Kathleen Fraser

COMMENTARY

THE DREAM RE-MEMBERS THE POEM


I had been looking at the paintings of Rene Magritte for years. Frank O’Hara, New York poet and then curator of the Museum of Modern Art, had first introduced me to Magritte’s work by taking me to a large retrospective at the museum in the mid-’60s. Early in 1972, I purchased the Ballantine paperback issue of forty of Magritte’s paintings and began looking, again, closely at his work. I had a powerful and unique encounter with one painting in which I seemed to enter the image, to leave the confines of my immediate experience (which, at that particular time, felt inarticulate and soggy with pain) and to become the image, to take on the body of the image, as mine. I felt spoken for. Identified. Acknowledged. That painting was called “Collective Invention.” It showed a reverse mermaid, top half fish, bottom half female torso, lying on sand, next to waves, unable to swim or walk.

Three years later, a student and friend of mine, knowing of my interest in Magritte, gave me the larger and splendid collection of his works published by Abrams. Again, I began looking. But this time my intention was to actively collaborate with Magritte’s sensibility—his images, his acute sense of displacement, his dream-like insistence upon mysterious and absurd relationships, a haunting coded world that spoke deeply to my unconscious. I wanted to write a series of poems in which this real dream-world was addressed. I would determine the order and choice of poem subject by leafing through the paintings until one moved out to me. I would then note its title (for the words were very important to Magritte; he was literary as well as painterly). The book would often remain open at that painting for days, and I would go about my life, now and again looking at it and noting the title. Usually within two weeks, some thought or event would set off the poem that was to enter into dialogue with this particular painting.

The painting entitled “Not to be Reproduced” pictures the back view of a man in a black, formal suit looking into a large, severely framed mirror, above a mantle. The mirror-image, which one would expect to show his face, again repeats the back view so that one is immediately struck by the secrecy, the withholding of full identity by this man. There is a note of vulnerability suggested by light falling on the left side of his hair and neck and along the merest edge of white shirt showing above the black suit coat.

I had been looking at this painting for a week or so when I suddenly thought that I wanted to write about secretive men and the fascination they held for me, to
try to pursue the mystery that hooked me in, again and again, to that fatal attraction. As I began writing, I decided to let go of the usual linear construction of the poem and work, instead, in a prose poem form so as to allow a more philosophic or narrative investigation... a different kind of space to stretch out in. I was, at that time, in a relationship with a philosopher-logician, whose particular secretiveness took a very complex form, and it was with this man’s sensibility that I began wrestling in the poem.

However, once I had proposed my first set of images and speculations, I came to this statement: “The secrets between men and women are of peculiar fascination” and immediately thought of a dream I’d had of my father, a year earlier. I rushed to my journals, found the dream and felt instinctively and absolutely that it was the next event to record in this poem I was writing. In this dream, my father was preparing to die but I couldn’t see that there was anything wrong with him and I became determined to convince him of the value of his life. In the dream I asked him to take off his clothes, i.e., to remove his black suit, his formality, his secrecy, his death robe. I asked him, essentially, to show himself to me, to trust me with what he’d been hiding. But I didn’t understand this at the time. I hadn’t analyzed the dream, but simply recorded it. The command from the unconscious to re-member the dream by finding it and giving it new life inside the poem, was a gift which would not have been given had I not first entered into the attitude of attention, the act of writing, composing, re-membering my feelings around secrets.

The second gift given during the act of writing the poem came when I wanted to locate the reality of my father’s death, which had come suddenly, ten years before, when he was killed in a car crash. As I began recording the concrete details of his death, my memory provided an image in the way that a dream does or a Magritte painting does, pulling it out from the thousands of details one stores up in ten years of life. I remembered that when asked if there was anything of my father’s that I wanted, I asked for his architect’s drawing tools. As I recorded this, I suddenly understood the meaning of those tools and was able to bring the poem to its finish, to its discovery.

This was all done without any analysis or intellectual plaiting of materials. The information came as swiftly and surely as a dream. I knew its placement was right. But it was not until months later that I understood an even deeper level of meaning for my own life. I had been struggling, during that period, to come into contact with the more aggressive or male aspects of my psyche (what Jung called the animus), which I’d felt frightened of and uneasy with. I had been working in a public job where a great deal of leadership, decision-making, assertiveness had been required. I was not easy with it and felt isolated from a wholeness-of-self because I couldn’t accept those parts of myself which I’d been able to successfully engage. As a result, I’d been experiencing a lessening of joy and energy, a kind of slow psychic dying. When I looked back at the poem, I realized that my father’s unclothed body which was ruddy and glowing was also representing this male part of him in me, the healthy animus which wanted to live, in spite of its wariness around being public. And that the only way I could achieve this integration of parts was through the active engagement with my writing—my creative process. That having the tools was of no use unless there were hands to hold and direct those tools.

In the writing process, I could take the logical skills my father had given me, the structural formal principles and the confidence needed to assert one’s own vision in the world, and combine those qualities or “tools” with my own more intuitive, feeling and visual/imagistic gifts and make a third form of life—the poem.

But without the gift of the dream and the dream-like perception of Magritte’s images and my willingness to attend and trust the exactness of both, there would have been no poem, no next step in my own psychic growth.

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LA REPRODUCTION INTERDITE/
NOT TO BE REPRODUCED

For Dick

I am interested in the logic of secrets, how it has always moved me, in particular, to be invited by a face into the aura of its withholding, as though we were designed to bring forward two opposing sets of facts and bathe ourselves in the resulting struggle, as in watching a tightrope walker move from one point in space to another, each foot brought precisely from behind and placed in front of the other, but without the delicious possibility of falling, were it not for the rope stretched tautly beneath him, cutting the air with its odor of hemp.

The secrets between men and women are of peculiar fascination. My father, for example, invited me into a dream last summer where I discovered that he was making preparations to die. He was busy doing small errands, rushing about in his impeccably tailored suit and polished shoes, with a face so sad, so preoccupied with its secret, so designed to escape observation that I immediately began to pay attention, invited as I was by that closed-off expression to become the rope upon which he demonstrated his journey.

As I watched him moving to get everything in order before leaving, my sense of dismay began to take on its own life, expanding into anger and then curiosity. "How does he know?" I asked my mother. The fibers in me were twisting and vibrating. A conviction was growing. I became filled with the possibility of his life continuing and decided to speak to him directly, hoping to convince him that his death need not be imminent.

I go to my father and I say "Why do you think you are going to die?" His feeling is more one of resignation or tiredness than any specific illness. I ask him matter-of-factly to take off his clothes so that I may look at his body. He does so and his body appears to be fine, a bit shorter and stockier than I remember, but ruddy and glowing. I see immediately that he is perfectly well and able to live for a very long time. I tell him with conviction and energy that there is no reason for him to continue on this course of dying, that he is wholly alive and has many things to do. As I tell him this, we are walking outside through a woods, now up a slight incline to a clearing. My father seems very joyous and happy to hear the news. He accepts it, but with a kind of privacy that he's always had, savoring it for himself, indicating that he hopes I won't make a public issue of it. There is a kind of charged excitement between us, a flirtation with the possibilities that now lie ahead.

In 1965, my father was hit by a car and pronounced dead. I asked for his first set of architect's drawing tools, wrapped in a chamois case he'd sewn himself, each metal pencil and compass enclosed in its own soft pocket, each a potential source of precision and invention, given a hand to hold it.