

Dream Poetry as Dream Work

Richard A. Russo¹

This paper explores the relationship between dream poetry and dream work by presenting a representative dream poem, along with the text of the dream that inspired it; examining some of its poetic qualities and showing how these figured in the writing of the poem; and comparing the dream writing process to dream interpretation and to Jungian active imagination work. The formal demands of poetry introduce a unique type of critical thought into the creative process that develops the dream material in ways different from other forms of dream work. Writing dream poetry differs from both dream interpretation and active imagination in important ways, but can be viewed as a form of non-interpretative dream work. These observations are probably generalizable to all forms of dream writing and dream art.

KEY WORDS: dreams; poetry; dream poetry; dream writing; non-interpretive dream work; dream interpretation; active imagination

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will explore the relationship between dream writing and dream work. By dream writing, I mean writing fiction or poetry using dream material as a starting point. In this paper, I focus on poetry because the formal principles at work in the writing process are more readily apparent.

I will begin by presenting a dream poem, along with the text of the dream that inspired it. Using this example, I will compare writing dream poetry to dream interpretation and to Jungian active imagination, in terms of process, purpose and end result. My thesis is that dream writing differs from both dream interpretation and active imagination in important ways, but can be viewed as a form of non-interpretative dream work.

Poets use dreams in many different ways. A dream poem may draw on a single dream or a series of dreams, stay close to the content of the original dream or depart from it substantially, incorporate the dream material as just a small part of the whole or make it the focus of the entire poem, and so on. Sometimes, the original “seed” dream may be edited out of the final version of the poem; conversely, during the writing process, dream material sometimes finds its way into a poem that started out as something else. For purposes of this preliminary exploration, I will examine one short poem that was inspired by a single short

¹Correspondence should be directed to Richard A. Russo, 835 Peralta Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94707; e-mail: rr@well.com.

dream and that stays close to the content of the original dream. By simplifying the context of the discussion, I hope to clarify general principles that may then be explored in more complex cases and generalized to all forms of dream writing.

“TWO SNAKES”: A REPRESENTATIVE DREAM POEM

With that as preface, here is the text of a dream as I recorded it in my journal, followed by the dream poem it inspired.

Dream Text (“Snake”)

... I'm on what seems to be a college campus. Visiting someone. My mother is there ... possibly my father, too. One of them has a pet snake. Long and green. I watch across the patio as it rears up and stretches towards the wall. I'm amazed at how strong it must be to hold itself at a forty-five degree angle like that. But it can't quite sustain long enough to reach the wall, and drops back to the ground and slithers under a grid of wooden boards. ...

... then the scene shifts slightly. The snake is climbing beside me on the bench where I'm sitting watching this all happen. It's thicker now, and dark brown rather than green. It wraps itself around my thigh and then coils up my arm. Using me as an anchor, it's now able to stretch across the open space and starts climbing the wall. ...

The dream, as remembered, starts out fuzzy: I “seem” to be on a college campus, my mother is there and “possibly” my father. The surrounding environment and other people drop away as the dream focuses on the snake. Two images stayed with me vividly in the days following the dream: first, the snake stretching at a forty-five degree angle trying to reach the wall, then the snake climbing up my body and reaching the wall. Because these images lingered in my waking mind, I decided to write a poem about them.

Two Snakes

Suddenly it was the fall
of 1963. We were together again
in the family car Dad had
polished and shined for the trip.
They were driving me to college:
Dad proudly clenching the wheel;
Mom, already clouded with goodbyes,
watching the road for signs;
Sis beside me in the back seat
in her restless summer dress.

On the wooden deck outside the dorm
we sipped bitter lemon tea.
A thin green snake crawled out from a hole
beneath where we sat.
Sis clutched Mom's hand as the snake reared up
and reached for the ivied wall:
a green question mark against gray stone.

But the snake fell short.
Dad looked a little sad
as it fell to earth
slipped between the boards
slithered back into darkness
deep underground.

Dad's been gone now fifteen years.
I thought of him today.
A mottled old snake,
thick and brown like an aged vine,
slid from beneath the garden stones,
wrapped itself round my thigh
and coiled up my arm,
reaching for the branches of the apple tree
that shelters where I sit and write.

I heard then Dad's smiling *yes*
in the whisper of smooth snake skin
against the apple bough.

DREAM WRITING AND DREAM INTERPRETATION

Considering the immense literature that exists on the subject, it is remarkable how few concrete definitions have been given for “dream interpretation.” Here’s one: “an attempt by someone (often the dreamer) to attribute meaning to the content of dream reports for purposes of counseling, psychotherapy or personal/social growth” (Krippner, 1999). In other words, the goal of dream interpretation is to arrive at a statement, or series of statements, about the “meaning” of the dream, which may then be applied to the waking life issues and concerns of the dreamer.

Right away, before any analysis of the dream poem and the dream writing process, we can see two major differences between dream writing and dream interpretation. First, the *purpose* of dream writing is to create a work of art (in this case, a poem), not “counseling, psychotherapy or personal/social growth.” In some cases, the writing of a dream poem may be therapeutic or contribute to personal growth, but these are incidental or secondary outcomes, not the primary purpose of the work.²

Secondly, the *end result* of the process of dream writing is a poem, whereas the end result of the process of dream interpretation is an interpretation, i.e. a statement (or series of statements) that “attribute meaning to the content of the dream report.”

The simplest approach to dream interpretation is probably the dream dictionary, which dates back to ancient times and is still popular today. Using a dream dictionary, one would look up the most prominent dream “symbols” to discover the meaning of the dream. Thus, for example, to dream of “a snake coiled around the body or a limb” might signify “bondage, a slave to the passions” (Chetwynd, 1972).

²See the discussion of poetry therapy later in this paper.

The modern era began with Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900. Following the Freudian approach, "in the interpretation of a dream one moves from its manifest content to its latent content" (Garma, 1987). More recent Freudians speak of "translating" (Kramer, 1987) or "decoding" (Langs, 1988) the dream.

The contemporary landscape of dream interpretation comprises a wide variety of approaches, some of them quite sophisticated. For example, in presenting her "dream interview" method, Gayle Delaney stresses that "the goal of this method of interpretation is to assist the dreamer in getting the point, the punchline of the dream, with as few interpretations or explanations from the interviewer as possible" (1993, 201). Nevertheless, the end result is an interpretation, a statement about the meaning of the dream (e.g. "Your dream seems to be reminding you to remember who you are and where you come from"). (Delaney, 1988) In the Ullman/Taylor approach to group dream work, the members of the group offer the dreamer possible meanings of the dream in the form of "If it were my dream—" statements, thereby owning their own projections onto the dream material (Taylor, 1984; Ullman, 1996).

All methods of interpretative dream work have in common the underlying presupposition that in order to achieve the goals of "counseling, psychotherapy or personal/social growth," the dream must be "interpreted." In themselves, dream reports do not announce their connection to waking life or therapeutic issues and concerns. The purpose of the work is to find (or, depending on your school of thought, make) those connections. Specific techniques are applied to "decode," "decipher" or otherwise "uncover" the meaning of the dream, which is not explicit in the dream text.

The movement in the process of dream interpretation is from something that is mysterious, ambiguous, full of possible meanings and readings and in that sense open-ended or expansive—the dream—to something that is unambiguous and literal—the interpretation. In that sense, dream interpretation is reductive.

This is true of all methods of dream interpretation, from the simplest to the most sophisticated. Some approaches require the assistance of a skilled dream interpreter to arrive at the meaning of the dream, others stress that the dreamer is the ultimate authority. Some approaches result in a single interpretation that is considered the *meaning* of the dream, others allow for many different interpretations and possible meanings. But all are reductive in the sense that a text that is rich and mysterious is replaced by a statement or series of statements that are straightforward and unambiguous.

"Reductive" in this context is a descriptive term; I do not mean to imply any negative connotation. Nor am I devaluing interpretive dream work. My own experience has been that, for purposes of "counseling, psychotherapy or personal/social growth," dream interpretation, done alone, in a therapeutic relationship, or in a group setting, is a powerful and productive method.

DREAM WRITING AND ACTIVE IMAGINATION

I'd now like to look more closely at the process of dream writing, in order to compare it to a different type of dream work, "active imagination," which it more closely resembles. Active imagination can be considered a form of *non-interpretative dream work*, in that it is a method of working with dream material that does not involve interpreting the meaning of the dream. As with the poem, I will use my own creative process as a representative example of the dream writing process.

My dream writing process begins with dream reentry. I get into a meditative state and try to reenter and re-experience the dream. I try to feel and see and experience the details of the dream as vividly as possible, and write them down as I experience them, and then to be open and receptive and see where the dream wants to go. Because my goal is to write, I'm particularly looking for a form that the material wants to take, a direction in which it wants to develop. I try to remain open and let the material unfold intuitively, never knowing in advance what form it will take—poem, story, meditative essay, or simply extended journal writing.

So far, this process is very close to how Jung described active imagination:

... One concentrates one's attention on some impressive but unintelligible dream-image, or on a spontaneous visual impression, and observes the changes taking place in it. All criticism must be suspended and the happenings observed and noted with absolute objectivity. ... (Jung, 1951, 190)

In this case, as I re-experienced the dream, I was quite certain that, just as I had recorded in my original notes, there was only one snake in the dream. The snake that tries to reach the wall and fails is the same snake that later crawls up my arm and succeeds, yet it looks quite different. In the first scene, the snake is thin and green; in the second, it's thick and brown. This paradox of the one snake that is somehow two captured my attention. I felt the key to the writing lay there, so instead of "Snake," as I had called the dream, I wrote "Two Snakes" at the top of a blank page and started writing. At first I wrote detailed descriptions of the two snakes, but the dream material remained static. In the course of describing the second snake, I realized it must be older than the first—that would account for the difference in appearance. Perhaps there were two snakes, a young one and an old one. But the dream was quite clear: there was just one snake. Suddenly I saw how one snake could be two: it wasn't two different snakes at the same time, but the same snake at two different times! A structure suggested itself and I saw how I could approach the writing: two scenes, an earlier one and a later one. The earlier time, given in the dream, was when I was leaving home for the first time to go to college. The later time, not given in the original dream, might be any. I trusted I'd discover it in the writing, but thought it was probably the present. I still had no idea what any of this was about or meant.

Jung described the active imagination process as having two stages: first, letting the unconscious come up, and second, coming to terms with the unconscious (Chodorow, 1997). Janet Dallett (1987), a Jungian author, has further divided each of Jung's stages in two.

According to Dallett, in the first stage of active imagination work, **"The thoughts of the ego-consciousness must first be set aside in order to give the unconscious a chance to enter."**

Marie-Louis von Franz, a prominent Jungian, called this stage "stopping the mad mind," i.e. quieting the mind, quieting thoughts, so that you're receptive to what the dream wants to show you (Franz, 1980). Often people use some sort of ritual to induce this open, receptive state. I call it a "meditative state;" Dallett describes it as "regaining the attitude of a child at play."

In the next stage, **"The unconscious begins to come in, usually in the form of fantasies, images, or emotions. These are written down or given some other external form."**

I find it was interesting that Dallett says it's absolutely essential that you give the material some external form, like writing it down, because "otherwise it is too easy simply not to see or hear what passes through, to be just a little dishonest about what the image really was, what the voice really said, or how you truly felt at the moment." So it's very

important that you suspend your ego judgments and considerations and just let the material unfold and then try to record that before your “mad mind” starts reinterpreting it and re-remembering it in perhaps a more favorable light. But note: the purpose of writing down the material that emerges during the active imagining is solely to record it, to capture it in its original form before our waking ego consciousness begins to distort it.

The first two stages of active imagination pretty much correspond to the first stages of the dream writing process described above. But at stages 3 and 4, the two processes diverge.

In stage 3, it’s the ego’s turn to react to the material. **“There is a confrontation with the unconscious material that has come up.”**

“Now,” Dallett says, “is the time for the ego’s questions, reservations, doubts and judgments.” This is the stage at which, for example, you would do Gestalt dialoging with the characters in the dream—ask them questions, ask them what they want to tell you, etc. In this case, I might “talk” to the snake, ask it why it has come to me in the dream, why it wants to reach the wall, and so on. “The figures of the unconscious express the reality of their own realm,” Dallett adds. “Sometimes one has to say no to the demands of the dream figures, to inform them of our limitations.”

The fourth stage in the active imagination process is: **“Conclusions are drawn and put to work in life.”**

One can no longer live unconsciously, as if one didn’t know what had been learned through the work. “What began as the play of a child,” Dallett says, “leads now to the most profound ethical consequences in terms of how an individual life is lived.”

Working with a Jungian analyst, the material that comes up during the “confrontation with the unconscious” becomes incorporated into the ongoing process of the analysis. This is also true of similar work done alone or with a non-Jungian therapist. In general, the material that emerges during active imagination work is then related to the current life situation of the dreamer, or to a problem or decision the dreamer faces, or to deeper issues being explored in the course of the psychotherapy.

I want to emphasize that the process of active imagination as Dallett describes it occurs within the context of Jungian analysis or a therapeutic relationship. In this context, the purpose of the work is to help the dreamer deal with his or her life issues. Stage 4—confronting the material, letting the ego have its say, and reaching some kind of synthesis that moves forward in the person’s life—is a very important part of the therapeutic work, but it is very different from what happens in the dream writing process.

Dallett says that it’s only at stages 3 and 4 that we can truly speak of active imagination, because until the waking ego has its reply and challenges the dream and questions the dream you’re not really engaged yet in the active imagination process. For me, stages 3 and 4 are precisely where the psychological or therapeutic process of active imagination departs from the creative process of dream writing. To understand this, I want to look closely at what happens in the next stages of the dream writing process and contrast it with the final stages of the active imagination process, but first we need to understand what distinguishes poetic writing from prose.

DREAM POETRY AS POETRY

What makes “Two Snakes” a poem and the text of the dream that inspired it prose?

To answer this question, we need to consider the formal qualities that distinguish poetry from prose, and to what extent and how they are present in the text of “Two Snakes.”

I will not attempt a full literary analysis (probably not a good idea with regard to one's own work!). For my purposes, I need only point out a few of the formal qualities of the poem so that we can understand how they figured in the process of its writing.

Line is probably the single most defining feature of poetry. The difference between poetry and prose is that poetry is divided into lines (Kinzie, 1999). Line doesn't necessarily match up with *syntax*, i.e. sentence structure. For example, in this poem, the first sentence ("Suddenly it was the fall of 1963") ends on line 2, so the opening line of the poem is not yet the end of a sentence: "Suddenly it was the fall." The effect of this line break is to emphasize the last phrase of the first line: "the fall."

Diction is the choice of words used in the poem (Addonizio & Laux, 1997). Words are chosen not just for their precise meaning, or denotation, but also for their connotations, the layers of meaning in the word, and also for their sound. I could have written line 1 as "Suddenly it was 1963," but instead I wrote "... the fall of 1963" and broke the line to emphasize the word "fall." Literally, in context, "fall" refers to the season, and helps evoke memories and feelings about that "back to school" time of year. But it has other meanings and connotations that resonate with the material in the poem. In a later verse we will see a different type of fall—the fall of the snake back to the ground after failing to reach the wall. And the phrase, "the fall," inevitably evokes a loss of innocence, the "Fall from Grace" in the Garden of Eden. So right away, by the end of the first line, we have all these images and feelings about "fall" and "the fall" and "falling" resonating in our minds, which will color how we read what is to come—for example, the first encounter with the snake in the second verse.

In the next sentence, why does the poet say that Dad had "polished and shined" the car? Isn't that redundant? To "polish" implies making something smooth, and to "shine" making it more reflective—but polishing something often makes it shiny and in common parlance, especially with regard to the metallic surface of a car, the two words are used interchangeably. I will return to this question later, when examining what happens during the process of writing. (The answer relates partly to meaning and partly to rhythm.)

Meter, the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a poem, is a major aspect of *rhythm*, the way the poem moves forward. Even poems like "Two Snakes" that do not adhere to a fixed meter contain rhythmic patterns. For example, the trochaic feet of the opening line (a *trochee* is a two-syllable foot with the stress on the first syllable) give way in the middle of the second line to a series of dactyls that dominate the rest of lines 3 and 4. (A *dactyl* is a metrical foot consisting of one accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables.) (Kinzie, 1999)

The second verse ends with a *metaphor*. Metaphor is the description of one thing in terms of another, an implied comparison stated as an identity. (Hall, 1992) In this case, the snake is described as "a green question mark against the gray stone." On one level, the metaphor serves to describe the snake more vividly. The reader is given a dramatic visual image that lingers in the mind, much the way the two dream images of the snake lingered in my mind. One effect of metaphor is that the qualities associated with one term are applied to the other, which is thus seen in a new light. Here, by the saying the snake is a question mark, the metaphor introduces a questioning of what's being presented in the scene. The question mark is described as being "against [the] gray stone," i.e. the "ivied wall," a synecdoche for college. A question has been raised about going to college.

"Poetry is recognizable most obviously by its music" (Koch, 1998). The *sound* of the language is an important aspect of most types of poetry. Sound can provide aesthetic

pleasure in its own right—this is often called the “musical” aspect of poetry—and can also be used to enhance meaning. In this poem, we have an example in the closing verse, where one can hear the hissing of a snake in all the “S” sounds in the phrase, “the whisper of smooth snake skin.”

This brief look at just a few of the poetic devices at work in “Two Snakes” is enough, I think, to show why it counts as a poem, and some of the ways that poetry differs from prose. In the next section, I resume my examination of the dream writing process, referring to some of the features just noted, and then return to the question of how dream writing relates to active imagination.

DREAM POETRY AS DREAM WORK

“Two Snakes” was a difficult poem to write. The initial dream felt static, just two scenes, both on the same patio, where first the snake appears and fails to reach the wall, then the snake crawls up my arm and reaches the wall. I tried several different starts and couldn’t get anywhere with it. I couldn’t find an axis of movement in the material, some aspect of the material that would inspire me and move the material forward toward some form, toward something I could shape into a poem.

The breakthrough, as I’ve already noted, was solving the puzzle of why the snake appeared in two guises. That gave me the key to writing the poem, because suddenly I had two different times, an earlier time and a later time, and that opened up the material for me. The point is that I was trying to find some way to approach the dream material that would allow me to write a poem. Transforming the dream scenes into two separate times created a dynamic tension between an earlier time and a later time, raising questions that fired my imagination. Was the later scene a result of the first, the outcome of some process initiated at that earlier time? Was it contrasting present time to that earlier time, to show how things have changed? In the original dream, I was on what vaguely “seemed like a college campus, visiting someone.” In writing the poem, setting the opening scene in the past took me back to the time when I was first going off to college, which was my earliest experience of being on a college campus with my parents. In the original dream, my father was barely present (“My mother is there . . . possibly my father, too.”). In the writing, quite unexpectedly, the poem became a poem about my father, at least in part. Searching for a way to approach the dream in order to be able to write a poem opened up a new dimension of the material that hadn’t been there in my thinking about the dream.

Once the poet finds a way to approach the material, the writing of the poem proceeds as a complex interaction between the raw source material—including the details of the original dream, the memories, “fantasies, images and emotions” (Dallett) that come up along the way, present time waking experiences, and thematic concerns emerging from the material—and the formal concerns of poetry. Sometimes the poet makes certain formal decisions at the outset—for example, to write in iambic pentameter or to use the sestina form. More typically, the contemporary poet begins the writing process in search of a form appropriate to the material, and then shapes the poem further during revision.

The interplay between the unfolding and amplification of the original dream material and the formal requirements of the poem is what distinguishes the dream writing process from active imagination and other forms of non-interpretive dream work.

In my own case, in pointing out some of the formal features of “Two Snakes,” I did not mean to imply that I was conducting such an analysis as I was writing the poem. But

because my goal was to write a poem, I was attentive to language, to its rhythms and sounds, to the meanings and connotations of the words I chose, and so on, and after I had a rough first draft, I began to examine what I had written in terms of its formal qualities, and to make revisions to heighten certain poetic effects and to make the poem as a whole more coherent. These formal concerns played a major role in how the dream material developed and in determining the final shape it would take. As Laurel Blossom has said, “Poems may begin in the subconscious, but they are finished by conscious craft” (1988, 15).

Consider the interplay between rhythm and diction. “Two Snakes” begins in trochaic meter, each foot having a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable:

Sūd-dēn̄ / l̄y it̄ / wās thē / fāl̄
ōf̄ / n̄ine-tēen̄ / s̄ix-t̄y / thrē.

(The last foot of line 1 “wraps around” to the start of the next line in order to emphasize the word “fall.”) The poem then shifts into dactyls:

to / gēth-ēr̄ ā / gāin̄ in̄ thē / fām-i-l̄y / cār Dād̄ hād̄
pōl-ishēd̄ and / shined̄ for̄ thē / trīp̄.

Note two things: how rhythm enhances meaning, and how rhythm affects word choice. The dactyls, were they to continue much longer, would soon become boring—but they capture the *feeling* of the monotonous work of polishing a car. And because the rhythm of the line demanded that a stressed syllable follow “polished and,” I was led to the word “shined.” The repetition of two closely related concepts, polishing and shining, introduced as a solution to rhythmic demands, then served to emphasize the preparations Dad made for the trip. The line implies that he spent a lot of time polishing and shining the car, i.e. that this trip was very important to him. The father begins to emerge as an important part of the poem.

The metaphor that states that the snake is “a green question mark against gray stone” began as an attempt to describe more vividly one of the central images of the dream. What began as an attempt at precise and evocative description opened up new thematic dimensions of the poem. What does the snake represent? What is being called into question? By whom? These questions demanded that I show how my father reacted to the snake’s failed attempt to climb the wall, a detail that was absent in the dream.

Earlier I called attention to how the break at the end of the first line emphasizes the word “fall,” and how as a result, the reader has various senses of “fall” in mind as he continues reading. The same is true for the writer. I believe that by starting with that opening line, the dream writing process took me to the ending under the apple tree. In fact, I *was* sitting under an apple tree in my back yard as I was writing the first draft of the poem, but I wouldn’t have thought to include my surroundings in the poem. The writing process led me to that, first, by breaking the material into two scenes, one of which was the present, and second, by sounding at the outset the theme of the “fall” with all its connotations. In the dream, I was sitting on the patio at a college when the snake crawled up my arm; in the poem, it ends up crawling up my arm as I sit beneath the apple tree that “shelters where I sit and write.”

As I was writing the last verse, I still had no idea how the poem would end. As dreamer, I was imagining myself in the scene, imagining the snake coiling up my arm and climbing to the apple tree. As poet, I was trying to describe what was happening and also wondering how the issues raised in the poem would be resolved. I knew my father had become central

to the poem, and that an atmosphere of questioning still hung over everything, but I didn't know how it would turn out. In trying to describe what was happening, I imagined the snake crawling over the apple bough, and heard the sound of it, the "whisper of smooth snake skin" against the bough, and surely it was all those "S" sounds that led me to "Dad's smiling yes." The sound made the connection for me. The movement of the poem was complete, from past to present, from youth to maturity, from initial questioning to final affirmation. A dream that had been enigmatic had become a poem about my creative life and my relationship with my father.

In all these examples from the writing of "Two Snakes," the formal concerns of writing poetry led me to emphasize some parts of the dream and de-emphasize others, and also led me new content that was not in the original dream.

Other poets have observed the same process. For example, Rachel Hadas, speaking of her dream poem, "Around Lake Erie and Across the Hudson," written in quatrains, said, "the spare format of quatrains helped me pare away irrelevancies and highlight details such as the haircut, the sweater and the precise seating arrangements in the car, even if I wasn't sure what these details meant" (1998, 46). John Hollander puts it this way: "The whole question of poetic dream transcription involves something . . . close to re-dreaming a dream. . . . For a poet . . . the language in which a vision is framed constitutes much of the vision itself" (1977, 87).

More poetically, Paul Mariani (1998, 142), speaking of dream poems, asks, "What's netted in the language?" and Maxine Kumin (1998, 97), in her poem, "Subduing the Dream in Alaska," says:

". . . a poem is like
a dream set straight, made rational.
A dream scrubbed up and sent to school."

We can see now how the dream writing process differs from the active imagination process.

As we have seen, stages 1 and 2 are similar for both poet and analyst. A receptive state of mind is cultivated and "fantasies, images and emotions" are allowed to come in without judgment. If the seed was a dream, the dream may be allowed to move forward or change.

According to Dallett, stages 3 and 4 complete the process. Without those stages, we cannot properly speak of "active imagination." This is precisely where the creative process of dream writing differs from the process of active imagination.

In stage 3 of active imagination work, the ego confronts the material that has arisen from the unconscious during the active imagining, but the confrontation is made on the grounds of the waking ego's limitations and concerns.

In stage 3 of the dream writing process, the poet confronts the material that has arisen during his or her reverie, and interrogates it in terms of the requirements of poetry. Formal concerns enter the process and mediate its unfolding. Choices are made based on language, its meaning, rhythm, and sound, and these choices influence the way the material develops. Some details that were in the original dream may drop out, others may be emphasized, and new material may be added to the mix—all in the service of the poem.

The fourth stage in the active imagination process is: "Conclusions are drawn and put to work in life." Active imagination work is done in the context of psychotherapy. The goal

of the work is to reach new insights and “conclusions” about the dreamer’s waking life and put them to practical application. Insights are reached, applications are made in a timely manner, and the work goes on.

The purpose of the dream writing process is to create a work of art. The end result is a poem. The poem must be intelligible to readers who did not have and do not know the original dream, and it must yield aesthetic enjoyment through its formal qualities as poetry. In short, it must succeed *as a poem*. For this reason, the process is not complete until the poem is finished—which may take years.

Nevertheless, I believe dream writing may be considered a form of dream work, though it is quite different from dream interpretation and from typical forms of non-interpretative dream work, such as active imagination. By broadening Krippner’s definition of dream interpretation, we may define “dream work” as “an attempt by someone (often the dreamer) to better appreciate and understand the content of dream reports for purposes of personal/social growth.” Dream writing, though its goal is to create a poem, often has the secondary result of increasing our appreciation and understanding of the original dream, which may also result in personal growth. For this reason, it can be considered a form of non-interpretive dream work, and be deliberately undertaken as such.

Denise Levertov provides an example. She dreamed that her sandal broke, and the poem she wrote from that dream, “The Broken Sandal,” became a series of questions, at first practical (how was she going to walk over the sharp stones?) but increasingly more abstract:

Where was I going I can’t go to now, unless hurting?

Where am I standing, if I’m to stand still now?

As she explains, “the dream demanded of the dreamer that some basic life questions be asked. In becoming poem, the organic process begun in dream continued, statements and questions giving the poem its necessarily terse form; and the mode of the questions was provided by the dream’s sandal-thong metaphor, so that ‘where am I (is my life) going?’ is given concrete context, a matter of bare feet, of hobbling, of hurting. Finally the dreamer-writer is brought to enquire the nature of the place that is the poem’s present.” (Levertov, 1981, 117)

Joyce Carol Oates reports that “a certain percentage of my dreams exert an eerie, almost terrifying authority over me, so that I seem to be in thrall to their aftershock, exhausted through much of the morning, sometimes through an entire day . . . these images, these emotions, in themselves unspeakable, must be transposed into *strategies of words* . . . in order to be contemplated at all” (1998, 167). [italics added]

DISCUSSION

Recent discussion is moving toward the view that dreaming is not an inherently different state of consciousness from waking, that many of the thought processes that go on during waking are also active during dreaming, that the two states may be viewed as points along the same continuum, “running from focused waking (e.g. doing arithmetic problems) to looser thought (e.g. reverie) to daydreaming to dreaming” (Hartman et al., 2001). According to Charles Tart’s model, a key feature of dream thought is the absence of the feedback loop that is constantly checking thought against perceived physical reality during waking (Tart,

1983). For Hobson (1988) and others, REM dreaming is characterized by poorer logic and less critical thinking than waking thought. Bert States (1997, 2003) has explored how dream thought unfolds in the absence of these limiting factors, most recently as an ongoing series of probability choices. He, too, stresses the continuity of dreaming with waking thought.

In this context, we could say that dream writing occurs in a middle zone along the continuum between waking and dreaming, and is distinguished from other forms of waking reverie by the presence of a particular type of critical thinking—what Kenneth Koch (1998) calls the “poetic language” and I have called the formal concerns of poetry. In this paper, I have shown how this unique form of critical thought blends with reverie during the dream writing process.

Although dream literature is rife with such statements as “In our dreams we all become writers, painters and filmmakers” (Hobson, 1988) and “All sleepers are poets while they dream” (Hollander, 1997), it is clear, based on the analysis I have presented, that the dream is *not* a poem, precisely because the critical thought process unique to poetry is lacking. As Charles Rycroft (1979) wryly observed, “If dreams are poetry, their creative efforts are imperfect.” To say the dream is a poem fails to honor the hard work and craft the poet puts into the creation of a poem. There is a sense in which “anything goes” during dreaming; hence the much-discussed aspect of “bizarreness” in dreams (e.g. States, 2000). In writing poetry, this simply is not true. At each point in the poem, there are better choices and worse choices, and the poet must use his or her knowledge of craft as well as personal poetic/aesthetic values to steer through to the final poem. A bad choice can set a poem off course and lead to artistic failure. The dream is what it is; the poem is what the poet makes of it, a process of vision and revision that may take years before it is successfully completed.

I should add that the kernel of truth in popular views of dreaming as “poetry” or “art” is that the dream is *creative*, in the sense of “novel . . . and in some manner useful or appropriate for the situation in which it occurs. . . . Dreams combine various elements to form new patterns.” (Krippner, 1999) The poets know this. Most contemporary handbooks on writing poetry contain chapters on dreams, recommending that the poet use dreams to shake himself out of his habitual writing habits, to “stop making sense” (Addonizio & Laux, 1997). “Consideration of dream images, in which the imagination has free play, or at least a play less censored than it has in the waking mind, provides valuable models of possibility for the too-deliberate, cautious, and thus ‘uninspired’ writer” (Levertov, 1981, 114).

With regard to the writing process, I do not mean to imply that all poets follow the exact stages I have described every time they write a poem. No two instances, even for the same poet, would unfold in exactly the same way. Stages of the process might be compressed or combined or skipped or occur in a different order. For example, during the initial poetic reverie over the dream material, some of the formal concerns driving the writing process are probably already at work, and after some initial attempts at writing, the poet may go off into renewed reverie; i.e., some of the dynamics I’ve assigned to stage 3 may seep into stage 2, and vice versa.

Similarly, actual instances of dream work will vary significantly according to the situation, the dreamer, and the method and values of the dream worker. Dream interpretation, active imagination and dream writing probably overlap, and may stand in different relationship to each other depending upon which aspect of the work one focuses on. For example, if we consider how close the dream work stays to the details of the original dream, we could conceptualize the relationship as a continuum, with dream interpretation at one end (in that we keep returning to the dream itself and seek to account for and “interpret”

the details as given) and the dream writing process at the other (in that we are free to follow the process away from the original details of the dream), with active imagination falling somewhere in the middle.

In general, my approach has been to look at “core” examples in all these areas and try to uncover the basic principles at work, knowing full well that reality is rarely that simple. My hope is that by clarifying basic principles, we can begin to find ways to talk about and understand the more complex cases.

Many poets have testified eloquently to the healing power of writing poetry from dreams (e.g. Chandler, 1987; Oates, 1998; Ray, 1998). Wesley McNair asks, “How can a poet, by dreaming deeply into the thing that most troubles him, restore himself? Even knowing from my own writing the power that comes from naming the darkness, I am still amazed by the process” (McNair, 1998, 158). The therapeutic value of creative expression has been well documented, and forms the basis of expressive arts therapies, including poetry therapy (Leedy, 1985; Fox, 1997). Poetry therapy, when applied to dreams, is clearly part of the spectrum of dream work and closely related to what I have called dream writing. Nevertheless, the key difference is in the intent of the work. Poetry writing that is intended primarily as therapy will emphasize certain parts of the process—e.g., the free expression of feelings, the articulation of previously unspoken thoughts, making connections—while downplaying others, especially those that might impede the therapeutic process—e.g. strong attention to formal issues, critical evaluation of the work, etc.

Two final observations:

- 1) I have argued that dream writing, though different from more familiar methods, can nevertheless be considered a type of dream work, because the formal concerns of poetry push the material in directions different from those inherent in other methods. As a corollary, I would argue that the better the writing, the better the dream work.

If it is true that the application of the formal principles of poetry develops the dream material in new ways that might not be reached through other forms of dream work, then it seems likely that the more skillful and successful and complete the writing process is, the more unique the resultant material will be. (Imagine a room full of poetry students, all given the same writing assignment. Some of the resulting poems will be bad—trite, full of shopworn phrases and clichéd observations. The most successful poems *as poems*, those with the most striking use of language, the most vivid images, are also likely to yield the freshest and most unexpected insights). The better the poem, the bigger the payoff.

- 2) I’ve chosen a simple dream poem to examine, but the principles explored with regard to “Two Snakes” can be applied to more complex dream poems, and generalized to all forms of dream writing. For example, in the process of writing a short story based on a dream, the formal concerns of fiction writing—plot, character development, story structure, etc.—would develop the dream material in new and surprising ways different from what would happen in more conventional types of dream work.

Furthermore, the same principles can be applied to all types of dream art. For example, in dream painting, the formal concerns of visual art—composition, interaction of color, etc.—introduce organizing principles not inherent in the original

dream. The result, again, is that the dream material is developed in new and surprising ways.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have explored the relationship between dream poetry and dream work by presenting a representative dream poem, along with the text of the dream that inspired it; examining some of its poetic qualities and showing how these figured in the writing of the poem; and comparing the dream writing process to dream interpretation and to Jungian active imagination work, in terms of process, purpose and end result. The formal demands of poetry introduce a unique type of critical thought into the creative process that develops the dream material in ways different from other forms of dream work. I conclude that writing dream poetry differs from both dream interpretation and active imagination in important ways, but can be viewed as a form of non-interpretative dream work. These observations are probably generalizable to all forms of dream writing and dream art.

REFERENCES

- Addonizio, K. & Laux, D. (1997). *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Blossom, L. (1998). Deciphering the Dream: The Day Logic of Poetic Process. In: Townley (1998), 13–23.
- Booth, P. (1987). Poems After Dreams. In: Russo (1987) 79–85.
- Chandler, J.C. (1987). Seven Snaps of the Shutter. In: Russo (1987) 22–23.
- Chetwynd, T. (1972). *How to Interpret Your Own Dreams (in one minute or less)*. New York: Dell Publishing Co.
- Chodorow, J. (1997). *Jung on Active Imagination*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Dallett, J. (1982). Active Imagination in Practice. In: Stein, M. (ed.), *Jungian Analysis*. (1982) 173–191. Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Co.
- Delaney, G. (1988). *Living Your Dreams*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Delaney, G. (1993a). "The Dream Interview," in Delaney, G. (1993b) 195–240.
- Delaney, G. (ed.) (1993b). *New Directions in Dream Interpretation*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Fosshage, J. & Loew, C. (1987). *Dream Interpretation: A Comparative Study*. New York: PMA Publishing.
- Fox, J. (1997). *Poetic Medicine: The Healing Art of Poem-Making*. New York: Tarcher.
- Franz, M.-L. von (1980). On Active Imagination. In: Baker, I.F. (ed.) (1980) *Methods of Treatment in Analytical Psychology*. Fellbach: Verlag Adolf Banz.
- Garma, A. (1987). The Freudian Approach. In: Fosshage & Loew (1987) 15–51.
- Hadas, R. (1998). Poems and Dreams. In: Townley (1998) 44–50.
- Hall, D. (1992, 2nd ed.). *To Read a Poem*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Hartmann, E.; Kundendorf, R.; Rosen, R.; & Grace, N. (2001). Contextualizing Images in Dreams and Daydreams. *Dreaming*, Vol. 11, no. 2, 97–104.
- Hobson, J.A. (1988). *The Dreaming Brain*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hollander, J. (1997). Dreaming Poetry. In: Hollander (1997) 78–95. *The Work of Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jones, R.M. (1979). *The Dream Poet*. New York: Schenkman.
- Jung, C.G. (1951) Psychological Aspects of the Kore. In: Jung (1969) 182–203. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kinzie, M. (1999). *A Poet's Guide to Poetry*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Koch, K. (1998). *Making Our Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry*. NY: Touchstone.
- Kramer, M. (1993). Dream Translation: An Approach to Understanding Dreams. In: Delaney, G. (1993b) 155–194.
- Krippner, S. (1999). Dreams and Creativity. In: Runco, M. & Pritzker, S. (eds.) (1999). *Encyclopedia of Creativity*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Kumin, M. (1998). Scrubbed Up and Sent to School. In: Townley (1998) 97–104.
- Leedy, J. (1985). *Poetry as Healer: Mending the Troubled Mind*. New York: Vanguard Pr.
- Levertov, D. (1981). Interweavings: Reflections on the Role of Dream in the Making of Poems. In: Levertov, D. (1981). *Light Up the Cave*. New York: New Directions. Reprinted in: Russo (1987) 63–76.
- Mariani, P. (1998). Dream Scripts. In: Townley (1998) 133–143.
- McNair, W. (1998). Dark Dreams, Dark Sayings: Poems about trauma. In: Townley (1998) 154–161.

- Oates, J.C. (1998). "Nostalgia": Dream, Memory, Poetry. In: Townley (1998) 162–169.
- Ray, D. (1998). Dreamwork, Griefwork, Poemwork. In: Townley (1998) 170–180.
- Russo, R. (ed.) (1987). *Dreams Are Wiser Than Men*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Russo, R. (1999). How Dreams Use Poets. Paper presented at the 16th Annual International Conference of the Association for the Study of Dreams, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1999.
- Rycroft, C. (1979). *The Innocence of Dreams*. New York: Pantheon.
- States, B. (1997). Involuntary Poetry. In: States, B. (1997) 188–211. *Seeing in the Dark*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- States, B. (2000). Dream Bizarreness and Inner Thought. *Dreaming*, 10, 179–192.
- States, B. (2003). Dreams, Art and Virtual Worldmaking. *Dreaming*, 13, 3–12.
- Tart, C.T. (1983). *States of Consciousness*. El Cerrito, CA: Psychological Processes Inc.
- Taylor, J. (1984) *Dream Work: Techniques for Discovering the Creative Power in Dreams*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Townley, R. (ed.) (1998). *Night Errands: How Poets Use Dreams*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Ullman, M. (1996). *Appreciating Dreams: A Group Approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.