

Ludvik Švab

# Humor in Dreams (I)

When Freud wrote his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* in 1905, he revealed his good taste in the choice of anecdotes, especially Jewish ones, which are so abundant and so congenially rendered, that out of gratitude the reader is willing to accept the method, by which the author, with professorial pedantry, arranges the jokes into Linnaean systems of drawers, in order to fit them more easily into the Procrustean beds of his paradigms, he finally confided the motive which led him to write this work. It was a letter from Freud's friend Wilhelm Fliess, who reproached him for including too many dreams that read like anecdotes in the manuscript of his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which Freud sent to him in 1899 for a friendly review. This observation is said to have aroused Freud's attention to this aspect of dreams, and to this interest we owe the aforementioned book. We encounter Freud's fondness for jokes earlier, as in the 1901 *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Freud, however, drew a strict distinction between a joke, in whose peculiar brevity are precipitated contrasting contents, nonsensical judgments, confusions and clarifications of hidden meaning for the activation of the flow of the spirit, and humor, which has a somewhat more extensive scope and contains the comic element, of which the joke is a subfamily. Where the joke approaches the technique of dreamwork is in the condensation of content and its modification. Dreams serve predominantly in the avoidance of the unpleasant, jokes in the acquisition of the pleasant; but in these two goals all our mentality converges.

Dreams can contain humor, which is more likely to be developed in comic situations, and also a joke, which is usually at the end of the dream as a punchline. However, the more important dividing line is, I think, whether we perceive the dream as humorous or funny during the dream itself, or whether we find it so only after waking up.

As a rule, we laugh during sleep and then after waking up we wonder what was so funny about it. On the other hand, there are dreams we perceive as tormenting or anxious, which, because of their absurdity, only become funny for us and the others when narrated—as is usually the case when we tell funny stories from our youth and childhood that didn't seem ridiculous to us at the time of their happening, on the contrary. An example of such an anxious dream, which later sounds as an anecdote, was told to me by Pavel Bayerle sometime in the early 1950s, at the time of the ongoing Korean conflict:

*I dreamed that the South Korean troops had achieved unexpected victories and were advancing unstopably, so he was summoned to go and dig trenches against them in the Bohemian-Moravian Highlands.*

I had a similar dream in the days after August 21, 1968:

*I was walking from Nosticova Street, where*

*I live, to Maltézské Square, and already from Nebovidská Street I could see lots of soldiers unfurling black banners, like those on the Labor Day Parade. The black color strikes me, and even more so the golden lettering on them, like on the ribbons for funeral wreaths. The letters are illegible, and only after a while do I realize that they are Chinese characters. I look at the soldiers and see that they are not Russians, but Chinese. I wake up with a comment: "Oh my gosh, we've jumped out of the frying pan into the fire."*

It is perhaps symptomatic of the times we live in that the absurdity of the punchline is more likely to be a sarcastic commentary on a very general and continuing anxious situation, unfortunately all too real, that seeps into our dreams, than an unexpected turn of more pleasant experiences.

*(Dream from February 5, 1974) On the hillside below the former Stalin monument, we are screening a film in the open air, our collective work. Then we all walk down the slope from Letná, presumably to the Old Synagogue Inn. On the way, however, we meet a crowd on the embankment looking across the river to the place of our screening. And indeed, in the corner of the screen, our still running film is transparently visible, live action and animated shots alternate. In the course of this event, confusion ensues, caused by the intervention of the security authorities. A person I know to be Miler\* declares the screening to be take the floor and reply that the person named is our collaborator and that I hope that this will not be a problem in a private screening. "Pretty private," Miler shouts, "half of Prague is here!" I sense that trouble is brewing.*

\*Miroslav Müller headed the culture department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. He was called the executioner of Czechoslovak culture. (Translator's Note)

The manifest anxiety present in my dream of November 11, 1981 is somewhat less pressing:

*I'm at a conference in a strange city and after it's over we're supposed to attend a gala premiere of a show at a local theatre. It's sold out, but one of the locals offers to let us watch the show from backstage. We are hidden in a sort of structure from which we can observe the action through transparent veils. Suddenly, a group of ballerinas burst onto the stage and start dancing. But what is worse, the construction on which we are sitting like chickens on a perch is set in motion on the revolving stage and threatens to expose us to the eyes of the audience. I am the first and probably the only one to realize the impending shame; quite nimbly I crawl away into the trap of the stage and flee through various basement spaces out from the theatre. Outside, however, I already meet the departing audience, and from Doc. Janik, I learn that the performance was prematurely terminated because of the*



Karol Baron, Figa, 1975



Karol Baron, Reductio ad absurdum I, 1975

(continued on page 4)

*I have frequently wondered if the majority of mankind ever pause to reflect upon the occasionally titanic significance of dreams, and of the obscure world to which they belong. Whilst the greater number of our nocturnal visions are perhaps no more than faint and fantastic reflections of our waking experiences—Freud to the contrary with his puerile symbolism—there are still a certain remainder whose immundane and ethereal character permits of no ordinary interpretation, and whose vaguely exciting and disquieting effect suggests possible minute glimpses into a sphere of mental existence no less important than physical life, yet separated from that life by an all but impassable barrier. From my experience I cannot doubt but that man, when lost to terrestrial consciousness, is indeed sojourning in another and uncorporeal life of far different nature from the life we know; and of which only the slightest and most indistinct memories linger after waking.*

H.P. Lovecraft, in *Dagon and Other Macabre Tales*, 1986

## H. P. Lovecraft

# Dreams

Several nights ago I had a strange dream of a strange city—a city of many palaces & gilded domes, lying in a hollow betwixt ranges of grey, horrible hills. There was not a soul in this vast region of stone-paved streets & marble walls & columns, & the numerous statues in the public places were of strange bearded men in robes the like whereof I have never seen before or since. I was, as I said, aware of this city visually. I was in it & around it. But certainly I had no corporeal existence. I saw, it seemed, everything at once; without the limitations of direction. I did not move, but transferred my perception from point to point at will. I occupied no space & had no form. I was only a consciousness, a perceptive presence. I recall a lively curiosity at the scene, & a tormenting struggle to recall its identity; for I felt that I had once known it well, & that if I could remember, I should be carried back to a very remote period—many thousand years, when something vaguely horrible had happened. Once I was almost on the verge of realisation, & was frantic with fear at the prospect, though I did not know what it was that I should recall. But here I awaked—in a very cramped posture & with too much bedclothing for the steadily increasing temperature. I related this in detail because it impressed me very vividly.

*(From a letter to Maurice W. Moe, dated May 15, 1918)*

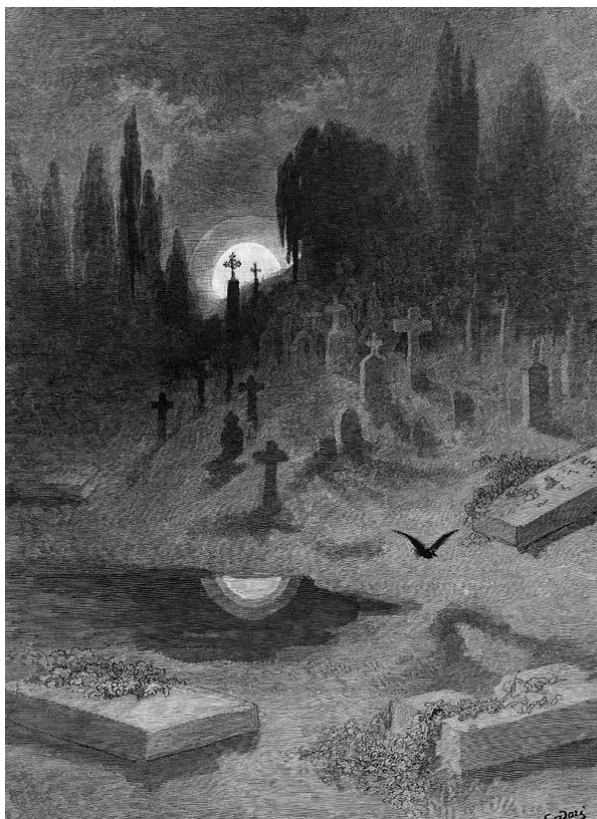
(...)

We were, for some terrible yet unknown reason, in a very strange & very ancient cemetery—which I could not identify. I suppose no Wisconsinite can picture such a thing—but we have them in New England; horrible old places where the slate stones are graven with odd letters & grotesque designs such as a skull & crossbones. In some of these places one can walk a long way without coming upon any grave less than a hundred & fifty years old. (...) Such was the scene of my dream—a hideous hollow whose surface was covered with a coarse, repulsive sort of long grass, above which peeped the shocking stones & markers of decaying slate. In a hillside were several tombs whose facades were in the last stages of decrepitude. I had an odd idea that no living thing had trodden that ground for many centuries till Loveman and I arrived. It was very late in the night—probably in the small hours, since a waning crescent moon had attained considerable height in the east. Loveman

carried, slung over his shoulder, a portable telephone outfit, whilst I bore two spades. We proceeded directly to a flat sepulchre near the centre of the horrible place, & began to clear away the moss-grown earth which had been washed down upon it by the rains of innumerable years. Loveman, in the dream, looked exactly like the snap-shots of himself which he has sent me—a large, robust young man, not the least Semitic in features (albeit dark), & very handsome save for a pair of protruding ears. We did not speak as he laid down his telephone outfit, took a shovel, & helped me clear away the earth & weeds. We both seemed very much impressed with something—almost awestruck. At last we completed these preliminaries, & Loveman stepped back to survey the sepulchre. He seemed to know exactly what he was about to do, & I also had an idea—though I cannot now remember what it was! All that I recall is that we were following up some idea which Loveman had gained as the result of extensive reading in some rare old books, of which he possessed the only existing copies. (Loveman, you may know, has a vast library of rare first editions & other treasures precious to the bibliophile's heart.) After some mental estimates, Loveman took up his shovel again, & using it as a lever, sought to pry up a certain slab which formed the top of the sepulchre. He did not succeed, so I approached & helped him with my own shovel. Finally we loosened the stone, lifted it with our combined

strength, & heaved it away. Beneath was a black pas-sageway with a flight of stone steps; but so horrible were the miasmatic vapours which poured up from the pit, that we stepped back for a while without making further observations. Then Loveman picked up the telephone outfit & began to uncoil the wire—speaking for the first time as he did so.

“I'm really sorry,” he said in a mellow, pleasant voice, cultivated & not very deep, “to have to ask you to stay above ground, but I couldn't answer for the consequences if you were to go down with me. Honestly, I doubt if anyone with a nervous system like yours could see it through. You can't imagine what I shall have to see & do—not even from what the book said & from what I have told you—and I don't think anyone without ironclad nerves could ever go down & come out of that place alive & sane. (...) I discovered this thing, & I am responsible in a way for anyone who goes with me—so I would



Gustave Doré, *The Raven*, 1882

*(Continued on page 3)*

(Continued from page 2)

not for a thousand dollars let you take the risk. But I'll keep you informed of every move I make by the telephone—you see I've enough wire here to reach the centre of the earth & back!"

I argued with him, but he replied that if I did not agree, he would call the thing off & get another fellow-explorer—he mentioned a "Dr. Burke," a name altogether unfamiliar to me. He added, that it would be of no use for me to descend alone, since he was the sole possessor of the real key to the affair. Finally I assented, & seated myself upon a marble bench close by the open grave, telephone in hand. He produced an electric lantern, prepared the telephone wire for unreeling, & disappeared down the damp stone steps, the insulated wire rustling as it uncoiled. For a moment I kept track of the glow of his lantern, but suddenly it faded out, as if there were a turn in the stone staircase. Then all was still. After this came a period of dull fear & anxious waiting. The crescent moon climbed higher, & the mist or fog about the hollow seemed to thicken. Everything was horribly damp & bedewed, & I thought I saw an owl flitting somewhere in the shadows. Then a clicking sounded in the telephone receiver.

"Lovecraft—I think I'm finding it"—the words came in a tense, excited tone. Then a brief pause, followed by more words in a tone of ineffable awe & horror.

"God, Lovecraft! If you could see what I am seeing!" I now asked in great excitement what had happened. Loveman answered in a trembling voice:

"I can't tell you—I don't dare—I never dreamed of this—I can't tell—It's enough to unseat any mind—wait—What's this?" Then a pause, a clicking in the receiver, & a sort of despairing groan. Speech again—

"Lovecraft—for God's sake—it's all up—Beat it! Beat it! Don't lose a second!" I was now thoroughly alarmed, & frantically asked Loveman to tell what the matter was. He replied only "Never mind! Hurry!" Then I felt a sort of offence through my fear—it irked me that anyone should assume I would be willing to desert a companion in peril. I disregarded his advice & told him I was coming down to his aid. But he cried:

"Don't be a fool—it's too late—there's no use—nothing you or anyone can do now." He seemed calmer—with a terrible, resigned calm, as if he had met & recognised an inevitable, inescapable doom. Yet he was obviously anxious that I should escape some unknown peril.

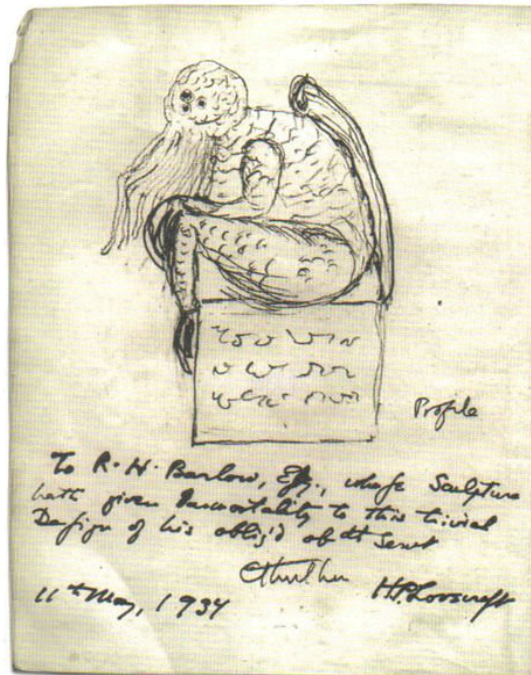
"For God's sake get out of this, if you can find the way! I'm not joking—So long, Lovecraft, won't see you again—God! Beat it! Beat it!" As he shrieked out the last words, his tone was a frenzied crescendo. I have tried to recall the wording as nearly as possible, but I cannot reproduce the tone. There followed a long—hideously long—period of silence. I tried to move to assist Loveman, but was absolutely paralysed. The slightest motion was an impossibility. I could speak, however, & kept calling excitedly into the telephone—"Loveman! Loveman! What is it? What's the trouble?" But he did not reply. And then came the unbelievably frightful thing—the awful, unexplainable, almost unmentionable thing. I have said that Loveman was now silent, but after a vast interval of terrified waiting another clicking came into the receiver.

I called "Loveman—are you there?" And in reply came a voice—a thing which I cannot describe with any words I know. Shall I say that it was hollow—very deep—fluid—gelatinous—infinately distant—unearthly—guttural—thick? What shall I say? In that telephone I heard it; heard it as I sat on a marble bench in that very ancient unknown cemetery with the crumbling stones & tombs & long grass & dampness & the owl & the waning crescent moon. Up from the sepulchre it came, & this is what it said:

"YOU FOOL, LOVEMAN IS DEAD!"

Well, that's the whole damn thing! I fainted in the dream, & the next I knew I was awake—& with a prize headache!

(From a letter to Alfred Galpin and Maurice W. Moe, dated December 11, 1919)



H. P. Lovecraft, Sketch of Cthulhu, 1934

I am not sleeping much this week, but last night I had a promising fragment of a dream that was cut short by premature awakening. I was alone in a black space, when suddenly, ahead of me, there arose out of some hidden pit a huge, white-robed man with a bald head & snowy beard. Across his shoulders was slung the corpse of a younger man—clean-shaven, & grizzled hair, & clad in a similar robe. A sound as a rushing wind or a roaring furnace accompanied this spectacular ascent—and ascent which seemed accomplished by some occult species of levitation.

(...)

I was in a museum of antiquities somewhere in Providence, talking with the curator, a very old and very learned man. I was trying to sell him an odd bas-relief which I had just modelled myself from clay. The old man laughed at me, and asked me what I meant by trying to sell a new thing of my own workmanship to a

museum of ancient things. I answered him in words which I remember exactly—a rare thing for me. Usually I recall no exact words beyond isolated sentences from my dreams. I said:

"Why do you say that this thing is new? The dreams of men are older than brooding Egypt or the contemplative Sphinx, or garden-girdled Babylon, and this thing was fashioned in my dreams."

Then the curator bade me show him my product, which I did. It was of old Egyptian design, apparently portraying priests of Ra in procession. The man seemed horror stricken, & asked in a terrible whisper—"WHO ARE YOU?" I told him that my name was H.P. Lovecraft—adding that I was the grandson of Whipple V. Phillips, why I thought would probably be better known to a man so old. He replied "No, no,—before that!" I said that I had no memories before that save in dreams. Then the curator offered a high price, which I refused; because I saw from his face that he meant to destroy my sculpture as soon as it was his—whereas I wished it hung in the museum. My refusal clearly perturbed the man, who asked me to name my own price. Humorously, I cried "One million pounds sterling!" (currency mixed up!), when to my amazement the old man did not laugh, but looked only more deeply worried. He had taken me seriously! Then he said in a perplexed, baffled, frightened tone, "I will consult with the directors of the institution—please call a week from today." I do not think the dream ended there, but I recall nothing beyond.

*H.P. Lovecraft*

(To be continued)

(continued from page 1)

embarrassing incident with the audience on stage. I ask rather brazenly who caused it, and to my horror I learn: "Well, you were there too, but you somehow ran away right at the beginning."

The witty punchline exposes how pathetic my shrewdness was and does not flatter me in any way, and indeed does not bring me pleasure, quite the opposite. While the previous examples placed the dreamer in the unenviable position of a victim, like a Don Quixotesque character one can identify with, the last one is such a strong condemnation of the first person in this drama-dream, that it can be understood as a dream joke by the punishing Superego.

The meaning of a dream as wish fulfilment—the thesis which caused Freud so much trouble and which he de facto did not revoke until the end of his life (1940)—probably applies much more to those dreams we experience as cheerful and funny, so that we can ask less pleasant questions to our judgment after waking up. Sometime in the late summer of 1938 I had a dream that I was at a performance where one of the performers sang a very comical song, the content of which made me, like everyone else, laugh our heads off. I didn't remember the content of the song when I woke up, just the strange name of the artist: Ashton-Gwatkin. Only the older among us

may remember that this was the name of one of the members of the Runciman Mission, which was expected by the entire naive Czech nation (including me) to avert the catastrophe that soon culminated in Munich. The trust which my father then placed in the word of the British gentleman, as well as my fondness of the nation embodied by Jerome K. Jerome, rather than my father's Lord Baden-Powell, the founder of Scouting, caused me to make the English diplomat a fellow player with the three men in a boat, in the good faith that we would still laugh, and all would turn out well. It didn't, and I couldn't laugh after I woke up the following morning. Later, I couldn't laugh at all.

With some good will, the feature of a wish fulfilment can also be traced in one of my dreams from the 1950s:

*Ludvík Souček\* comes unexpectedly to the Medeks\*\* for a merry drinking party. He is wearing the flamboyant cloak usually worn by noblemen in Lehár's operettas. In an exaggerated manner, he raises a glass of champagne and gestures to all of us with suspicious pompousness: "Merry elm, merry elm..." We all laugh at this ingenious, yet by no means cruel, mockery of Russian national grandiosity, which no longer has a sinister connotation for us.*

\*Czech author, mostly known for science fiction books. (Translator's Note)

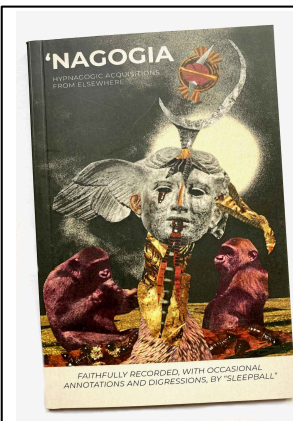
\*\*Czech surrealists Mikuláš Medek and his wife Emila Medková. (Translator's Note)



Marcel Fleiss, who was looking at the painting explained that he did not smoke. I remembered the kitchen of my house in Toronto, where, sitting at the head of the table, I looked day after day at a painting by Susana, in which a woman curled up on herself reveals an immense nacreous thigh. The painting is titled "The Origin of Fire" and represents a friend of ours. In the dream I knew that her sex, warm like a petal, opened and closed like flowers do in the sunlight.

(At noon I was able to find the Fleiss catalog. Not only is the painting different, but seeing it one feels as if one were breaking a taboo, not unlike those trying to reach that sex, each a different dreamer, myself included.)

November 27, 1986



## ONEIRIC ECHOES

An assembly of hypnagogic voices and imagery, purposely induced and recorded as accurately as possible. The assemblage in this manner of a tentative "hypnagogic poetry" based strictly on the accumulations of a particular session. With digressions and commentary upon the various findings, including their urban, historical and cultural correspondences. Also, a method for inducing the state of hypnagogia with a view to capturing its oneiric bounty.

<https://peculiarmormyrid.com/2022/04/30/nagogia/>

(From 'Nagogia - How to induce Mock Sleep)

The trick is to accelerate the process of falling asleep through exaggerated comfort. This method requires a cold room—basically cold enough to make you uncomfortable without a blanket. If you have trouble getting drowsy, throw off any blankets and try for a few minutes to sleep in the cold. After a while you should feel sleepy but unable to fall asleep. Then pull the blankets back over you.

Also if you are noise or light sensitive and sleep on your side, you can pull a pillow over your head. Just make sure you can breathe. The weight will help relax you. Finally make sure your arm is also propped up on a pillow.

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