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Dreams in Austin's "Martha Gardner" and "The Sufferings of a Country Schoolmaster"

In his last tale, William Austin produces a very cunning interpretation of Martha Gardner's dream which seems unexpectedly to anticipate the Freudian theory of the formation of oneiric fantasies. Beyond the rationalization the author never fails to propose of almost every fictional element in his tales pertaining to the marvelous, his conception of the determining mechanisms at work in Martha's dream invites the psychoanalysis-oriented literary critic to check whether his interpretation is consistent with the imaginary content of the narrative.

Martha Gardner, a humble old woman, realizes that she is likely to lose her only possession for the benefit of a powerful corporation coveting her small estate. Because she thinks she has never injured anybody during her whole simple, virtuous life, she bitterly resents the corporation's proceedings against her modest person and considers them as both unfair and unjustified. She soon becomes irrational and feels somewhat persecuted:

Why could they not wait a little longer, and I should have been at rest? But now I see no end to my sorrows. When I lay my head on my pillow, the Corporation appears to me in all its terrors; when I sleep — no, I do not sleep — when I dream, I dream of the Corporation; and when I awake, there stands the Great Corporation of Charles River Bridge against Martha Gardner (85).

What makes Martha so desperate is the fact that she has “nothing to show” to the tribunal as evidence of ownership for “all [her] deeds were destroyed” (87) in a blaze. In this extreme state of tension, Martha has a strange dream which timely brings her the solution to her torments.

“Your angel behind the curtain made his appearance last night. He knocked at my door once, I was afraid ; he knocked at my door again, I was afraid and said nothing. He knocked at my door the third time, and said, ‘Awake, Martha, awake, and fear no harm.’ I took courage and replied, ‘I am awake, but am overcome with fear, for I am alone, and there is none to help me.’ ‘Fear nothing, Martha, I am here to help you. Listen ; in the house of your son-in-law, in an old trunk at the bottom of the old trunk, in the garret, behind the chimney, there all your deeds and records are preserved.’” (87)

Indeed, the dream proves to be an authentic premonition for the documents are in effect discovered in the very place indicated by the angel of the dream. Denying the marvelous side of the premonition, Austin puts forward a rational explanation of his own to account for the coincidence:

This incident of “the angel behind the curtain,” deserves a passing remark. There was nothing strange in Martha Gardner’s dreaming every night of her lawsuit, of the Great Corporation, and of her lost deeds. Neither is it strange that she should dream of finding them ; and if we connect the sanguine expressions of her friend Wood with her own earnest wishes, we have the key to her dream. There is no probability that she heard a knocking at her chamber door, either once, twice, or thrice ; but she dreamed she did so, and in the morning she doubtless thought it was more than a dream. She had probably seen that old trunk many times, little imagining the jewel it contained. There is really nothing marvellous in this dream, I do not wish it to be so considered. (88)

In his rationale, Austin develops almost sixty years before Freud an implicit theory which anticipates some of the major principles of the psychoanalytical theory of “dreams as wish-fulfillments” (Freud: *Dreams* 200-13). First of all, he points out unhesitatingly that the motivation of the dream is frustrated desire: Martha wishes she could have her lost deeds again, and Austin asserts that there is nothing

strange “that she should dream of finding them.” Another breakthrough of Freud’s theory concerned the mechanism which conditions the configuration of the dream. According to him, dreams are determined by at least two factors: one comes from a hidden desire, and the other borrows from the “impressions of the immediately preceding days” (Freud: *Dreams* 247) — the content of the dream being a compromise between these two determinants. Austin’s explanation is consistent with these constraints: “if we connect the sanguine expressions of [Martha’s] friend Wood with her own earnest wishes, we have the key to her dream.” Indeed, Colonel Wood made, precisely the previous day, an encouraging remark which should have struck Martha’s tormented psyche: “I have a presentiment that there is an angel behind the curtain ; when human help fails us, an armed giant sometimes appears in our defence” (87). However, one may object pertinently that Martha’s wish was not really repressed; but considering that she was convinced her deeds had been burned, she would have quite logically tried to repress a desire which would have appeared to her and to her circle of friends as vain and irrational. Moreover, Austin skillfully manages to sort out in Martha’s narrative what belongs to the dream and what is real: “There is no probability that she heard a knocking at her chamber door, either once, twice, or thrice ; but she dreamed she did so, and in the morning she doubtless thought it was more than a dream. She had probably seen that old trunk many times, little imagining the jewel it contained.” Undoubtedly, Austin’s rhetoric is conform to Freud’s own technique, and the whole passage sounds like one of the psychoanalyst’s “little” pieces of demonstration he uses in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Strictly speaking, Martha’s dream looks in fact more like a dream of the infantile type (Freud: *Dreams* 210-11), which is not that surprising as Martha’s bizarre mental condition is allusively depicted by Austin as close to that of a child: “Young life returned upon her, and in her old age she enjoyed a morning view” (89). Moreover, the configuration of her dream may have been determined by her peculiar situation for “dreams of an infantile type seem to occur in adults with special frequency when they find themselves in unusual external circumstances” (Freud: *Dreams* 210-11 n2). However, encouraged by Austin’s brief analysis, one may be tempted to interpret the dream more deeply and see

whether the outcome of the interpretation is consistent with the rest of the narrative.

One element of the manifest dream is particularly striking and may help suggest a more extensive interpretation: indeed, the “angel behind the curtain” evokes a hidden anonymous figure, reformulated by Mr. Wood as “an armed giant sometimes appear[ing] in our defence” (87). This benevolent though menacing character seems to be willing to protect Martha, and his unusual size suggests the appearance of an adult in children’s eyes. Although he does not give it the place of a strict interpretation, Austin associates Martha’s dream with a particularly mysterious event which occurred earlier in her life: “though it was far more important to her than the return of the old wooden post, yet this dream is not worthy of a passing notice compared with the adventures of that almost intellectual wooden post” (88). Austin deliberately displaces the stress from the hidden angel to the wandering post which he queerly describes as “intellectual,” a word never used for objects, unless they symbolically stand for living beings. Moreover, the narrator is not the only one to link the angel with Martha’s favorite post. Her friends equally insist on the analogy: “Remember the wooden post with Ebenezer Mansir’s name carved on it. Remember the ‘angel behind the curtain’” (88). Quite mysteriously, this remarkable post has a “name carved on it,” that of a character of Martha’s childhood. This is convincing evidence that the post and the angel are akin, which may be a creditable key to the unconscious meaning of the dream. The author makes it clear that Ebenezer Mansir’s post was particularly dear to Martha’s heart for it is one of the most precious reminiscences of her childhood:

Soon after the erection of Charles River Bridge, the Select-men of Charlestown believed a portion of Martha Gardner’s estate was the town dock, and they ordered a favorite wooden post standing at the dock to be cut away. The post stood under her chamber window, and from her youth upwards she was attached to that post as much as Pope was attached to the classic post before his door. Ebenezer Mansir tied his fishing-boat to that post, and Martha, when a child played in the boat, and when it floated on an ebb tide down the dock the length of its tether, she sailed up the dock by the help of the rope. That was a pure pleasure never to be forgotten. (86)

It seems thus that the post stands metonymically for Ebenezer Mansir himself, an interpretation corroborated by the fact that both of them have travelled on the seas. Ebenezer was a fisherman, and the post, once cut away from its hole, sailed also on the oceans, "floating on the mighty waters, now in the Gulph Stream, now driven up the Baltic, then by a north wind sent to the Equator and Pacific, and thence back to the Atlantic ; and after such a voyage of adventure, arriving at Charlestown, in its own dock again" (86). Not surprisingly, the post eventually comes back to the very place where his former owner used to wharf his boat. We understand now that Martha's attachment to her post is that of a little girl for a benevolent father figure, an interpretation perfectly consistent with the previously postulated link between the "giant angel" and the post. We can now reformulate Martha's dream as follows: her distress makes her regress to her childhood, and logically, she calls for the help of a powerful and benevolent father which the dream disguises appropriately as an angel. We can even suggest an extra level of interpretation. We know that the post was cut away "soon after the erection of Charles River Bridge." The day before the dream, Mr. Wood tried to comfort Martha and asked her:

"...have you forgotten your old wooden post with Ebenezer Mansir's name carved on it, the old wooden post which the Select-men of Charlestown, in their wrath, ordered to be cut away, and which, after traversing the whole world of waters, floated back, after two years, to your own door, and was replaced in its own post-hole ?" (86)

Once again, Mr. Wood induces the content of the dream, but this time on a more unconscious level. By linking the post episode with the present action of the corporation, he feeds Martha's hopes to keep her property despite the malevolence of her powerful opponents. The rhetoric of the dream appears thus as follows: what happened once, can repeat itself, and Martha must have good reasons to win her lawsuit against those who have already been defeated. The appearance of the angel not only means the return of the father, but Martha's victory in the contest, which would satisfy her wishes doubly.

Another coincidence may lead us to a supplementary interpretation. When the wandering post eventually returned to Charlestown, it

“came floating up the dock at mid-day, shining like an emerald” (87). There is but one other mention of a piece of jewellery in the story: when the deeds were discovered in the old trunk, the author remarks that Martha had no doubt been “little imagining the jewel it contained” (88). We can now guess what that jewel stands for in Martha’s unconscious: the post of her childhood and the deeds she inherited are one and the same thing, this equation being corroborated by the fact that both its terms are part of Martha’s paternal heritage. Quite logically, the post episode became part of her “family record” (87).

The polysemic value of the dream now appears more fully. By making the angel appear to save her, the dreamer unconsciously fulfils several of her dearest wishes: she re-experiences a happy episode of her childhood, as well as one occurring in her adult age — the return of the post —, she symbolically wins her lawsuit against the corporation, and on a more archaic mental level, she demonstrates her power on a father figure by making it come and help her. Beyond the reality of facts, Martha’s agony seems now motivated by more unconscious threats. By contesting her right to her property, the corporation symbolically challenges her position in her family lineage and menaces to deprive her of a most structural psychic element: feeling that she risks losing her symbolic father, Martha experiences a deep distress, which may account for the torpor in which she is temporarily plunged.

Not surprisingly, it is another father figure who manages to awake her from her trance-like state. Indeed, Colonel Wood has all the qualities of a benevolent father. He is introduced as

...one of those rare men, whom, as soon as the eyes saw, the lips whispered, “there goes a man.” His noble heart you might read in his face and see in his hand. In his dealings so just, that his word was a promissory note, which passed like a bill of exchange from man to man. His looks created immediate confidence. (85)

Mr. Wood immediately realizes that Martha’s mental state is serious, and quite intuitively, he conjures up a special event of her life which proves to be the right thing to do. His evocation of the post episode and his linking of it with the “angel” parable triggers off a

dream which proves to be seminal in the process of her recovery. In so doing, he acts as a genuine psychoanalyst whose interpretation induces transference reactions which show the patient the way to resolve his or her psychic conflict. Thus, even if Austin himself does not achieve a complete interpretation of Martha's dream, he pertinently inserts fecund elements in his narrative which, at least temporarily but quite efficiently, enable her to restore her mental balance. The narrative thus appears as quite psychologically consistent, revealing not only the author's intuitive knowledge of the functioning of the unconscious, but the application of this insight in his fiction, according to rules that anticipate the future psychoanalytical theory.

Another of Austin's fictional characters, who seems to live under the yoke of his oneiric life, is the young student of "The Sufferings of a Country Schoolmaster." Indeed, the whole narrative appears as the long relation of a mental state which obviously pertains to the realm of dreams. From the very beginning of the tale, the reader is warned that what follows belongs to the imaginary. The story opens with the following lines: "Ye happy beings of tranquil stomach, who sleep on beds of down, feed heartily, *and fear nothing but the nightmare . . .* listen to the sufferings of a country schoolmaster" (17; our emphasis). Moreover, the numerous hints at the world of dreams confirm the oneiric status of the narrative (see, in this issue, "The Schoolmaster of 'Stingy Hollow'"). In this tale, the protagonist appears, first and foremost, to be the victim of his greed:

I shall certainly lose the money ; and then I shall as certainly *dream* of it. Now it is vastly more pleasant to *dream* that you have got money, than to *dream* that you have lost it. (18; our emphasis)

In the rest of the narrative, the protagonist keeps on *dreaming* not of money but of food, as if the frustrated drive motivating his dreams has passed from money to a series of more archaic objects in the field of orality:

When I had eaten the entire rackoon, I awoke : and such had been the deceit practised on my senses, that after I was satisfied it was all a

dream, I could not keep my jaws still, so inveterately were they bent on eating (24)

.....
 So jealous did I become, that I often questioned myself in my sleep, and argued the point whether I was really eating or dreaming. Once in particular, I well remember that I insisted I was eating a beef steak, and took it on my fork and held it up, and said, "this is a real beef, this cannot be a dream, I am certain I am eating an excellent beef steak, I cannot be dreaming now. (27)

.....
 I retired to bed, and soon began to dream of my steaks ; and when I had eaten them, awoke, and found my lips moving as usual. (30)

Unlike in "Martha Gardner," the dreams in this tale are numerous, but all of them are centered on the same motif. The dreamer seems obsessed by the necessity to eat and he is no longer able to distinguish his fancies from the real: "I often questioned myself in my sleep, and argued the point whether I was really eating or dreaming." But even if these dreams are undoubtedly linked with "internal organic somatic stimuli" (Freud: *Dreams* 95-102), their unconscious contents are not totally elucidated for we still do not know what determines "the choice of what dream-images are to be produced" (Ibid. 102). Among the numerous dreams related in the young schoolteacher's story, there is one which is more accurately detailed than the others and which may open up further possibilities of interpretation.

I seemed to see the rackoon suspended on a hook, and hanging majestically before the fire, perspiring most beautifully into the dripping pan. The rackoon roasting in this manner, showed to far greater advantage, than if he had been run through with a spit. I eagerly watched it all the time it was roasting ; the flavour of it was ravishing ; no heathen god ever smelt such an incense. At length I saw it placed before me on table ; and I seemed to have the whole rackoon within reach of my knife and fork, and most uncourteously I seized upon the whole for myself. Yet however impolite this may appear, it was quite natural ; for I know by experience, that excessive hunger is excessively selfish. Steak after steak, slice after slice, collop after collop I carved from the rackoon ; and when I could cut no more, I took every bone from its socket, and as though my appetite increased by the meat I fed on, I seized the rackoon's bones and polished every one of them to the smoothness of ivory. When I had eaten the entire rackoon, I awoke. (24)

On the face of it, the dream seems entirely directed toward the object of the young man's quite comprehensible greed for food. It borrows its major element — the raccoon — from what had happened the previous day and anticipates in a rather selfish manner what, according to the dreamer's wish, will most probably occur the next day. The raccoon is depicted in a very appetizing way, revealing the dreamer's desire to eat it: "I eagerly watched it all the time it was roasting; the flavor of it was ravishing." However, the appearance of the raccoon deserves some comment; a few hours before he fell asleep, the dreamer saw it after its fur had been removed: "when skinned, he seemed to be one entire mass of fatness, of a most delicate whiteness. I was overjoyed" (24). Without its coat, the raccoon looks as if it were *naked* showing indecently its flesh "of a most delicate whiteness." It is no wonder then if the sight of this naked body hanging in the fireplace and "perspiring most beautifully" appeared to the dreamer "to far greater advantage, than if he had been run through with a spit" and if he "eagerly watched it." The sight of this indecent body was indeed most likely to arouse his appetites. If we analyse them in Freudian terms, his preconscious *desire* to eat a succulent dish — to be distinguished from pure *hunger* which is the internal stimulus (need) triggering off the dream — is doubled by a more unconscious desire not devoid of sexual tinges — the contemplation of a naked body: the dreamer literally *stares hungrily* at the naked raccoon.

This interpretation is echoed in another dream during which the young schoolteacher "rambled through the country milking, in [his] own way, every cow [he] met, and hamstringing every ox, and cutting steaks from them" (27). We have already underlined the ambiguity of the young man's fancies as far as the "beautiful cow" (17) he met in the snow was concerned, noting that this "probably involuntary analogy" ("Stingy Hollow" 142) paralleled Ichabod Crane's greedy desire for the buxom Katrina Van Tassel. The whiteness of the raccoon's flesh makes the hungry young man's phantasm even more specific: for someone who "preferred the milk to the meat" (27), and whose desire had been frustrated since his arrival in that destitute family — "My next request was a bowl of milk — but alas, the cow was dry" (21) —, it is no wonder if his fantasies are mainly directed toward milk and creatures

who produce it: “in the soft climate of Arabia, . . . if a man can once in twenty-four hours swallow a pint of camel’s milk, he is perfectly happy” (23). His meeting with the new milch cow, “[which] carried not less than a pail of milk in her bag” (27) temporarily satisfies not only his hunger but also his wish, as the verb “prefer” — “I preferred the milk to the meat” — clearly indicates. All this is convincing evidence that the young man’s “*pamphagous* appetite” (21) is not only the outcome of his state of starvation, but that beyond the fact that he would literally “eat anything” — “*pamphagous*” is a neologism, borrowed from the Greek —, his regressive *desire* for the breast still leads him to make the corresponding choices.

The regressive traits of the young man’s dream now appear in many other aspects. Undoubtedly, in this place “which appeared to be outlawed from the rest of the world” (19), the usual rules and laws no longer prevail, and it is no surprise if the schoolteacher fancies the raccoon all for himself: “most uncourteously I seized upon the whole for myself. Yet however impolite this may appear, it was quite natural” (24). Like in any dream, the only laws at work are those of desire, and are essentially selfish, *i.e.* “natural.” In fact, this part of the dream suggests a twofold interpretation, combining genital and oral drives. The sight of the appetizing flesh on the dressed table makes the dreamer think that he had “the whole rackoon within reach of [his] knife and fork” (24). Knives and forks are well-known psychoanalytical symbols for the “male organ” (Freud: *Dreams* 470), and we know that in dreams “tables laid for a meal stand for women” (Ibid. 472). Moreover, the young schoolmaster dreams that “steak after steak, slice after slice, collop after collop [he] carve[s] from the rackoon” (24). These symbolic elements compose a sexual scene obviously intermingled with more primitive oral fantasies of devouring. However, this oneiric association is not really surprising: “Since ‘bed and board’ constitute marriage, the latter often takes the place of the former in dreams and the sexual complex of ideas is, so far as may be, transposed on to the eating complex” (Freud 472-73). This part of the dream can thus be deciphered in the following terms: the young frustrated dreamer fancies that he eats his fill, without any restraint or respect to social conventions, satisfying his oral wishes directed to the breast, like an infant does in the early

period of his life; but his genital desire intermingles with fancies of devouring, in the form of a sexual scene first appearing as a voyeuristic picture, then in the accomplishment of the sexual act itself, as the symbolic presence of verbs like “to carve” and “to cut” corroborates. Quite logically, the dreamer’s “appetite increased by the meat [he] fed on” and he woke up as soon as his wish was fulfilled: “When I had eaten the entire raccoon, I awoke.” The dually transgressive nature of the dream makes him then feel relieved: “such had been the deceit practised on my senses, that after I was satisfied it was all a dream.” The condensation in the raccoon — both the symbol of the nourishing breast and that of the body he makes love to — reveals the *maternal* essence of the object of his desire.

We do not learn a lot of the young student’s early life, except through one memory of his childhood in which he was extremely frightened by the dark prophecy of a Mrs. Pitcher. This reminiscence was so painful that the young man almost fainted at the mere thought of it:

The sudden recollection of Mrs. Pitcher’s prophecy, gave me such an “ill-turn” that the family observed it, and asked me if I was indisposed, I told them I felt rather faint. (22)

If, in accordance with the psychoanalytical theory, all remembrances of childhood are screen-memories, this episode may confirm and enrich our interpretation. Mrs. Pitcher, considered as a powerful witch, was supposedly responsible for an accident during which the coach the young man, then a boy, was travelling in broke into pieces. The very patronym is revealing: a pitcher is a small container used to pour milk, and Mrs. Pitcher herself appears “with her cup in her hand” (22), both elements suggesting that she was just having tea. However, we know that tea and milk are precisely missing at the young student’s home. Mrs. Pitcher can thus be seen as the one who “contains” the desired milk, *i.e.* a symbolic mother figure. Indeed, her kind attitude with the young boy could as well be that of a comforting mother: “when she laid her piercing black eyes on me, she stood considering a moment, then clapped me on the head and buried her hand in my flaxen hair, and gently shook me” (22). Unfortunately, what she said then contradicts her

maternal attitude: “you are a very likely boy, Johnny, but I fear you will one day die of hunger” (22). The words she pronounced then must have sounded like a death sentence for the child for she was supposedly powerful enough to have been responsible for the wreck of the coach: “Just opposite the residence of Mrs. Mary Pitcher, the stage broke down, the whippetree parted, the braces snapped asunder, and there seemed to be a sudden and unaccountable wreck of every thing” (22). Coaches are well-known unconscious symbols for mothers (see Freud’s seminal study of ‘Little Hans’), and the falling into pieces of the vehicle calls to mind the wild dismembering of the raccoon in the young schoolmaster’s dream: “when I could cut no more, I took every bone from its socket, and as though my appetite increased by the meat I fed on, I seized the rackoon’s bones and polished every one of them to the smoothness of ivory” (24). We can thus suppose that the dismembering of the raccoon’s body is a reminiscence of what Mrs. Pitcher did to the coach; but this time, the dreamer inflicts to the mother figure what the latter did to him twice: as a *bad* mother, she symbolically deprived him of milk, and then she destroyed the body of the *good* mother represented by the coach. The interpretation of the dream then casts a new light on the unconscious value of the reminiscence, the chronology of actions and their causes being simply inverted: in the screen-memory, the young man attributes the wrecking of the coach to the very person who has threatened him of starvation, thus disguising his own revengeful desire, in a projective representation. These indirect echoes of the screen-memory may account, in conformity with Melanie Klein’s analysis of archaic phantasms in young children, for the somewhat violent atmosphere of the end of the dream, the dreamer being both *hungry* and *angry*.

In these two tales, the analysis of the dreams reveals a consistent psychological framework which, beyond the obvious allegorical value of his fictions,¹ shows Austin’s great knowledge of the most hidden layers of the human psyche. This unquestionably provides his two short stories with a depth which makes him a forerunner of modern writing. Although most probably oriented to the readers of his time, his

¹ See Zimbalatti (lxxvi-cxxiii; cxxxviii-clxxii).

tales not only announce Hawthorne's or even Poe's later obsessions, but they illustrate decades in advance Freud's intuition according to which "creative writers are valuable allies . . . In their knowledge of the mind they are far in advance of us everyday people (*Gradiva* 34). So was unquestionably William Austin.

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