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# TO BELIEVE OR TO INTERPRET

In the Arabo-muslim culture, the visionary dream, *ru'yâ*, is a religious event, —the forty-eighth part of the prophesy, it is confirmed by one of the often quoted *hadîth,* Muhammad's speeches—, one that is bound to happen at any moment to great numbers of people. A remarkable book by an expert on Sufism, Pierre Lory, *Le rêve et ses interprétations en Islam*[1] enables us to grasp the scope of this "permanent revelation" through the scale of the material it presents. If one was to retain only a single trait in support of the book's author, and thus of the dream's eschatological importance, it would be the calling to prayer, *adhân*, which was established in Islam thanks to the similar dreams of the two Companions of Prophet Muhammad, 'Abd Allah ibn Zayd of Medina and the future caliph 'Umar. "Hence the meaning," writes Pierre Lory, "of the Companions assembling around the Prophet every morning in order to share dreams: they came to bring the unveilings of the order of the divine Real, *haqq*." Whence the critique of Muhammad's detractors, who in the sura of "The Prophets" reproach him for making up "medleys of dream" (Qur'an, 21: 5).[2]

For Islam, the last monotheist religion, the dream is an ordinary miracle, destined for everyone, and in the Muslim society, throughout the ages, dream activity, this dimension of psychic and physiological life, of the Prophet, of the Sufis and of the simple believers, has never been overlooked. Yet the particular nature of the visionary dream is to give information about the hidden dimension of the dreamer's existence and especially to help consider the future.

The literature of dream criticism that grew out of these dreams, century after century, is considerable and it testifies to the importance of the relationship between the flesh and the spirit as it concerned the Islamist thinkers—without even mentioning the colossal dream sound box, the indispensable corollary of the Qur'an, *One Thousand and One Nights*. Just like this collection of stories, *Le grand livre de l'interprétation des rêves*[3] is anonymous, although it is attributed to Ibn Sîrîn, the

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[1] Pierre Lory, *Le rêve et ses interprétations en Islam* [Dream and its Interpretations in Islam] (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003).

[2] *The Holy Qur'an*, trans. Yusif Ali.

[3] *Le grand livre de l'interprétation des rêves* [The Great Book of Dream Interpretation] (La Tour d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube, 2005).

transmitter of both the dreams and the statements of the Prophet at the dawn of Islam. In this text, recently translated by Youssef Seddik, we learn in particular the meaning of dreams about "coupling and all that is connected to it, the sexual act and repudiation, jealousy and corpulence, acquisition of a slave and fornication, sodomy, group debauchery, wantonness, female or male travesty and observation of the female sex," but also the signification of dreams "of prophets and God's and Muhammad's messengers." This text, similar in its excess to the *One Thousand and One Nights*, shows a continuity between the human and the divine, as well as an interpenetration of the sacred and the profane, leading to some surprising juxtapositions. For example: "He who sees himself in a dream copulating with his dead mother, in her grave, will die, because the Very-High had said: 'From the (earth) did We create you, and into it shall We return you'" (Qur'an, 20: 55).

The eruption of the dream into a prophecy is the recognition of the necessary subversion of the spiritual by the carnal. Released from the rules of morality, as apt to blasphemy as it is to sacrilege, playing with reason, the dream scene combines the inadmissible and the impossible. In this respect, it resembles what of the divine revelation had reached the Prophet, the strange supernatural dictate that he himself dared not approach critically. The Qur'an will be established a decade after Muhammad's death (632) by the third caliph, 'Othman, who will shape a *ne varietur* collection of revelations, to which the living Prophet had often proposed variant versions and which he had refused to fixate—in a verse, God himself declares: "It is for Us to collect it and to promulgate it" (Qur'an, 75 :17).

With a literary construction dating back to the 7th century, but in its modernity yielding nothing to the most innovative western works, the Qur'an is a "*mise-en-abîme*" of biblical, canonical or apocryphal stories, giving us a sensational rereading of them thanks to "dream-work," the condensations, displacements and figurations it effects. Are we perhaps more able to read the Qur'an today, after having been able to confront ourselves with a work of the English language impregnated by all other human languages: Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* or the relation of his *Night Journey* to that of the Prophet?

The Qur'an identifies itself as a "reminder" of the monotheist scriptures, all of whose prophets it refers to, yet it stages them differently, exposing both the aspects known from their biblical story and those that are unknown. Like a broken mirror, the Qur'an reflects the fragments of their lives that do not appear in the mirror plane of the Bible. How, then, can we not ask whether the Qur'an is not the dream of monotheist religion, requiring each of its readers to decipher its content in order to access its dream-thoughts? For all the Islamist mystic philosophers—who made no distinction between speculative, dream and visionary activity, all of which lead from the natural to the supernatural—interpretation is decisive, personal and infinite. In their own way, they took up for themselves Muhammad's prophetic gesture for themselves, aiming to preserve the extreme mobility of the revelations for which he was the receptacle.

Interpreting, *ta'bîr,* is the master-word [*maître-mot*] created by Qur'anic textuality and it consists of passing from the manifest, *zâhir*, to the latent, *bâtin*, which then

itself becomes the manifest of another latent content and so on, the oscillation of *zâhir* and *bâtin* deploying itself indefinitely. Each person engages in interpretation according to his or her own speculative capacity and each Qur'anic verse is likely to be given several meanings, according to the level of the dreamer's spiritual progress and according to his or her clairvoyance, *al-baçin.* One easily sees that for the political and religious powers, such unlimited liberty of interpretation is inadmissibly audacious, which many Islamic spiritual thinkers have paid for with their lives.

Thus they carry out the recommendation of a 12th-century Persian thinker, Sohravardî, to his disciples: "Read the Qur'an as if it had been revealed only for you."

But if the Qur'an constitutes a dream addressed to everyone, leading each reader to interpret it in his own way in order to come to a revelation of the divine dimension concerning oneself—*one's own* God and no longer the God common to all—we understand the conflict arising at the heart of this monotheist religion, a conflict between believing in the dream and interpreting it.

In the Qur'an, this dilemma is reflected in the primal scene of the sacrifice of Abraham's son, which depends here on the missing interpretation of the dream sent to the Patriarch—the father's refusal to sacrifice the child, at the very basis of monotheism's religious difference, thus depends, only in the Qu'ran, on his ability or inability to interpret his dream.

The episode is presented as follows:

> Then, when (the son) reached (the age of) (serious) work with him, he said: "O my son! I see in vision that I offer thee in sacrifice: Now see what is thy view!" (The son) said: "O my father! Do as thou art commanded: thou will find me, if Allah so wills one practicing Patience and Constancy!"
>
> So when they had both submitted their wills (to Allah), and he had laid him prostrate on his forehead (for sacrifice),
>
> We called out to him "O Abraham!
>
> "Thou hast already fulfilled the vision!"—thus indeed do We reward those who do right.
>
> For this was obviously a trial
>
> And We ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice.
>
> (Qur'an, 37: 102-8)

Confronted with the dream, Abraham is subject to the test everyone must face: whether to believe or to interpret one's dream. He chooses to believe and to kill his son, putting both of them, in the final instance, before the judgment of God. In an exemplary fashion, Abraham bears within himself all the subsequent religious conflicts between the faithful, who believe what they read in their referential Scriptures or what the priests tell them about it, and the unfaithful (infidels), who endlessly interpret what they read. The religious world view is constructed with the former and undone by the latter. "The letter kills but the spirit gives life," claims Paul

of Tarsus in his second epistle to the Corinthians; in each monotheistic religion, the antagonism between the defendants of the letter and the defendants of the spirit is all the more perennial in that it derives from psychic life, from the opposition between everyone's religiosity and spirituality.

In the 12th century, the greatest Andalusian Sufi master Shaykh al-akbar, Ibn 'Arabî, believed that every terrestrial act existed simultaneously in several dimensions. The dream is the lived proof of the multiplicity of human states, hence the importance of interpretation, which allows us to pass from one shore of desire to another, from one level of existence to another, from the human to the divine. In *The Book of the Bezels of Wisdoms*, which he claims he had received in his sleep from the hands of the Prophet, Ibn 'Arabî writes: "To interpret means to transpose the perceived form onto another reality."

In this work, what he sees as Abraham's main error is that he adhered to the dream's vision as if to an objective view, one that lies outside of himself. The error is to give in to the manifest meaning of the dream, to reduce it to an action, instead of hearing its latent signification, which would lead one to think the action seen in the dream instead of realizing it. This passage from the dream's visuality to its spirituality simultaneously represents an instinctual renunciation and a "progress in the life of the spirit." Abraham, explains Ibn 'Arabî, should have understood that the figure of his son in the dream was only a representation of himself, confronted with the enigma and the scandal of individual death striking a life demanded [*voulue*] by God. Commenting on the divine intervention, Ibn 'Arabî sees in it the shadow of a reproach: "God said to Abraham, while he was speaking to him: 'In truth, O Abraham, you believed in a vision,' which is not to say that Abraham, believing he had to sacrifice his son, was faithful to the divine inspiration; because he had taken the vision literally, while every dream demands a transposition or interpretation."

Here we have someone who immediately tosses into the dustbin of History all the refusals to interpret that have been boasted of by so many past and present murderers, usurping the name of God to perpetrate in reality crimes they might have dreamed of in their feverish nights. Opposed to this is the man who, desirous of submitting himself to God alone, escapes from his illusory representation of reality thanks to the dream, thanks to the uncertainty that the dream instills in everyone's language, thanks to interpretation which is bound to the psychic continent and the spiritual ocean, that the dream awaits from him.