression of unconscious death wishes toward the young woman brought on by his friend's engagement. Part two was interpreted, in equally orthodox vein, as a symptom of libidinal regression to the oral stage of psychosexual development. One is not surprised to learn that the therapeutic effect of these sterotyped interpretations was nil. In particular, the patient had little use for the analyst's insinuation that the dream betrayed his unconscious death wishes toward the fiancee; he could find no factual evidence for the presence of such wishes either in his dreams or in his waking life. Since he did not see eye to eye with his analyst on numerous other points, the patient left him to seek out a daseinsanalyst.

When during the ensuing therapy the dream about the cancer death of the friend's fiancee came up again, Boss refrained carefully from imputing to the patient any unconscious death wishes; on the contrary, the dreamer's genuine sorrow upon learning of her death seemed to indicate, if anything, a wish that she stay alive. What seemed more important to Boss, though, than these speculations was the fact that the friend's engagement had attuned the patient to the theme of loving commitment. Even though the dreamer was not ready to realize for himself the intimacy of shared love, he was able to partake of it vicariously by admitting to his dream world a close friend involved in just such a relationship. Yet even in this distanced

form an adult love could not endure in his impoverished existential sphere. With the young woman's death, it vanished from the scene to become merely a mournful memory. This disappearance of the promise of love made the patient's universe shrink to the extent that his dealings with the world were not restricted to the ingestion of food in a restaurant where each person must serve himself; and even within this narrow ("oral") sphere, there was a lack of plenitude—no dessert. At this stage, sweets were present, as it were, only in the mode of being yearned for. No wonder, then, that at the close of the dream the patient could no longer manage even a distant glimpse of the far richer sweetness of love or a woman.

This example and many others throughout the book illustrate how Boss, renouncing the use of theoretical constructs like libido, unconscious, orality, regression, censorship, etc., goes about *explicating* the phenomena of dreaming. His method is, simply, to let the dream phenomena unfold, to allow them to tell their own story. To be able to read this story the interpreter need not be steeped in esoteric knowledge about symbolic equivalences but does need a mind uncluttered by theoretical preconceptions. Above all, he needs the seemingly simple, yet extremely rare, ability to see, clearly and accurately, what is there, before his eyes. To those who possess or manage to acquire this phenomenological vision most dreams will reveal very directly the dreamer's existential condition. And the interpreter's close adherence to the dream phenomena will bring home to the dreamer, sometimes with shattering impact, the unacknowledged truth of his existential predicament.

That dreams *read* (rather than "interpreted") along phenomenological lines present poetically condensed images of a person's life situation at a given moment and also accurately reflect changes in this situation over time—hence serving as gauges of a patient's progress in therapy—is documented by Boss' expert use of his patients' dream series. A most instructive case, presented by Boss in his earlier book on dreams, involved a series of 823 dreams dreamt by a thirtyish engineer over a period of three years. The dreams of this depressed and impotent man sorted themselves into well-

defined phases during which certain themes predominated, almost to the exclusion of others. There was an orderly, and progressive, sequence from stage to stage. Thus during the first six months of therapy, this man dreamt only of turbines, cyclotrons, automobiles, airplanes, and other machines. Then he began to dream about plants, trees, vegetables, and flowers. This botanical phase was followed, after a long, dreamless interval, by dreams teeming with animal life, at first only in the guise of harmful insects. (Over a six-month period he related more than a hundred insect dreams.) Next there was an extended phase dominated by toads, frogs, and snakes. The first warm-blooded animal that managed to enter his dream world was a mouse scurrying into a mousehole. The first human being to appear in his dreams, after two whole years of therapy, was an unconscious, gigantic woman in a long red gown, who floated in a large pond under a transparent layer of ice. Six months later he dreamt that he was dancing at a county fair with a woman who was also wearing a red gown but was, unlike the earlier dream figure, wide awake and full of life.

This man's waking life had first taken a visible turn for the better at the time he began to dream about plants. At that point his feeling that life was devoid of meaning had started to recede. His sexual impotence had completely vanished by the time he dared let lions and horses enter his dream world.

Most dream series are not as systematic and orderly as that of this mechanical engineer who had to graduate in his dreams through the whole phylogenetic scale before he was ready to realize his full human potential. But if there is forward movement at all in therapy, it is, as Boss' other dream series document, picked up most sensitively by dreams, especially in cases where the behavioral indications of waking life are still unclear and contradictory. Inversely, the recurrence of the same sterotyped dream over a long period of time is a reliable sign that therapy has come to a standstill.

Besides their practical value, dream series also possess great theoretical interest. They pose with particular acuity the problem to which Boss devotes the last major section of this book—the prob-

lem of the relationship between waking life and dream life.

In addressing this thorny question, Boss begins by telling us how *not* to approach dream phenomena. They are not to be approached as minor, truncated, spectral reproductions of waking life. Nor are they to be prejudged by the peremptory canons of daylight reality. Boss' discussion of the meaning of "realness," based on Heidegger's subtle ontology of Being, challenges the common assumption that our dream experiences lack, or are deficient in, the attribute of reality.

Boss repeats tirelessly that waking and dreaming are autonomous modes of being, neither one reducible to the other. In each of them, human existence articulates itself in characteristic ways. It is the enduring identify of the human being, now dreaming, now awake, the continuity of his life history, that ties together dreaming and waking, which forever exist only as the dreaming or waking of this particular person at this particular time.

As Boss, following in the footsteps of other philosophers, points out, it is extremely difficult to define criteria that clearly distinguish between wakefulness and sleep. The more than two-thousand-year-old riddle of the Chinese sage Chuang-Tse has not been resolved: Chuang-Tse, having dreamed vividly of being a butterfly and then having awakened into his human existence, had been life wondering: "Was I then a man who dreamed of being a butterfly, or am I now a butterfly dreaming that he is a man?" The perplexity of the Chinese sage was echoed by Rene Descartes who, in his *Meditations*, professed his inability to decide for certain whether he was awake or asleep. Descartes' uncertainty stemmed from the fact that "all the same thoughts and conceptions which we have while awake may also come to us in sleep." Boss, translating Descartes' insight into the language of modern psychology, has shown that all the modes of relating to the world that human beings display while awake are to be found also in their dreams, including the mode of dreaming[7], the ode of awakening[8], and the mode of interpreting dreams[9]. It is even possible "to dream that one is falling asleep and to have dreams during this dreamt dreaming state only to—while

still dreaming—'wake up,' thereby becoming aware of the dream within a dream as a 'mere dream.' Only a second awakening, after a more or less prolonged dream state, will discharge the dreamer, now more awake, into his everyday world." In view of this curious *relativity* of the consciousness of awakeness, the cautious comparative "more awake" seems appropriate.

Though the seemingly clear common sense distinctions between waking and dreaming disintegrate under philosophical scrutiny, Boss' phenomology of dreaming proposes some less perishable touchstones for the two modes. For one, Boss suggests, the world of dreaming is, despite its apparent fluidity, narrower, more closed and hermetic, than the waking world. By this, Boss means that our dreams are pretty much limited to the temporal mode of the immediate present; the temporal dimensions of past and future, of self-conscious memory and anticipation, are usually absent while we dream. We distort Boss' meaning only a little if we propose the paradoxical formula that dreaming, at least as far as its temporal modes are concerned, is characterized by the absence of the imaginary.

But not only with regard to its temporal modes. The phenomena we encounter while dreaming usually present themselves in a very concrete, physically tangible form—not infrequently tangible to the point of being oppressive. (Here is the making of another paradox: the "immaterial" tissue of dreaming presents us mostly with "material" phenomena.) Abstract ideas, theoretical speculations, philosophical musings, psychological self-analysis are only rarely present in dreams. The concrete-minded realm of dreaming confronts us directly with sensations, perceptions, and emotions that grant us hardly any reflective distance. It is a universe of sights and sounds, with scant space for overarching insight or vision.

(Others have noted this predilection of dreams for the concrete. It was precisely this feature of dreams that seemed to compel the use of symbolism to assimilate their language to that of the everyday world. Boss does not deny that *some* translation of dream language is necessary but insists that it ought to be minimal. It ought to