
The Dream and the Cave Allegory in the Work of Novalis Henry of Ofterdingen

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Abstract: The subject of this article is the novel *Henry of Ofterdingen* of the romantic poet Novalis and the allegorical aspects of the dream and the cave, according to the interpretation of the philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin. In Novalis' work, we come across the figure of a traveler and his journey away from daily concerns/ preoccupations. The hero bears the name of a legendary and historical figure of the German Middle Ages, the great poet and Minnesinger Henry of Ofterdingen, indicating the author's wish to combine past, legendary or actual facts with current and future ones.

Keywords: Dream, Memory, Allegory, Cave, Clean Language

1. Introduction

Novalis' work begins with the description of one of the hero's dreams, where the limits between experience and imagination, reality and dream, spectacularly collapse. In Novalis' work, the dream is compatible with the aesthetic rationale and the philosophical questions of Romanticism, according to which the world should become more romantic. Henry feels released from the controlling powers of the conscious self, slipping from the condition of awakening and led into imagination: "The young man gradually lost himself in his sweet fancies, and fell asleep. Then he dreamed of regions far distant, and unknown to him" [1].

2. The Interpretation of the Dream

Henry considers dream to be a divine gift and sees a "soft bosom" [2] in it, a protective barrier from the conventionality of life and habit, a breathing space where imagination is released from the bounds of reality and the rules and laws governing it. For our young hero, dreaming is a revelation, contrary to his father, who considers the existence and interpretation of dreams meaningless when compared to the logic and order of a suburban life, stating characteristically that dreams are froth, values also embraced by the Enlightenment:

Dreams are froth, let the learned think what they will of

them; and you will do well to turn your attention from such useless and hurtful speculations. The times when Heavenly visions were seen in dreams have long past by, nor can we understand the state of mind, which those chosen men, of whom the Bible speaks, enjoyed. Dreams, as well as other human affairs, must have been of a different nature then [3].

But the strength in dreaming lies in the revelation of the hero's future personal course. It is a course from a vaguely canny young man to a poet: "Henry was a poet by nature. Many events seemed to conspire to aid his development, and as yet nothing had disturbed the elasticity of his soul" [4].

Further to that, focusing on the dream's anthropological aspects, we find that dreaming in Novalis' work reflects the hero's experiences and although it brings him in contradiction to actual life, it charms him and determines his next steps. It is worth mentioning here that authors and philosophers of the ancient time, including Sophocles, Aristotle, Hippocrates and Plato, often wondered whether a sleeping person is dreaming or remembering. In Homer, dreams symbolize messengers from the Gods, and serve a prophetic role. In Novalis' work, God does not simply make man-poet a recipient and declarer of his message, as it was the case in antiquity, but the subject/person who dreams also understands the divine concept of his mission and in other words "prophesizes his own self" [5]. This is not a parallel life, but the essence of man's experiences. Our hero walks through metaphysical experiences which release him from the oppressions of

reality, leading him to the world of poetry. For several scholars, Novalis' work and dream as an experiment of his poetry, is the opposite pole to Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, presenting a subject in the course of his training. Wilhelm Meister resents life's banality in order to pursue the unclear concepts of happiness and ideals, until at the end he finds his ideal in the sphere of reality. Henry on the other hand, is fully detached from his actual state and finds himself lost in a worldview governed by dreaming. The divine gift of dreaming is not merely found in the dream itself, but even more so in the ability to interpret and narrate it; in this way, the gift of dreaming is converted to a gift for poetry. Thus, dreaming is converted to literature and text.

3. The Dream as an Allegory

This is the part where we notice the rhetorical application of the dream as an allegory, parallel to its conception as a style means framing the entire work. Dreaming is neither merely a state in which we find our hero, nor a temporal sequence in the work's plot, but the *allegory* encompassing the entire story. The dream is integral in the plot, it is the work's plot itself, since the hero's life and dreams coincide. The world becomes a dream and the dream becomes a world. According to Benjamin, the dream sequences are not just a technique in the form of a game, but an expression, similarly to language and writing [6], and they constitute a lingual map of the hero's experiences and emotions, presented in the story as an actual fact. Dream becomes a story and a narration.

With regard to the fulfillment of his personal essence as a poet, which is also the title of the second part of the work, the hero experiences a bipolarity – he transcends from dreaming to awakening, creating the switches of aspects. Romanticism's ideal is this exact irresolution between dreaming and awakening, between something which can be determined and something which cannot. According to Novalis, man's existence is the balance between these extreme conditions [7]. In this clashing condition, our hero experiences regular successions of dreaming and awakening, the conscious and the unconscious mind, as contradicting forms and energies, with their limits being clearly determined by the author: "His delightful astonishment was increasing with this singular change, when suddenly his mother's voice awoke him, and he found himself in his parents' room, already gilded by the morning sun" [8]. It should be mentioned here that awakening describes a transitional state between being asleep and being awake, and it is no longer a conscious knowledge about the past. The dream allows us to process existence and present is experienced as an awakened state, to which the dream also refers [9].

4. Dream and Memory

Analyzing one of the hero's dreams, we can connect the state of awakening with that of memories. Henry awakes from an erotic dream, in which he dreams of Matilda with whom he will later develop an emotional connection: "She

put a wondrous, secret word into his mouth, and it rang through his whole being" [10]. But our hero wakes up and forgets this word; all that's left is a sweet sense of nostalgia: "He would have given his life to remember that word" [11]. Dreaming and awakening are converted to allegories for remembrance and oblivion, using repetition to change the word that the hero fails to remember into narration of dreams, narration of legends, and finally the story itself. Dream, as a lingual system, determines the complex world of imagination and allows the hero to act beyond rationalism and logical order, in a reality which becomes the dream of logic. Dream is the field Freud will later call the unconscious mind, in which we detect experiences of nostalgia and disposition, moments of terror and fear – it is a transition field where perception is expanded and the Ego is set free. Should the dream be interpreted as a figment of imagination or as a memory, there is always some inherent logic which cannot be expressed in language, yet without the latter, the dream would not exist in the sphere of intellect.

Memory is not just an experience in a different dimension, but a construction that becomes an esoteric experience. It is an introvert path, in which knowledge is present as identification. According to Schlegel's theory of memory, as expressed in his philosophical lectures in 1804, and contrary to Fichte, the starting point is not *being* but *becoming*; not a documented Ego, but an Ego discovered in the process; not a certain Ego, but the uncertainty of Ego. Schlegel's theory of memory is the experience of Ego's imperfection, a disjointed Ego which includes interpersonal change, loss of consciousness and its restoration, and this is now called *memory* [12].

G. Benedetti also defines human existence in what constantly swings between two poles, the state of being awake and the state of being asleep. This is what Heraclitus called *opposite roads*, when spiritual life is in constant alternation and is fractured into different forms and energies. Thus, man's life is a regular track between dreaming and being awake [13]. This alternating state between memory and oblivion is dominant in the first part of the narration titled *Expectation* and is described as follows:

All that he saw and heard seemed only to remove new bars within him, and to open new windows for his spirit. The world, with its great and changing relations, lay before him. But as yet it was silent; and his soul, its language was not yet awakened [14].

5. The Myth of the Cave

Reading Henry's dream, it is easy to comprehend his transition into the sphere of unknown mystery, a transition directly related to the location of the cave. At first, he falls into an uneasy slumber in which he dreams of a cave filled with blue light, a light he cannot resist, as he is filled with intense emotions, swimming with the light's stream outside the cave and towards the light of day, when he immediately awakens. The alternation between sleeping and being awake can be interpreted as the alternation between the earth's depth

and surface, a fact that in combination with the dream constitutes a regression in time and space. Topographically, caves are the places of dreams and awake spectator's dimensions of depth and reader's dimensions of surface. These are not utopian areas, but different locations, locations of transition which are at the same time factual and mythical. These are the heterotopias of space and time mentioned in Michel Foucault's theory. This is the space of dreams, which might be imaginary but occupies its own space in literature as a lingual sequence. [15].

The images of the dream and cave provide a new kind of mythology in Novalis' work. These are temporal structures, perfectly interweaved with the experience of space. The time experienced by the hero coincides with the space he experiences, causing a "reversal of the topographical order of things" [16], that is, it becomes an experience of the subject's expansion and removal of limits. The unconscious mind and forgotten notions become symbols of cryptography, which are illuminated deep inside earth, under the surface of rationalism, reaching to the hidden innermost emotions of the subject. A common element between dreaming and real life, which is repeated in Henry's wandering, is the cave. In his journey, Henry meets an old man searching for treasures, who leads him to a cave: "It seemed as if the world lay disclosed within him, showing him as a friendly visitor all her hidden treasures and beauties" [17]. In that cave, which hosts monuments of old, remnants of an old era, he is led to "that fabulous olden time" opening inside him an invisible, "a secret door" [18].

The cave, as a place of initiation and knowledge, illustrates the hero's state of mind, a fact which is evident by the primary role saved for caves in searching for hero's identity and his road to poetry. The cave becomes the place where senses and emotions are projected and illuminated. At this point, we should refer to the historical background of the time. The geological and topographical exploration of caves, which began in the 18th century in an effort to find answers about the world's origins, acquires a romantic and psychological/historical aspect. It is connected to feelings, mythological and poetic associations and finally serves as an allegory for the soul, as it is the case in this hero. Nature's aesthetics serve as a mirror of the soul, a surface on which the self-reflection of the Ego is projected. Using the concept of soul as a cave, Novalis refers to two traditions; that of Jacob Böhme, in which nature is a text and to the traditional topography of memory. The new element in Novalis' poetry is the reflection of the soul's imagination, acquiring the form of the book of life, found inside the cave.

In Novalis' work, the cave as matter, as an actual image, is converted to an allegorical construction, in which man and nature find themselves against each other as open mirrors. The cave is used as a cryptographic symbol of inhibition and the unconscious mind, which under the pressure of rationalism and the logical order of things is converted to an inward rotation, although found on land. This view and theory is in complete contradiction with the allegory of the cave, as suggested by Plato in *Republic*:

Imagine human beings living in an underground cave which is open towards the light; they have been there from childhood, having their necks and legs chained, and can only see into the cave. At a distance there is a fire and the prisoners can only watch the shadows on the rock, thinking this is the real world ... [19].

The cave, as an experience archive, an archive for the storage of legendary and ancient years, and as a composition of memory and nostalgia, becomes a space for esoteric knowledge, a place of fulfillment:

Many words, many thoughts, fell like quickening seeds into his breast, and soon drew him from the narrow circle of his youth to the heights of the world. The hours just passed lay behind him like long-revolving years: and it seemed as if he had always thought and felt as now [20].

6. The Cave as an Allegory of Image and Writing

We shall now proceed to Henry's *book of life* and how it correlates to the concept of writing. In particular, as Henry walks inside the cave, he notices human footprints on the ground. Following the footprints, he is led to a hermit surrounded by old books. Henry mentions that in this mountain, deep inside the earth, he found his *lode*, noticing the heap of books. He discovers a special book hidden among the others, which features individuals known and unknown to him, which are familiar in a mysterious way. The entire book is written in a language the hero does not speak. It is untitled and fragmented, but features a series of images in which Henry identifies himself among a company of unknown individuals, and feels as if he belongs to a mythical world—like seeing himself through a mirror, but not seen in the *here* and *now* of his actual life. Henry interprets the images he sees as scenes from his future life and although the book he discovers in the cave is old, it becomes the source of esoteric life for him and a kind of memory in which Henry is present, since he sees "his idol in different vignettes" [21].

The power of images expresses the direct representation of the imagination of a poet in the making, where the subject invades the space of images and the space of images becomes a body. These images are deciphered symbols, transformed in the hero's imagination and the cave becomes the special place of a memory-nostalgia for the world's origins, a plunge in the past, the seeking of the lost unity with nature, an associating aura of initiation in a nature at the same time covered and disclosed. The cave becomes the absolute space, where distance and limits between the hero and the images of the book, no longer exist. According to the above, the concept of memory is closely related to writing and in this way, the book of life becomes the *palimpsest* in which the identification's present is revealed, where Henry does not merely want to appropriate the knowledge offered to him by the images, but the experience of meeting and converging all times. We can analyze this according to the philosopher's and cultural critic Walter Benjamin interpretation of allegory, who

characteristically states: “It is not only the past shedding its light to the present, or the present to the past, but the image itself is where an action of the present and an action of the past swiftly meet in one state” [22].

In other words, while past seen from the present is characterized by the temporal relation of continuity, the image is defined by immobility, which places memory in a dialectical relation with the work's events. Thus, memory as a course in time, becomes an image in this work and the place we find it becomes writing. If we were to compare the concept of memory with that of cave and its exploration, it would become apparent that these are not only actual findings, but also the discovery of ideal pathways. Memory does not operate as an object to investigate the past, but as a present scene. This scene is transformed into an interacting relation between writing and image. A common element of the cave as an actual space and the text as an intellectual space is the momentary immobility of time, within which imagination and memory become writing.

The past and what lies behind it temporally cover a plethora of abstracts and in the place of a narrative sequence, we find images which are aesthetical images of dreams and actual images of nature become text. In Romanticism, communication between times in a narration is achieved through the image, as the present's invasion in the past causes a trace of memory which one can only read in images. The pursuit of this kind of memory is not a deciphering of the old, but a tangible reading of memory's traces. Henry's book of life is the text showing the relation between past and present. Thus, past has a visual and temporal presence, or, in other words, the difference between image and writing, which is retained through time, is that images establish and delimit the work as a space of memory. In particular, the allegory of the cave in combination with the allegory of the dream, present the following spatial and temporal consideration of memory: The structure of depth replaces the earth surface linearity and stability, and on the other hand, dream invalidates actual time. According to Luther, this depth is the height and primitive abyss of the world's Genesis. It is the original place of bareness, terror, death and hell. But it is also the property of God's unfathomable and immeasurable wisdom [23].

7. Conclusion

Allegory is a temporal and spatial encroachment of limits, connecting the past and the future in a present future experience, as the hero characteristically notes: “And in this very joy of expressing in the world what is without it, and of doing that which in reality was the primal object of our existence, lies the origin of poetry” [24].

The cave is an *image* offering the soul a spatial form of depth and breadth. Journey and wandering operate as techniques of memory and imagination, translating a complex character to a sequence, based on the standards of writing. On the other hand, the mine becomes architecture of character – this is where Henry finds the book, which as a

means of mental time construction and placement, bears its own symbolic significance. In other words, image is not found outside or before language, but converses with it and expresses language's hidden powers. These powers can be traced to poetic language's capacity of producing similarities, lingual images which are similar to actual or aesthetical ones.

On track with Benjamin's theory, we can suppose that Henry's book of life is not simply a historical or mythical book, but the lost state of language and speech, which Henry simply cannot read. Both allegory and memory dominating Novalis' work can be interpreted as nostalgia for the *clean language*. Allegory is born in secular time, actual time, the time of language decomposition consciousness, and becomes a form of reflection:

To speak accurately, this all-embracing freedom, this mastership of dominion, is the essence, the impulse of Conscience. In it is revealed the sacred peculiarity, the immediate creation of Personality, and every action of the master, is at once the announcement of the lofty, simple, evident world - -God's word [25].

Hans Blumenberg's discernment between living time and secular time is also interesting. Living time is the time before the original in, when the world self-understands and secular time is language's coincidence and collapse time. In secular time, man becomes the other who names things, since he does no longer know the origins of his existence [26].

In Novalis' work, we notice that the allegories of dream and cave, project a memory re-activating the past, releasing it from temporal sequences and chronologies, introducing it in the present experience. According to this, the past is not something stored in man's memory, but something isolated and hidden within each thing, discovered by its name, the word. This leads to the presentiment of man's existence origins and the origins of language. Language is not only the language of memory, but also the memory of language, defining language not as a tool - as human language actually is - but as an image-matter, God's creative language.

Allegory creates spaces of memory and a historical consciousness, narrating old as new and new as old. There is a close link between allegory and memory, in which allegory is interpreted as the poetic expression of memory. This typical encroachment of limits in allegories, as mentioned previously, connects the past and the future in one present experience, manifesting a trace and a seeking for the lost similarity of idea and word, which is why the encroachment suggests the seeking of a clean language [27]. For Benjamin, this seeking for God's creative language can be detected in the *name*:

The deepest depiction of the word of God is the point in which human language reaches its most familiar participation in the divine infinity of the simple word, the point in which human language cannot become a word and knowledge at the same time - this is the name [28].

It is the threshold between finite and infinite language, as the name is the common element between man and God's creative word, the point where one can detect the notion of God. The notion of God in the work considered could be

located in the image and name of the blue flower, a symbol of Romanticism, also functioning as a symbol of re-identification. The blue flower serves as a name, concentrating and clarifying the Word of God. As an image, it is a dream event becoming an experience, the experience of image directing the hero along with the name to the road of *divine counseling*. In Romanticism, dreams frame the hero's life. It is not merely a delivery means used by heralds and messages from God, but a means used to interpret the hero's character and unconscious mind. For Novalis, a person is complete in the harmony of his unconscious and conscious mind and this harmony is a synthesis of soul and nature, allowing the dreaming poet to reach self-knowledge. And beyond that: the dream is a process, in which cultural and historical elements contribute.

The primitive relation of closeness and distance from Divinity is clarified with the use of the name, elevating man's course: "You have seen the wonder of the world. It lies in your power to become the happiest being in the world, and, besides that, a celebrated man" [29]. It is not a random fact, that the starting point of the story's dreams is a foreigner's narration about a blue flower. This narration excites imagination and becomes a memory implemented on another level as well that of the work's various stories' narration. The poetic means of repetition is used here, as a basic feature of memory and an important strategy to arrange Novalis' narration space. Memory becomes transparent through the narration of fairytales, songs, legends or dreams, since during the narration of a story, it can anticipate the narration's continuation. Storytelling is the art of continuing a narration and this is preserved, when one can safeguard the stories [30]. This is precisely what transpires here, with the work becoming a cave, a storage space, a space for collecting and keeping memories. The work's hero listens to the stories, forgets about himself and what he hears, are deeply buried within him.

Our hero is fascinated to such extent, that the gift of narration comes by itself. The coherence of Novalis work is clearly the act of memory, a mythical association with nature. Both the cave, considered a primitive image of residence, and the dream's aesthetics, are transformed with precision in a lingual *similarity*, bringing it to the limits of what is called, the clean language, requiring a regression in time. For Benjamin, childhood is a time before rationalism, with no discernment between subject and object that is why children are better aware of the name. For children, words are like caves in which they identify strange connection pathways [31]. Henry ascertains that in dreams we "change the continual earnestness of age, into the merry sports of childhood" [32].

Finally, another point worth mentioning is the affinity between the notions of allegory and memory, with that of imitation. The subject's self-disintegration and his return to nature are part of his imitating power. It is a communication by nature, the language of things, to which human responds to by imitating, producing similarities. The gift of understanding similarities is a remnant of a wish to become similar, and this notion is derived from the man's magical

return to nature. Thus, the gift of dreaming is also a remnant of that mythical association with nature. The divine gift of dreaming is converted through wish and imitation, that is, through the wish of becoming similar, to the magical gift of poetry:

Ancient and future times, innumerable men, strange countries, and the most singular events rise up within us, as from deep hiding places, and tear us away from the known present. We hear strange words and know not their import. The language of the poet stirs, up a magical power; ... [33].

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