



DREAMING APHORISMS

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Dreams are condensed escapes, which encounter and reflect language in its condensed assertive mode: the aphorism. This essay argues that the relationship between dreams and aphorisms is based on a relationship of synchronicity between thought and action. While dreams call for interpretation, for thoughtful deliberation, the path of the aphorism is against interpretation. The aphorism is the action that the dream gets caught in. Literary works engaging with the theme of dream-writing, such as Susan Sontag's *The Benefactor* (1963), illustrate how the idea of dreaming aphorisms functions as the matrix of interpretation which always finds itself, first, in a state of concluding, and then in a state of foregrounding complementarities.

The Benefactor (1963) is a *roman à clef* depicting the life of a French writer named Hippolyte who lives his life according to the dreams he has. Occasionally, he imparts his discoveries about his dreams to his friend Jean-Jacques, also a writer. Critics have suggested that the two figures are modeled after the writers Antonin Artaud and Jean Genet [Sayres, 1990]. While Sontag herself admits that to be the case especially in regard of the character Jean-Jacques being modeled after "the idea of Genet", she denies that there is any relation between Hippolyte and Artaud [Evans, 2001]. While these relations may be interesting in themselves, this essay will not engage with making any lengthy comparisons between Artaud, Genet, and the fictional character Hippolyte. My main concern is to show how Hippolyte's living for dreaming-making decisions and acting with the sole purpose of influencing his dreams-takes place in an introspection which seeks to replace the surface of action with the workings of the unconscious. I want to claim that Hippolyte's dreams as aphorisms ultimately constitute a form of literary criticism.

In *The Benefactor* the conscious move from thought to dream and from dream to interpretation is mediated by a narrative strategy that formulates dreams as aphorisms. Thus I argue that the construction of aphorisms on the basis of a narrative that reverses the conscious into the unconscious is a way of engaging with literary criticism in its simple form. Sontag's aphorisms, which range in their exposition from contemplation to argumentation via rhetorical questions, suggest that interpretation and literary criticism rely on the simplicity of form. The aphorisms are thus examples of how the literary critic negotiates the ambiguity in the relationship between interpretation and dream through the form of the aphorism.

Insofar as interpretation marks content (dream), form is something the aphorism as a genre establishes per se. In this relation, whereas interpretation is pragmatic, the aphorism is epistemological. Here some questions can be posed: number of questions: to what extent is interpretation a constituting factor in the construction of the aphorism? Under which

conditions do we have a shift from the aphorism's epistemological concerns to claims of pragmatic authority that are grounded in the performativity of interpretation (here as it is mediated by dreams)? Can we make a distinction between performative and non-performative aphorisms?

The Benefactor begins with a telling epigram, "Je rêve donc je suis," which sets the tone for the rest of the book. The protagonist, a 61-year old man without a profession or a vocation is Sontag's first person narrator who writes the book that we are reading. The book is an autobiographical account of Hippolyte's life and covers the period before the Second World War and after. The narrative begins with Hippolyte's arrival to an unidentified city, which the reader, however, understands is probably Paris. Hippolyte is young and studies philosophy at the university. While he has all the fervor associated with young students, his ambition is not to have any ambition, but instead to enjoy being in his own company. Internalizing what it means to be conscious about his own capacity to cognize even consciousness, Hippolyte finds that he is able to study, as he puts it, "avariciously" for three years, at the end of which he publishes an influential article. Although the article proposes, as he informs, "important ideas on a topic of no great importance" [Sontag, 1963: 6], Hippolyte uses the positive reception of it as a ticket to enjoy the favors of Frau Anders, a middle-aged foreigner and a Jewess, who keeps a salon where intellectuals meet regularly. Soon after attending these meetings Hippolyte decides that putting an end to his studies will only confirm his philosophy whose aim is that "instead of accumulating ideas, we might be better occupied with dissolving them" [8].

The idea of dissolution is one that preoccupies Hippolyte especially since he sees that only through dissolution can he penetrate the surface of his consciousness. Dissolving his conscious self through dissociating himself from what he calls "symmetrical ideas" which are too concerned with how a whole is the sum of its parts, Hippolyte becomes his own fragment of synchronicity with the outside world through the aid of his dreams. Having had a mysterious dream in which a bather in black made him dance for a woman in white, Hippolyte decides that instead of letting interpretation get the better of him, he would much rather have his dream interpret his life. The subsequent variations of this dream together with new ones thus become Hippolyte's new fate makers. As the woman later becomes identified in Hippolyte's dream as Frau Anders, and the bather shares with Jean Jacques the same traits, it becomes clear for Hippolyte that in order to enable the dream to shape and interpret his life he would have to perform its dictates. The trajectory from thought to action is, however, asymmetrical, as Hippolyte enters his dream on one side and exists through a side that is differently shaped. Thus when he dreams of seducing Frau Anders, the subsequent enactment of that act in real life has different consequences for the action/thought relationship. Not only does he seduce Frau Anders and elope with her to Africa, but he also sells her to an Arab as soon as he grows bored with her complacency and willingness to please him. When Frau Anders instructs him that one way of solving the problem of boredom would be for Hippolyte to surprise her, he does so indeed, by making her the slave of another.

The life narrative from then on becomes more and more similar to a dream narrative as events become more and more fantastic. Frau Anders returns as a mutilated and abused woman and Hippolyte attempts to murder her, yet does not succeed. As an act of reconciliation, he offers to decorate and give her his own house, yet when she suggests that they should get married he decides that the only way in which he can escape the trap is by marrying someone else. The events escalate with the war breaking out, Frau Anders's seeking refuge with Hippolyte and his new wife who is also dying, his subsequent turning into a stage actor, and finally his becoming ill and secluded in the house given away as a gift. Here, towards the end of the book the narrative takes a turn, and we are informed that Hippolyte has stumbled over documents that question the validity of what has been narrated. One document informs that he has been evicted from his house by Frau Anders herself upon her return from Africa where she was not held a slave but was elected a queen for a whole tribe because of her ability to interpret dreams. Another document shows Hippolyte's attempt to exhibit mental sanity in a letter addressed to the warden of an insane asylum where he apparently was kept in custody. And yet another document constitutes a draft for the writing of the story that we have been reading. Only, this draft shows that what we mainly have been taking to be Hippolyte's dreams are in fact real events, and events rendered as real are in fact dreams.

The purpose of this account is to show that Sontag creates a narrative that combines dream and narrative as a gesture towards performing an act of literary criticism that is here granted through the aphorism. Hippolyte's voice from beyond the dreams creates a style that masquerades the intellectual climate in France before the war. The figure of the modernist artist who writes from inside his head, yet struggles to get out of his unconscious and thus legitimize himself as a writer who is both sane and insane at the same time, and whose writing is both symmetrical and asymmetrical, is here rendered as a site of substitution: a dream for an aphorism, an interpretation for a posture. When Hippolyte concludes his narrative with the remark that he has had both his life and after-life, we begin to see how, for him, the dream is the thought of action, not action in itself but its complementary: a state of reposing which is synchronic with a state of concluding. There is a lot of symmetry between the final pages of *The Benefactor* and the string of aphorisms we find not only throughout the whole book but also enumerated in a random order in Hippolyte's newly found notebook containing ideas and a draft for his autobiography. His after-life is comprised in these final lines which, while challenging Hippolyte's integrity as an autobiographical writer, seem to suggest that authorial force in any genre can only be attained through a photographic posture which is able to capture the truth of a life that is subsumed by dreaming aphorisms. Says Hippolyte:

I shall conclude not by describing an act, nor with one of my favorite ideas, but with a posture. Not with words, but with silence. With a photograph of myself, myself as I shall sit here after finishing this page. It is winter. You may imagine me in a bare room, my feet near the stove, bundled up in many sweaters, my black hair turned gray,

enjoying the waning tribulations of subjectivity and the repose of a privacy that is genuine. [274]

It is revealed at this point that the way in which Hippolyte manages to bypass his consciousness and claim his waking life as an integral whole made up of dreaming parts is by taking photographs of himself at the moment in which he catches himself choosing himself. Finally declaring to the reader that in spite of evidence to the contrary he was never insane, but perhaps merely eccentric in his choice of dreams which tested a reality against aphoristic thinking, he explains: "the acts of the eccentric and the madman may well be the same. But the eccentric has made a choice, while the insane person has not; rather he is abandoned to his choices, submerged in them. I submit that I made a choice, admittedly an unusual one. I chose myself" [273]. These considerations recall one of Artaud's definitions of the madman for whom embracing insanity is the beginning of authenticity. Thus he asks: "And what is an authentic madman? It is a man who preferred to become mad, in the socially accepted sense of the word, rather than forfeit a certain superior idea of human honor" [Artaud, 1976: 485]. For Artaud, choosing to become a madman becomes a gift of authenticity conferred upon oneself, which is similar to Hippolyte's project: to make dreams the condition of performative aphorisms.

One of Sontag's major insights here is to suggest that a performative aphorism has the function of identifying different sites of knowledge which is gained through means other than interpretation. For example, the idea of a photograph of oneself may well constitute an epistemological site that links dreams with presence and presence with authenticity through establishing a relationship of synchronicity between the extraordinary and the banal. Says Hippolyte:

This is what I learned from dreams. Dreams always have the quality of being present – even when, as I am doing, one relates them, twenty, thirty years after. They do not age, or become less credible; they are what they are. The loyal dreamer does not seek his hearer's credence, he does not need to convince his hearer that such and such amazing thing happened in the dream. Since all events in the dream are equally fantastic, they are independent of the assent of other people. This reveals, by the way, the falsity of that line which people of taste insist on drawing and redrawing between the banal and the extraordinary. All events in dreams are extraordinary, and banal, at the same time [Sontag, 1963: 116].

What legitimizes Hippolyte's choice of choosing himself is the presence of dreams. Dreams captured through a photographic gaze. Hippolyte's line of reasoning seems to go in the direction of saying that insofar as dreams are present, they are also performative, and if they perform both the extraordinary and the banal at the same time, then, they must be aphoristic as they capture a simultaneous movement between telling a story and making it short. Choosing oneself is thus the emblem of style.

Furthermore, this 'Whitmanesque' echo suggests more than what is implied in Hippolyte's definitions of dreams. When he declares that "Dreams are the onanism of the spirit" [97], what he suggests is that the spirit passes through a photographic hole as a gaze and becomes the dream

of the self. This dream needs both a hole and a whole to pass through and beyond interpretation. Hippolyte's idea of interpreting his dreams, especially the dreams following classical themes such as whipping, humiliation, confinement, and punishment, follows a passing through a narrow hole. To be more precise, he in fact relegates his dream experiences to a passing through the "devil's asshole" [261]. Identifying such a topology has for Hippolyte the function of performing his own goal, which I have suggested is to dream aphorisms and elude their interpretation. "I am looking for silence", he says, further adding, "I am exploring the various styles of silence, and I wish to be answered by silence. You might say [...] that I am disemboweling myself" [32]. This suggests that understanding dreams through interpretation rather than through measuring (w)holes is to deny them their silent presence. When Hippolyte muses on the alternatives to and implications of choosing himself he asserts that "One can also climb down, climb into the devil's mouth, past the bodies of traitors, through the gullet and into the devil's bowels themselves" [261] thus concluding that the method of passing one's consciousness through the dreaming aphorisms is an act which is rewarded with the thought of reposing. When he thus declares that "The devil's asshole is the backdoor to paradise" he passes judgment on the after-life which is sanctioned not by action but by thought.

Unlike Hippolyte's after-life which assumes the posture of the "man-who-dreams" both in fragments and in wholes, the life he leads in accordance with dreaming, while digging a hole for the notion of repose, also gives repose the status of posture in performance. In the end Hippolyte aims at becoming a puppet, just like the one he dreams of in one of his dreams. Stripped of choices and volition he finds that only as a puppet is he able to justify the performance of the questions and formulations raised in his notebook and which challenge his life of dreams. Thus he writes:

10. The only interesting answers are those which destroy the question.

13. When I destroy the dreams, do I destroy myself? [...]

18. Oh, the great simplifiers!

24. I don't want to have any convictions. If I am (or believe) something, I want to discover it through my acts; I don't want to act in the way I do because it accords with what I believe or what I am. [...]

39. My body failed me in my dreams.

42. I have put something into the world. Therefore I will take something out of it: my self. [241]

I venture here to suggest that these aphorisms unlike the ones derived from his dreams represent for Hippolyte a non-performative stage. Insofar as they are not filtered through any holes—photographic, organic, or otherwise—they represent a relation between dream and body which is mediated by the knowledge and desire to possess the unconscious. In her rendition of Hippolyte's dealing with the figures of authority in his dreams, Sonhya Sayres's speculates: "If those dreams live on without him, hasn't he utterly

won? Who would want the unconscious for a servant? The unconscious serves, by way of its fantastic distortions, only itself" [Sayres, 1990: 68]. These rhetorical questions suggest that dreams and criticism (the latter as represented by authorities) are incompatible. The fact that Hippolyte is not interested in individuality, as he is in favor of banality, testifies to his desire to possess the unconscious but only insofar as the unconscious is one of the great simplifiers; a simplifier that needs no criticism.

Sontag's own concern with how dreams can be no more and no less than the stories that they tell shows her investment in the question of whether narratives of dreams can escape interpretation. It can be contended that insofar as narration advances through the medium of the aphoristic genre in *The Benefactor*, what is attempted is the separation of performative aphorisms—whose function is to demand being served by the unconscious—from non-performative aphorisms which have the potential to fuel the unconscious through formulations that follow a form and style which may consciously be learned at any stage. The juxtaposition of Hippolyte's dreaming aphorisms (whose performative action influence his thinking while he is in a state of reposition, being asleep) and aphorisms which follow the conventions of writings (as we find them in drafts, notes, letters) highlights the tension between a writer's reality and an interpreter's reality.

It is no coincidence that Sontag's protagonist can be considered a composite of the two French thinkers, Artaud and Genet, whom we can say have been known for often having interpreted their own work even before it was written. Genet's declaration that he has "no readers, only thousands of voyeurs" [Genet, 1995] illustrates as much. Artaud's choosing his madness also suggests what the underlying premise for that preference is: to look upon oneself as one devoted to one's vocation and pain, namely to look upon oneself as one who "feel[s] one's thought shift within oneself" [Sontag, 1976: xxi]. The interpretation that comes before thought, the voyeurism of interpretation, is contextualized by Sontag as a site of knowledge mediated by aphorisms. The critical nerve that *The Benefactor* displays in its thematization of works of art and their critics is found in such lines as the following: "In a dream we do look at ourselves, we project ourselves on our own screen; we are actor, director, and spectator all at once" [145]. These lines serve a pragmatic purpose insofar as they announce Sontag's now famous advocating for an erotic of art instead of a hermeneutics in her essay "Against Interpretation," written a year after her first novel. When she writes that "The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means" [Sontag, 1964: 14] she makes the implicit suggestion that if criticism is to achieve its erotic goal, it had better start dreaming.

The Benefactor thus constitutes itself both as a novel of anticipation and a novel of correlations between different styles of writing and different literary modes and genres. The dreaming aphorism as the master condensation of assertions is here used to serve as future symmetries between the conscious and the unconscious. In turn the mind will keep on dreaming, the narrative will keep on seeing, and criticism will keep on being.

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