Artists and the Dream in Nineteenth-Century Paris: Towards a Prehistory of Surrealism
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Source: History Workshop Journal, No. 48 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 151-168
Published by: Oxford University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4289639
Accessed: 26/05/2010 04:56
Artists and the Dream in nineteenth-century Paris: Towards a Prehistory of Surrealism
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In 1847, shortly after the artist’s death, the Magasin Pittoresque published two wood-engravings by the French caricaturist and illustrator Jean-Jacques Grandville (1803–47). What is most striking about both are the eccentric metamorphoses which objects undergo: eyes turn into fish, eyebrows into birds, a mushroom becomes an umbrella and then a bat. The prints are known as ‘First Dream: Crime and Atonement’ (Fig. 1) and ‘Second Dream: A Stroll in the Sky’ (Fig. 2). These titles, which were added by Edouard Charton, the publisher of the Magasin Pittoresque, distracted both readers of the journal and art historians from Grandville’s real concern in that they direct the viewer’s gaze to the pictures’ narrative content. In two letters to
Charton, Grandville had specifically reflected on the titles. In contrast to Charton’s titles, he had attempted in his suggestions to focus attention on the mechanisms of dreaming: ‘What will our title be? Metamorphoses in Sleep? Transformations, Deformations, Reformations of Dreams? Chain of Thought in Dreams?’

Grandville was obviously less concerned with telling a story in pictures than with developing a specific language in which to convey the ways in which dreams manifest themselves. He wrote to Charton of the ‘novelty and difficulty’ of this venture – and not without a certain pride in his innovative achievement: ‘Until now, to my knowledge, no work of art has understood and expressed the dream in this way’. Grandville’s search for a new pictorial language focused on the dream. He claimed to have discovered a new understanding and artistic expression of dreams.

From the perspective of the end of the twentieth century, this sounds curious. Instinctively, we associate a new understanding of dreams with Sigmund Freud’s epoch-making work, The Interpretation of Dreams, and the artistic expression of this new understanding with the Surrealists. This fixation seems to obscure recognition that in France, a paradigm shift in the pictorial as well as theoretical understanding of dreams was already taking place in the middle of the nineteenth century. In order to understand this shift, two developments must be viewed in relation to one another: on the one hand, the conception that was gaining acceptance around the middle of the century of the radically subjective reality of dreams; and on the other, the artistic appropriation of this conception.

Until then, works of visual art, when they concerned themselves with dreams, employed a visual language based on motifs derived from a familiar dream iconography: with the type ‘dreamer/dream’, with sleeping figures, owls, Jacob’s ladders or spiral staircases. Such motifs are still present in Fuseli’s 1781 ‘The Nightmare’ and Goya’s ‘Capricho 43’ of 1797/8 (Fig. 3), the two great models for representing dreams at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Grandville’s work provides an ideal-typical example of how the borrowing of motifs from Fuseli and Goya gradually disappears in favour of a contemporary view of the dream.

Grandville’s prints are, however, only one example of the new artistic treatment of dreams. In French graphic arts – the great field of experimentation in the visual arts in the last century – several artists can be found for whom engaging with the subject of the dream inspired them to try out new media and techniques. Victor Hugo (1802–85), Charles Meryon (1821–68) and Odilon Redon (1840–1916) all experimented, albeit in very different ways, with unusual pictorial strategies. To a greater extent than canvas, paper offered possibilities for experimentation.

While it is true that these four artists are not infrequently associated with dreams and the phantastical in the current scholarly literature, scarcely any attempt has been made to locate the term ‘dream’ historically. Thus it has
been impossible to determine more precisely that which is 'dreamlike' in their works. An historical anchoring of these works in the then-contemporary conception of dreams, on the other hand, can achieve two things: firstly it can reconstruct their conditions of creation; moreover, and more particularly, it can explain that which is specific in this form of artistic expression.

Naturally, 'dream' is a commonplace term, above all in the context of a time when it had not yet become a scientific one. One said 'dream' (réve or songe) and meant – besides nocturnal dreams – day-dreaming, phantasies or visions, nightmares, hallucinations or madness, but also opium or hashish-induced dreams or somnambulism. Initially as a kind of unstructured 'knowledge', broad discourses on the dream began to take shape in Paris in the 1840s, a process in which writers, visual artists and men of letters were as involved as medical doctors, astronomers and practicing 'dream interpreters'. Despite their official prohibition, premises existed in Paris (cabinets) where, in exchange for money, a middle-class, largely female clientele could have their dreams interpreted and the future predicted. One cannot for this time yet speak of a specialized psychological discipline, as the 'field' as such did not exist. Psychological questions were dealt with within a medical or anthropological framework. As with the fields of sociology, history and geography, the disciplinary institutionalization of psychology did not take place until the 1880s.
EMPIRICAL DREAM RESEARCH AND THE EXAMINATION OF THE MECHANISMS OF DREAMING

The nascent empirical study of dreams elevated the ‘course and material’ (Maury) of dreams, their incoherent manifestations and mechanisms, to the status of an object worthy of observation. At the centre of the investigations stood questions regarding the rules of dreams, perception, memory, intelligence and the capacity for judgement and free will. Precisely here a direct connection can be perceived between artistic strategies and ideas about dreams. The words into which the key concepts of the new dream research were condensed – ‘association’, ‘automatism’, ‘combination’, ‘assemblage’ and ‘superimposition’ – can just as easily be applied in a description of the aesthetic principles underlying the efforts of a Grandville, an Hugo, a Meryon or a Redon to appropriate the dream artistically.

Within the framework of the expanding study of mental alienation since the mid-1840s, many articles and monographs on the dream appeared. The dream, as well as the so-called hashish dream – a ‘dream without sleep’ – offered the possibility, as Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours emphasized in his much-discussed study ‘Du hachisch et de l’aliénation mentale’ (1845), that everyone could study these conditions, not from outside but from inside, through self-experimentation. This introverted perspective also characterized the works of Grandville, Hugo, Meryon and Redon. Unlike almost the whole tradition, they were not interested in representing sleeping persons with their dreams, but exclusively in the interior dream images.

One of the most influential investigations, and one which was known far outside of a medically or psychologically specialized readership, was the empirical study Le sommeil et les rêves by Alfred Maury, first published in 1861 and reprinted numerous times. Maury, Librarian and, after 1857, Professor of ‘History and Morals’ at the Institut de France, had already published large sections of the text, both as separate pamphlets and in three articles for the Annales médico-psychologiques in 1848, 1853 and 1857. Maury was concerned with the way in which in dreams, one leaves the real world with its specific laws, its feeling for space and time and its social conventions. New laws, strange kinds of combinations and coincidental relations develop between persons, objects and words, whose contradiction with external reality does not surprise the dreaming subject. There, ‘everything is new, strange, outside of our habitual conceptions’. A multitude of images is created, according to Maury, through a combination of sensory stimuli which at some point had impressed themselves upon the sleeper during wakefulness and were often subsequently forgotten. The strange and new in dream images, he claims, results from the way in which they are assembled and grouped. This insistance upon memory as a decisive motor of dream production is a significant feature of the contemporary discourse. In this connection, one can easily mention the names of Baudelaire or Grandville. In the letter to Charton quoted at the outset, Grandville
attributes a constitutive role to memory and describes the dream as a composite of fragments of the past:

In my opinion, one never dreams of any object that one has not seen or thought about while one was awake, and it is the amalgamation of these various objects glimpsed or thought about, often at a considerable distance in time, which creates such strange, such incongruous unities in dreams.\(^{17}\)

One occasionally finds such statements translated into sociological language, as for example in an article by the medical doctor Antonin Macario. He explains that the ‘forms of dreams’ not only reflect personal experiences but also ‘the general ideas that mark every century’.\(^ {18}\)

A brief glance at earlier centuries quickly reveals that such interpretations were not entirely new. As far back as the *Encyclopédie* of d’Alembert and Diderot (1751–1772), an ‘immeasurably large assemblage of all our ideas’ was named as the cause of the peculiarity and weirdness of dreams. The article ‘Songe’, which is a slightly shortened version of the ‘Essai sur les songes’ (1746) by Samuel Formey, makes it clear that the groundwork for the new way of looking at the dream had long been in place.\(^ {19}\) Eighteenth-century philosophers such as David Hartley and Denis Diderot described the odd, incoherent manifestations of nocturnal dream images and the speed with which these unfold.\(^ {20}\) Formey, who expressly wanted to follow the ‘path of experience’ (*route de l’expérience*), described the lack of control in dreams and the influence of external and internal bodily sensations.\(^ {21}\) Indeed, he declared the appearance of particularly alien things, which stand ‘in contradiction to all the laws and order of nature’, to be a ‘criterion’ by which the dream state could be distinguished from that of wakefulness.\(^ {22}\)

However, in the eighteenth century, the discussions on dreams revolved above all around the role of the psyche in sleep, and dream images were generally understood as products of an ‘objective’ reality.\(^ {23}\) Formey had alleged that dreams were connected to the universe: nocturnal dreams, he argued, were a succession of images (*représentations*) which unceasingly unfolded in the mind and represented the universe but which were only visible to human beings in sleep in the form of dreams.\(^ {24}\) Although the subjective element in dreams was occasionally described, the notion that dreams allowed one to participate in an objective reality had not yet been discarded.\(^ {25}\) Even among the learned, such opinions would endure for generations: According to a few brief sentences which Baudelaire added to his *Paradis artificiels* (1860) concerning the ‘hieroglyphic’ nature of certain dreams, there were still people who attributed prognostic qualities to them:

As it cannot be explained in terms of natural causes, they have attributed to it a cause external to human beings; and even today – not even
speaking of oneiromancers – there exists a philosophical school that sees in dreams of this kind at times a reproach, at times a counsel; in sum, a symbolic and moral picture, engendered in the very spirit of the sleeping man.26

As Maurice Halbwachs already observed, the notion that a dream has its own logic (Halbwachs), its own law (Maury), only first began to spread with Maury (and some of his contemporaries). This view – that thinking in dreams and in the state of wakefulness has a different ‘frame of reference’ (Halbwachs) – became widely disseminated only in the nineteenth century with the institutionalization of scientific journals and the establishment of an experimental approach to dreams.27 Thus, although the key words in this discourse not infrequently resembled those of the eighteenth century, they were used in the context of a different interpretation of reality and perception: the dream now no longer made participation in an objective reality possible, as Formey could still argue in the Encyclopédie article. Rather it opened up a highly subjective reality, ‘a world where there is no reality other than the beings created by our memories and our imagination’, as Moreau de Tours put it, referring to the hashish dream,28

Such ideas about dreams being subject to their own laws and about the reality of dreams being subjective posed a particular challenge to artists and provided a decisive intellectual precondition for the production of new media and techniques. Interest in dreams seems above all to have meant interest in an area of experience where everyday laws do not apply, which is governed instead by other laws which one can attempt to grasp in treatises, poetic texts or with a pen, paint brush or etching needle. Various motivations can be distinguished: while the dream researcher, but also Grandville, wanted to get hold of the tangible laws of dreams, some artists, such as Hugo and ultimately and especially Redon, were trying to approach the ephemeral.

GRANDVILLE’S CHAINS OF MOTIFS AND THE SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE ON DREAMS

The principle of ‘associative logic’ was already apparent in both of Grandville’s ‘Dreams’ of 1847. These prints from the end of his life do not stand alone in his work. In Grandville’s oeuvre, an interest in associative logic is combined with the eye of the caricaturist, which perhaps made him more sensitive to such mechanisms. Already in 1844 he published the wood-engraving ‘The Metamorphoses of Sleep’ (Fig. 4) in the series ‘Another World’.29 Here two chains of associations interconnect after several stages into a vase with a flower, which in turn is transformed into a female figure, only to dissolve into the mist. The disparate objects are linked only through similarity of form. What is special in Grandville’s metamorphoses is that the mutations do not follow a linear progression, but are continually being
joined by new objects which cannot be deduced from the preceding stage. This is what constitutes their surreal character.

Grandville’s 1840s prints contain obvious parallels to the observations of contemporary dream researchers. Here there are direct overlaps between the artistic and scientific discourses on dreams. This has not yet been noted because the start of empirical dream research is generally dated to the 1860s. Alfred Maury’s monograph, published in 1861, and the 1867 study *Les rêves et les moyens de les diriger* by d’Hervey de Saint-Denys are held to be the pioneering works of dream research.\(^3^0\) In fact, however, the journal *Annales médico-psychologiques*, which was founded in 1843, was already publishing numerous articles on observations of dreams, including some by Maury, in the 1840s. The founding of this journal and the holding of an open competition on ‘Sleep from a psychological point of view’ by the Institut de France in 1853 already marked the institutionalization of the empirical perspective on dreams. This earlier dating leads us back to precisely the time in which Grandville, Hugo and Meryon were experimenting in their graphic works. One must keep in mind that Grandville developed his ‘new’ manner of representing dreams at a time when such empirical research was in its infancy. Nevertheless, Grandville’s prints are not least particularly instructive for having preceded the larger wave of publications on empirical dream research.

The associative interconnection of objects related to one another only in their external form was stressed as a peculiarity of dreams by many authors in the *Annales médico-psychologiques*, including Maury with the example of associative word chains in sleep. D’Hervey de Saint-Denys could think of no better way to describe this than to refer to Grandville’s ‘capricious mutations’. In order to make his own observations comprehensible, he invoked the example of Grandville’s ‘Revelation of the Ballet’, a coloured wood-engraving from the series ‘Another World’ of 1844.\(^3^1\)

Marie-Jean-Leon d’Hervey de Saint-Denys, an orientalist and sinologist at the Collège de France, also attempted to categorize the logic of dreams pictorially by means of a coloured diagram on the frontispiece of his treatise *Les rêves et les moyens de les diriger* (Fig. 5). These plates call attention to the differing interests between the scientific and artistic approaches to dreams. The upper part of the image, in which a man appears at a dinner party in the company of a naked woman, seems like an illustration of the often-described sexual phantasies in dreams. More significant for the new perspective on dreams, however, are the abstract, coloured drawings in the lower six diagrams. Here we find organic forms and crystalline structures captured, mostly against a black background. The motifs recall flames or wheels of fire, graphic symbols or temperature curves, magnetic fields or cell structures. It seems as if the division of the frontispiece argues in the same manner as the illustrations of workshops in the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d’Alembert do.\(^3^2\) These illustrations always show in the upper third a total view of the manufactury and in the lower part the different tools that are
necessary for the craft in question. From this evidence, d'Hervey de Saint-
Denys used a well-established academic style to depict a workshop of dream
and its tools.

What is striking is the apparently scientific precision with which d'Hervey
de Saint-Denys attempted to break down the phenomenon of dreaming into
structures. The dream researcher, as it appears here, represents his way of
seeing with positivist certainty. His schemata attempt to grasp the logic of
dreams just as is promised in the title of his study: 'Dreams and the Means
of Steering Them'. Artists, on the other hand, while also grappling in their
works with the notion of dreams following laws of their own, were primarily
concerned with the intangible, the ephemeral, the incoherent.

THE CREATION OF DREAM MOODS: VICTOR HUGO

One artist who dealt extensively with his 'nocturnal life' was Victor Hugo.
This is testified to by a number of ink drawings as well as numerous
recordings of dreams in his personal diary, as well as a few collections of
poems (such as 'Les contemplations', 1856) and novels (Les travailleurs de
la mer, 1866, and L'homme qui rit, 1869), and particularly the dream-text
'Promontorium somnii' – the Foothills of Sleep – from the year 1863. In the
first years of his exile on the island of Jersey, between 1853 and 1855, Hugo
also held seances, the protocols of which have survived.33

The combination of romantic motifs and unfamiliar media and tech-
niques is the determining characteristic of Hugo's ink and wash drawings,
which, in the words of Eugène de Mirecourt, 'transport [the viewer] into the
regions of dreams'. Indeed, Hugo, whose works on paper fall into the so-
called 'second Romantic' era, still relied in certain works on the traditional
iconographic repertoire of medieval castles and ruins, sinking ships and
lonely lighthouses for the creation of uncanny moods.

More interesting here, however, are those works that are dominated by
experiments with materials. These one can regard as a calculated playing
with chance and interpret as an artistic appropriation of automatic pro-
cesses. Hugo developed aleatoric procedures which attributed an important
role during artistic work to free association and which went far beyond con-
temporary conventions of conceiving of pictures. He splashed ink on paper,
strewed salt on fresh paint, made impressions or folded the sheets while they
were still wet. In addition, he dipped objects like lace made of fabric or
metal, ferns or his finger in ink or gouache and pressed them onto paper.
Occasionally, he would lay the lace under the paper and make rubbings
of its structure. Usually he did not leave the forms thus created unaltered on
the paper, but rather used them as a source of inspiration.

In a lace print which Hugo entitled 'Laces and Spectres' (Fig. 6),34 one
can see how he discerned phantastical spectres in the printed structures: by
adding a few lines, he formed two grotesque faces out of the openwork
pattern, one of which appears in a frontal view and the other in profile. It
was above all on the basis of these technical experiments that André Breton later declared Hugo one of the forerunners of surrealism.

Against the background of Hugo’s intensive involvement with dreams and his interest in seances, it seems reasonable to interpret his controlled dialogue with chance as a pictorial strategy intended to evoke unseen forces. A good many prints bear a close resemblance to the symmetrical ink-blot pictures which Justinus Kerner was then making in Germany. A follower of mesmerism, Kerner interpreted these blots as expressions of a supersensory spirit world.\textsuperscript{35} Even though Hugo was probably unaware of the existence of these images, the reference to Kerner may support this interpretation of Hugo’s folded and ink-blot pictures.

In the case of Hugo, however, one should never lose sight of the pathos with which he displayed his visionary powers and his apparently intuitive approach. Hugo created a veritable myth surrounding his own person and his entire artistic oeuvre. In his much-cited letter to Baudelaire, he spoke mystifyingly of his ‘strange mixtures’ and explained these in terms of the search for a language for the pictures in his mind, which he hoped to find not in motifs but rather in media and techniques: ‘By the end, I was mixing pencil, charcoal pencil, sepia, coal and soot and all sorts of bizarre mixtures which managed to render a little more closely that which my eye and above all mind’s eye sees’.\textsuperscript{36} Probably it was he himself who gave birth to the widespread but spurious legend that he used coffee in his works on paper.

A MEETING OF ESSENTIALLY DISSIMILAR REALITIES: CHARLES MERYON

The etchings of Charles Meryon are also recognizable in the context of the nascent and directly-popular dream research as an expression of a new aesthetic. This aesthetic is closely related to the later surrealist conceptions of collage, just as, not many years after Meryon’s death, it found its poetic expression in the ‘Chants de Maldoror’ by Lautréamont.

‘The Vampire’ (Fig. 7) is a print from the series ‘Etchings on Paris’ in which Meryon invoked the old Paris, threatened with demolition in the framework of Haussmann’s redevelopment program.\textsuperscript{37} His head resting on his hands, the winged monster from the Grand Galerie of Notre Dame looks down upon Paris. The meditative gaze and the iconographic gesture of the propped-up head is not only the most obvious reference to the ‘infinite domain of dreams and of meditation’,\textsuperscript{38} as Meryon put it in an unpublished letter to his first biographer Philippe Burty. Furthermore, the foreshortenings and condensations of the architecture as well as the focus on individual details without regard to real proportions express precisely that conception of space which is described in detail in theoretical texts on dreams.

Meryon removed objects from their accustomed locations and tailored the view to his own purposes. He shortened the distances between the
Vampire and the Tour St Jacques, compressed the houses in their vicinity and shifted the stone monster to the edge of the picture’s front margin. Nor did he pay heed to real proportions: the church tower and the surrounding buildings appear too large for the cityscape behind. Meryon intensified the
impression of unreality even more by means of the black birds, whose wings partly extend out of the space of illusion and into that of the viewer.

The montage character, demonstrated in other prints in Meryon’s predilection for extreme pictorial details, is particularly apparent in the process through which this etching was created. Probably using photographic models, Meryon took individual objects out of their context and worked them out precisely. Only in the second, etched proof did he combine them into a single image. In one drawing and in the first proof of the etching, he dealt only with the surrounding house fronts and the large birds; the Vampire and the Tour St Jacques are merely contoured in faint outlines. In another drawing, he represented these in isolation, sketching but shadowy outlines of the surrounding buildings.39

Meryon’s collage-like method is clearly visible in those etchings in which phantastic phenomena populate the otherwise dreary, stony cityscape. A particularly vivid example is the fourth proof of ‘Collège Henri IV’ (Fig. 8) from 1864.40 The authentic appearance of the print’s topography is marred by steep, towering cliffs and the presence of the sea in the upper region of the picture. A flotilla of sailing-ships and whales, accompanied by two oversized sea gods and a flock of birds, is heading directly towards the closely packed houses. A confusing effect is created by the disproportionately large schoolboys standing under the imposing school complex, a few of whom have gathered around a female, apparently allegorical figure. In the picture, a seamless interweaving of highly divergent levels of reality is achieved: Details of a seemingly topographical view of nineteenth-century Paris, echoes of a Renaissance landscape, allegorical and ancient mythological figures as well as exotic native ships all encounter one another directly.

To be sure, in interpreting this picture one might consider the possible influence of Meryon’s mental disturbance (this has repeatedly been done, particularly in the case of his later etchings). Nevertheless ‘mental disturbance’ itself is not an objective diagnosis but rather a social construct. Meryon’s combination of different objects and levels of reality leads to an – according to mid nineteenth-century standards – unusual organization of the pictorial field. It serves as evidence of that new, artistic treatment of reality which asserted itself in the second half of the century: objects became freely available, interchangeable and, as incoherent separate components, could be recombined to form something new.

**ISOLATION AND SUPERIMPOSITION:**  
**ODILON REDON, THE ‘PRINCE DU RÊVE’**

The montage character of Odilon Redon’s ‘Noirs’ is much more striking. Redon, whom his contemporaries dubbed the ‘prince of mysterious dreams’, was of a generation already familiar with the empirical discoveries of the middle of the century. He could play with the notion that dreams are a combination of familiar images which one has perceived while awake
and which the powers of the imagination in sleep can recombine into new, often incoherent formations. By the 1880s, when a fourth, revised edition of his monograph appeared, the observations of an Alfred Maury fitted in with popular and much-cited views. This is made clear, for example, by Paul-Max Simon’s 1882 publication, *Le monde des rêves*, which often makes reference to the authors of the mid-century.\(^4^1\)

In the charcoal drawing ‘Guardian Spirit of the Waters’ (Fig. 9) from 1878, unconnected elements come together:\(^4^2\) A gigantic head with a small wing hovers over a body of water on which a boat is sailing and over which a couple of birds are winging. In relation to the colossal head, the space with its low horizon appears endlessly wide and the sailboat tiny. With its black hair and partially darkened face, the head appears cut out against the light background. Only the shadows of the head, which are visible on the water, create a formal connection among the various elements in the picture. The modernity of Redon’s approach lies in the conception of the picture plane as a field of experimentation for ‘autonomous’ collage ciphers.

In other prints, the combination of unrelated pictorial elements leads to the condensation of a new object. In the lithograph ‘There was perhaps a first vision attempted in the flower’ (Fig. 10), from the series ‘The Origins’ from 1883, a plant figure with an oversized, upward-looking eye is superimposed upon strata of other objects.\(^4^3\) To the right of the plant, a flower can be seen under greyish-black crosshatching; to the left, the flesh-coloured detail of a face and the sketchy beginnings of a very dark black cap can just barely be made out. The individual regions of objects can only be interpreted in relation to their surroundings and only ever make parts of the print coherent.

Of the artists discussed here, Redon is the one whose oeuvre has received the most scholarly attention in the past few years. Particularly in the context of the Redon retrospective mounted in Chicago in 1994, possible connections to contemporary dream research have been suggested. The title of his first album of lithographs, *Dans le rêve* (In Dreams), published in 1879, could have its source in Alfred Maury’s famous treatise, *Le sommeil et les rêves*, reprinted the previous year. An unpublished short story by Redon is supposed to be structurally and compositionally analogous to Eduard von Hartmann’s ‘Philosophie des Unbewußten’ (Philosophy of the Unconscious). The motif of the winged heads of many creatures suggests an allusion to Hypnos, the ancient Greek god of sleep.\(^4^4\)

Redon’s ‘Noirs’ contain very different pictorial qualities. Some prints present dream-images, elements of nocturnal nightmares, in a very concrete and traditional manner featuring grotesque forms, skeletons, skulls and monsters. Others, more instructive here, deal with the concept of dreaming beyond the level of motifs and place media and techniques at the centre of attention. In ‘The Polyp of the Dream’ (Fig. 11), a charcoal drawing from 1885, a crude blackening around the edges intensifies into a deep black at the center of the picture, out of which a half-darkened, three-quarters profile of a child emerges.\(^4^5\) This is partly encircled by a snake-like creature, the polyp
Artists and the Dream

Fig. 8. Charles Meryon, ‘Collège Henri IV’, 1864.

Fig. 9. Odilon Redon, ‘Guardian Spirit of the Waters’, 1878.

Fig. 10. Odilon Redon, ‘There was perhaps a first vision attempted in the flower’, 1883.

of the dream. In its intensity, the black counteracts any notion of a spatial continuum. Nothing is tangible, nothing can be visibly placed. Only in the lower third of the picture can a body of water and a column be made out.

With his use of the colour black – which for centuries, through the work of Rembrandt, Piranesi, Goya and Delacroix, had been associated with the uncanny, with night and death – Redon did indeed take up its traditional connotations. Yet the black in his prints is no longer an atmospheric darkness that bathes events in an uncanny ambience. In several prints, the black
detaches itself from the objects it surrounds and becomes its own, independent bearer of meaning, an abstract expression of subjectivity and an inner world.

In the process, the black becomes a vehicle for a new, positively charged notion of melancholy and the dream. In the 1883 charcoal drawing 'The Sphinx' (Fig. 12) the dream is depicted not as a threat, as was still the case in Goya’s ‘Caprichos’, but rather as a second reality interwoven with the external one. Instead of juxtaposing two realities, the incoherence of the dream reality in Redon’s works is integrated into a flowing black-to-white continuum with soft transitions and fine shading.

The image is dominated by the profile of a gigantic head wearing a diadem. Vegetal forms and horizontal hatching on the picture’s lower margin suggest an overgrown bank and a body of water. In connection with this landscape and the dark clouds in the upper region of the picture, the head and shoulders of the ‘Sphinx’ can also be read as steeply-rising cliff formations. Unlike the manner in which multiple meanings are played with in a traditional picture puzzle, a complete synthesis of face and landscape is not achieved here. Rather, the overlapping planes penetrate one another. Thus, although the eyes, nose and mouth of the sphinx can clearly be recognized, the skin on the face appears angular, stony. It is the simultaneity of several layers of meaning that provides space for the different associations.

With the superimposition of pictorial layers and the overdetermination of individual objects, Redon’s prints not infrequently give the impression that he was searching for a pictorial language, the scientific conceptualization of which was to come only at the turn of the twentieth century with Sigmund Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud, who like Redon spent some time in Paris at the end of the century, would later, in his reflections on dream-work, declare the overdetermination of individual pictorial elements to be a central distinguishing characteristic of dreams. Such analogies make clear that the caesura of ‘Freud’ at the end of the century was not as radical as the myth of the *Interpretation of Dreams* might suggest.

In 1901, Henri Bergson gave a lecture on dreams at the Institut Psychologique in which he identified the mechanisms and role of memory in dreams as the central fields of dream research in the century that had just ended. He concluded this stock-taking with the prediction that ‘psychical research’ on the unconscious would be among the central tasks of the twentieth century. Even though Freud, to whom Bergson at one point referred, blazed a trail with his *Interpretation of Dreams*, the French were slow to recognize this fact; the book was not even translated into French until 1926. What had to be grasped, according to Bergson, was, as Starobinski later put it, that Freud ‘in a manner of speaking put an end to the monopoly of organic life and instead bestowed the monopoly position on the psychical apparatus’. Many an artist in the half-century before Freud had already granted a very dominating position to the ‘psychical apparatus’ in their works. For Redon, above all, the mechanisms of dreaming were of
interest only insofar as such knowledge could serve in the search for the psychological dimensions of dreams, the moments of fear or of being lost. With Redon – as, at a more rudimentary stage, already with Grandville, Hugo and Meryon – that productive connection between dream conceptions and pictorial strategies, the legacy of which extends far into the twentieth century, was already bearing fruit.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


6 A development which had already begun in the eighteenth century with the establishment of the psychological discipline ‘psychologica rationalis’ and its complementary science ‘psychologica empirica’. See the overview provided by Wolfgang Riedel in *Anthropologie und Literatur in der deutschen Spätäufklärung, Skizze einer Forschungslandschaft* in *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 6, special issue, 1994, pp. 105–10, although the focus here is on the German late Enlightenment. For the French late Enlightenment, see the study by Sergio Moravia, *Beobachtende Vernunft, Philosophie und Anthropologie in der Aufklärung*, 1970. It deals extensively with the anthropologically-oriented Société des Observateurs de l’homme, which was founded in 1799.


9 The interest in dreams was directly related to the discussions between the opposing parties of the so-called ‘physiologists’ and ‘spiritualists’; as the latter came out on top, greater importance was attributed to psychological aspects and the inner life, including dreams, became a central object of study. On this, see Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify, The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Mass., New York and Port Chester, 1990, pp. 242–5.

10 See Moreau de Tours, *Du Hachisch et de l’aliénation mentale, Etudes psychologiques*, Paris, 1845, p. 37 (‘un véritable état de rêve, mais de rêve sans sommeil’), pp. 29–32, 34, 146. In comparison with mental disturbance and the hashish dream, he described the dream state as ‘l’expression la plus complète; on pourrait dire qu’il en est le type normal ou physiologique’ (p. 350). See also Charles Lévéque, ‘Du sommeil et du somnabulisme, au point de vue psychologique’, in *Revue des deux mondes* 14, 1858, p. 928.


16 In the *Paradis artificiels* (1860) Baudelaire distinguishes between two types of dreams and mentions the appearance of everyday memories as a characteristic of ‘natural dreams’: ‘Les rêves de l’homme sont de deux classes. Les uns, pleins de sa vie ordinaire, de ses préoccupations, de ses désirs, de ses vices, se combinent d’une façon plus ou moins bizarre avec les objets entournés dans la journée, qui se sont indiscrètement fixés sur la vaste toile de sa mémoire.’ *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, vol. 1, Paris, Pléiade, 1975, p. 408.

17 ‘A mon avis, on ne rêve aucun objet dont l’on n’ait eu la vue ou la pensée lorsque l’on était éveillé, et c’est l’amalgame de ces objets divers entourés ou pensés, à des distances de temps souvent considérables, qui forme ces ensembles si étranges, si hétéroclites des songes...’ Grandville, *Magasin pittoresque* 15: 27, 1847, p. 211, col. 2. Compare the original letter, lines 38–46: ‘... car à mon avis: l’on ne rêve rien que l’on n’en ait eu la vue ou la pensée étant éveillé, et ce dont ses amalgames, ces combinaisons d’objets divers entourés ou pensés, à des distances de temps [sic] souvent assez considérables qui forment les assemblages si hétéroclites et étranges des songes...’

18 ‘Les formes des rêves reflètent les idées générales qui dominent dans chaque siècle...’
Macario, ‘Des rêves considérés sous le rapport physiologique et pathologique’, *Annales médico-psychologiques* 8, 1846, pp. 172, 179. One of the best-known examples of this was a dream of Maury’s which was inspired by a falling headboard. It was set at the time of the French Revolution and involved Maury being beheaded. See Maury, ‘Nouvelles observations’, p. 418. The identical text appears in Maury, *Le sommeil*, pp. 133–4, and was later quoted in Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams.


21 Formey did not use the term ‘automatisme’ but sought to grasp the conglomerate of nocturnal dream images and the state of absent reason with the metaphor of ‘anarchy’, an exclusively negative state: ‘L’imagination de la veille est une République policiée, où la voix du Magistrat remet tout en ordre; l’imagination des songes est la même République dans l’état d’Anarchie.’ Formey, *Mélanges*, p. 180 (in *Encyclopédie*, vol. 15, p. 355, cols. 1–2).


23 See Crocker, ‘L’analyse’, pp. 278 and 301–3. He notes that the belief in the forward-looking, at times even prophetic nature of dreams was also widespread among the philosophers. Formey’s remarks appear in the *Encyclopédie* (vol. 15, p. 354, col. 2) under the rubric ‘Songe (Métaphysique & Physiologie)’.

24 See Formey, *Mélanges*, pp. 183–4 (Encyclopédie, vol. 31, p. 400, col. 2): ‘... dès que le sommeil s’est emparé de la machine, l’âme a sans interruption une suite des représentations. ... Depuis le moment que l’âme a été créée, & jointe à un corps, ou même à un corpuscle organisé, elle n’a cessé de faire les fonctions essentielles à une âme, c’est-à-dire, d’avoir une suite non interrompue d’idées qui lui représentent l’univers. . . .’ On this see also the views of Louis de Beausobre in Crocker, ‘L’analyse’, pp. 276–7.


26 ‘... et encore aujourd’hui, sans parler de oneiro-manciens, il existe une école philosophique qui voit dans les rêves de ce genre tantôt un reproche, tantôt un conseil; en somme, un tableau symbolique et moral, engendré dans l’esprit même de l’homme qui sommeille’, Baudelaire, *Paradis artificiels* (1860), in *Oeuvres complets*, vol. 1, p. 409.

27 See Maurice Halbwachs, *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Beziehungen* (1925), Frankfurt am Main, 1985, pp. 44–6 and 81. In this context, Halbwachs draws attention to the basic agreement between Maury’s observations and Freud’s reflections on dreams as systems of signs. See Maury, *Le sommeil*, p. 38, ‘suitant une certaine loi’.

28 ‘... un monde où il n’y a de réel que les êtres créés par nos souvenirs et notre imagination ...’, Moreau of Tours, *Du Haschisch*, p. 147. See also (p. 150): ‘Les créations de notre imagination ont pris place de la réalité . . .’


30 Tony James has recently revised this view, at least implicitly. In his study *Dreams, Creativity and Madness in Nineteenth-century France* (Oxford, 1995), the first extensive cultural history of dreams in France in the nineteenth century, he portrays the years around 1855 as the time when ideas about dreams changed significantly. James does address the question of the potential for artistic creativity in dreams and other phenomena of sleep, but he refers only to literature, neglecting the visual arts. See my review of his book in *Kritische Berichte* 4, 1997.

31 ‘Parfois enfin, l’évocation successive des réminiscences s’enchaîne uniquement par des similitudes de formes sensibles, ce qui est d’ailleurs une sorte d’abstraction capable d’enfanter les composés les plus étranges. Sans l’appliquer aux songes, Granville [sic] avait eu le sentiment de ces mutations capricieuses, quand son crayon nous montrait une série graduée de silhouettes commençant par celle d’une danseuse et finissant par celle d’une bobine aux mouvements furieux’: Marie-Jean-Leon d’Hervey de Saint-Denys, *Les rêves et les moyens de les diriger*, Paris, 1867, p. 43, see also p. 411.


38 ‘… tout cela, dis-je, jette l’esprit, sans qu’on puisse se défendre, dans le domaine infini des rêves et de la méditation’: Meryon, 13 January 1863, lines 48–51, *Toledo, Ohio, Museum of Art*, inv. no. 19.81.d.


