

The Untranslatability of Dreams

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Abstract

This short meditation on dreamwork-narrative wonders why dreams are not easily translated. It takes off from Derrida's remark in *Writing and Difference* that "since the materiality of the signifier constitutes the idiom of every dream scene, dreams are untranslatable" (210). Working through a secular, a Hindu and a Buddhist parable respectively, this essay considers 5 possible explanations for the untranslatability of dreams. It proposes that there might be no material to translate, as in the fiction whose "materiality" we assume and which we are used to reading and interpreting in broad daylight. Dreams however continue to be immaterial while the translator works away at his desk. We haven't yet known it as either material "work" or "text," so there might yet be no need to trouble ourselves with the death of *its* author.

Abstract in Malay

Kajian ringkas tentang naratif berasaskan mimpi ini meneliti sebab-sebab mimpi sukar untuk ditafsir. Kajian ini bermula dari pernyataan Derrida dalam karyanya *Writing and Difference* yang berbunyi "oleh sebab sifat material penanda member bentuk kepada setiap adegan mimpi, mimpi menjadi sukar untuk ditafsir." Dengan menggunakan pendekatan sekular, cerita-cerita moral Hindu dan Buddha, esei ini mengambil-kira lima penerangan yang mungkin mampu menjawab persoalan kesukaran mentafsir mimpi. Esei ini mengusulkan bahawa berkemungkinan besar, tidak ada sesuatu yang kukuh untuk ditafsir, seperti dalam karya-karya fiksi yang selalu kita baca dan tafsir secaa terus, lebih-lebih lagi dengan sifat mimpi yang berterusan walau pun ketika penulis tidak menulis. Kita masih belum jelas tentang sama ada ianya "karya" atau "teks". Oleh yang demikian, kita masih belum perlu untuk menjawab persoalan tentang berakhirnya peranan penulis.

Keywords

Untranslatability, dreamwork, dreamlanguage, fiction, metaphor, parable

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Keywords in Malay

Kesukaran mentafsir, mimpi, laras bahasa mimpi, fiksyen, metafora, kisah perumpamaan

No one ever dreamt a sequence of actions or events on the Aristotelian principle of unity. Although the poet Yeats believed that “In dreams begin responsibilities,” no one was ever so punctilious as to leave their dreams half-way to attend to responsible tasks, no matter how pressing the dream-machine had made them. What we enjoy generally as *art* is seldom an incomplete or ongoing project. Art is finished, not *finishing*. Dreams, on the contrary, are never finished. They are a *process*, the only nominal we may use for their true mood and aspect that ought to be known as “progressive.” The art of fiction is designed to be had “objectively” – to be studied, if you please, in objective terms. No dream ever was available to us that freely for inspection or scrutiny. (Is dream “work” or “text”? Who killed *its* author?) Neither the diegetic nor mimetic functions of fiction apply to dreams, for dreamers are not obliged by the peculiarity of their experience to account for the sequence of events of which they are part, or explain convincingly to any interested audience their identification with subjectivities in situations they are *not* in.

Although there is plenty to explain dream-logic, and some such plenty we vaguely recall the day after, that logic doesn’t always enter standard text-books. What does not move in a straight line, as a matter of fact, has never entered any text-book; the “cause” in *because* should certainly be admissible evidence to the question-setters and a consensus should then emerge among the evaluators of examination boards. Upon such enviable conditions of comprehensible mutuality, the gods themselves throw incense. Dreams, alas, do not move along a causal line. If what causes dreams is still moot, what causes sustain and inform dreams are relatively unknown. Those who have reflected on dreamscapes tell us that one thing to the other strikes as natural to the mind as hand to glove, but mind you, *this* mind is under no direct supervision of a wakeful reality. Compare this with the mind of a writer for which one thing to the other is as pre- and post-determined as our academic schedule is to our weekly lectures and tutorials. We need only to see perhaps that the writer and the writer’s reality are both awake; they keep watching and censoring each other endlessly. Art cannot therefore afford to make such “mistakes” as would dreams, for no one watches dreams with such artistic ardour in wakefulness. A writer’s plot belongs to daylight: *An emotionally unstable woman unconsciously blots out all memory of seeing her date murdered by her closest friend* is a novel *manqué* but certainly not the stuff of dreams. And finally, a writer’s language. Even the language of Djuana Barnes’s *Nightwood* is available to the pedantic stylistician for inspection the way the language of one’s dream is not. The dreamer perhaps is that *uncommon* reader

with whom Dr Johnson need not necessarily concur, one who “reads” the dream as an emblematic collection of signs rather than as a textorium where one guise disguises itself as another, as *metaphor*.

If disjunction may be seen to be a pattern of sorts of dreams, their *unpredictability* (also the unpredictability if impossibility of their recurrence) is an assurance we most welcome. We never dreamt twice; we never step into the same dream-river twice. The best of their descriptions, the day after, or night after, is at best a description that Wordsworth called “a sleep and a forgetting.” Most “poetic” if you will, but not quite data-rich and forthcoming on minute details that a curious fiction-reader will relish. Here’s one such incoherent “story” of sorts from Charles Bernstein’s “Signs of the Particularities” (*Islets/Irritations*) whose “dream” is sensed mostly through the language, the reshuffled order of words controlling perspectival thinking:

A

flutter wheel, a
 journey to a star. A
 bully, a pug nose. “You made my life
 so glamorous.” At any moment
 I might lose it. An influence beyond
 our conception. Spellbound, it weaves
 the open fire hydrant pouring
 water into the garbage strewn
 about the curb. Passing over
 in silence. Saying it again.
 “This time it will be different.”
 Turning away. Paisley wallpaper. (Bernstein 59)

Does this replicate what the dreamer had met but forgotten for the rest of the day? No one knows the syntax of “inner speech.” We don’t ask who speaks, what is spoken and to whom. That may be what Jacques Derrida meant by “the materiality of the signifier [that] constitutes the idiom of every dream scene” (210). We can only know (but not translate) this alternative consciousness to others. Metaphors, as in Bernstein above, can try but we are not sure that they work in translation. Metaphors in one language are somewhat like Prufrock’s mermaids; they speak each to each, but they won’t speak to us. Consider, for another example, this passage from E.M. Cioran’s “Temptation to Exist,” a celebrated reflection on death and certain incentives for living. “Let us speak plainly,” begins Cioran half way through a reflexive heave, and continues with metaphors: “everything which keeps us from self-dissolution, every lie which protects us against our unbreatheable certitudes in religions. When I grant myself a share in eternity... I trample underfoot the evidence of my friable,

worthless being. I lie to others as to myself.... We last only as long as our fictions” (221).

In indirection, like Polonius, do dreams find directions out. Translators can perhaps begin to figure this out.

Humanities do not empiricise such things the way cognitive or neurosciences do. Parables are a humanist’s best bet. The following three parables, the first two narrated from memory of its folk origins, are for those who do not seek exemplarity in the parables they hear or see.

The Mahout’s Thinking

A mahout is now on a hospital bed, his face smashed and swollen in a terrible accident. Asked how this happened, he explains his elephant’s “careless advance” through a tall metallic archway. “Couldn’t you see atop the elephant that you were approaching the archway? Why did you not crouch yourself a little until the elephant walked through?” “Well, given the elephant’s proverbial wisdom, I thought it would bend *its* head as it reached the arcade. It did not!”

The Envious Disciple’s Thinking

Two young disciples of Aadi Sankara reach a river-bank where they spot a young woman. The river is in spate; she is afraid. She cannot swim across to the other bank. One of the disciples volunteers to help her. Would she mind if he carried her on his head and crossed the river? Of course she wouldn’t. And so they go across the river, the young woman borne on the man’s head.

The other disciple is aghast at this sacrilege. He cannot wait to report all this to Sankara. The guru listens to this disciple most attentively, but thinks it proper to confirm this detail: “So you have seen your friend put her down on the other bank and walk away. If so, why are *you* still carrying her in your head?”

Shalipa’s Realisation

Shalipa was a low caste woodcutter who lived near the charnel ground of Bighapur. Packs of wolves came by night to eat the corpses (in a charnel ground corpses are simply deposited on the ground to decay or be eaten by wild animals). The wolves howled all night long, and Shalipa became more and more afraid of them until he could neither eat by day nor sleep by night for fear of the howling of wolves. One evening, a wandering yogin stopped by his cottage asking for food. Shalipa gave him food and drink, and, well pleased, the yogin repaid him with a discourse on the virtues of fearing *samsara* (conditioned existence) and practising the *dharma*.

Shalipa thanked the yogin but said, “Everyone fears *samsaara*. But I have a specific fear. Wolves come to the charnel ground and howl all night, and I am so afraid of them that I can neither eat nor sleep nor practise the *dharma*. Please can’t you give me a spell so that I can stop the howling of the wolves?”

The yogin laughed and said, “Foolish man. What good will it do you to eat the food of greed when you do not know what food is? What good will it do you to sleep the corpse-like sleep of ignorance when you do not know what rest is? What good will it do you to destroy the howling of the wolves with the spells or anger when you do not know what hearing or any other sense is? If you follow my instructions, I will teach you to destroy all fear.”

Shalipa accepted the yogin as his teacher, gave him all that he had, and begged him for instruction. After giving him initiation, the yogin told him to move into the charnel ground with the wolves and to meditate ceaselessly upon all sound as identical to the howling of wolves. Shalipa obeyed him. Gradually he came to understand the nature of all sound and of all reality. He meditated for nine years, overcame all obscurations of his mind and body, lost all fear, and attained great realization. Thereafter, he wore a wolf skin around his shoulders and was known as *Shalipa* (the wolf-yogin). He taught his disciples many different practices about the nature of appearances and reality. He taught the unity of appearance, emptiness, wisdom, and skilful means. Finally, in that very body, he went to the realm of the Heroes.²

The mahout, the self-righteous disciple, and Shalipa are three persons variously beguiled by much the same wakeful self that repeatedly flunks the reality test. We are amused by their stories because we can easily see a little of ourselves in each of them. We are so beguiled often by our realities (and contrary to our common belief) *not* necessarily by the dreams we have had. And we are also beguiled in varying degrees by our overgrown egos that refuse to recognise our follies, egos that violate all traffic rules on the intellectual highways of their passing. Dreams fulfil a function we haven’t yet quite recognised – they facilitate sensing, knowing, feeling; reacting and relating to the world we seem inured to in this horrendously rewired world. The mahout parable has lived with me for at least 40 years but an anecdote from the annals of Transcendentalist America embeds a similar experience.³ Elizabeth Palmer Peabody once bumped bang on to a big tree on her walk. Asked whether she had not seen it in her way (literally what we mean when we say *obviously*), she is supposed to have added to

² A Tibetan Buddhist story in Eleanor Rosch (6-7).

³ Narrated in her Chapter 5, “Pedagogy of Buddhism” by Eve K. Sedgwick (167).

her “yes” that she had not *realised* it. If there is a touch of this transcendentalist fuzziness in the mahout of my parable, there is perhaps something of his oafish wisdom in Peabody.

The narrative dynamics of the parable replicates dreamwork at least in one crucial sense. A parable is a process, a *saying* rather than the said. The use of story-telling in the Buddhist tradition (much as in other religious/pedagogic formats) is to be seen in precisely this *saying*, the illustration of a life lesson in an indirect way. As in the famous Platonic and other dialogues, between a Master and a Disciple there arise (always) building blocks. They build blocks at once of comprehension and forward movement as well as of blocks that complicate comprehension and impede onward movement. In this process, the Disciple learns not so much in quantity or bulk as in an ethics of self-liberation.

I have only begun, rather hazily, to understand why Jacques Derrida says in his *Writing and Difference* that “[S]ince the materiality of the signifier constitutes the idiom of every dream scene, dreams are untranslatable” (210). The possibilities I want to consider are these: (1) a dream is as foreign to the wakeful self as an unknown language is to it. (Is it then more appropriate to say that the Unconscious is structured like a *foreign* language?); (2) the dream has a materiality (audio-visual effects? soundings? representational tags? iconic markings?) that are hard to capture in the direct conversational equation of the signifier and the signified; (3) the “materiality” of one language is that which another relinquishes in translation; (4) within itself (intratextually), and externally across several other texts (intertextually), a dream will generate significations that fight one another; these are the things that are proverbially lost in translation; (5) the contexts of composition, dissemination, and reception are radically altered in all translations; such decontextualisation certainly affects *translation* – the text so produced, which is *a* translation, and the translating process itself. We have not even considered the dream-translator’s intertextualities, a large subject better kept out of the purview of dreams for obvious reasons. How shall one ever cope with the dream-embroidery referring back and back to the stitch before, the new stitch beginning at the beginning of the newer one going back toward its body the older stitch held with its left hand in folds, this backward motion being recorded in glossy embroidery thread, fine silk strands clear pure colours, over and over resulted in uniquely easy and belaboured image? In short, how does one say *how* it is, *as* it is?⁴

Dreams are untranslatable also because they are believed to have been consigned to what Julia Kristeva has famously called *chora* – variously, and perhaps incompletely, understood as a receptacle, a space anterior to meaning. I have somehow understood this, again incompletely as such understanding goes,

⁴ I am indebted to Laurence Venuti (especially 217–218) and to Barbara Einzig (63) for some of my formulations here.

as *all about language* but not quite *a language* (like Malayalam or English or Hindi with which I imagine making my wakeful self). The *chora* is both “poetic” and “symbolic” in the peculiar senses in which dreams often are – lean or fat termites tunnelling through some Pharaonic woodwork. Rachel Blau DuPlessis puts this all so ethereally when she says: “The inseparability of the two functions: that while it may sing melodies in all and nothing, we in English hear only its English. Translation and focused location occur to filter the heterogeneousness through the meaning-melody we hear, in speaking English. Yet it will always sing more than we can hear” (85).

The Oxford Book of Dreams both corroborates and falsifies dreams and what they tell us in a way Joseph Addison’s “Dream – An Allegory” does not. This is a well-known *Spectator* essay for which the writer must set a convincing scene in reality (which Addison does in the essay’s opening paragraphs most admirably) and proceeds to record the details of a vision he has had. Human imperfections and the mortification to which the imperfect humanity is always subject are the theme. Given a chance to “correct,” and yet another to undo the “correction,” how do human beings fare? To one schooled in Buddhist thought, Addison is a Zen master of sorts. If he fails somewhat in the ultimate analysis as per the Zen principles of disinterested pedagogy, it is in his last paragraph of moral editorialising:

Besides the several pieces of morality to be drawn out of this vision, learned from it, never to repine at my own misfortunes, or to envy the happiness of another, since it is impossible for any man to form a right judgment of his neighbour’s sufferings; for which reason also I have determined never to think too lightly of another’s complaints, but to regard the sorrows of my fellow-creatures with sentiments of humanity and compassion. (Addison 70)

We are back again to the highly suggestive phrase: “the materiality of the signifier [that] constitutes the idiom of every dream scene,” the reason Derrida gives for the untranslatability of dreams. It is very easily explained in other terms as well. The tumult of the dream is all silence. And it is relayed in silence, as, say, in Sylvia Plath’s “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams.” Dream has a language that does not enforce or reproduce oppression through social or other institutions. That it gives all of us an alternative consciousness is its unique claim to our special attention, at least since Freud and his studies. In this alternative consciousness, there is absolutely no insistence on *meaning* as we have routinely come to think of it. If anything, there is only the insistence not to accept *meaning* on its putative claims. As Stanley Cavell puts in *à propos* Beckett’s *Endgame*, this alternative consciousness dreams afford us is not in the discovery

of failure/lack of meaning, “but its total, even totalitarian success— our inability not to mean what we are given to mean” (116).

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