

The Multiplicity of the Self

Madeline Ji

The self, in a psychoanalytic perspective, is never singular. To explore the subject of dreams, one can begin by imagining the self as a multidimensional space they occupy. They can feel the feeling of possessing this space, and it is constantly affected by multiple forces which can be both internal and external.

For psychoanalysts such as Bollas, ego structures emerge in the earliest years of life when mother and child negotiate paradigms for processing life's experience (Bollas 72). One could view ego as the construction inside the space of the self, supporting its frame and negotiating with different forces. In Bollas' words, the idiom of ego is unique to each person (81), but there is a common feature: ego learns how to handle different parts of the self through the way parents handle the infant. On the other hand, there is a tendency in some places within the self, which is being handled as the object, and that is a piece of remaining memory from the infantile stage when we are treated as the object by our parents.

We constantly feel alienated from some parts of the self, which makes an intersubjective subvocal space necessary for us to place our distant memories and strange infantile selves (Bollas 42). Thus, subject-object relations actively operate in our psychic space and become the key to balancing instinctual wishes and superego's regulation (Bollas 42) and pleasure principle (the tendency of seeking pleasure) and Nirvana principle (the tendency of seeking inorganic state

and death) (Pontalis 37). It is only reasonable for us to discuss the subject of dreams within this context of dynamic relations.

Bollas and Pontalis both agree that analyzing dreams is usually not a comfortable activity for dreamers. “In describing the self involved in a dream, the patient may express a mood of shock or disgust with the self.” (Bollas 61) Our attitude toward our dream selves is similar to our attitude toward our infant selves, that is, we feel that we are not identical to “them”. In the dream, parts of the self turn into the object of ego’s articulation of memory and desire (Bollas 64), and dream events seem to be arranged by an Other—an action maker which we could not perceive and are therefore alienated by (Bollas 65). Nevertheless, dream space is different from intersubjective subvocal space, since the former is a “hallucinatory event” in which parts of the self is represented through illusions, and the latter is a “mode of conscious objectification of psychic states” that communications happen proactively (Bollas 47). Freud offers us a way to look at the establishment of dream in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which is to translate imagery into words and dramatic experience into thematic nucleus (Bollas 65), but Bollas, Pontalis, and Lewin point out that subject’s experience of dreams, or in other words, the process of ego establishing dreams, is equally important (Lewin 6; Pontalis 23; Bollas 47). If we use literature as an analogy, the former will be similar to the theme and the latter will be similar to the rhetoric.

It is important to notice that dream experience is different from the dream text. In the dream experience, the subject is inside the fiction made by the Other (Bollas 70). A person experiences a dream as it is completely uncontrollable. On the other hand, dream text is “a reversal of the dream experience” because it transcribes experiences into text-based scripts (Bollas 70). When the dream text is being told, the Other is inside the narratives made by the subject. In Pontalis’ point of view, the analysis of dream text would be a violent action of

destroying a comfort space and a paternal penetration of the maternal body. Lewin also agrees that the relationship between the subject and the dream is related to the infant and the mother. In comparison, Bollas is more interested in dream experience which indicates the way dream setting is being formed, as he says, “the decision about the nature of dream setting – the moment when the ego chooses how it will populate the dream space – is what...means by the dream experience.” (71) Instead of making the infant-mother relationship fully responsible for the dream content, he says that early infantile experience does influence dreams, but it is the ego that arranges dream setting based on these infantile desires and recent thoughts during the day.

For Bollas, dream work is the aesthetic function of the ego, a facility that can synthesize thoughts and wishes (70). It is called an “aesthetic function” due to the unique manner of working of each ego. Firstly, a person falls asleep and experiences regression. Secondly, the conscious day narrative meets with infantile desires from earlier experience. As the dream subject meets with the Other, a discourse of the Other happens. In the discourse, the conscious thoughts turn into emblematic theatre through the idiom of ego. Then, the dream theatre creates a space where 1) the subject’s conscious thoughts are not violated; and 2) the Other’s desire is gratified. In this theatre, the Other compels subject to re-experience their life following the voice of unconscious desires. To form the dream setting, ego uses the dream-work strategies described by Freud, such as condensation, displacement, symbolization, secondary revision or elaboration, and so on. The decision of dream setting made by ego, or what Bollas calls the ego attitude, is prior to subject’s feelings and desires. The dream subject is passively placed into an allegory of desire and dread that is fashioned by the ego (Bollas 64). Similarly, Pontalis points out that in the dream, specifically nightmares, the subject’s annihilation or dissolution is held at bay, which

makes it possible for the subject to look at death without truly being hurt (36). Whether feeling joy or sadness, pain or safety, the subject of the dream is always in a passive role.

Yet the dream subject is the only perspective the dreamer can choose for experiencing the dream. It is also the only possible outlet for the dream to be told. If the dream is on one side and the reality is on the other side, the subject is a piece of glass that separates them in the middle. Dream subject's passivity and inability to decide on dream setting is very similar to the subject's inability to control the world in reality. The distinction between the feeling of being the dream self and the feeling of being the waking self is as small as the distance between the two sides of the glass, making the boundary between dream and reality almost transparent. In *Waking Life* (2001) by Richard Linklater, the protagonist shown the passivity of the subject facing the overwhelming world in whether the reality or the dream. In his first dream, he got out of the car, picked up the note, obeyed the instructions on the note, and was hit by a car. He was the object who received the driver's speech and who was affected by the advice of his fellow passenger. However, all of this was known to others only through his narrative after waking up. When he was telling the dream, the dream as a whole was an object relative to him. Throughout the film, he kept trying to “wake up”, that is, to pass from dream to reality or vice versa. Toward the end, however, he understood the ambiguity between these two spaces: he let go of his hand and immersed himself in this world where dream and reality merge into one. In the film, he had conversations with various individuals. Facing the uncontrollable space (whether it is the space of dreams or the space of reality), some chose to try to explain its movements, some chose to explore the constant rules, some vented their rage, and some proved that they were free and not under any control. The protagonist made a decision similar to that of Zhuangzi, a famous Chinese philosopher who made a discussion on dreams in his essay *Zhuangzi Dreaming a*

Butterfly (庄周梦蝶). When the distinction between the dream and the reality no longer exists, becoming Zhuangzi or becoming a butterfly depends on nothing more than how the physical features change. In this case, just be happy and feel what it is like to be a butterfly.

The subject is not only the bridge connected the dream and the reality in a philosophical context; in a clinical context of psychoanalysis, it is also the bridge connected the present self and the experience that became internalized by the early ego, as Bollas says, “each time the dreaming subject is made the object of the ego’s attitude, the self re-experiences existential attitudes towards instinct and object that were constituted in the earliest years of life, attitudes no longer available to cognitive recollection, but remembered in the structure of the ego’s handling of memories or desires” (78). Yet Bollas points out that psychoanalysts have been slightly in favor of the Other and regarded the conscious subjectivity with suspicion, which caused a negative impact on analysts’ understanding of patients’ true selves. This bias might be due to the power dynamic between the analyst and the patient since analysts tend to treat patients’ disagreement as a denial of the truth. Having recognized the importance of the subject, we can say that analysts should listen to the patient's conscious thoughts with the same attitude as they would use to investigate the unconscious.

The subject of the dream is a split of self, helping the ego structure to negotiate with unconscious wishes and conscious thoughts. It opens a window for the waking self to witness the handling of ego in the night theatre; it is more like a view instead of an actual self, while the true self is a space affected by complex forces. When we are viewing the world through the waking self, we could think about that there is another view of the dream self; when we are seeing through

the dream self, remember that there is another view of the waking self, and that we never know which view is which.

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