

#### LARVATUS PRODEO: DESCARTES' DREAM

Descartes begins the groundwork of philosophy with distrust of his own prejudices, with distrust above all of the potential deus deceptor, just as Hobbes begins interpreting the State and there-with all morality by starting from man's natural distrust.

--Leo Strauss  
Hobbes<sup>1</sup>

For all the vaunted rationalism Descartes comes to us with the prosophon (mask) of doubt, uncertainty, and ambiguity of the "thinking thing." Nonetheless he gives a major impetus to the modern "myth of science," the faith in salvation through reason, and the ritual of method as the mechanism for that salvation. Curiously enough Descartes reveals his own enlightenment in dream fragments which even Freud was reluctant to interpret since the analysand was dead, and there could be no free associations. At times the dreamer resembles the Young Stranger in "The Bacchae" since the revelation is revolutionary. At times he plays Teiresias in attempting to conciliate the Apollonian and the Dionysian and ending up not quite satisfying either's demands. At times he resembles Pentheus in trying to hold on to remnants of the old order.<sup>2</sup>

Descartes' dream, recounted in the now lost Olympicas survives in a briefer description in Baillet's life and in Leibniz' Cogitationes Privatae, is a tailor-

made personal myth. It is comparable to Boehme's vision of 1610: "the Gate was opened to me, that in one quarter of an hour I saw more and knew more than if I had been many years together at a University."<sup>3</sup> It could be compared to Pascal's "fire" of November 23, 1654, to Yeats' "heaven blazing in the brain," or to Nijinsky's "God is fire in the head."<sup>4</sup> In evaluating Descartes perhaps it is well to keep in mind Romola Nijinsky's account of his dream:

I was thirsty and asked Diaghilieff to give me an orange. He brought me one. I fell asleep with the orange in my hand. When I woke it was squashed, lying on the floor. I slept for a long time not understanding what was happening to me. I lost consciousness. I was afraid of Diaghilieff, not of death.<sup>5</sup>

Although Descartes' dream is likewise a "real" dream, it belongs to the genre described in Macrobius' "In Somnium Scipionis."<sup>6</sup> The interpretation of the symbolism and the allegory probably reveals only a bit about the dreamer and more about the interpreter. The "revelation" occurred on November 10, 1619, but whether the interpreter should approach it through oneiromancy, theology, or psychology, is unclear. Jacques Maritain, for example, hints darkly of "neuropathology" without indicating precisely what is pathological. As we will see, John R. Cole in a distinguished examination maintains that the issue is "vocational choice," Descartes' rejection of the law as a career and his decision to become a "seeker after truth."<sup>7</sup> Cole reconstructs Descartes' state of mind and notes that St. Martin's Eve is a great time for celebrations since it is the opening of the legal season. (Huet had uncharitably suggested that Descartes was drunk. Descartes himself had stated that he had been on the wagon for three months.) The dream can be handed to Jung and the "Other", and "The Shadow" will appear as a "mysterious stranger." For Freudians there will be sexual symbolism. Descartes' self-analysis merely adds further mystery, and for students of the occult there is the Rosicrucian explanation proposed by Paul Arnold. Like the earlier mistranslation of Moses' horns, the dream leads to discoveries which are

theoretical but may or may not be correct. Like the Zen koan it opens a gateway for speculation and served Descartes precisely in that manner, yet as Maritain writes: "It is the Mid-Autumnal Night's Dream conjured up by a mischevious genius in a philosopher's brain -- it is the Dream of Descartes,"<sup>8</sup> but it is also the dream of Goya, "The Dream of Reason Which Produces Monsters," the "dream of the modern age," science.

Maritain offers a synopsis:

Descartes dreams first of all that a tempestuous wind is whirling him about in the street as he struggles . . . to reach the church of the College (of La Fleche) . . . the wind blows him violently against the Church; soon someone in the middle of the college courtyard, tells him that an acquaintance of his has something --a melon--to give him . . . He has another dream that fills him with terror; he is awakened by a burst of noise like a crack of lightning and sees thousands of sparks in his room. In a third and final dream he sees upon his table a Dictionary and a Corpus poetarum, open at a passage of Ausonius: quod vitae sectabor iter? (What path shall I follow in life?) An unknown man hands him a bit of verse--the words Est et Non catch his eye.<sup>9</sup>

For reasons of brevity presumably he omits the first reference which is to ghosts. and in doing so neglects one of the keys in "The Search for Truth." Descartes had written: "I would advise you that these doubts which alarmed you at the start, are like phantoms and empty images which appear at night." Universal doubt is the point fixe around which the rest of Descartes' philosophy, even the cogito, revolves, the point from which is revealed God, man, and reason. Certainly the dream itself raises doubts in the ability to reason to interpret myth with any degree of certainty. Perhaps indeed that is the revelation.

In a way we might as well be dealing with the Arunta because the dream is a personal rather than a public myth, and the referents are not totally clear in the context of seventeenth century France although Cole does an admirable job structuring the dream around Descartes' rejection of the law as a profession, explaining the left-sidedness mentioned in the dream and the "right way" or "right method" of approaching the problem.

He also notes Descartes' immersion in a family totally dominated by lawyers. Likewise Cole correctly indicates the failure of the friendship with Isaac Beeckman which had an impact on Descartes' life. Nonetheless there are problems and contradictions. If, for example, through the appearance of the poets (Ausonius), Descartes is maintaining that self-knowledge and science profit from poetic imagination, then the scientific method is incomplete. Indeed the entire idea of revelation through a dream, even of going to sleep and waking up with the solution to a problem, is an odd basis on which to rest the foundation of the "myth of science."

Let us examine a few of the specific components:

- (1) Blown by the wind to the Temple
- (2) Gift of a foreign melon
- (3) Thunder and sparks
- (4) The vanishing books: Ausonius
- (5) Est et Non

In the first part of the dream (after the ghosts) Descartes is forced by the wind to the Temple, which Descartes takes to be spirit, and Baillet describes as "evil genius." Well it may be that he is being forced to do involuntarily what he would have done voluntarily, but since "dreams go by opposites" and what is really worrying Descartes is his relationship to the Church, what may be the source of his anxiety is that science is blowing him away from the Church. The imagery recalls Plato's philosopher king<sup>5</sup> being forced back into the shadows of the Cave. If he has correctly understood his limitations qua man and achieved a Delphic sort of self-knowledge, and one can see the Pythoness inhaling the heady fumes, then why not go voluntarily? What may be revealed is the "shotgun marriage" of Faith and Science at which Descartes makes a noble effort to officiate but gets caught in one of his own vortices so that the earth can move while yet standing still. He hides behind the mask of orthodoxy to avoid the problem of Galilei whom he did not very greatly admire.

The Temple may be specifically intended as the Church at LaFleche (Baillet uses Templum in his marginal note.) but it immediately suggests the Temple of Solomon and

the Knights Templar with the reception of occult or arcane knowledge when the normal sources of sensory perception, which in Descartes' analysis lead to delusion, are cut off. Cole firmly rejects Arnold's contention that there are exact parallels to Andreae's Chymische Hochzeit: Christiani Rosenkreutz (1616)<sup>10</sup>; and the demonstration would be utterly convincing except for the citation elsewhere from Leibniz that Polybius Cosmopolitanus' (Descartes) Thesaurus Mathematicus supports the work of the German Rosicrucians and helps them undo Gordian knots. Cole is correct in stating that Descartes thought that his "new method" set man out on the right path, but there is inherently a mystical element in that revelation. What Descartes thought he had discovered was the inner path to the "philosopher's stone," the touchstone of human knowledge which might even allow him to prolong human life. What we are dealing with is a clavis, or key, touched though it is by personal referents. The setting of the dream is important, the "heated chamber," the alembic to distill the quinta essentia of human knowledge. Et ego in Arcadia. Descartes keeps hinting that he is hiding something, more important an elaborate presumably than Baillet's anagrams. The motto under his portrait was "Bene qui latuit, bene vixit" and he also gives the motto "Lavratu prodeo," masked I proceed, or is it masked by or for God. Certainly Descartes preserves the alchemic faith that the right method will permit the achievement of the great work. Reason is the way to truth.

Descartes' melon is like Chichikof's box. There is a lot hidden there. On the personal level, Cole indicates that "melon" in French folk wisdom represented "good friend" as in "you have to try a lot of melons to get a good one," and that Descartes' friendship with Isaac Beeckman was not in good shape. Descartes also writes, however, of dumping all of the apples out of the basket in order to examine them and get rid of the rotten ones, retaining only the good apples or "savory onions," or whatever. In this case one fruit simply displaces another. Descartes himself says that the melon is solitude, and although it puzzles any analyst (especially Freudians) how you can get to melon to solitude, William Penn did later write a treatise entitled "the fruits of solitude," so solitude may be an enabling condition. If you puzzle too hard over the symbolism of melons you are likely to be left "melon-headed." The melon indeed

could be a displacement for a head, John the Baptist, the paraclete, Baphomet, his own. It could be Pascal's sphere, center everywhere circumference nowhere. Irenaeus wrote of Valentinius' "delirious melons" in which case it is heretical. In St. Amant's poem, written after Descartes' vision, it is the symbol of Nature. The melon could be a golden orb or equally an egg in which we move as at a Roman banquet ovum ad malum, and if really an apple, the Hesperides, Atalanta, Paris, the last two symbolizing difficult choices. There may be an association with mal or evil or melanos, black. In the latter case the rising of the black cholera or bile leads to melancholy or solitude. The meaning is occulted and ultimately "not proven."

The thunder and sparks are a kind of coup de foudre. Descartes is suddenly struck as the gateway opens. Cole indicates that the quotation from Ausonius may refer to the law and family problems or to setting on the right way to solve them. The books vanish and reappear on a table, possibly Beeckman's "table books" but perhaps the tabula rasa of human knowledge on which the books make an impression. There is a comparison with Flamel's vision of the disappearing books of occult knowledge and to Roger Bacon. Further, with Descartes' method books will disappear (one almost thinks of computerization) through the consolidation into a single work, Descartes, lolle et lege. The Est et Non is Pythagorean with Abelard's Sic et Non in the background. Certainly Pythagoreanism with the unification of spirit and geometry accords well with Descartes' efforts in which "perceptible things allow us to perceive Olympian things."

Scholars and amateurs can continue to deconstruct Descartes' dream to their hearts' content and still remain uncertain in their conclusions. yet some theories seem more probable than others. The process by which the dream is interpreted rationally is close to Descartes' scientific method plus poetic insight. Perhaps that is what the illumination is all about, and Descartes is really doing no more (!) than anticipating Freud. Perhaps returning to the ghosts the subject is that of the "First Meditation," certainty versus doubt. God has certain knowledge of all things. Human knowledge is limited to some things and certain knowledge only of God, that through man's doubting or thinking nature. We near Heisenberg. It almost appears, however, that Descartes asks us to 'Cast all your cares on (Science/Reason) that anchor holds' thus replacing

the divine with a secular mythology, which is precisely opening the way politically for Rousseau's social contract and the age of constitutionalism, but also for the full absurdity of Madame de Momoro and the pantomime of "Reason." Poor Descartes and the Descartist; poor Marx and the Marxist.

The Cartesian problem, which leads to the aberrations, or rationalism, is similar to that of Platonic myth-making in the Republic. Descartes requires that the "true believers" adhere to the creed of Reason before the apples are emptied. He argues that we must analyze our preconceptions and prejudices in this manner, retaining only those which are "reasonable." By cutting ourselves off from sensory delusions we exist as if in a dream to receive a heightened perception of divine revelation. We sweep away the "world of illusions" and are alone with God and ourself. Descartes requires his follower to believe that he is not dreaming (when he says he is) and not insane. While throwing out the old illusions, he installs a new set as does Plato. Maritain comments that he attributes to the quantities and mathematics he manipulates a role as actual physical causes. He goes beyond that by elevating his method to a ritual and seeming to exclude the kind of dream experience which led to its discovery. Is no one else supposed to have dreams? While seeming to imply that poetry plays a role in achieving self knowledge he ignores the poets as much as Plato excludes them from the Republic, not even really relating the geometrics and mathematics of music to mythmaking. Ultimately he demands a scientific faith which in turn leads toward positivism, materialism, and agnosticism.

The Cartesian theories lead to vortices and brute automatons (animals do not have souls, so why should they suffer since they cannot benefit from suffering as can man). One is reminded of the story attributed to Descartes' malicious enemies that he shipped a female automaton (Cp. Hoffman) on a sailing vessel. The captain opened the crate, thought it was the devil, and dumped the whole thing overboard, arguably a rational response given demons and madmen. The automated "bride of Frankenstein" leads directly to LaMettrie's "Man a Machine" and leaves man victimized by irrational forces in an environment that he cannot understand much less control. Maritain argues that Descartes is a "privileged victim" of his own illusion. He "comes forth masked on the stage of the world," Larvatus Prodeo. He wears the "mask of methodism" which Sheldon Wolin ably describes in "Political Theory as a Vocation."

Cartesianism attempts to resolve the apparent conflicts between God and Nature, Science and Reason as does Leibniz's theory of monads and his explanation of the existence of evil in the "best possible of worlds." Leibniz argues that God could have chosen to make man perfectly good and eliminate human suffering. Since he did not there must be some long term benefit for short term evil (Kant later adds that man is not in a position to know or judge God's motives.) Such rosy-glazed optimism is dealt a severe blow by the Lisbon earthquake(1755) which as a focal point for intellectual controversy is an instance where a real event assumes an essentially mythological function. The earthquake led to the quarrel between Rousseau and Voltaire and Voltaire's satiric destruction of Leibniz in "Candide" in which after much suffering the protagonist goes "to cultivate his garden." The Earthquake marks one of the last major natural events in which a strong argument was made for divine or supernatural intervention in human affairs. The questions were numerous. Was the event divine punishment or natural phenomenon? If divine, why did the innocents suffer and who was being punished, Portugal, the Inquisition, the Molinists? Although God could intervene in human affairs, had he chosen to use the earthquake to do so? The Earthquake serves as a great mythological gateway to open speculation and stimulate understanding of man's relationship to God and nature.<sup>11</sup>



## NOTES:

1. Strauss, op. cit., p. 56; Cf. Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation," pp. 23-79, Fleisher, op. cit.
2. E. S. Haldane, Life of Renee Descartes (1905), p. 51; Jacques Maritain, The Dream of Descartes 1969 (1944); John R. Cole, The Olympian Dream and Youthful Rebellion of Rene Descartes (1992); Cf. The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (1984).
3. Wilson, Religion and the Rebel, p. 154.
4. Ibid., p. 188.
5. Romola Nijinsky, The Last Years of Nijinsky (1968), p. 14.
6. Macrobius, Commentary on the Dream of Scipio (1952).
7. Cole, op. cit.
8. Maritain, op. cit., p. 29.
9. Ibid., p. 14; I have abbreviated the dream somewhat differently. Descartes wakes up on his right side.
10. Cole, op. cit., p214ff.
11. T.D. Kendrick, The Lisbon Earthquake (1957).