Dream Touch

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Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* just squeezed into the end of the nineteenth century, appearing in November 1899. My topic in this article is concentrated before Freud's intervention, an intervention that has had an increasingly powerful effect since its first appearance. It seems from a variety of evidence that throughout the nineteenth century people had tended to be less inhibited in recounting their dream experiences than we are now in the aftermath of Freudian interpretation. At the start of the introductory note to the first edition, Freud construed dream as symptomatic, an expression of abnormal psychic activity and, by implication, associated with the clinic and with shame: 'For the dream proves on psychological investigation to be the first of a series of abnormal psychic formations, a series whose succeeding members — the hysterical phobias, the obsessions, the delusions — must, for practical reasons, claim the attention of the physician.'[1] People may have shared their dreams more readily before that threatening indication, although Freud emphasized that dream itself was not matter for the physician.

My material in this article is largely literary but dream sharing and dream interpretation occur as both popular and scientific preoccupations among the Victorians. Jonathan C. Glance, in 'Revelation, Nonsense or Dyspepsia: Victorian Dream Theories', lists a considerable number of texts ranging from the anonymous undated *Nocturnal Revels; or, Universal Interpreter of Dreams and Visions* to William Hammond's *Sleep and its Derangements* (1869).[2]

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[1] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), p. xxiii.

[2] Jonathan C. Glance, 'Revelation, Nonsense or Dyspepsia: Victorian Dream Theories', paper presented at the Northeast Victorian Studies Association conference, Brown University, Providence, RI, 29 April 2001 <http://faculty.mercer.edu/glance_jc/files/academic_work/victorian_dream_theories.htm> [accessed 12 August 2014].

Victorian people also shared a common experience now mercifully inhibited by antibiotics: that of delirium, with its extraordinarily material and persistent images as compared with the fleeting and often irrecoverable imagery of dream. Pip, in *Great Expectations*, falls into a dangerous fever:

> I confounded impossible existences with my own identity; that I was a brick in the house-wall, and yet entreating to be released from the giddy place where the builders had set me; that I was a steel beam of a vast engine, clashing and whirling over a gulf, and yet that I implored in my own person to have the engine stopped, and my part in it hammered off.[3]

Claustrophobia ('a brick in the house wall', 'a steel beam of a vast engine') hideously combines with vertiginous space. Materials and human identity are crushed viciously together: the body as a cramped brick beset on all sides. That solid realization of touch is peculiar to delirious dreaming. More usual is the half-remembered coherence of nightly dreaming irremediably altered by the confusion of waking.

Indigestion, rather than psychic dilemmas, was frequently accused as the source of bad dreams, though Scrooge was perhaps unusually sceptical when he responds to Marley's ghost: 'You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!'[4] The body's interior organs struggle to assimilate these alien fragments, which bump up against them instead of sliding harmoniously into all the forms of digested material. I emphasize this interiority at the start of my argument because when we talk about touch we tend to concentrate on the surface of the body: the hand of the one who touches, the skin of the one who is touched. But touch is also a visceral experience, received within the darkness of the body's interior. Such inner 'digestive' touch is, according to then common beliefs, often the unromantic source of dreaming: 'cheese dreams'. Less often mentioned is touch within all the body's other orifices: ears, mouth, nose, anus, vagina. In dream, or in the recollection of dreaming, such touch may be tabooed as dangerous.

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[3] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 422.

[4] Charles Dickens, 'A Christmas Carol', in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*, ed. by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 5–83 (p. 21).

It is sometimes argued that touch is comparatively rare in dreams because it signals stimuli from outside the dream: that is, it is instrumentally important for the dreamer to be capable of distinguishing a real touch as a signal to wake. So touch within dream can rapidly become threatening. The Irish, later Japanese, writer Lafcadio Hearn, who was among those who developed the 'instrumental' argument, asserts in his essay 'Nightmare-Touch' (1900) that

> the common fear of ghosts is *the fear of being touched by ghosts*, — or, in other words, that the imagined Supernatural is dreaded mainly because of its imagined power to touch. Only to *touch*, remember! — not to wound or kill.
>
> But this dread of the touch would itself be the result of experience, — stored up in the individual by inheritance, like the child's fear of darkness.[5]

He ends the essay with a darkly evolutionist explanation:

> It may be doubted whether the phantasms of any particular nightmare have a history older than the brain in which they move. But the shock of the touch would seem to indicate *some point of dream-contact with the total race-experience of a shadowy seizure*. It may be that profundities of Self, — abysses never reached by any ray from the life of sun, — are strangely stirred in slumber, and that out of their blackness immediately responds a shuddering of memory, measureless even by millions of years. (p. 246, emphasis in original)

Hearn, who worked extensively on Japanese ghost legends, here argues for a universal and primordial force to dream touch. The value that the Victorians placed on the immensely expanded time frame for understanding offered by evolutionary ideas also led into a fascination with the 'primitive'. In this passage, Hearn anticipates, or shares, Freud's emphasis on a geological metaphor for consciousness in which the unconscious is 'beneath' consciousness as well as issuing from sources remote in time. Such emphasis draws deep on evolutionary theory.

That sense of touch as a threshold between the living and the dead, the present and the past, as much as between waking and sleeping, informs Tennyson's increasingly passionate invocation of the tactile in *In*

[5] Lafcadio Hearn, 'Nightmare-Touch', in *Shadowings* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1900), pp. 235–46 (p. 237, emphasis in original).

Memoriam (1850). The loss of the beloved, 'the happy dead', is intensified by the blunt realization that the living are forgotten by the dead: 'But he forgets the days before | God shut the doorways of his head.' So, yearning, the poet prays:

> And in the long harmonious years
> (If Death so taste Lethean springs),
> May some dim touch of earthly things
> Surprise thee ranging with thy peers.
>
> If such a dreamy touch should fall,
> O turn thee round, resolve the doubt;
> My guardian angel will speak out
> In that high place, and tell thee all.[6]

Touch in these two stanzas shifts from the sense of 'small amount' ('dim touch of earthly things') to the full measure of 'dreamy touch', and to the cry 'O turn thee round, resolve the doubt'. 'Who touched me?' asked Christ, and his disciples seeing him in the midst of the crowd demurred at the question. But the woman had touched Him in her need and He had felt that peculiar penetration of the needy touch.[7] So may the lover beyond the bounds of death. Here the poet longs for the beloved feelingly to remember him. Touch becomes both dream and sensory immediacy. Dreams, of their nature, cannot be touched. They happen only inside the head. Here, that perception becomes linked to the impossibility of touching the lost beloved, whose body is no longer there after death. The 'clay' of the body crumbles away.

Later, in section XCIII of *In Memoriam*, the first line acknowledges seemingly absolute separation — 'I shall not see thee' — but then moves urgently to transcend separation 'Spirit to Spirit, Ghost to Ghost'. And finally urges touch, which breaks the bounds of surface even as it is itself annihilated:

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[6] 'In Memoriam A. H. H.', in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Longman, 1969), pp. 853–988 (XLIV, pp. 901–02).

[7] In the Christian Gospels, touching and not touching are elsewhere charged with significance: the unrisen Christ appearing in the garden to his women followers tells them, 'Do not touch me' (*Noli me tangere*) while he later encourages Doubting Thomas to probe the wound in his side (John 20. 17; John 20. 24–29).

I shall not see thee. Dare I say
    No spirit ever brake the band
    That stays him from the native land
Where first he walked when clasped in clay?

No visual shade of some one lost,
    But he, the Spirit himself, may come
    Where all the nerve of sense is numb;
Spirit to Spirit, Ghost to Ghost.

O, therefore from thy sightless range
    With gods in unconjectured bliss,
    O, from the distance of the abyss
Of ten-fold complicated change

Descend, and touch, and enter; hear
    The wish too strong for words to name;
    That in this blindness of the frame
My Ghost may feel that thine is near. (p. 944)

Sight is lost. Language will not suffice. The 'nerve of sense is numb': touch becomes its own contrary (numbness) but in this dream of absolute intimacy and completeness the lover is besought to 'descend, and touch, and enter': ghosts commingling as bodies may not. Touch in this dream is extreme and comforting at once.

The longing to be touched by the lost beloved occurs in dream most often as uncompleted gesture. One of the most poignant examples, and one important to Tennyson, is Milton's Sonnet 23 written in his blindness, which opens:

Methought I saw my late espousèd saint
    Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave,
    Whom Jove's great son to her glad husband gave,
Rescued from death by force, though pale and faint.

And closes:

But O as to embrace me she inclined,
I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night.[8]

[8] John Milton, 'Sonnet XXIII', in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by Gordon Campbell (New York: Knopf, 1992), pp. 108–09.

The pause at the end of the line 'she inclined' enacts the interrupted arc of the embrace.

Touch in the hypnagogic and hypnopompic states — at the brink of falling asleep and of waking up — is a threshold where confusion between waking and sleeping may occur. In an early diary entry Lewis Carroll wonders whether this is also a description of madness:

> Question: when we are dreaming and, as often happens, have a dim consciousness of the fact and try to wake, do we not say and do things which in waking life would be insane? May we not then sometimes define insanity as an inability to distinguish which is the waking and which the sleeping life?[9]

His next sentence takes thought in a different direction: the autonomy of the dream: 'We often dream without the least suspicion of unreality: "sleep hath its own world," and it is often as lifelike as the other.' That sentence is, I think, closer to the experience of the Alice books, whose dreamworld is entirely lifelike and corporeal: 'we're all mad here.' So, Alice falls down the rabbit hole at the start in an impossibly leisurely way, with absurd alternative explanations: 'Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her, and to wonder what was going to happen next.'[10] Wells, however deep, do not usually affect the speed of falling. But nevertheless she ends the fall with an onomatopoeic bodily impact: 'suddenly, thump! thump! down she came upon a heap of sticks and dry leaves' (p. 11). The textures of sticks and leaves assure the reader of the actuality of her impact. Alice is there in her body ('thump! thump!') not as a dream figment. Indeed, her ability to 'wonder what was going to happen next' is also not typical of the immersive moment-by-moment experience of dream.

Alice is both the dreamer and the dreamt. She and we are entering that other form of dream that is reading, in which the reader-dreamer reaches for the material worlds described, always yearning as well as engrossed. The reach and the falling short of the imagination as, reading, we seek to inhabit (or seek to evade) the worlds evoked makes for a peculiar

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[9] *Lewis Carroll's Diaries: The Private Journals of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson*, ed. by Edward Wakeling, 10 vols (Luton: Lewis Carroll Society, 1993–2007), II: *January to December 1856* (1994), p. 38 (9 February 1856).

[10] Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, ed. by Hugh Haughton (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 10.

form of dream experience. I shall return to that with my last example, Thomas Hardy's novella 'The Withered Arm' (1888).

That transgression of the bounds between dream distortion of sense material and forthright actuality produces the uncanny, in which the familiar harbours repressed materials. But rarely does this overwhelm the reader with the full horror evoked in *Wuthering Heights* (1847): uncanny because of its very material actuality, the slide from dream to performance. Lockwood, obliged to stay overnight at Wuthering Heights, is lodged in an old-fashioned bedroom which contains an old diary belonging to Catherine Linton. He dreams first a horrible dream about judging and being judged which he believes has been generated by the scratching of a branch against the window (touch and hearing combine). Then believing himself to be awake, he remembers where he is:

> This time, I remembered I was lying in the oak closet, and I heard distinctly the gusty wind, and the driving of the snow; I heard, also, the fir-bough repeat its teasing sound, and ascribed it to the right cause; but it annoyed me so much, that I resolved to silence it, if possible; and, I thought, I rose and endeavoured to unhasp the casement. The hook was soldered into the staple, a circumstance observed by me when awake, but forgotten.
>
> 'I must stop it, nevertheless!' I muttered, knocking my knuckles through the glass, and stretching an arm out to seize the importunate branch: instead of which, my fingers closed on the fingers of a little, ice-cold hand!
>
> The intense horror of nightmare came over me: I tried to draw back my arm, but the hand clung to it, and a most melancholy voice sobbed,
>
> 'Let me in — let me in!'
>
> 'Who are you?' I asked, struggling, meanwhile, to disengage myself.
>
> 'Catherine Linton,' it replied, shiveringly (why did I think of *Linton*? I had read *Earnshaw* twenty times for Linton), 'I'm come home, I'd lost my way on the moor!'
>
> As it spoke, I discerned, obscurely, a child's face looking through the window — terror made me cruel; and, finding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes: still it wailed, 'Let me in!' and maintained its tenacious gripe, almost maddening me with fear.

> 'How can I!' I said at length. 'Let *me* go, if you want me to let you in!'
>
> The fingers relaxed, I snatched mine through the hole, hurriedly piled the books up in a pyramid against it, and stopped my ears to exclude the lamentable prayer.[11]

The grip of the child's hand instead of a branch, then the breaking of the established bounds between sleep and wake in the physical pulling and rubbing 'till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes', the helpless gripe and false negotiations between the two locked hand to arm, hideously confuse the states of being asleep and awake, so that there is no escape from either actuality or nightmare.

The whole is made the more extreme by the prosaic personality of Lockwood who in the preamble explains his experience thus: 'Alas, for the effects of bad tea and bad temper! What else could it be that made me pass such a terrible night?' (p. 64). Touch becomes invasive grip and crosses the needed boundary between sleep and wake. Dyspepsia won't quite suffice as explanation here.

Dyspepsia and appetite together haunt Victorian lives, particularly perhaps as those lives are realized in literature. In Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' (1862) Laura succumbs to the lure of the goblins' fruits. The poem opens with apparently innocent profusion of

> Apples and quinces,
> Lemons and oranges,
> Plump unpecked cherries,
> Melons and raspberries,
> Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,
> Swart-headed mulberries,
> Wild free-born cranberries,
> Crab-apples, dewberries,
> Pine-apples, blackberries,
> Apricots, strawberries.[12]

Succulence and sight combine in the reader's imagination but everything described is intact, that is, in a fundamental sense of 'intact', untouched: the surface bloom is unsmudged, the cherries are unpecked. The

[11] Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. by David Daiches (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 66–67.

[12] Christina Rossetti, 'Goblin Market', in *Goblin Market, The Prince's Progress and Other Poems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), pp. 1–20 (p. 1).

haptic and the tactile resolve without distress while Laura simply looks. Touch remains innocent when it is divorced from appetite and takes only the estranged form of sight, since the haptic is poised between the seen and felt. But when Laura succumbs and exchanges 'a golden curl' for juices, a dizzying and obsessional fugue begins in which night and day can no longer be distinguished, or pain and pleasure, or touch and taste. The lip and the tongue, thresholds of inner tactile experience, are the medium of experience here and infantile sucking becomes confused with sexuality:

> She dropped a tear more rare than pearl,
> Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red:
> Sweeter than honey from the rock,
> Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,
> Clearer than water flowed that juice;
> She never tasted such before,
> How should it cloy with length of use?
> She sucked and sucked and sucked the more
> Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;
> She sucked until her lips were sore;
> Then flung the emptied rinds away
> But gathered up one kernel-stone,
> And knew not was it night or day
> As she turned home alone. (pp. 5–6)

The greedy lascivious description collapses the boundaries between senses, particularly touch and taste, and the primal sucking on sore lips suggests an overwhelming anxiety about the move from surface to interior. Indigestion is no joke here. The disarray of appetite touches on sex and poverty and overeating in a dreamlike whirl. Touching must stay on the surface to be tolerable, not enter the body's dark.

The heady and dangerous delights of 'Goblin Market' are at the far end of a spectrum of sensuality from geometrical figures, yet, as Mark Blacklock has generously reminded me, Edwin Abbott Abbott's *Flatland* (published first in 1884 under the pseudonym 'A. Square') has some curious inventions concerning touch and dream. In the two-dimensional and rigidly hierarchical world of Flatland, introductions between the geometrical persons is effected by mutual 'feeling' of angles: 'Let me ask you to feel Mr. So-and-so'; although it is assumed, of course, that the 'feeling' is

to be reciprocal.[13] The lower orders and women work by 'feeling' and — this being an ingenious satire on British social organization — the language of feeling is confined to nursery years. In one-dimensional Lineland, which he visits in a dream within the dream, touching is entirely forbidden. Mr A. Square takes for granted a two-dimensional world and in such a world things have no volume and so no interiors. As readers we must live alongside this entirely surface world if we are to understand the narrator's experience.

The narrator is much discomfited by the visionary dream apparition of a Sphere who attempts to teach him the third dimension. The Sphere touches him on what he calls his 'inside' but the Sphere knows as his 'side': 'An eye in my inside! An eye in my stomach! Your Lordship jests':

> 'I tell you that I come from Space, or, since you will not understand what Space means, from the Land of Three Dimensions whence I but lately looked down upon your Plane which you call Space forsooth. From that position of advantage I discerned all that you speak of as solid (by which you mean 'enclosed on four sides'), your houses, your churches, your very chests and safes, yes even your insides and stomachs, all lying open and exposed to my view.' (p. 56)

Human perception, and the world we live in, is blessed with interiority. The third dimension makes the hidden possible. This is the revelation that *Flatland* offers. The dark interior of things is the gift of the spherical. Yet it is also a place of dread. To be touched within is an intimacy the Sphere refuses with hauteur:

> 'Let me beg thee to vouchsafe thy servant a sight of thy interior.'
> Sphere: 'My what?'
> 'Thine interior; thy stomach, thy intestines.'
> Sphere: 'Whence this ill-timed impertinent request?' (p. 70)

There may be here a satirical innuendo about those in authority and their reluctance to reveal the inner workings of power. *Flatland* uses dream experience to mock current social orders but also to illuminate our endowment as inhabitants of a three-dimensional world. Touching and not

[13] A. Square [Edwin Abbott Abbott], *Flatland: A Romance in Many Dimensions* (London: Seeley, 1884), p. 18.

touching here become social arbiters and also guide the reader to understand our own sensory conditions afresh.

Touch can damage as well as delight. Thomas Hardy hated to be touched and yet was extraordinarily responsive to the tactile. (His maid had to throw his coat over his shoulders rather than help him on with it.) Perhaps he hated to be touched exactly because he was so responsive. 'The Withered Arm' compresses the malign power of touch together with dream-lore and superstition so that all the goodwill of the characters founders in calamity. Touch is the mainspring of the plot, culminating in a scene so shocking that I leave it to you to read. To tell it in summary would dissipate its power. The story opens and closes with milkmaids in a dairy drawing down the milk through the udders of the motionless cows. Touch here seems to promise a workaday or pastoral tale to come. One dairymaid sits alone. The premise of the plot is that this young woman is the former lover of the employer who is bringing home his new bride that day. A young boy runs alongside their homecoming gig, observing the new bride. He is the son of the lone milkmaid, Rhoda Brook: so far, so prosaic, though with a hint of too close observation. But the story takes a sudden lurch into dream or vision:

> Rhoda Brook dreamed — since her assertion that she really saw, before falling asleep, was not to be believed — that the young wife, in the pale silk dress and white bonnet, but with features shockingly distorted, and wrinkled as by age, was sitting upon her chest as she lay.[14]

Was this a dream? Or the real visitation of an incubus? In her dream Rhoda violently pushes away her assailant's arm with her hand. When she wakes she 'could feel her antagonist's arm with her grasp even now — the very flesh and bone of it, as it seemed' (p. 335). Once the women meet, this terror disperses as they feel genuine goodwill towards each other. Yet in the course of their friendly conversation the young wife remarks that she has a little ailment and uncovers her arm, where Rhoda to her horror sees 'upon the pink round surface of the arm [...] faint marks of an unhealthy colour, as if produced by a rough grasp' (p. 337). Over the course of months and years the arm gradually withers, the marks of the four fingers become more pronounced, taking away the young wife's bloom and her husband's affection. Together the women consult

[14] Thomas Hardy, 'The Withered Arm', in *The Withered Arm and Other Stories*, ed. by Kristin Brady (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 329–57 (p. 335).

the sorcerer 'Conjuror Trendle' with ill consequences for them both. What makes the story much more troubling than even this suggests is that the two women bear each other no ill will and each struggles to find a way out of her dilemma.

With appalling Hardyean economy, at the story's conclusion, several years later, all four characters, milkmaid, wife, boy, and farmer, are brought together in the climactic scene where the wife must touch the body of a just-hanged man in order to be rid of the curse to her arm. You may guess who the just-hanged young man is, and who the observers of his execution are. Read the whole. This story is a nightmare. As we read we enter a delusional state in which our bodies enact the dreads provoked. Hardy's tale grips the reader by its close observation and sympathy and it destabilizes our understanding with its matter-of-fact combining of magic event and human horror. It is an example of dream touch performed in the reader's act of reading. We recoil; we cannot escape; we experience the piteous events, the injustice, and must touch the warm body of the recently dead. Hardy, so wary of touching, swarms our imaginations with materials that open up our capacities as dreamers, as readers.

Like Lafcadio Hearn, writing in the same period while drawing on different folk cultures Irish and Japanese, Hardy was fascinated by the uncanny and by the capacity of the human psyche in enforcing seemingly magical events. Both inclined to an evolutionary understanding of the relations between dreaming and touching: the ancient practical dangers of being touched while sleeping merge into a folk memory of touch as a perilous sense in the dream state. What Hearn understood as 'the fear of being touched by ghosts' in Hardy manifests as the dread of possessing unwilled powers as well as being possessed by unwilled powers. What Hearn calls 'a shuddering of memory, measureless even by millions of years' Hardy enacts in the young bodies of his characters and in the timeless bodies of his readers.

Touch in dream endangers as well as alerts to danger. The incomplete gesture is safest. Touch in dream narrative can compellingly close up the space between fiction and actuality. Touch recalls our enclosed condition before birth. It reminds the Victorians (and ourselves) that touch is a matter not only of the surface of the body but of its dark interior.