6 The Interpretation of Dreams

In his writings on astrology Cardano for the most part followed the classical authorities. As an interpreter of dreams, however, he is of remarkable originality. Antiquity left us no substantial theoretical work on this art which claims to be scientific and which could, therefore, have served Cardano as a model. It is unlikely that such a work existed. Cardano tried to fill this gap with his Synesiorum Somniorum omnis generis insomnia explicantes, libri IV. According to a note in De Libris propriis, he wrote the book around 1545, but later revised and enlarged it.\footnote{M. Fierz, Girolamo Cardano © Birkhäuser Boston 1983} It was published in Basel in 1562 and translated into German the following year.\footnote{M. Fierz, Girolamo Cardano © Birkhäuser Boston 1983}

The point of departure for Cardano's theoretical considerations is the book by Synesius of Cyrene.\footnote{M. Fierz, Girolamo Cardano © Birkhäuser Boston 1983} He lived around 400 A.D., he was a neo-Platonist and pupil of Hypatia at Alexandria. Later on in life, he converted to Christianity and was ordained as bishop. Synesius seems to have been an amiable and judicious man who was free of all worldly ambition. He therefore found his episcopal office rather burdensome.

His Book on Dreams is a short treatise—he claims to have written it in a single night. In it he defends the
merits of dream interpretation and offers a philosophical explanation for his views. Central to his theory is the idea that the universe is a unified and animated entity. Yet this unity is not a simple oneness; it is composed of many parts. Consequently, as in all relationships, discord exists alongside harmony. The universal interrelations of phenomena provide the basis for the art of divination. This art opens the path to God and makes possible the ascension of the soul. In the pursuit of this goal divination by dreams is particularly useful. All that is required to practice it is to go to sleep after having washed one's hands and said one's prayers. Every person can dream, whether rich or poor, master or slave. The dream is a democratic and philanthropic phenomenon.

There are sublime dreams in which we experience a union with God; these need no interpretation. But most dreams are obscure and have to be methodically interpreted. How can one master the art of interpretation? First, one must sharpen one's powers of perception. Philosophy is quite useful for this because it frees one from the interference of emotions. There is no general method of teaching the interpretation of dreams. It is an excellent idea to write down one's dreams—to keep, so to speak, a "night-diary." This is also a good exercise in the proper use of language.

These are the basic general considerations with which Cardano starts. In analogy to our calling modern dream analysts either "Freudians" or "Jungians," we would call Cardano a "Synesian," as expressed by the title of his book. It is dedicated to Carlo Borromeo, Cardinal-Archbishop of Milan, whose family had greatly benefited from Cardano's superior abilities as a physician, and who had become his patron. Borromeo, who was eventually canonized, was one of the cardinals who defended Cardano.