

Richard Smith on Part II Chapter 4

359.01: What are dreams?: This whole chapter is in 'conversation' with Sigmund Freud's work, particularly *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Van's opening paragraph defines dreams in conspicuously non-Freudian terms.

359. 06-8: I can classify them by subject matter into several categories among which two surpass the others in generic distinctiveness: Nabokov mimics and parodies not only Freud's ideas but also his style in this chapter. *The Interpretation of Dreams* features numerous binaries of this kind (italics mine).

Gruppe speaks of such a classification [...] "Dreams were divided into *two classes*: the first class was believed to be influenced only by the present (or the past) [...] The second class of dreams, on the other hand, was determinative of the future. (Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, (3rd ed.). (A. A. Brill, Trans.). Originally published in New York by Macmillan.(Original German work published 1900.) p. 4)

Whenever the sources of dreams are completely enumerated they fall into the following *four categories* [...]: (1) external (objective) sensory stimuli; (2) internal (subjective) sensory stimuli; (3) internal (organic) physical stimuli; (4) Purely psychical sources of excitation. (p. 9-10)

Organically determined sensations, he says, "may be divided into *two classes*: (1) general sensations - those affecting the whole system; (2) specific sensations - those that are immanent in the principal systems of the vegetative organism (p. 14)

These *two categories* of impressions - the insignificant and the undisposed-of - are essentially the same as those which were emphasized by Robert (p. 28)

We must at once distinguish *two classes* of such dreams: those in which the dreamer remains unmoved, and those in which he feels profoundly grieved by the death of the beloved person (p.81)

I feel justified in dividing these dreams roughly into *two classes*: first, those which always really have the same meaning, and second, those which despite the same or a similar content must nevertheless be given the most varied interpretations (p. 121)

360.14: the snide “bitterly” instead of “butterfly”: Cf: 158.17-18: “Tomorrow you'll come here with your green net” said Van bitterly, “my butterfly.”

360.14-15: the meaningless “nuclear” instead of “unclear”: On the level of basic world-building, 'nuclear' is 'meaningless' to Van because on Antiterra there has been no nuclear fission and therefore no bomb. This is in keeping with the conspicuous absence of 20th Century horror on Van's planet.

360.20: “skyscrape”: VN got me. I did read “skyscrape” before the correction. Did anyone read ‘skyscape the first time?

360.25-26: we are “van”: Van is saying that 'we are one' sounds like 'we are Van' when pronounced in a Russian accent.

361.12-13: “what is the precise minimum of hairs on a body that allows one to call it ‘hairy’?”: Borges seems to make passing reference to the Sorites paradox in the short story, 'The Writing of God':

I dreamed that there was a grain of sand on the floor of my cell.
Unconcerned, I went back to sleep; I dreamed that I woke up and there were two grains of sand. Again I slept; I dreamed that now there were three. Thus the grains of sand multiplied, little by little, until they filled the cell and I was dying beneath that hemisphere of sand.

Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Writing of God', *The Aleph and Other Stories*, trans. by A. Hurley, (2004: New York, Penguin) p. 92.

361.31-32: trying to make a transatlantic call for an ambulance to be sent from Vence at once: Vence is ‘whence’ in Marina’s already mentioned ‘double-you-less’ Russian accent. She is (absurdly) calling an ambulance ‘from whence at once’.

362.4: an organ: In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud lists objects that, in the dream of a sexually repressed person, might symbolize Van's 'organ':

All elongated objects, sticks, tree-trunks, umbrellas (on account of the opening, which might be likened to an erection), all sharp and elongated weapons, knives, daggers, and pikes, represent the male member. A frequent, but not very intelligible symbol for the same is a nail-file (a reference to rubbing and scraping?).

(The Interpretation of Dreams, 115)

Van, not being repressed, has no need for any such symbols; he simply sees his 'organ'.

362.25-8: All dreams are affected... a grave internal disorder: Here Nabokov is in agreement with Freud.

362.33-363.1: a dismal weakening of the intellectual faculties of the dreamer: Here Nabokov is, again, in harmony with Freud.

We have seen that the very fact of falling asleep involves a renunciation of one of the psychic activities- namely, the voluntary guidance of the flow of ideas. [...]the peculiarities of the dream may be explained by the restricted activity of the psyche during sleep [...]. The dream is incoherent; it reconciles, without hesitation, the worst contradictions; it admits impossibilities; it disregards the authoritative knowledge of the waking state, and it shows us as ethically and morally obtuse. He who should behave in the waking state as his dreams represent him as behaving would be considered insane. He who in the waking state should speak as he does in his dreams [...] would impress us as a feeble-minded or muddle-headed person. It seems to us, then, that we are merely speaking in accordance with the facts [...] when we rate psychic activity in dreams very low, and especially when we assert that in dreams the higher intellectual activities are suspended or at least greatly impaired.

(*The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 20)

363.9-11: A writer who likens, say, the fact of imagination's weakening less rapidly than memory, to the lead of a pencil getting used up more slowly than its erasing end:

This, at first, seems like a faulty analogy in that it implies memory is exhausted through use whereas, generally, a memory is more likely to die from neglect. However, if the analogy is interpreted to mean that memory edits (by erasing) the excesses of imagination and that the weakening of memory lets the imagination run wild then this becomes an allegory for Van's composition of *Ada*.

363.19: I compare that real experience to the condition of this real commonplace object. Neither is a symbol for the other:

This is very contra Freud:

one naturally asks oneself whether many of these symbols have not a permanently established meaning, like the signs in shorthand.... (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 114)

Freud then gives examples:

Small boxes, chests, cupboards, and ovens correspond to the female organ; also cavities, ships, and all kinds of vessels. - A room in a dream generally represents a woman; the description of its various entrances and exits is scarcely calculated to make us doubt this interpretation.[...] The interest as to whether the room is open or locked will be readily understood in this connection. [...] There is no need to be explicit as to the sort of key that will unlock the room[...] - The dream of walking through a suite of rooms signifies a brothel or a harem. [...] Steep inclines, ladders and stairs, and going up or down them, are symbolic representations of the sexual act.[...] Smooth walls over which one climbs, facades of houses, across which one lets oneself down [...] correspond to erect human bodies, and probably repeat in our dreams childish memories of climbing up parents or nurses. Smooth walls are men; in anxiety dreams one often holds firmly to projections on houses. Tables, whether bare or covered, and boards, are women [...]. Wood generally speaking, seems [...] to represent feminine

matter [...] - Of articles of dress, a woman's hat may very often be interpreted with certainty as the male genitals. In the dreams of men, one often finds the necktie as a symbol for the penis [...] All complicated machines and appliances are very probably the genitals - as a rule the male genitals [...]. It is quite unmistakable that all weapons and tools are used as symbols for the male organ: e.g., ploughshare, hammer, gun, revolver, dagger, sword, etc. Again, many of the landscapes seen in dreams, especially those that contain bridges or wooded mountains, may be readily recognized as descriptions of the genitals.[...] - Children, too, often signify the genitals, since men and women are in the habit of fondly referring to their genital organs as little man, little woman, little thing. [...] To play with or to beat a little child is often the dream's representation of masturbation. [...] Relatives in dreams generally stand for the genitals [...] verified examples allow us to recognize sisters as symbols of the breasts, and brothers as symbols of the larger hemispheres. [...] The genitals may even be represented in dreams by other parts of the body: the male member by the hand or the foot, the female genital orifice by the mouth, the ear, or even the eye... (p. 115.)

363.20-21: a little conical titbit with a comical cherry on top: Clearly the 'tit' in 'titbit' is not selected in innocence.

363.25: decapitated trunk

From Freud again (italics mine):

The dream-work represents castration by baldness, hair-cutting, the loss of teeth, and *beheading* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, p 115)

Note, in the context of castration, that 'trunk' could mean 'torso' but it could also mean the main stem of a tree (a phallic symbol mentioned by Freud, p. 115)