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The Freedom of Thought, in Dream-life if Nowhere Else: Freud, Foucault, and Euripides

Sharon Sliwinski

On the Freedom of Thought, in Dream Life if Nowhere Else: Freud, Foucault, and Euripides

When I assigned *The Interpretation of Dreams* in a seminar class a few years ago, a student queried me about one of Freud's remarks at the end of the first preface, a moment when he asks his readers to grant him "the right of freedom of thought—in my dream-life, if nowhere else." I tried to explain, perhaps a little too hastily, that the plea refers to the fact that Freud used his own dreams as the key source material for the book and this had put him in a tight spot. As he acknowledges: "it inevitably followed that I should have to reveal to the public gaze more of the intimacies of my mental life than I liked, or than is normally necessary for any writer who is a man of science and not a poet." One's dreams do not usually qualify as scientific data. The preface closes with a request that his readers accept this unorthodox situation and that anyone finding a reference to him- or herself in the book "grant me the right of freedom of thought—in my dream-life, if nowhere else" (Freud, 1900, pp. xxiii–xxiv).

My explanation did not seem to satisfy the student. What I assumed was a relatively simple issue of clarification led to an avalanche of increasingly complicated questions: But what does it mean to reveal the intimacies of mental life to the public gaze—whether one's own or that of others? What does dream-life have to do with the freedom of thought? And what does the freedom of thought have to do with the freedom of speech? Indeed, what does it mean to speak of freedom? And exactly *who* is free to speak of it? Somewhat inadvertently, this avalanche of questions demonstrated Hannah Arendt's point that "whether we know it or not, the question of politics is

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always present when we speak of the problem of freedom” (Arendt, 1960, p. 28). The discussion also made concrete one of the obstacles that philosophers regularly identify in their grappling with the concept of freedom: namely, that this word remains necessarily empty of meaning, or put more precisely, that this signifier has no definitive referent, but instead works like a placeholder, a guardian of a border to a necessarily open space of meaning.¹ In this way, freedom involves a kind of suspension or liberation of meaning itself. In using this word, the word-bearer reserves the right to assign its representation. Or as Immanuel Kant described it in his first *Critique*, the question of freedom involves the power to be *the cause* of one’s own actions and representations. In this respect, freedom would seem to involve an act of sovereignty, a claiming for oneself the right to represent oneself to oneself.

Here we are back to Freud’s plea for the right to freedom of thought, in dream-life if nowhere else. But as my students were quick to point out, Freud is not simply claiming this right; he is asking his readers *to grant him* this right. This is an intersubjective moment in the text. Here freedom is less an acceding of sovereignty than a form of human intercourse and therefore, as this essay will argue, involves the problem of politics.

The Dead Daughter in a Box Dream

The dreamer does not have a pseudonym like some of Freud’s more famous patients. Her appearance in the historical record is brief enough that her anonymity has been preserved. I have taken to calling her Frau K—the reason will become clear. It is not known why she came to see Dr. Freud. Our only record of her treatment is a fragment of a dream, but because of this fragment we know that she was mother to a teenaged daughter, probably in her forties by the turn of the twentieth century, and almost certainly lived in Vienna where Freud practiced. Here is how Frau K entered the annals of history:

When she was young she had been remarkable for her ready wit and cheerful disposition; and these characteristics were still to be seen, at all events in the ideas

that occurred to her during treatment. In the course of a longish dream, this lady imagined that she saw her only, fifteen-year-old daughter lying dead 'in a case'. She had half a mind to use the scene as an objection to the wish-fulfillment theory, though she herself suspected that the detail of the 'case' must point the way to another view of the dream. In the course of analysis she recalled that at a party the evening before there had been some talk about the English word 'box' and the various ways it could be translated into German—such as '*Schachtel*' ['case'], '*Loge*' ['box at the theatre'], '*Kasten*' ['chest'], '*Ohrfeige*' ['box on the ear'], and so on. Other portions of the same dream enabled us to discover further that she had guessed that the English 'box' was related to the German '*Büchse*' ('receptacle') and that she had then been plagued by a recollection that '*Büchse*' is used as a vulgar term for the female genitals. If some allowance was made for the limits of her knowledge of topographical anatomy, it might be presumed, therefore, that the child lying in the case meant an embryo in the womb. After being enlightened up to this point, she no longer denied that the dream-picture corresponded to a wish of hers. Like so many young married women, she had been far from pleased when she became pregnant; and more than once she had allowed herself to wish that the child in her womb might die. Indeed, in a fit of rage after a violent scene with her husband, she had beaten with her fists on her body so as to hit the child inside it. Thus the dead child was in fact the fulfillment of a wish, but of a wish that had been put aside fifteen years earlier. It is scarcely to be wondered at if a wish that was fulfilled after such a long delay was not recognized. Too much had changed in the interval. (Freud, 1900, pp. 154–155)

I admit, in my first few readings of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, I passed over this passage without giving it much attention. Surely this has something to do with Freud's tone. He seems oddly calm as he describes this young mother's wish for the death of her daughter, as if such thoughts were all too banal to really bother about.

It was not until we discussed this passage in my class that the weight of this dream registered, and then it was one of my students—an intelligent young man who could easily be described as remarkable for his ready wit and cheerful disposition—who made the force of Frau K's latent rage visible. One day, when the conversation had grown stagnant in the class, this student drew our attention to this particular passage. He read the section aloud, and when this failed to arouse interest from his colleagues, he dramatically acted out the gesture of this young mother beating with her fists upon her own body, desperately wishing that the product of her unhappy marriage would die in utero—*im Büchse*. The student's empathy with this nineteenth-century Viennese woman was extraordinary to behold. I suspect we were all stunned by this dramatic performance. Perhaps it was just the student's own latent rage and frustration that was on display that day. Then again, perhaps the emotional situation that engenders a dream is somehow inscribed in these fragile testimonies, affixed there by some mysterious resonance that ever awaits recognition. Either way, from that moment on, I felt I understood something new about the way violence begets violence, the way frustration born of grief can change the world in unpredictable ways—and the fact we can never know with any amount of certainty the consequences of our actions.

Of course, Frau K did not really try to kill her daughter. At best, her dream could be called an experimental kind of action: after all, a dream is just a dream. Nevertheless, it does seem strange that Freud says so little about the awful conflict that Frau K's vision harbored. He seems a little too preoccupied with putting this dream to use in defense of his theory that these visions represent the disguised fulfillment of an unconscious wish. And so there Frau K's dream might have stayed, like some nameless footman, riding on the back of the king's coach. Except that this dream did not stay forgotten. It reappears, again and again, in a way that even the most famous dreams from Freud's book do not.

The first reappearance comes one hundred pages later in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. When Frau K's dream is recounted this time Freud catalogues it under what he calls "typical dreams," and more specifically, under the class of "dreams that

depict the death of a loved relative.” The gesture of cataloguing dreams this way feels a bit like an attempt to tame and contain these diaphanous objects. (His English editors extended this gesture after Freud’s death, giving titles to all the dreams appearing in his collected works. This particular entry is indexed as the “dead daughter in a box” dream.) When Frau K’s dream returns in this latter instance, Freud reiterates his view that such dark thoughts belong to the past, and usually to a past that has been long abandoned. The unconscious, after all, knows no time. When the loved one appears in these dreams, the doctor muses, “they are not dead in our sense of the word but only like the shades in the *Odyssey*, which awoke to some sort of life as soon as they had tasted blood” (1900, p. 249).

In this instance, Freud offers a few more details about his patient’s case history. He reports that behind Frau K’s wish for the death of her daughter was an even earlier memory from the dreamer’s childhood: when she was a small child, Frau K recalled hearing a story that her own mother had fallen into a deep depression during the pregnancy of which “she had been the fruit.” So there is a second layer of grief built into this dream: Frau K’s mother also harbored a death wish for her unborn child. Freud’s response to this uncanny repetition is equally brief: “When the dreamer herself was grown-up and pregnant, she merely followed her mother’s example” (1900, p. 249).

“Merely” indeed.

Like sedimentary rock, Frau K’s dream bears the extended deposits of a turbulent history that spans at least two generations. It manages to speak of the frustration and pain of a violent marriage and of a passionate wish to destroy the fruit of such a marriage. Yet, the dream also carries a second, painful memory: the knowledge that the dreamer herself was unwanted, similarly subject to a mother’s death wish. The dream registers these black passions, or perhaps more accurately, it bears the memory of these wished-for deaths, giving form and shape to these shades from the underworld that come to life with the taste of blood. This dream registers and displays the ways our most passionate conflicts can become split-off from consciousness and transformed into fossils that are buried in the mind. Indeed, this single dream manages to testify to any

number of things, including the ways unacknowledged psychic pain can bind people to one another in captivity, going so far as to chain the fate of one generation to the next. And in this respect Frau K's oneiric vision worked like a transport between worlds—between the land of the living and the land of the undead shades moored within her.

Symbolizing Infanticide

After making its debut in the pages of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the “dead daughter in a case” dream quietly faded from public view. As far as I have been able to learn, this dream never received any further commentary as the book began to garner a large audience in the decades after its publication. Frau K's dream is not among the handful of dreams that have become infamous, attracting continuous attention and analysis even decades later. By contrast, Freud's first “specimen” dream—the so-called dream of “Irma's injection”—has received thousands of citations and continues to be subject to passionate debate and reinterpretation more than one hundred years after its initial publication, prompting the French analyst J.-B. Pontalis to quip, “Poor Irma, will she never stop being given new injections of meaning?” (1981, p. 40)

Dr. Freud himself returned to Frau K's dream at least once more in his written work. It is recounted after an interval of some fifteen years, this time in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. The title refers to the fact that, by this point, Freud had secured the prestigious appointment as Professor Extraordinarius (Assistant Professor) at the University of Vienna. The Herr Doktor Professor's class was a mixed group of doctors and laymen of both sexes. In the winter of 1915–16, in the bitter midst of the First World War, Freud delivered what he decided would be his last course. He spent several weeks lecturing on dream interpretation. One day the topic was “the archaic and infantile features of dreams.” After reminding the class where he left off last time, Freud begins the day's lecture by speaking about “childhood amnesia”—the bewildering fact that we have almost no memory from the first years of life. One gets the sense that Freud is droning on to an indifferent audi-

ence, and that he knows it, too, because he pauses to offer a pithy editorial comment: "There has not, in my opinion, been enough astonishment over this fact" (1916–17[1915–1917], p. 200). Dreams, Freud goes on to say, have at their disposal this forgotten material from the first years of childhood. One imagines he took a long pause and a slow intake of breath before he delivers this thunderbolt: "You will recall the amazement which was caused by our discovery that what instigates dreams are actively evil and extravagantly sexual wishes which have made the censorship and distortion of dreams necessary" (p. 201). If the audience had grown restless and bored (as lecture hall audiences are wont to do), one can imagine them suddenly growing attentive. Finally Herr Doktor Professor is living up to his racy reputation. Freud follows up with an example of an "actively evil" dream:

A woman, whose dream meant she would like to see her daughter, now seventeen years old, dead before her eyes, found under our guidance that she had indeed at one time harbored this death-wish. The child was the fruit of an unhappy marriage which was soon dissolved. Once, while she still bore her daughter in her womb, in a fit of rage after a violent scene with her husband she had beaten with her fists on her body in order to kill the child inside it. How many mothers, who love their children tenderly, perhaps overly-tenderly, today, conceived them unwillingly and wished at that time that the living thing within them might not develop further! They may even have expressed that wish in various, fortunately harmless, actions. Thus their death-wish against someone they love, which is later so mysterious, originates from the earliest days of their relationship to that person. (p. 202)²

Freud exhibits Frau K's dream to his class almost like a laboratory specimen, positioning the psychic object as evidence of that particular, passionate bond we call "motherhood." The aggression and grief contained in the dream is generalized ("How many mothers...") in a way that aims to show how maternal love can be freighted with a vertiginous intensity, which can even include "evil wishes" that aim to destroy the bond itself.

It is surely no coincidence that a dream about death wishes for one's children would return to Freud's mind in the midst of this terrible war. The doctor had two sons, as well as any number of psychoanalytic followers, in uniform. An entire generation of young men would be killed in this conflict. It is canny of Freud to use Frau K's dream to suggest that these visions harken back to the time of an early childhood that has been long forgotten. The British war poet Wilfred Owen would take an even longer view in his "Parable of the Old Man and the Young." The short, chilling poem, written while Owen was on his way back to the trenches after a breakdown, sets the Great War within a parable of the Biblical story of the binding of Isaac. In Owen's version, as in the Biblical account, an angel appears at the penultimate moment to stay the father's hand from sacrificing his son, commanding that a ram be used in the boy's place. But in Owen's retelling, the old man, ignoring the angel's order, slays his son: "And half the seed of Europe, one by one" (1965, p. 42).

Lecturing to a roomful of Vienna's youth at virtually the same moment Owen would write these lines, Freud broaches the fantasy of killing one's child somewhat more guardedly. But like the poet, the Professor's point is that violence has a symbolic dimension, and perhaps we might say that Frau K's dream shares something of the sparse elegance of Owen's poem. Inside her womb is an actual fetus, of course, but in Frau K's mind there is also the *image* of a child, a psychic representation woven together from her thoughts and desires, from the unconscious memories of her own experience of early childhood, and from the emotional situation of the gestation. In Frau K's case—but not only hers, of course—a war is occurring at the frontier between this inner dimension and the external reality of her condition. Violence is enacted in the material world, to be sure, but it draws upon the imaginary realm to gather its awful force. Here is where the potent work of dream life comes in, generating, as it does, a buttress between these sometimes hostile dimensions. Dreaming offers a potential place in which to be, *to exist*, in all the rich senses of that verb, an interim space in which to negotiate the conflicting demands of a hostile external reality and the relentless drives from the inside.

The maternal figure—or should I say the *maternal body*—is central to dream life, but I will hold in abeyance for the moment a discussion of the particular contents of Frau K's dream and what Julia Kristeva calls the "passion of motherhood" (Kristeva, 2005, n.p.) in order to focus on what the activity of dreaming accomplishes in the larger sense. At its heart, *The Interpretation of Dreams* is a study of the formation and organization of dream life, and more specifically, of what Freud called the "dream-work," that is, the particular symbolic operations that transform the dreamer's latent thoughts into the manifest content of the dream. These operations are readily evident in Frau K's case: her dream borrowed from the day's residues; her inner ear became attuned to a particular fragment of the dinner conversation in order to give form to her deeply conflicted thoughts and feelings about motherhood. In this respect, this dream made special use of one of the four forms of dream-work, what Freud termed "considerations of representability," (1900, p. 339) or what is now more simply described as *symbolization*. In Frau K's mind, the word "box" served as a substitute signifier for her womb. This idea was given representation, indeed, *figured*, through the transformation of the word into an image: Frau K dreams of her daughter, dead in a box. This word-image substitution allowed for the mental representation of an old conflict that still demanded expression.

This is one of Freud's most significant discoveries: dreaming is a unique and vital thought process, indeed, one of the fundamental means by which we are able to give *form to thought*. If the idea of aborting an unwanted pregnancy could not be acknowledged in fin-de-siècle Vienna even at a liberal dinner party—abortion would not be legalized in Austria until 1974 and indeed the procedure is still not covered by the government health care system to this day—this otherwise inadmissible idea was given a stage in Frau K's dream life. In short, Frau K's dream provided a home for a thought that could not be thought otherwise. And on Freud's couch she managed to find the courage to speak of it freely. In this respect, psychoanalysis brokers its therapeutic action on the site of speech. Like politics, the main mechanism by which this process achieves its worldly effects is through human discourse. But what does the

free association of the clinic have to do with the free speech of the political domain? My student's question needled me and I didn't have an answer.

The Courage of Truth

Then something unpredictable happened. Frau K reappeared, this time in the ancient past. Not literally, of course, but I encountered her particular knot of emotional conflicts in the body of another woman. The effect was not so much uncanny as what Aby Warburg described with his *pathosformeln*: a kind of re-appearing trope, a figure of pathos that is actually an ancient motif that has been unconsciously transmitted through time and space.

When I encountered Frau K the second time, she appeared again as a figure of theory. This time she stepped out of the transcript of one of Michel Foucault's late lectures. The philosopher held a Chair at the Collège de France from 1970 until his death in 1984 and as was the custom for Collège professors he provided twenty-six hours of teaching each year. Thanks to the rapid development of cassette recorders during this period almost all of his lectures have been preserved. Like Freud, Foucault attracted an audience from a broad cross section of people: students, teachers, researchers, and simply the curious, among whom many came from outside France. Here is how one journalist described the atmosphere surrounding his classes:

When Foucault enters the amphitheatre, brisk and dynamic like someone who plunges into the water, he steps over bodies to reach his chair, pushes away the cassette recorders so he can put down his papers, removes his jacket, lights a lamp and sets off at full speed. His voice is strong and effective, amplified by the loudspeakers that are the only concession to modernism in a hall that is barely lit by light spread from stucco bowls. The hall has three hundred places and there are five hundred people packed together, filling the smallest free space...There is no oratorical effect. It is clear and terribly effective.

There is absolutely no concession to improvisation...At 19.15 Foucault stops. The students rush towards his desk, not to speak to him, but to stop their cassette recorders. There are no questions. Foucault is alone. (as cited in Ewald & Fontana, 2010, p. xii)

Sometimes one can glean a sense of this strange environment from the transcripts, especially in the opening and closing moments of the lectures, when Foucault speaks directly to his audience, apologizing, for instance, for being a bit “washed out” by the flu, or when he abruptly concludes his last class with: “That’s it, and many thanks.”

My own enthrallment began with a lecture delivered on the night of January 19, 1983, just a year and a half before Foucault’s untimely death. He spends most of the two hours conducting a detailed analysis of Euripides’s play *Ion*. In this period of his life, Foucault was preoccupied with the activity of truth-telling (*franc-parler*), with what the ancient Greeks called *parrhesia* and what he termed “the courage of truth.” The element of courage was especially important to the philosopher; he never tired of emphasizing that *parrhesia* is a unique form of address in that it necessarily involves some sort of risk or danger for the speaker. When Antigone admits to defying the royal decree to bury her brother’s body, for example, she exposes how Creon’s tyranny is incompatible with justice and in so doing becomes a *parrhesiastes*, a bearer of the truth. In this case, the price for Antigone’s courage is her life. Less dramatically, Foucault speaks of those occasions when one takes the risk of telling a friend an unpleasant truth—something that the speaker knows will put the friendship at risk. (He does not reference it, but the example brings to mind the bitter dispute Foucault had with his friend Jacques Derrida over the question of madness.) For Foucault, *parrhesia* is an irruptive, fracturing kind of speech that opens an undefined field of possibility between interlocutors and as such is indivisibly linked to courage and to freedom.

The philosopher spent those last few years of his life trying to show how this particular form of speech served as the forgotten basis of Athenian democracy. According to Foucault, *parrhesia* is not an exercise of power in itself, but it does have a central role in the *polis* as the grounds of the citizen’s right to

the freedom of speech. In this respect, the philosopher situates this activity of truth-telling as politically constitutive, both at the structural level of the city-state and in the dynamic relations between citizens, what he began calling “the government of self and others.”

On the night of January 19, 1983, Foucault was engrossed in the question of where *parrhesia* comes from. Exactly how does a citizen of Athens acquire this courage of truth, this right to speak freely? For an answer he turned to Euripides’ ancient tragedy *Ion*. The play pivots on the title character’s search for his identity. Ion was raised as an orphan by the priestesses of Delphi and, as Foucault notes, this condition poses both a psychological and a political dilemma for the young man. On the one hand, one cannot exercise the courage of truth without knowing oneself, without “self-knowledge” in the Socratic sense; on the other hand, the political right to speak freely in the city-state is transmitted through family lineage—only citizens have the right to employ *parrhesia* in the *demos*. As Foucault points out, the play poses this dilemma concretely. Ion laments: “If I do not find she who bore me, my life is impossible.” *Parrhesia*, the philosopher coolly observes, “must come from the mother” (Foucault, 2010, p. 105).

On, My Soul, Speak!

Enter Kreousa. Euripides describes this ancient Queen of Athens as possessing a rare beauty and unmatched grace, but like Frau K, her countenance is marred by a deep grief. She has, as one poet once described, “the inhumanity of a meteor, sunk under the sea” (H.D., 2003, p. 171). The nature of this inhumanity will be familiar given our intimacy with Frau K’s “evil wishes.” The chorus provides Kreousa’s backstory at the outset of the play. As a young woman she was “seduced” by the god Apollo. Today we might call it rape. The difference was not as significant for the ancients. In classical Greece, using one’s psychological, social, or intellectual abilities to seduce another person was judged to be no less criminal than using physical coercion. At any rate, Apollo made sure Kreousa’s father was kept in ignorance. And she, too, bore the secret,

month by month, until it came time to give birth to the fruit of the seduction, whereupon Kreousa returned to the place where Apollo had initially brought her, a cave beneath Athens' acropolis. There, all alone, she gave birth to a son. And there, in her shame, she abandoned the child, leaving it exposed to the elements to die. But unbeknownst to her, Apollo sent his messenger Hermes to save the child and deliver him to Delphi, where he was raised as a servant of the temple without any knowledge of his identity. In the meantime, Kreousa married a foreign general named Xouthos in a match made to end a war. After many years, the couple found themselves unable to produce an heir and so they voyaged to Delphi to consult the oracle. The stage is set for a collision between a son looking for answers about his mother and a mother looking to reconcile her "ancient regrets" about her son.³

The subsequent action turns on a case of mistaken identity. Misinterpreting the oracle's enigmatic message, Xouthos mistakenly believes Ion to be his son, a long-lost child of some drunken affair from his youth. When Kreousa hears of this she is struck with rage and grief, for this means her noble line will end and the throne of Athens will pass to this bastard son. One of the most remarkable scenes of the play takes place at the gates of Apollo's temple. In a long, moving speech born from shame and humiliation and rage, Kreousa bursts out with the truth. For Foucault, the scene is an exemplar of *par-thesis*. Indeed, the struggle to find the courage of the truth is dramatically evident in these words written more than two thousand years ago:

Soul, soul, speak; nay, soul, O, my soul, be silent;
how can you name an act of shame,
an illicit act? soul, soul, be silent;
nay, nay, O, my soul, speak;
what can stop you, what can prevent?
is not your husband traitorous?
has he not stolen your hope and your house;
all hope of a child is lost;
great Zeus, O, great Zeus, be my witness;
O, goddess who haunts my rocks,
by Tritonis your holy lake, be witness;

O, witness and help,
O, stars, O, star-throne of Zeus;
I have hidden too long this truth,
I must lighten my heart of this secret;
I must be rid of it.

O, eyes, eyes weep, O, heart, heart break,
you fell in a trap of men,
you were snared in a god's net;
(are gods or men more base?)

O, eyes, eyes weep, O, heart,
O, my heart cry out against him of the seven-strung lyre,
against him of the singing voice;
yes to you, you, you I shout
harmony rhythm, delight of the Muses,
you I accuse; you, born of Leto,
you bright traitor within the light;

why did you seek me out, brilliant, with gold hair?
vibrant, you seized my wrists, while the flowers fell from
my lap,
the gold and the pale-gold crocus,
while you fulfilled your wish,
what did it help, my shout of mother, mother?
no help came to me in the rocks;
O, mother, O, gold flowers lost;

O, terror, O, hopeless loss, O, evil union,
O, fate, where is he whom you begot?
(for fear of my mother, I left the child on those
bride-rocks;)

O, eyes, eyes, weep,
but that god will not relent, who thought of the harp-note
while his child was done to death by hovering eagles or
hawks;
O, heart, heart break,
but your heart will never break, who sit apart and speak
prophecies;

I will speak to you on your golden throne, you devil at
earth-heart,
your golden tripod is cursed;

O, evil lover, you grant my husband who owes you naught,
his child to inherit my house, while my child and your
child is lost;
our son was torn by beaks of ravaging birds,
he was caught out of the little robes I wrapped him in,
and lost;

O terror, O hopelessness, O evil union, O fate,
I left him there on the rocks, alone in a lonely place,
be witness, O, Delos,
and hate, hate him you palm-branch,
caught with the leaves of the laurel to bless that other
so-holy birth,
yours, Leto's child with Zeus;

heart, heart weep,
soul, O my soul,
cry out, harmony, rhythm,
delight of the Muses, you, I accuse
who pluck from the soulless frame of the harp,
the soul of the harp. (H.D., 2003, pp. 209–13)⁴

Upon hearing this awful confession, Kreousa's companion, her father's old tutor, is overcome with tears. One suspects he functions as a stand-in for Kreousa's own father, who surely would not have been able to bear this testimony. What father could bear to hear that his daughter was raped and bore a child all alone so many years ago? A remarkable dialogue ensues in which more details emerge. At the conclusion of the scene, the old man, so full of rage, insists on taking revenge against the god. Kreousa is hesitant but eventually relents and a plot is hatched to poison Ion at the evening's banquet. Here is where the element of tragedy enters.

As Foucault points out, the *parrhesia* operates on several levels in this scene. Most obviously, Kreousa's tirade against Apollo represents a public accusation concerning an injustice,

a specific juridical form of *parrhesia*. An important element of asymmetry is present here in so far as the accused (Apollo) is much more powerful than the accuser (Kreousa). This is a familiar political dilemma: What can the oppressed do in the face of a much more powerful oppressor, when one has no means of retaliation, when one is too weak to fight to redress the wrong? One can speak. At risk and grave danger to oneself, one can stand up before the person who committed the injustice and *speak*. Indeed, Kreousa does dare to speak freely of her oppression: she publicly accuses the god at the very doorstep of his temple. In this way, *parrhesia* is situated, Foucault puts it, as a “human practice, a human right, and a human risk” (2010, p. 154).

The philosopher does not say this, but it bears emphasizing that this form of juridical *parrhesia* does not belong only to the ancient past. It still operates in the contemporary age, for instance in the testimony given at the United Nations’ International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. One of the Tribunal’s trials sought to prosecute four Serbian soldiers for rape as a crime against humanity. This was the first time in history that an international court tried such a case. The prosecution turned, in large part, on the testimony of a handful of women from the town of Foča, who summoned the courage to speak of their systematic sexual enslavement. The transcripts of the testimonies, like Kreousa’s speech, carry all the harrowing effects of an injury that cannot be presented directly, but whose force is nevertheless felt in its belated effects, in all the fragile irruptions and breakdowns of speech, which simultaneously command and defy our witness. When Kreousa speaks of the “gold flowers lost,” we understand her meaning. At The Hague at the turn of the twenty-first century, the women had to be more direct. When the prosecuting lawyer asked Witness 87—whose identity was protected by the mandate of the court—what happened after she was raped by the Serb soldiers who captured her, she answered: “They asked me if I was a virgin.” When she answered that she was “until a few moments ago,” she was ordered to take her clothes off again, whereupon four more soldiers raped her (www.icty.org/sid/10117, n.p.).

The subject of *parrhesia* calls for much greater discussion. For now, I will stress that this remarkable form of speech, this courage of truth, still serves as a central pivot in the matrix of political discourse, even today, at the dawn of the third millennium.

Practicing the Freedom of Thought

Freud's patient Frau K and Foucault's muse Kreousa, apart from serving as animating forces in each thinker's respective theories, faced a similar conflict and both became word-bearers of a difficult truth. But while these two women bear an extraordinary affinity, it must be acknowledged that the two men with whom they traveled do not. Foucault's antipathy for the "disciplining" techniques of psychology would have been well known to his audience and he was, at best, circumspect about psychoanalysis (even as he shares a few, faint words of praise for the French analyst Jacques Lacan in these late lectures). But even if these two thinkers were not particularly compatible, the body of their thought, or perhaps I should say the maternal bodies animating their thought—the sheer vitality and transforming force of these two women, the Viennese dreamer and the ancient queen of Athens—surely allow us to bring them into conversation.

At the end of his life, Foucault staked his thought on the wager that *parrhesia* served as the grounds of a democracy worthy of the name. Although the citizen's right to freedom of speech would seem to be constitutionally given, the philosopher showed, via Euripides, that this right must be actively *forged*, that this is a form of speech that is born of passion, painfully extracted, often at the expense of excruciating shame or grave danger. In this respect, Foucault makes a strong distinction between the problems of law, which script constitutional rights and freedoms for abstract citizens, and the problems of politics, which lean on the character of specific human players. What interested Foucault was the latter, and especially *parrhesia*, that specific speech-act which indexes the subject to the truth and which powerfully structures the speaker's relationship to the self and to others. It is this theatrical arena of politics that Foucault described as "the government of self and others."

My wager is that Frau K's grappling with her dream life also places her within this theater of truth. But where this woman's story differs from the dramatic staging of Euripides' play is the vehicle by which this *parrhesiastes* arrives at the courage of truth. Unlike Kreousa, the truth comes to Frau K in an alienated form—through a dream. I am wary of rarifying this object. Frau K's dream of her daughter dead in a box could mean any number of things—this was precisely Freud's point when he insisted that all dreams are "overdetermined," that they have any number of sources and significations. Any attempt to pin down some ultimate meaning is not only impossible but also contrary to the point. It would be foolish to suggest that some static truth can be housed in a dream. Rather, as with Kreousa, the speaker's index to the truth emerges in the transposition of the event into words, including the chain of associative memories and thoughts that this act sets in motion. In Frau K's case, grappling with this dream eventually led her to disclose a painful experience to Dr. Freud: that when she became pregnant in the midst of a violent, unhappy marriage, she wished her unborn child would die in her womb. What is at stake in this disclosure is not simply the remembrance of things past. As Foucault helps to show, what is more important is the enactment of a particular form of speech in the present, for here is where meaning is fashioned, or more accurately, *re-fashioned*. Frau K reconstituted her reality through her discourse, or rather she was intersubjectively reconstituted within it, for this speech involves an address to the other, including a negotiation with "It"—*das Es*. In this, Frau K's efforts bear a striking similarity to the freedom of speech that Foucault describes: each woman struggled to articulate a powerful emotional truth, an experience whose verbal conveyance effectively restructured the speaker's relationship to herself and others. As Jacques Lacan compactly phrased it: "one changes the course of [her] history by modifying the moorings of [her] being" (2006, p. 527).

It is important to distinguish the two distinct aspects or moments in this transposition of dream life into political terms. The first involves the *intra*-subjective activity of dreaming itself, the symbolizing action that is the dream work. The second is the

disclosure of this experience to another, the speaker's particular use of her dream as a mode of *inter*-subjective communication.

Before coming to see Dr. Freud, Frau K did not have a language for what ailed her. Presumably this is why she called upon the doctor. Contrary to most modern forms of medical treatment, however, the psychoanalyst does not dispense a script to the patient. The cure does not arrive from elsewhere. Rather, it is the patient who must provide the material for the treatment. The analyst's role is to listen and to facilitate this talking cure. The facilitation is not neutral, of course; the analyst is an object of transference, which is no small matter. But as many theorists have suggested, this treatment is perhaps best understood as a site for the support and strengthening of the patient's dreaming function, which is to say, the patient's capacity to symbolize his or her own conflicts.⁵ Dream-work is the name Freud gave to this particular psychological labor. One of his greatest discoveries was the recognition that dreams are one of the primary means by which human beings conduct this important intra-subjective dialogue. Symbolization is often compared to metabolism: an internal, life-sustaining transformation of raw experience into composite material that allows the organism to grow. This quotidian activity allows unexpressed or otherwise inexpressible psychic states to find expression—something otherwise unspeakable is made manifest. It is difficult to overemphasize the significance of this transformative act, this unique psychic work. Symbolization constitutes human reality—it creates the material of our common world as such.

Dreaming is also a kind of close encounter with the unconscious. In reporting the dream, "It" manifests in our discourse; indeed, "It" speaks through us. The recognition of the presence of the unconscious in human life has considerable consequences in social and political terms. Rather than casting one's misfortune as a matter of Fate or a vengeful action of the gods, taking the unconscious into account means accepting that the human condition entails being subject to this other agency that cannot be possessed, indeed, that cannot even be grasped directly and yet nevertheless works through us. Perhaps this is where the idea of "speaking in tongues" originates—in the estranging experience of having several voices in our mouths at the same time.

At the social and political level, the unconscious is perhaps best understood not as a personal reservoir of recollections and images but rather as a metabolizing *function*, an agency rather like the stomach whose role is to digest the raw contents that pass through its walls. As the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss succinctly described it:

As the organ of a specific function, the unconscious merely imposes structural laws upon the unarticulated elements that originate elsewhere. We might say, therefore, that the preconscious is the individual lexicon where each of us accumulates the vocabulary of his personal history, but that this vocabulary becomes significant, for us and for others, only to the extent that the unconscious structures it according to its laws and thus transforms it into language. (1963, p. 203)

No doubt there is an echo here of Lacan's infamous dictum that "the unconscious is structured like a language." The French analyst regularly emphasized that psychoanalysis procures its effects by altering the speaker's access to language. For Lacan, the symbolic order is a paternal force. But it is worth pointing out that Lévi-Strauss's description of the unconscious occurs in the context of a study of a Cuna woman from the Panama Republic who has become ill during the course of her pregnancy. "The Effectiveness of Symbols," from which the quotation above is drawn, is an extended interpretation of the first "magico-religious text," which includes an eighteen-page description of an encounter between the pregnant woman and a shaman (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p. 186). Here is another iteration of our central figure—a Frau K among the indigenous community of South America. *Parrhesia comes from the mother.*

During his analysis of his own specimen dream—the dream of Irma's injection—Freud appended a now famous footnote: "There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable—a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown" (1900, p. 111n1). He was musing on the dream's trio of exchangeable women: Irma, her friend, and his own wife. Strikingly, he marks the spot—the point of the unknown in every dream—not with the proverbial "x" but rather

with “the navel”—with that odd vestige of the umbilical chord, the organ that once physically connected us to our mother’s body. In this moment, Freud’s fevered pursuit of the dream’s meaning begins to bear an unmistakable resemblance to Ion’s pitched search for she who bore him. In Freud’s case, the dream object serves as a stand-in for this absent and unknown figure. And indeed, this was J.-B. Pontalis’ speculative thesis: that every dream, as an object of analysis, refers to the maternal body (1981, p. 29).⁶ Like so many psychic and organic processes, we are dependent on this figure to give form to thought.

The second, *inter-subjective* aspect—the dreamer’s *use* of this diaphanous object as a means to communicate with others, the symbolic *disclosure* of the dream in words—renders this process into a political matter proper. As Hannah Arendt emphasized: “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a *second birth*” (1998, p. 176, emphasis added). Like Foucault, Arendt emphasized that true speech works to reveal *who* the speaker is. Politics, for both theorists, turns on the disclosure of the agent of speech. Arendt tirelessly insisted that political theory overlooks this relatively simple fact: that human beings must disclose themselves as subjects, as distinct and unique persons and that our political life together depends on this “web” of human relationships. Strikingly, Arendt situates politics firmly upon the fact of natality. For her, the actualization of the human condition corresponds to the fact of birth. It is precisely because we are born—and that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world—that we are able to conceive of something like freedom. Arendt simultaneously purges and grounds this concept, treating freedom not as a transcendental Idea or self-reflective mental activity, but rather as something conditioned on human existence, a result of having been born: “The very capacity for beginning is rooted in *natality*, and by no means in creativity, not in a gift but in the fact that human beings, new men, again and again appear in the world by virtue of birth” (Arendt, 1978, p. 217).

Thus when Freud claimed his “right to the freedom of thought—in dream-life if nowhere else,” he effectively inserted himself into the web of human relations, transposing his private concerns into political matters. The gesture is more than a little

akin to the “second birth” Arendt situates as the grounds of the political realm. Dreaming actualizes the freedom of thought. By transposing this experience into words, the speaker exposes his or her commitments to the social situation and establishes a particular relationship to his or her audience. The commitment involved in such speech activity involves a risk—the courage of truth.

Unfortunately, the historical record does not afford us access to the rest of Frau K’s story. We will have to be content with wondering how her access to her newfound capacity for speech affected the rest of her life. I would be willing to wager that, like Kreousa, Frau K’s claiming of her role as *parrhesiastes* had a profound effect on the next generation, that her daughter’s future, like that of young Ion, was set free by the mother’s courage of truth.

Perhaps it is a form of historical idealism to return to the problem of truth telling in the political sphere. As Arendt dryly noted in 1967: “No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other” (1967, p. 49). But then again, perhaps in our contemporary moment, which is so disillusioned with freedom and truth, dream life might just offer a new horizon to play this old game of politics, a place from which free speech and the courage of truth might return—albeit from elsewhere.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Immanuel Kant (1781/2003) and Jean-Luc Nancy (1993), especially chapter 1 in Nancy, “Are we free to speak of freedom?” pp. 1–8.
2. Freud taught at the university from about 1885 until 1916 and it seems entirely possible that he regularly presented Frau K’s dream in this manner, although no recordings of these earlier lectures remain.
3. There is another layer of this conflict built into the play: as queen of Athens, Kreousa is a descendent of Erechtheus, the archaic king and founder of Athens, who himself was motherless—“earth begot” as Ion puts it.
4. This is H.D.’s translation, although I have modified her line-breaks. See *Hippolytus Temporizes & Ion*, pp. 209–213.
5. The idea that the psychoanalytic process should serve as an analogue of the dreaming function has a long lineage. This is by no means an exhaustive list: M.R. Khan, 1962, 1972/1974, 1976; J.-B. Pontalis, 1974; Hanna Segal, 1981a, 1981b; Thomas Ogden, 2004a, 2004b.
6. This also aligns with Wilfred Bion’s model of thinking, wherein the baby’s capacity to deal with thoughts relies upon the container of the mother.

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