

Dreaming the Dream of the Poem: Flattened Curves of Infinitivity

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I am honored to contribute to the special issue celebrating the publication of Lissa Wolsak's *Squeezed Light: Collected Poems 1994-2005*. Wolsak is a poet extraordinaire, a wordsmith who dazzles the mind with masterful attention to the richness, indeed the superfluity, of language, reveling in revealing the capacity of the linguistic gesture to express the inexpressible. The poems, aphorisms, and dicta anthologized in this volume can be called "apophatic utterances" insofar as they point the way through words to the undoing of words. In concert with many poets and mystic visionaries through the course of history, Wolsak embraces the notion that just as thought leads not to the unthinkable but to the unthought, that which is thought recurringly as what cannot be thought, so speech leads not to silence but to unsaying, that which is spoken repeatedly as what cannot be spoken, utterances that never say what has been said and always say what has not been said. Thus, the poetic expression, a form of "impossible speech," according to the locution of Michel de Certeau cited by Wolsak,¹ summons in each moment the event of nothing—"materiality at its / venerable creation"²—in virtue of which all semiotic signs are transposed into "occurrent symbol-covers,"³ markings of the immanent transcendence that coheres extensively in space and intensively in time, through which we apprehend the "attingent squeezed light" on the "convex" that is beyond, radiating the simple but elusive truth: "what-is touches what-is."⁴

The following passage provides one of the most transparent accounts of what may be called Wolsak's theory of poetics:

Incarnations of the shaping spirit, with generous and agile hermeneutics, turn the flat surface of primary understanding to elicit infinitivity, even if in struggle with all the confusions of verbal theory. The way to the hidden or deeper meaning of the Torah is to take a passage out of context, to find, if not the conglomerates of the physical formations, then the conglomerates

¹ Lissa Wolsak, *Squeezed Light: Collected Poems 1994-2005*, introduction by George Quasha with Charles Stein (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 2010), p. 142.

² *Ibid.*, p. 190.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

of divine formations. A fundamental methodological principle in connection with the interpretation of prophecy is the deliberate violation of context as a way of coming to appreciate the meaning of the text. Consciousness breaks with its own imaginative skeleton to exist inside and outside the manner of things and can inquire through matter, energy, space..time, in anti-totalitarian postulates to the impinging nakedness and origins. Each dream follows the mouth. To let .. to culture ..⁵

Commenting on this text in the introduction to the volume, George Quasha and Charles Stein, significant bards in their own right, note that Wolsak signals here “a poetics of strategic shifts and variability. ... These shifts have apophatic force, where each thing said or indicated gives way or gives birth to its other, producing not so much a contrary as a radical furtherance.” The poems, accordingly, are “released apophatically in immediate further saying. They are process-degraded, recycled, returned to the ground of saying.”⁶

Contemplating the passage anew, the first thing I would note is that the expression “incarnations of a shaping spirit” is perfectly suited to describe Wolsak’s poetic offerings, partaking as they do in what she calls in another context the “somatics of openness.”⁷ The poems are “opening circulations,”⁸ textual embodiments of what remains open, the spirit/breath that circulates in the process of becoming what it has always never been, the delimited that is limited only by its potential to delimit limitlessly. Here hermeneutics is the key, for the interpretive gaze turns the “flat surface of primary understanding to elicit infinitivity.” Echoing a theme well attested in the Jewish exegetical tradition, perhaps most prominent in the mystical worldview of kabbalah, Wolsak notes that the “way to the hidden or deeper meaning of the Torah is to take a passage out of context.” In the domain of the secret, literal reading is not sufficient—things never seem to be merely what they seem to be. Prophecy itself—first and foremost, a modality of seeing—demands an interpretative strategy that is a “deliberate violation of context.” Wolsak cites and glosses two passages from *The Guide of the Perplexed* by Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) that elucidate the point:

“as we have said, the prophets use in their speeches, equivocal words and words that are not intended to mean what they indicate, according to their first signification.” And with respect to things known unconsciously, “rather there will befall him when teaching another, that which he had undergone when learning himself. I

⁵ Ibid., p. 144.

⁶ Ibid., pp. xxvi-xxvii.

⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

⁸ Ibid., p. 155.

mean to say that the subject matter will appear, flash, and then be hidden again.⁹

Prophetic language is inherently equivocal—what the prophet says is never intended to mean what is indicated by the external sense. This dissimulation underscores the parabolic nature of metaphysical truths, or what Maimonides calls the “great secrets” of divine science.¹⁰ The parable or riddle is the appropriate form to communicate these mysteries, so that the simpleminded will be attuned to the outer meaning and the wise to the inner. Perhaps influenced by Ibn Bājja (1085–1139), Maimonides describes the manifestation of truth as a sudden flash of light. For most people, this occurs intermittently, so that the obscure night will appear momentarily to be bright as day, but there is an individual, “for whom the lightning flashes time and again, so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light. Thus night appears to him as day.”¹¹ The individual to whom Maimonides refers is Moses. Having attained a permanent state of conjunction with the Active Intellect, encoded in the biblical image of standing with God (Deuteronomy 5:28), he no longer experienced the opposition between diurnal and nocturnal. The inability to discern the difference between light and dark, which is usually associated with a blind person, is here applied to the maximum vision that was realized by only one human being. And yet, even for the perfect individual, the manner of communicating truths, “either orally or in writing,” is through flashes, for secrets cannot be explained with “complete clarity and coherence.”¹² Maimonides thus clearly states that his own objective is that “the truths be glimpsed and then again be concealed.”¹³

Reflecting the Maimonidean perspective, Wolsak remarks, “Prophetic utterance is divine in the sense of having the greatest possible penetrating power.”¹⁴ The piercing potential of the word of prophecy is proportionate to its capacity to disclose and conceal enigmatic truths concomitantly. The dialectic of esotericism, however, is extended to the poet:

Preferring
indefinable flash
to pious incline,
to feel singly

⁹ Ibid., p. 152. The first passage is from Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated with an introduction and notes by Shlomo Pines, with an introductory essay by Leo Strauss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), II.29, p. 347, and the second is from the “Introduction,” p. 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., “Introduction,” p. 7.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 8; see I.34, p. 78.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

¹⁴ Wolsak, *Squeezed Light*, p. 149.

just.. autopoiesis
of thingly beams..
arise in brief
zoot space¹⁵

The meaning of the poetic gesticulation—the unsaying of what is said in the act of saying what is unsaid—is intrinsically hidden, and consequently, the latent must be made manifest through a constant process of hermeneutical elucidation. On this score, interpretation precedes the text—implicating the reader in a reversal of the temporal flow—and hence, alluding to a rabbinic maxim, Wolsak notes that each dream follows the mouth. According to the talmudic narrative in which this teaching occurs, Rava, the third-century Babylonian scholar, discovers that this dictum was written in the book of the dream-interpreter Bar Hedyā.¹⁶ This statement encapsulates formulaically the quintessential aspect of the rabbinic approach to deciphering dream symbols. Indeed, the tactic implemented by Bar Hedyā is precisely the one promulgated by the sages in their way of reading the Torah. The import of this axiom, therefore, is not only that every dream demands an interpretation—a dream that is not interpreted, in the language of another assertion recorded in the name of R. Ḥisda, is like a letter that has not been read¹⁷—but that the upshot of the dream is determined by its interpretation. To say that dreams depend on interpretation does not mean simply that the interpretation retroactively bestows sense on the dream, but that the interpretation is a mode of performative speech that protentively endows reality upon the dream and, as a consequence, the dream shapes reality. The circularity of reasoning implied here illumines the reversibility of cause and effect that we may infer from the oneiric phenomenon—the cause occasions the effect that is its cause. Alternatively expressed, the stuff of the dream is determined by its interpretability, though the latter is determined by the stuff of the dream.

The affinity between interpreting a text and a dream is brought to the fore in the concise description of the rabbinic hermeneutical practice offered by Emmanuel Levinas: “the intention of the signified by the signifier is not the only way of indicating significance. In its other modes, the significance of the signifier responds only to the mind that seeks it, thus becoming part of the process of signification; interpretation necessarily includes that seeking without which the non-said, inherent in the texture of what is declared, would be extinguished by the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 182.

¹⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 56a.

¹⁷ Ibid., 55a. The analysis here is a brief summary of the discussion in Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), pp. 143-177.

weight of the texts and sink into their letters.”¹⁸ Just as the reader actively participates in the creation of the meaning of the text—indeed, in a profound sense, interpretation is part of the constitution of the text, including the manner in which a particular verse may be vocalized—that gives shape to the identity of the reader, so the dreamer weaves the dream through which the dreamer is woven. To be sure, there are passages in rabbinic literature, and other documents of the ancient world, that posit a one-to-one correspondence between dream images and symbols, but this by no means intimates that a particular dream yields only one meaning.

Quite the contrary, some rabbis entertained the notion that the dream has multiple meanings. Consider the following comment that is attached to a tradition transmitted in a chain of several sages, culminating with the elder R. Bena’ah:

There were twenty-four interpreters of dreams in Jerusalem. One time I dreamt a dream and I went to all of them, and what one interpreted for me was not what the other interpreted—yet all of them were fulfilled in me, to substantiate what is said, “all dreams follow the mouth.” Is the statement that “all dreams follow the mouth” scriptural? Yes, as stated by R. Eleazar, for R. Eleazar said: Whence do we know that all dreams follow the mouth? As it says, “as he [Joseph] interpreted to us, so it was” (Gen 41:13). Rava said: This is only if he interpreted it in accord with one’s dream, as it says, “according to each man’s dream did he interpret” (ibid., 12).¹⁹

The adage that all dreams follow the mouth is offered as the rationale to legitimate the multivalency of the dream, which, in the talmudic context, means not only that manifold interpretations of a dream are possible but that they all will be fulfilled, a harder thing for the human mind to comprehend. The example of Joseph, the paradigmatic explicator of dreams in Jewish lore, is cited as the biblical basis for the oneirocritic principle, the wide-ranging repercussions of which may be adduced by the qualifying remark ascribed to Rava: it is valid to say that the meaning of the dream is made real by the interpretation only in the case that the interpretation corresponds to the content of the dream. Rava’s

¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, “The Jewish Understanding of Scripture,” *Cross Currents* 44 (1994): 497. For a different rendering, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, translated by Gary D. Mole (London: Athlone Press, 1994), p. 110.

¹⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 55b.

caveat notwithstanding, the rabbinic idea bespeaks a radical hermeneutic that would endow the interpreter with the power to make the images of the dream come true, which conveys the notion that the reality presumed to be true consists of the images that are so interpreted. Veracity and duplicity are not inherent properties of the phenomenon that is dreamt; they are relative to the expository condition of the dreamer.

The polysemic underpinnings of the claim that all dreams follow the mouth attest to the capability of interpretation to actualize the dream, and in so doing to shape reality. This is not limited to a situation where there is ostensible accord between the interpretation and the dream content. To insist on this qualification is to miss the significance of the rabbinic orientation entirely. That the various interpretations are all valid implies that the dream, when divested of any interpretative cloak, is hermeneutically neutral. The interpretative token, as it were, transmutes the mimetic relationship of representation and represented, and, in the process, upends the conventional hierarchy of appearance and reality; the latter is as much shaped by the former as the former is by the latter. There is no way to fathom the text of the dream but through the veil of interpretation and no way to unveil the veil of the dream but through the text of interpretation. As Paul Ricoeur put it, “dreams attest that we constantly mean something other than what we say; in dreams the manifest meaning endlessly refers to hidden meaning; that is what makes every dreamer a poet. From this point of view, dreams express the private archeology of the dreamer, which at times coincides with that of an entire peoples ... But even then they do not coincide, the mythical and the oneiric have in common this structure of double meaning.”²⁰

And this brings us back to Wolsak’s juxtaposition of the dream and the poem, and to her insight that the deeper meaning can only be accessed by violating the context. Following Nietzsche’s surmise regarding the poetic symbol, we can say of the dream that it signifies the “nature of being as interpreted being,” that is, there is no being of which to speak discriminately that is not already a being of which one has spoken indiscriminately, no sense of the real that is not real because it appears to some observer as real. Hence, interpreting a dream, as reading a text, requires the “rigorous philology” of a “genealogical decipherment.”²¹ These words, it seems to me, accurately capture Wolsak’s poetic sensibility. Her words well forth from a space of infinitivity, the flattening of the curve, the place of the dream that is naught but time. Here it would be prudent to recall the kinship between poem and dream expounded by Bachelard:

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, translated by Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 15.

²¹ Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, translated by Duncan Large (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 144.

The poet's room is full of words, words which move about in the shadows. Sometimes the words are unfaithful to the things. They try to establish oneiric synonymies between things. The phantomalization of objects is always expressed in the language of visual hallucinations. But for a word dreamer there are phantomalizations through language. In order to go to those oneiric depths words must be given the time to dream.²²

Neuroscientifically, the basic elements whence the dream is crafted are metaphoric images produced by and in the brain of the dreamer. I do not think it advantageous to view the dreamer as an entity that can be surgically severed from the event of the dream that is dreamt. Within the curvature of the oneiric timespace, the images are confabulated in the very consciousness that is confabulated by the images. Considering this conundrum, Bachelard wondered if the dreamer “who crosses the madness of the night” is sure of being the one who is dreaming the dream. Boldly, he concludes, the “night dreamer cannot articulate a *cogito*. The night dream is a dream without a dreamer.”²³ If we are to uphold an identity of a dreamer, it is enfolded within the folds of the dream unfolded in its being retold, whether in word, image, or deed.

Dreamer and dream should not be conceived as binarily quantized entities, as when we speak commonly of one *having* the dream, as if the persona of the dreamer could be determined independently of the dream, a view epitomized in Freud's contention that dreams are “absolutely self-centered” and hence every figure that appears in a dream should be decoded as a mask that conceals (and thereby reveals) the self.²⁴ The notion of the mask is paramount for grasping the poetic comportment of the dream, but I see no reason to brand the images that appear in the dream as masks donned by a dreamer—to speak of a mask, one must suppose the existence of a face, but within the phenomenal constellation of the dream there is no face of which to speak that is not a mask. As Nancy eloquently expressed the point:

The sleeping *self* does not appear: it is not phenomenalized, and if it dreams of itself, that is ... according to an appearing that leaves no room for a distinction between being and appearing. Sleep does authorize the analysis of any form of appearance

²² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*, translated by Daniel Russell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 49.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated by Joyce Crick, with an introduction and notes by Ritchie Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 246.

whatsoever, since it shows itself to itself as this appearance that appears only as non-appearing ... In this non-appearing, one single thing shows itself. But it does not show itself to others, and in this precise sense it does not appear. ... The sleeping self is the self of the thing in itself: a self that cannot even distinguish *itself* from what is not “self,” a self without self, in a way, but that finds or touches in this being-without-self its most genuine autonomous existence.²⁵

The dissolution of self characteristic of the dream can be appreciated from the example of the writer for whom the different personae created are veils through which one is revealed to the extent that one is hidden. Explicating this affinity between dreaming and creative writing, Blanchot offered the following:

In the dream, who is dreaming? Who is the “I” of the dream? Who is the person to whom one attributes this “I,” admitting that there is no one? Between the one who sleeps and the one who is the subject of the dream’s plot, there is a fissure, the hint of an interval and a difference of structure; of course it is not truly another, another person, but what is it? And if, upon awakening, we hastily and greedily take possession of the night’s adventures, as if they belonged to us, is it not with a certain feeling of usurpation (of gratitude as well)? Do we not preserve the memory of an irreducible distance, a distance of a peculiar sort, the distance between me and myself, but also the distance of a peculiar sort, the distance between me and myself, but also the distance between each of the characters and the identities—even certain—that we lend them, a distance without distance, illumination and fascinating, which is like the proximity of the remote or contact with faraway? An intrigue and a questioning that refer us to an experience often described of late: the experience of the writer when, in a narrative, poetic, or dramatic work, he writes “I,” not knowing who says it or what relation he maintains to himself. In this sense, the dream is perhaps close to literature, at least to its enigmas, its glamour, and its illusions.²⁶

²⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep*, translated by Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), pp. 13-15 (emphasis in the original)

²⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 141-42.

The recording of dreams is not primarily for the sake of deciphering them according to some theoretical scheme; rather, the goal is to allow them to be received in their own light “as traces of a literary affirmation that is not psychoanalytic or autobiographical. They were dreams; they are signs of poetry.”²⁷ Identifying dreams as *signs of poetry* insinuates that just the poet’s identity is both constricted and expanded by the poem—the poet’s sense of self is created by the poem that could have only been created by this poet—so the dream is woven from the cloth whence the dreamer, too, is woven. And just as the poet (or artists of other aesthetic media) would both take pride in his or her creation and yet refuse to aver ownership²⁸— the work of art is thus often depicted as having come unintentionally by way of an external fount of inspiration—the dreamer both lays claim to and disowns the content of the dream. Oneirically, we configure the configuration that configures us.

By heeding the ancient wisdom that each dream follows the mouth, we come to appreciate the power of poesis to deliver the heart to the “clear of infancy / on an equatorial pier,” the “transmental abyss” that is the “sum of all possible derivation,”²⁹ the “open place / which inflects / being as in union or rapture.”³⁰ If we are to employ a teleological idiom, the purpose of the poem, as that of the dream, is “to let.. to culture,” to propagate and to refine the mind with word-images that intone truths laid bare in the letting-be of the unconcealed, to inculcate the “vision of presence via absence—hidden, because all language about divinity disperses into paradox and ambiguity.”³¹ We can apply to Wolsak’s poetry her depiction of language as that which “carries with it a sense of its own incompleteness and is inspired when the scission between active speech and reception of speech merge into unity, however evanescent or momentary.”³² Through her poetic alchemy, Wolsak teaches the patient listener to stay on the path, to sojourn resolutely in the disclosure of the withdrawal, to wait interminably for what draws near incessantly, to traverse the immeasurable distance of the abiding-expanse, the horizon of being, the “place where the /

²⁷ Ibid., p. 142.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 143.

²⁹ Wolsak, *Squeezed Light*, p. 195.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 189.

³¹ Ibid., p. 148.

³² Ibid.

curvature becomes infinite,”³³ where “fire is swung as / ipseity and light,”³⁴ and the “wrapped spark” of love issues incandescently from the “depth of mercy.”³⁵

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³³ Ibid., p. 181.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 193.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 196.