



## Strange Creative Gifts and Freud's "The Symbolism of Dreams"

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Unlike the symbols found in folk-lore and fairy tales, Freud argues that "dreams symbols are used almost exclusively for the expression of sexual objects and relations." Dreamers, Freud argues, draw upon an ancient language within their unconscious and thus have a mode of expression at their disposal which they do not know in waking life: "we can only say," he writes, "that the knowledge of symbolism is unconscious to the dreamer, that it belongs to his unconscious mental life."

Do artists, too, have access to this ancient language of dream symbols, but only during moments of creativity? Examining various nineteenth century writers, I identify similar dream symbols or images used in mapping out choreographies of assault and violence, and also consider the ways in which various writers, male and female, invoke similar dream symbols of flowers and landscapes.

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"Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." (A. Conan Doyle. 2003. "The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet," 514)

### **I**

Freud's lecture, "Symbolism in Dreams," appears as the tenth chapter in his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, a series of lectures he gave during the winter terms of 1915-1916 and 1916-1917. He had previously spoken about the manifest and latent content of dreams and about censorship in dreams. And in turn, this lecture will be followed by one on "The Dream Work." But even with all of the rich dream material surrounding this chapter, he nevertheless suggests

that “symbolism is the most remarkable chapter of the theory of dreams” (Freud 1966, 186). He also admits that this theory has provoked the most resistance: “the most violent resistance has been expressed once again to the existence of a symbolic relation between dreams and the unconscious,” even from those who “have gone a long way in agreeing with psycho-analysis” (Freud 1966, 186-87). In his lecture, he reminds us that we find symbols in many different places: “myths and fairy tales, by the people in their sayings and songs, by colloquial linguistic usage and by the poetic imagination” (Freud 1966, 205). Confessing that he would love to see “real professionals in mythology, anthropology, philology and folklore” (Freud 1966, 204) explore the use of symbolism, he admits that our understanding of dream-symbolism “does not go as far as we should like” and that “the concept of a symbol cannot be at present sharply delineated” (Freud 1966, 187). Freud also notes that there are crucial differences between the symbolism of dreams and those symbols found in other fields, in that the symbolism of dreams focuses primarily on “that of sexual life—the genitals, sexual processes, sexual intercourse. The very great majority of symbols,” he writes, “in dreams are sexual symbols” (Freud 1966, 189).

But what these fields share in common is that they all reach into a distant and ultimately unknowable past. As Gillian Beer has pointed out, Charles Lyell and Darwin charted out for their age the depths of a primordial past, presenting it with a world in which “origins can never be fully regained or rediscovered” (Beer 1983, 81). Like those extinct fossils of sea creatures that Lyell discovered in scarped cliffs far from any water, Freud finds in these various fields of symbolism evidence of “an ancient but extinct mode of expression” still making itself felt. Drawing, as he often does, upon archeology for a metaphor, Freud writes of how “one gets an impression that what we are faced with here is an ancient but extinct mode of expression, of which different pieces have survived in different fields, one piece only here, another only there, a third, perhaps, in slightly modified forms in several fields” (Freud 1966, 205). Thus, while the mode of expression is itself extinct and its origins can never be known, its ancient shards have survived in various fields such as folk-lore, myths, and fairy tales.

But, as noted earlier, while symbolism in other fields is by no means always sexual, “in dreams symbols are used almost exclusively for the expression of sexual objects and relations” (Freud 1966, 205). Even more surprising, he suggests, is that the “dreamer has a symbolic mode of expression at his disposal which he does not know in waking and does not recognize” (Freud 1966, 204). “This is as extraordinary,” he continues, “as if you were to discover that your housemaid understood Sanskrit, though you know she was born in a Bohemian village and never learned it” (Freud 1966, 204). Why this should be the case, he adds, “is not easily explained” (Freud 1966, 205), but in attempting to do so, he turns to the theories of Hans Sperber (1912), a Swedish philologist, concerning the origin of speech. Sperber argues that “sexual needs have played the biggest part in the origin and development of speech” for “the original sounds of speech served for communication, and summoned the speaker’s sexual partner” (Freud

1966, 206).<sup>1</sup> As Freud points out, Sperber argues that “primal man made work acceptable, as it were, by treating it as an equivalent of and substitute for sexual activity...As time went on, the words became detached from the sexual meaning and fixed to the work” (Freud 1966, 206), *work* in this context referring to reality, the stuff of everyday life. In this way, Freud continues, “a number of verbal roots would have been formed, all of which were sexual in origin and had subsequently lost their sexual meaning” (Freud 1966, 206). At this point, Freud turns once again in his lecture to lost or irrecoverable origins, to an ancient phylogenetic past, arguing that “dreams...preserve something of the earliest conditions,” and because of this “residue of an ancient verbal identity,” they contain “an extraordinarily large number of sexual symbols” (Freud 1966, 206). Thus, while the words themselves are a part of our regular vocabulary—trees, ponds, brooks, etc.--their sexual origins remain unknown by us, except when we are dreaming. Only then, as it were, can we speak Sanskrit.

In his *Language and the Origins of Psychoanalysis*, John Forrester initially notes that it is “strange to find such a full-blown hypothesis about the origin of language in a lecture on symbolism,” but goes on to note that it is understandable that Freud would turn to Sperber, for “there is an intimate connection in Freud’s mind between the theory of language and the nature of symbols. The theory fits psychoanalysis like a glove, the origin of language grows out of sexual needs and bears an intimate connection to reality—‘work’” (Forrester 1980, 112). Thus, Freud argues that memories of our language or verbal roots from our ancient past exist in our unconscious, even though we do not know them when awake. When we dream, we recover the shards of an ancient and lost language.

The question I want to explore in this paper is this: if dreamers, like the housemaid speaking Sanskrit, have access to a rich language that they do not know, is it possible that fiction writers and poets also have access to this language? What if their “knowledge of symbolism,” like that of the dreamer, belongs to their “unconscious mental life” (Freud 1966, 204), a site that opens up only during moments of creativity? Like other artists, Dickens talks about drawing upon sources that remained a mystery for him, once telling John Forster that “when I sit down to my book, some benevolent power shows it all to me...and I don’t invent it—really do not—but see it, and write it down” (Dickens 1999, 118). In much the same vein, in her 1850 Preface to *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë asks how her sister, having led the sheltered life that she did, could possibly have created a novel such as *Wuthering Heights*, and argues that “the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always the master--something that at times strangely will and works for itself” (Brontë 1990, 322).

If all of this sounds improbable, how do we explain why writers as different from one another as Wordsworth, Dickens, and Thomas Hardy draw

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<sup>1</sup> Freud makes a point of observing that Sperber was not associated with psychoanalysis.

upon similar sexual symbols or images in mapping out comparable choreographies of assault and violence, variously imagined, fantasized, or actually acted out? It seems unlikely, if not impossible, that all of these pre-Freudian artists consciously chose to make use of the same symbols while aware of their sexual implications. And although these writers are male, female artists as various as George Eliot, Emily Dickinson, and Edith Wharton have also drawn upon similar sexual symbols and imagery, for example, images of the flower with its historical connection with female sexuality (for example, Édouard *Manet's Olympia* [1856], and the intimate paintings of Georgia O'Keefe), but especially the rose, with its particular shapes and scents.<sup>2</sup>

One example involving the rose is the famous conservatory scene in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, where Maggie Tulliver and Stephen Guest have wandered off by themselves. Attracted to a "large half-opened rose," Maggie tells Stephen that "I think I am quite wicked with roses--I like to gather them and smell them till they have no scent left" (Eliot 1981, 441). After this rather startling confession, we hear that "Stephen was mute; he was incapable of putting a sentence together, and Maggie bent her arm a little upward toward the large, half opened rose that had attracted her" (Eliot 1981, 441). The narrator then gives us an eroticized portrayal of "the beauty of a woman's arm"--"the unspeakable suggestions of tenderness that lie in the dimpled elbow, and all the varied gently-lessening curves down to the delicate wrist" (Eliot 1981, 441)—a description that helps explain why Stephen, excited by Maggie's words and behavior, impulsively kisses her arm, and, in doing so, earns her wrath--"what right have I given you to insult me" she asks, as "she darted from him to the adjoining room" (Eliot 1981, 442).<sup>3</sup>

Although more collected than Maggie, Emily Dickinson, too, is attracted to the rose's depth and beauty. In Poem #334, she writes of how "All the letters I can write / Are not fair as this / Syllables of Velvet- / Sentences of Plush, / Depths of Ruby, undrained, / Hid, Lip, for Thee- / Play it were a Humming Bird- / And just sipped-me-" (Dickinson 1960, 158). And in *Beatrice Palmato*, Edith Wharton takes the images of the rose's floral depth to yet another level: "Suddenly his head bent lower, and with a deeper thrill she felt his lips pressed upon that quivering invisible bud, and then the delicate firm thrust of his tongue, so full and yet so infinitely subtle, pressing apart the close petals, and forcing itself in deeper and deeper through the passage that glowed" (Wharton 1992, 176).

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<sup>2</sup> A recent example would be the film, *American Beauty* (1999), and the rose strewn Angela, the adolescent object of Lester Burnhams's erotic fantasies.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Homans sees the focus on Maggie's arms as "genteel metonymies for her breasts," noting that Maggie is described at one point as "broad-chested" as an adolescent" (Homans 1993, 175). She also suggests that Maggie's sexuality in the conservatory scene "is not for her use, but for Stephen's as a "commodity" (Homans 1993, 175). Interestingly enough, she says nothing about Maggie's words and actions during the rose-smelling scene that leave Stephen speechless, nor about the narrator's eroticization of Maggie's arm. Homans underestimates Eliot's ability to create a scene with complex and ambiguous dynamics.

But let me turn now to the implications behind the sexual symbolism we find in the landscapes of a number of writers, beginning with the nineteenth-century British novelist, Elizabeth Gaskell, and her 1853 novel, *Ruth*. In an early seduction scene involving the young Ruth and her lover, Bellingham, we find a landscape strikingly similar to the one we will later find in Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Here is Gaskell's landscape: "They went on a few yards, and then they came to a circular pool overshadowed by the trees...the pond was hardly below the surface of the ground and there was nothing like a bank on any side" (Gaskell 2004, 63). And, she adds, "the speed-well grew in the shallowest water of the pool and all around its margins (Gaskell 2004, 64-65). Given the nature of Gaskell's description, it is not surprising that Jenny Uglow characterizes it as "a sexualized landscape of a deep pool in a mountain cleft, fringed with green trees" (Uglow 1993, 330). Shortly after this moment, we discover that Ruth is pregnant and that she has been abandoned by her young gentleman lover.

We will find a similar landscape in Wordsworth's "Nutting," and in his reading of that poem, Jonathan Arac argues that Wordsworth's rendering of the bower "unmistakably echoes the scene in Milton's *Paradise Lost* describing Satan's first vision of Eden," "making explicit," Arac notes, "the sexual suggestion that many readers have found in Milton" (Arac 1987, 41):

As with a rural mound the champaign head  
Of a steep wilderness, whose hairy sides  
With thicket overgrown, grotesque and wild,  
Access denied. (Milton 1962, 4: 134-137)

I will turn to "Nutting" and its bower later, but while there is no evidence that Gaskell had this passage from Milton in mind while creating the seduction scene in *Ruth*, its Miltonic echoes are, I think, even stronger than those we find in "Nutting." Perhaps Gaskell knew Milton so well she unconsciously draws upon him in creating this landscape. We cannot know. Felicia Bonaparte rightly notes that "Gaskell was not only extremely sensual, she was also extremely sexual. She had a healthy interest in sex...and a healthy appreciation of the power of sexual passion" (Bonaparte 1992, 87). But even so, it is still extremely unlikely that she consciously created the "sexualized landscape," to use Uglow's phrase, of Ruth's seduction with female genitalia in mind.

But like Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, Gaskell also knew that art arises from deep and often frightening places. She often writes of Charlotte Brontë when reflecting on her own ideas of creativity, and she once observed that Brontë's fiction "gives one the idea of creative power carried to the verge of insanity" (Gaskell 1967, 398). In comparing herself to Charlotte Brontë, she notes that Brontë "puts all of her naughtiness into her books, and I put in all my goodness," adding that "my books are far better than I am" (Gaskell 1967, 228). Or maybe, her books are not as "good" as she believes them to be. She had mixed feelings about the origins of *Ruth*, unsure where they came from, for some unfavorable reviews made her think, she writes, that "I must be an improper woman without knowing it, I do manage to shock people" (Gaskell 1967, 222-223).

Gaskell knows, but cannot explain how her art comes about, beginning, if not in insanity or dreams, in sources she cannot identify or recognize, places of impropriety that exist but that she cannot access, except through her art. Or, could it be, as I am arguing, that Milton, Wordsworth, Gaskell, and Thomas Hardy all draw upon the same sources that dreamers draw upon, namely, images from an ancient past they both know and do not know? Such a proposition seems unlikely, I know, but listen to Freud's description in his lecture on the symbolism of dreams of the representation of the female genitals "The female genitals," he writes, "are symbolically represented by all such objects as share their characteristic of enclosing a hollow space," and he further notes that that "the complicated topography of the female genital parts makes one understand how it is that they are often represented as landscapes, with rocks, woods, and water" (Freud 1966, 192). It is almost as if Freud had Milton, Gaskell, and, as we will see, Wordsworth and Thomas Hardy, specifically in mind, for his characterization of the symbolic representation of female genitals corresponds in virtually every respect with those landscapes we find in this rather disparate group of artists, in works dating from 1674 to 1873. How is this possible? What does it mean?

## II

Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved...they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him...to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possession, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. (Freud 2010, 94-95)

I want to pursue these questions by turning to three nineteenth-century English texts: Wordsworth's "Nutting" (1798), Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), and Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), while also keeping in mind Freud's rather grim portrayal of humanity in the above epigraph. For these three writers seemed to understand the point that Freud makes when he reminds us that we are not gentle creatures, but aggressive ones, and that our erotic instincts are inextricably laced with violence and aggression. Let me begin with Dickens's novel and a particular moment involving Dick Swiveller and Sally Brass. The scene is a long one, and I will cite only portions of it now, and will return to it later. The scene takes place when Swiveller catches his first glimpse of Sally working on her books in the law office: he stood, we read, "gazing upon Miss Sally Brass, seeing or thinking of nothing else, and rooted to the spot" (Dickens 2000, 257). It is anything but an ordinary "boy meets girl" moment: "there stood Dick, gazing now at the green gown, now at the brown head-dress, now at the face, and now at the rapid pen, in a state of stupid perplexity, wondering how he got into the company of that strange monster, and whether it was a dream, and he would ever wake" (Dickens 2000, 257). As he continues to look at her, unable to concentrate on his own work, he "by degrees began to feel

strange feelings creeping over him—horrible desires to annihilate this Sally Brass—mysterious promptings to knock her head-dress off and try how she looked without it” (Dickens 2000, 258).

He soon finds “a very large ruler on the table—a large, black, shining ruler,” and he takes “it up and began to rub his nose with it. From rubbing his nose with the ruler, to poising it in his hand and giving it an occasional flourish after the tomahawk manner,” his flourishes “went close to Miss Sally’s head, the ragged edges of her head-dress fluttered with the wind it raised. Advance it but an inch, and that green brown knot was on the ground” (Dickens 2000, 258). But Sally Brass seems oblivious to his activities, for “the unconscious maiden worked away, and never raised her eyes” (Dickens 2000, 258). He continues to make these flourishes with the ruler and, we read, “by these means, Mr. Swiveller calmed the agitations of his feelings, until his applications to the ruler became less fierce and frequent” (Dickens 2000, 258). The dynamics of this scene ring true, confirming Freud’s observation in his *Civilization and its Discontents* that as “is well known, temptations are merely increased by constant frustration, whereas an occasional satisfaction of them causes them to diminish, at least for the time being” (Freud 2010, 73).

As far as I know, there is nothing like this scene anywhere else in Dickens. Sally Brass is depicted early on as an androgynous figure, in some respects more masculine than feminine. We hear that there is such a similarity between her and her brother that if “she had assumed her brother’s clothes in a frolic, and sat down beside him, it would have been difficult for the oldest friend of the family to determine which was Sampson and which was Sally, especially since the lady carried upon her upper lip certain reddish demonstrations, which...might have been mistaken for a beard” (Dickens 2000, 251). We also find out that “she wore no collar or kerchief except upon her head, which was invariably ornamented by a brown gauze scarf...and which, when twisted...formed an easy and graceful head-dress” (Dickens 2000, 251). Freud tells us in his lecture on dream symbolism that “the *hat* is an obscure symbol...perhaps, too, head-coverings in general—with a male significance as a rule, but also capable of a female one” (Freud 1966, 194, emphasis Freud’s). Sally’s head-covering, however, is not a hat as such, but rather a twisted “brown gauze scarf” turned into a head-dress that will later become the object of much of Dick Swiveller’s attention—and his fantasies of violence.

Dickens does not tell us why Swiveller responds as he does, or why Sally Brass evokes such a reaction from him. What we do know is that Swiveller moves quickly from amazement and wonder to fantasies of extreme violence. In his “Wordsworth’s ‘Nutting’ and the Violent End of Reading,” Robert Nevelndine begins his inquiry by speaking of the shared historical background of Wordsworth and Sade, suggesting that “the romance of trespass, of violating a sacred or daemonic ground, is a central form in modern literature,” and that “the time has been long in coming when Sade and Wordsworth would meet openly on that ground” (Nevelndine 1996, 658). Dickens’s novel makes a point of observing that

Sally's head-dress is more than just a head covering, suggesting instead that it is "like the wing of the fabled vampire" (Dickens 2000, ch.33:251). And, as such, it is an almost mythic accessory for the wondrous Sally Brass, a "sacred or daemonic ground" that Swiveller wants to violate, destroy.

There is such a moment of similar wonder and amazement leading to an explosive violence in "Nutting" as well, but in this case, the violence is acted out instead of only imagined. Wordsworth's speaker tells us how as a young boy, he came to "a bower, beneath whose leaves / The violets of five seasons re-appear and fade, unseen by any human eye" (Wordsworth 1956, 260). He remembers how "A little while I stood, / Breathing with such suppression of the heart / As joy delights in" as he sits "among the flowers, and with the flowers I played," and as he continues to bask in the scene, his cheek resting on one of the moss-covered stones near the running water "where fairy water-breaks do murmur on / For ever," he becomes aware of how "The heart luxuriates with indifferent things, / Wasting its kindness on stocks and stones, / And on the vacant air" (Wordsworth 1956, 261). Then suddenly, he tells us, "up I rose, / And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash / And merciless ravage: and the shady nook / Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower / Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up / Their quiet being" (Wordsworth 1956, 261).

"Nutting" is at the heart of Geoffrey Hartman's seminal study of Wordsworth, for he argues that this poem "anticipates the larger story of how the imagination moves precariously closer to nature and perhaps extinction," until through this violence, the "child's willful consciousness matures into the sympathetic imagination" and, as he tells us, "I felt a sense of pain when I beheld/ The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky" (Hartman 1964, 75). Given the landscape that the boy intrudes upon—the "fairy water breaks," the moss covered stones, its "beds of matted fern," etc.—one can see why Arac finds it signaling the sexual suggestions in Milton's description of Satan's first view of Eden, and it is also strikingly similar to the landscape in Gaskell's *Ruth*. Arac and others have spoken of the virtual rape of nature by the boy. Frances Ferguson, for example, alters the trajectory of this motif by arguing that "the sexual overtones...shift so that the boy who would have forced himself upon the bower is seduced into a sense that the bower encourages his designs" (Ferguson 1977, 74). David Ferry similarly speaks of how the boy "turns out to be a sort of rapist and voluptuary in nature" (Ferry 1959, 25); and Margaret Homans writes of how in "Nutting," "the boy must ravage the virgin bower before he can discover that 'there is a spirit in the woods'" (Homans 1981, 240). But if the figure of Sally Brass is at times drawn as androgynous, some readers have located sexual ambiguity in "Nutting" as well.

Robert Neveland's "Wordsworth's 'Nutting' and the Violent End of Reading," draws heavily upon Freud's discussion of dream symbolism, but arrives at a rather different reading of the poem. Most strikingly, he finds the landscape of the bower to be masculine rather than feminine, as he identifies the "phallic images" that "predominate," namely, "the hazels rose / Tall and erect,

with tempting clusters hung.” He also writes of how the boy with his “nutting crook in hand...a huge endowment from behind” proceeds to “ravish a phallic symbol plus the nearest virgin opening that he can, that ‘green and mossy bower” (Nevelndine 1996, 666). He argues that “the overtly masculine shape of the images in ‘Nutting’ which are virtually impossible to mistake for female, renders incomprehensible...Harold Bloom’s claim that “the rough analogy is with the female human body,’ as well as Margaret Homans’ reading of the bower as a woman’s” (Nevelndine 1996, 665). Speaking of the scene where the boy destroys the bower with “merciless ravage,” and the “virgin scene” lies around him, “deformed and sullied,” Nevelndine suggests that it captures, if not anal rape rather than vaginal rape, at least the temptation for such a rape, arguing, like Ferguson, that the bower itself “may conceal some feminine principle to tempt the boy away from his desired objective: an inexperienced male orifice” (Nevelndine 1996, 666). However, Nevelndine somewhat hedges his bet here, confessing that “the ‘mutilated bower’ would typically imply a female organ, but also asking if it is not perhaps a rather male opening, that ‘green and mossy bower’ instead of ‘one of those green stones?’” (666).

Freud’s lecture on the symbolism of dreams does not help us resolve the rather disparate readings of the same poem. For in it, he notes that the “genitals, the male sexual organ, finds symbolic substitutes...in things that resemble it in shape, things...that are long and upstanding, such as sticks, umbrellas, posts, trees, and so on” (190), and thus would seem to support Nevelndine’s comments about the hazel trees and the nutting crook. But on the other hand, Freud’s comments about the dream symbols of female sexuality, as we have seen, also support Bloom, Homan, and Arac, who identify the landscape of the poem, with its “fairy water breaks,” its “beds of matted fern, and tangled thickets,” as feminine. What I find most interesting, however, is not whether this particular bower in “Nutting” is male or female, or maybe, like Miss Sally Brass, even both, but how these modern critics, regardless of their specific reading of certain texts, draw upon those sexual symbols and images spoken of by Freud long ago. In doing so, they seem to confirm Einstein’s remark in a letter to Freud that “even people who regard themselves as ‘unbelievers with regard to your teachings actually think and speak in your concepts the moment they let themselves go” (Fölsing 1997, 651).

### III

Richard Carpenter’s “The Mirror and the Sword: Imagery in *Far from the Madding Crowd*” finds ample evidence of a connection between sexual violence and passion, even while noting that the Victorian age required its artists to approach these questions indirectly through metaphor and imagery. But these techniques, he argues, enable Hardy--and here again Freud and Sade make an appearance—to show that when Bathsheba blushes when she sees Gabriel Oak accidentally nick an ewe in the groin while shearing her, it indicates that “Bathsheba longs to be dominated and violated by an aggressive male” (Carpenter 1964, 341). He suggests there are two scenes in the novel that “underline the idea that Bathsheba courts aggression, a kind of symbolic rape” (Carpenter 1964, 342),

the first when Troy catches his spur in her dress and the second during his sword prowess demonstration. In fact, this latter scene contains perhaps the most explicit use of sexual symbolism of the works we have examined. Even the title of the twenty-eighth chapter where this scene takes place, "The Hollow Amid the Ferns," looks back to Milton, "Nutting," and *Ruth*. As Bathsheba approaches the site of their rendezvous, Hardy's language suggests an orgasmic intensity of emotions, akin to Lacan's description of female *jouissance*.<sup>4</sup> "She was," Hardy writes, "now literally trembling and panting at this her temerity in such an errant undertaking; her breath came and went quickly, and her eyes shone with infrequent light" (Hardy 1957, 161). "Yet go she must," Hardy continues, and soon "she reached a verge of a pit in the middle of the ferns" (Hardy 1957, 161). Hardy extends the description of this hollow, telling us that "the pit was a saucer-shaped concave, naturally formed" and that "the middle within the bed of verdure was floored with a thick flossy carpet of moss and grass intermingled, so yielding that the foot was half-buried within it" (Hardy 1957, 161).

At the end of his sword-fighting demonstration, when Troy assures her both that she had been close to death many times, but also perfectly safe in his skilled hands, "Bathsheba, overcome by a hundred tumultuous feelings resulting from the scene, abstractedly sat down on a tuft of heather" (Hardy 1957, 164). Before Troy leaves her, he kisses her, and after he leaves, the intensity and confusion of Bathsheba's emotions are recorded by her body, torn between sexual excitement on one hand and guilt for her feelings on the other. We hear how that "minute's interval had brought the blood beating into her face, setting her stinging as if aflame to the very hollows of her feet," and also led to "a stroke resulting...in a liquid stream, here a stream of tears. She felt like one who had sinned a great sin" (Hardy 1957, 165). We recall that Carpenter argues how "Bathsheba longs to be dominated and violated by an aggressive male" (Carpenter 1964, 341), and this scene would seem to support his reading.

Linda Shires, however, argues that things are not quite this simple, for Hardy, she writes, "does not believe in a dialectical theory of power where one sex oppresses the other, but rather in power as shifting, as attained and lost in multiple negotiations which cross gender, age, and class" (Shires 1991, 164).<sup>5</sup> Thus even while she speaks of "the male use of phallic weapons" [Troy's sword, Gabriel's shearing scissors] (Shires 1991, 169), she argues that "the connection of power with the male sex and victimization with the female sex oversimplifies the struggle of gender and power" (Shires 1991, 171). Shires maintains that what we find instead in *Far from the Madding Crowd* is the destabilization "of power and gender" until "sexual difference is re-established through the fixture of closure"

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<sup>4</sup> See Lacan's essay, "God and the Jouissance of The Woman. A Love Letter," (*Feminine Sexuality*, 137-148). In it, he writes "there is a *jouissance* proper to her and of which she knows nothing, except that she experiences it—that much she does know" (145).

<sup>5</sup> Shires identifies this same symbol of the female body when, in speaking of the scene in chapter forty-four when a distraught Bathsheba runs away from Troy and the coffin of Fanny Bawn, she notes that "her disappearance into this wet hollow is fully emblematic of a return to the womb" (Shires 1991, 162).

(Shires 1991,164), namely Gabriel and Bathsheba's marriage at the end of the novel. In her examination of the male and female gaze in this novel, as well as Bathsheba's relationship with the three men in her life (Gabriel, Boldwood, and Troy), Shires suggests that "a passive and an active sexuality, which are themselves complicated by a sadism becoming masochism and a masochism becoming sexual repression, as well as a scopophilia which can turn into exhibitionism, vie with each other across the slash of sexual difference (m/f) until they are themselves tied up in the knot / closure of marriage" (Shires 1991, 171).

#### IV

In many respects, Dickens's novel is quite different from the other texts we have considered, but its sexual dynamics and choreography are strikingly similar. That mixture of sadism and masochism that entangles the female male relationship in those knots of complexity and ambiguity that Linda Shires finds in Hardy abounds in Dickens's novel, most vividly in the figure of Quilp, but also in the relationship between Swiveller and Sally Brass. Kucich regards Quilp as a demonic and violent figure who, like Punch and Freud's violent neighbor, "abandon[s] values like love, sympathy, and friendship, which are grounded in desires to preserve and nurture the self and others" (Kucich 1980, 66). "I hate your virtuous people," Quilp says at one point, "ah! I hate 'em every one" (Dickens 2000, 366). But women are attracted to him, not in spite of his looks and behavior, but because of them. As Quilp's wife tells her friends, "Quilp has a way with him, when he likes," she says, "that the best-looking woman here couldn't refuse him if I was dead, and she was free, and he chose to make love to her" (Dickens 2000, 38). She also tells them that her mother had told her of Quilp's sexual powers even before their marriage: "Mother knows...what I say is quite correct," she admits, "for she often said so before we were married" (Dickens 2000, 38).

The Quilp marriage is in fact one of the strongest depictions of the dynamics of sado-masochism in Dickens. Norman Page, the editor of the Penguin edition of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, suggests that the scene where Quilp keeps his wife "awake all night long while he smokes pipe after pipe may well be one of the most sexually charged scenes in mainstream Victorian fiction" (Dickens 2000, xxii). In writing of the paintings of Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, Adam Kirsch has recently argued that these two artists shared "a Freudian intuition," namely, that "in Vienna in the early twentieth century, it was clear that setting sexuality free meant loosening a powerful and potentially destructive force, one that can domineer and seduce, as in Klimt, or entrap and torment, as in Schiele" (Kirsch 2018, 56). Dickens, I would argue, arrived at these truths much earlier.

I want to return now to Swiveller and Sally Brass, and the scene alluded to earlier. Before this scene takes place, Swiveller has allowed Quilp to get him drunk and then told him of the plans that he and Trent had regarding Little Nell. He is ashamed of having been manipulated, and when "a penitent Richard" confesses to Trent that Quilp had "screwed it [their plans] out of me" (Dickens

2000, 180), both Trent and Swiveller realize “Swiveller’s folly,” how he was “a mere tool” in Quilp’s hands (Dickens 2000, 183). Thus, when Swiveller arrives at Brass’s office, a position Quilp creates for him, he already feels unmanned, having been powerless to resist Quilp’s scheming. So how does this feeling of male inadequacy explain his behavior with Sally Brass? From the first time he sees her, his reaction to Sally Brass is peculiar, strange. “In a state of utter stupefaction,” he looks at “the beauteous Sally, as if she had been some curious animal whose like had never lived” (Dickens 2000, 257). He continues to look at her, and “in a state of stupid perplexity, wondering how he got into the company of that strange monster, and whether he would ever wake,” but then strange things begin to happen: after having looked at her for so long “that he could see nothing,” he takes his eyes off of her, and when he finally “raises his eyes...there was the intolerable brown head-dress—there was the green gown—there was, in short, Miss Sally Brass arrayed in all of her charms, and more tremendous than ever” (Dickens 2000, 257). From a “curious animal” and “strange monster” to a “tremendous” woman, “arrayed in all of her charms” (Dickens 2000, 257), thus we witness the metamorphosis of Miss Sally in Swiveller’s eyes and imagination.

But this admiration quickly turns to imagined violence and aggression, with many of the same turns we saw in “Nutting,” when a “sudden happiness beyond all hope” soon turns into violence and ravage. For Swiveller “by degrees began to feel strange influences creeping over him—horrible desires to knock her head-dress off and try how she looked without it” (Dickens 2000, 258). As we have seen, Swiveller finds a “large, black, shining ruler” on a desk”, and he soon gives it “a flourish after the tomahawk manner...and in some of those flourishes it went close to Miss Sally’s head; the ragged edges of the head-dress shuttered with the wind it raised; advance it but an inch, and that great brown knot was on the ground” (Dickens 2000, 258). Bathsheba is throughout intensely aware of Troy’s sword play, but Swiveller’s burst of violence and his wielding of a phallic ruler perhaps restores some of his missing manhood to Swiveller, but Miss Sally seems to ignore him, oblivious to his attempts to reassert his virility.

We are soon told, however, that Swiveller finds favor with Sally Brass, and also hear more about her. We are told that the “amiable virgin had passed her life in a kind of legal childhood,” for once her father discovered her talents in the law office, he impressed Sally into service, and consequently she “knew little of the world,” and was lacking “in those gentler and softer arts in which women usually excelled” (Dickens 2000, 274-275). The novel calls attention to her worldly inexperience, writing of how she “was in a state of lawful innocence, so to speak. The law had been her nurse, and, as bandy-legs or such physical deformities in children are held to be the consequence of bad nursing, so, if in a mind so beautiful any moral twist or bandiness could be found, Miss Sally Brass’s nurse was alone to blame” (275). She remains an “amiable virgin” in “a state of lawful innocence” until Swiveller, “in full freshness as something new and hitherto undreamed of” seduces her with his “song and merriment, conjuring with ink-stands and boxes of wafers” (Dickens 2000, 275). Unlike the violent seduction or ravishment we find in “Nutting,” this particular seduction is joyous,

even celebratory. He succeeds in getting through to her, breaking down the walls that the bad nurse of law had built up around her; and we hear that “a friendship sprung up between them” (Dickens 2000, 275). Given Sally’s masculine features, it seems at first that their relationship might be more like a bromance, for Swiveller “would sometimes reward her with a hearty slap on the back, and protest that she was a devilish good fellow, a jolly dog, and so forth, all of which compliments Miss Sally would receive in entire good part and with perfect satisfaction” (Dickens 2000, 275-76). But it is more than that.

The fact that Sally has been pulled out of her narrow world by the abundant energy and antics of Swiveller and has come to know a wider and richer world through his intervention seems like a win-win situation for both of them, but it is a situation complicated not only by the presence of the Marchioness in the basement and Sally’s treatment of her, but also by Sally’s brown head-dress. I want to consider only the latter source of complication.<sup>6</sup> As we saw earlier, the text calls our attention to this particular piece of Sally’s dress, and also stresses how during their first meeting it becomes the object not only of Swiveller’s attention but also of his fantasies of violence. We hear how he had “horrible desires to annihilate this Sally Brass, mysterious promptings to knock her head-dress off and try how she looked without it” (Dickens 2000, 258), swinging his “large, black, shining ruler” closer and closer to it, but without touching it. Miss Sally becomes in this scene the neighbor that Freud speaks of in *Civilization and its Discontents*, “someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him...to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possession, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him” (Freud 2010, 94-95).

Freud reminds us there that “men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved...they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness” (Freud 2010, 94) But Freud might have also written, “men are not gentle creatures who want *only* to be loved” (emphasis mine), for love does come into Swiveller’s life later in the novel. But what is most important and most surprising is the outburst of violence on his part, his desire to hurt the woman in front of him. Nothing has prepared us for this moment, or led us to suspect that Swiveller would be capable of such desires and feelings. But Dickens seems to suggest that each of us contains our own Quilp, just waiting to be released from containment.

Dickens’s close friend, Wilkie Collins, would create in *The Woman in White* a famous scene of the male gaze imaginatively undressing a woman as Marian Halcombe approaches Walter Hartright early in the novel, but this scene with Swiveller and Miss Sally is, as far as I know, the closest Dickens ever comes to depicting a man mentally disrobing a woman.<sup>7</sup> Sally’s head-dress is more in this novel than simply a head-dress. It is, as we have seen, that which defines Sally as Sally, the one aspect of her clothing that speaks to the essential identity of

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<sup>6</sup> In a cancelled manuscript, Dickens suggests that the Marchioness is the illegitimate offspring of Sally Brass and Quilp. I am working, however, with the text as he finally published it.

<sup>7</sup> See *The Woman in White*, pp.36-37.

the woman it covers; and thus when Swiveller has his horrible desire “to knock her head-dress off and try how she looked without it” (Dickens 2000, 258), he wants more than to simply knock her head-dress off; he wants to see her stripped, violently deprived of her self-created identity. In other words, he wants to use her sexually, to humiliate her, and cause her pain. But he works out his fantasies with masturbatory swings of his ruler and the urge finally goes away. Freud, as noted earlier, is not certain of how to read the hat as a sexual symbol, telling us that “the hat is an obscure symbol...perhaps, too, head-coverings in general—with a male significance as a rule, but also capable of a female one” (194). But the head-dress in this case is almost certainly a female one.

The scene I have in mind is the one in which Miss Sally and Swiveller watch a Punch show through a window. This moment suggests that the androgynous Sally has been feminized, made more pliant and gentler by Swiveller’s attentions, and it also testifies to an almost erotic bond between the two of them. When he discovers that a Punch show is being performed outside of Bevis Mark, where the Brass law offices are located, Swiveller, who prefers to do anything rather than work, persuades Sally to watch the show with him, and we hear that “he and Miss Sally rose as with one” (Dickens 2000, 281). The moment that follows is classic Dickens, totally unexpected and yet perfectly right; nothing else could say as much as it says, and only he could say it.

As Swiveller and Miss Sally watch the show from a window sill, hidden from the view of the others by a dirty window, we see a certain ritual being performed: “the glass being dim, Mr. Swiveller, agreeably to a friendly custom which he had established between them, hitched off the brown head-dress from Miss Sally’s head, and dusted it carefully therewith. By the time he had handed it back and its beautiful wearer had put it on again (which she did with perfect composure and indifference)” (Dickens 2000, 281), the Punch show has ended. We need to remember that this exchange takes place while the two of them are watching a Punch show, which consists of a sequence of short scenes, each depicting an interaction between two characters, in which one of them, sometimes Judy herself, is clobbered by Punch’s club, and sometimes these scenes of violence actually ended in death. These shows were one of Dickens’s favorite entertainments; and, as John Kucich has shown, Dickens draws upon the Punch show throughout the novel, but in an especially wonderful way here.

For what stands out here is the amazing tenderness of this moment, the ways in which Swiveller “hitched off the brown head-dress from Miss Sally’s head, and dusted it carefully therewith” (Dickens 2000, 281). In contrast to the violent scene being played outside of their window in the Punch show, this scene is incredibly quiet, subdued. The difficulty here, making any interpretation necessarily tentative, is the text’s refusal to let us into Miss Sally’s thoughts or impressions. As we have seen, the earlier meeting between them also involved Miss Sally’s head-dress, but in that case, he had violent fantasies about knocking it off of her head with his ruler and seeing what she looked like without it. This scene, on the other hand, represents some kind of love-making ritual; as opposed

to the first one, this is a gentle and comforting moment, but here, as in the earlier one, the nature of Sally's participation is problematically mapped out. In both scenes we hear of an apparently detached involvement on Miss Sally's part. It is difficult to believe, however, that she could have remained unaware of the thrusts and parries of his long ruler, since with "some of those flourishes it went close to Miss Sally's head; the ragged edges of the head-dress shuttered with the wind it raised; advance it but an inch, and that great brown knot was on the ground" (258).

It is more likely that in both cases she feigns indifference or obliviousness to these exchanges, her long career with in the law office making it possible for her to play it close to the chest, however moved or disturbed she might be. She is much better than Bathsheba in hiding what she feels or thinks. But she hides it so well even the text does not allow us to peek into it. What we do know, however, is that their relationship develops in good directions, for he finds favor in her eyes, no longer regarding her as a "strange monster," and her life expands, being brought by him into a world larger and more alive than that of the Brass law offices. And we also know that the head-dress dusting ritual is one that they practice on a regular scale, always with her consent, and thus one that must give her some degree of pleasure.

That relationship does not last, however, for Swiveller moves instead towards the girl in the basement and finally ends up not only renaming the Marchioness, Sophronia Sphinx, but marrying her and sending her to school. And if we first meet Sally Brass as an androgynous figure, she later will move back towards androgyny, showing once again the slipperiness of gender in Dickens's novels. While being interrogated regarding Quilp and his scheming, Sally Brass says very little, but her fawning brother soon shows up and confesses all, leading Sally to observe that "this is my brother, that I have worked and toiled for, and believed to have had something of the man in him" (Dickens 2000, 501). The narrator confirms Sally's opinion, telling us how Brass "in his deep debasement really seemed to change sexes with his sister, and to have made over to her any spark of manliness he might have possessed" (Dickens 2000, 501).

## V

I would like to conclude my inquiry at this point by returning to the original question I posed earlier: to what extent is it possible to accept, even provisionally, Freud's theory of the symbolism of dreams, in which he argues that we have inherited these dream symbols from an ancient past that remains inaccessible to us on a conscious level, but one that appears during our dreams, when our unconscious is most active? I have focused my attention on artists rather than dreamers, asking whether artists too have access to these sets of symbols, but, again, only on an unconscious level when they are involved in the midst of creativity, making art. Robert Buss's famous painting, "Dickens's Dream" (1875), captures the relationship between the artist and the dreamer, as we see a sleeping Dickens surrounded by figures of his imagination. And as we have seen,

artists such as Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and Elizabeth Gaskell all acknowledge that their art comes from places they can access only when creating their art.

If this possibility seems improbable, I must confess that I tended in that direction at the start of my inquiry, thinking that there must be other explanations. But this question kept nagging me, and this paper is the result of that nagging. If what I am arguing is not the case, then how do we explain the extraordinary similarity of dream symbolism that we find not only in Wordsworth, Dickens, and Hardy, but also in Gaskell, Milton, George Eliot, Emily Dickinson, and Edith Wharton? As we have seen, Freud's description of those landscapes that we find in the dream symbolism of female genitals is so similar to the landscapes we find in Milton, Wordsworth, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Thomas Hardy, that it is almost as if he had them in mind. But with the possible exception of Edith Wharton, none of the writers could possibly have known Freud or his writings.<sup>8</sup> And while it may be, as Arac has argued, that the bowered landscape that we find in "Nutting" has echoes of the landscape we find in Book Four of *Paradise Lost*, what do we do with Milton himself? Let me cite once again the passage from *Paradise Lost* that Arac has in mind, when Satan first views Eden, in Biblical terms the site of the origin of the world:

As with a rural mound the champaign head  
Of a steep wilderness, whose hairy sides  
With thicket overgrown, grotesque and wild,  
Access denied. (*Paradise Lost* 4: 134-137)

One can see why readers have read this passage as sexual, for even though it appears in an English epic poem first published in 1667, it could also be describing Gustave Courbet's *Origine du Monde* (1866), his own "origin of the world," a scandalous painting of a close-up view of the genitals and abdomen of a naked woman. Milton would have undoubtedly been disturbed by Courbet's painting, but this passage from *Paradise Lost* describes it with almost uncanny accuracy.<sup>9</sup>

Or what do we do with the ways in which the female poets we have looked at explore the symbolism of flowers, and especially the rose, to link flowers and female sexuality? Or again, the sexualized landscape of Gaskell's *Ruth*? The violence and sexual symbolism we have found in Wordsworth, Dickens, and Hardy, the phallic aggression and desire to ravish, violate, and cause pain, the interstices of masochism and sadism that we find these works cannot be accounted for by the fact that these particular works are written by male authors, for to do so diminishes far too many women writers, from Mary Shelley and Emily Brontë to Alice Munro, Joyce Carol Oates, and others. Thus, have these

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hardy lived late enough (1928) to have read some of Freud's writings, but there is no indication that he ever did so.

<sup>9</sup> When Courbet's *Origine du Monde* came up for sale in 1955, it was purchased by the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, and his wife, Sylvia Bataille. They installed it in their country home, but covered it with a slide so that they could control access to it. Lacan is, of course, probably the most famous interpreter of Freud in the twentieth century.

artists, so different from one another in many ways, all drawn from images they both know and do not know, accessing, like dreamers, dream symbols originating in an ancient and forgotten past? I realize that these are questions and not answers. But a further exploration of Freud's theory of memory might help clarify the questions themselves.

Freud, as Richard Terdiman writes, is "the artificer of memory," and, as such, he participates in the "anxiety about memory that came into focus in the nineteenth-century" (Terdiman 1993, 242), namely "modernity's 'memory crisis,'" brought about by questions involving the presence of the past. "Freud's understanding of memory," Terdiman writes, "can help us read the memory crisis," since "for psychoanalysis, memory is the heart of the matter" (Terdiman 1993, 241-242). Crucial to Terdiman's argument--and to mine--is Freud's claim in his essay, "The Unconscious," that "the processes of the system Ucs. are *timeless*, i.e. they are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time; they have no reference to time at all" (Freud 1963, 135).

Thus, as Terdiman notes, "what psychoanalysis means by memory...is unconscious memory *strictly defined*, the memory of the mysterious, timeless system *Ucs.* (Terdiman 1993, 271). For psychoanalysis, the fact that "the past is preserved and can be projected into the present completes the form of total memory conservation in the unconscious" (Terdiman 1993, 282). As Terdiman writes, "with Freud's Lamarckianism, the psyche's registration of the dynamic towards recuperation of the present seems to consummate itself. Now *everything* in human experience—not only the things I have repressed and no longer recall from my own past, but even things I never experienced from a past beyond myself—becomes the object of permanent memory inscription within my unconscious" (Terdiman 1993, 282, emphasis Terdiman's).

Like Darwin and Lyell, his fellow explorers of the presence of an ancient and forgotten past in the present, Freud's theory of the unconscious maintains that the past is never lost, forgotten, perhaps, but retrievable in various ways. In trying to understand why we find an abundance of sexual symbols in dreams, but their relative absence in other fields, Freud reached towards the philological theories of Hans Sperber, finding in his work evidence of the deep connection between the theory of language and sexuality. But Freud does not spend much time on this connection and departs from it fairly early in his lecture and turns his attention exclusively to dream symbolism. Freud's comments about the possible origin of the nature of sexual symbolism in dreams are reminiscent of the difficulty he faced in his case history of the Wolf-Man, in trying to determine whether the Wolf-man's memories of his childhood were true or were instead fantasies on his part. When Freud returned to this case in 1918, he presents a narrative voice whose authority paradoxically rests upon its willingness to disclaim authority, for he confesses that he will end this particular line of inquiry with a "non liquet," or "it is not clear" (Freud 1955, 60). Peter Brooks describes this move on Freud's part as "one of the most daring moments in Freud's thought, and one of his most heroic gestures as a writer" (Brooks, 1985, 277).

In some respects, our discussion of Freud's theory regarding the nature of dream symbolism in art must also end with a "non liquet," for it there is no demonstrable proof that dreamers and artists draw upon this ancient language of the night. What remains clear, though, I think, is the remarkable presence of similar sexual symbolism in a number of diverse texts from different periods of time. And, as I have said before, unless we are ready to maintain that all of the writers we have examined drew upon these symbols while aware of their sexual implications, we need to speculate about other possible origins. Let me end by sharing the passage from *Sherlock Holmes* that serves as the epigraph for this essay: "Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth" (Doyle 2003, 514).

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