Book Review


In The Unconscious and its Narratives, Zvi Giora converses with Freud, not the “Freudian” Freud with whom we are familiar through the theoretical work of Jones and Rapaport and not the “post-modern” Freud whom we encounter through Lacan and Derrida, but Freud as he is manifest in his own self-interpreted career. Giora concretely reveals Freud’s hesitations and ambivalences within three domains: dreaming, therapy, and literature. And, in a series of essays, he presents his own perspective. Dreaming (the first essay) is his primary focus, although his conception of therapy (the second essay) and literature (the third essay) cannot be understood independently of his discussion of dreaming. In this respect, Giora honours Freud, who also gave dreaming theoretical primacy.

But Giora is as critical of Freud as he is appreciative. He begins his volume by challenging the evidence that dreams are narratives whose interpretation reveals the primary process form and the autobiographical content of unconscious thought. He repeatedly uses Freud’s qualifications of purportedly “basic” psychoanalytic tenets to develop this challenge. For example:

- He reviews studies of dream phenomenology to argue that dreaming is not a privileged domain within which to examine primary process thought. He reinforces this argument by referring to Freud’s proposal that some dream thoughts—and even some entire dreams—are not transformed into sensory images. Thus, Giora uses Freud’s qualification of a “basic” principle of dream formation to bolster his own thesis that dreaming does not uniformly manifest the sensory qualities, bizarreness, and affective-motivational tone of primary process thought.

- He reviews Freud’s study of the Wolf Man to argue that attempts to identify early childhood memories (e.g., of the primal scene) through dream interpretation provide unstable constructions, rather than secure reconstructions. With careful attention to original texts, Giora presents Freud’s own equivocations about the determinacy of free associations and about the possibility of validly reconstructing the Wolf Man’s childhood trauma. He then uses these equivocations to reinforce his own concerns about the validity of dream interpretation.

The preceding are just two examples of an analytic strategy that Giora uses with varying effectiveness throughout his book. In each instance, he presents his conversation with Freud in a manner that retains the complexity of Freud’s perspective—which I consider an uncommon accomplishment. However, his use of Freud’s hesitations to deconstruct Freud
are not uniformly convincing. Sometimes (e.g., in his suggestion that free associations are
often undetermined by the dream) he seems to draw on slender threads, but at other times
(e.g., in his discussion of remembered, rather than fantasized, trauma in the aetiology of
the neuroses) these threads combine to reflect deep hesitations in Freud that reverberate in
Giora’s proposed alternatives.

Giora’s commentary on dreams is not solely driven by his conversation with Freud. His
critique—and proposed alternatives—are also grounded in experimental studies of dream-
ing. He selects and presents this evidence to reinvigorate an hypothesis with a lineage that
can be traced from Aristotle to Winson: dreaming is the continuation of waking thought
but under the conditions peculiar to sleep. Giora’s review of the related research links
(a) Freud’s rejection of the distinction between dreams and thoughts during sleep,
(b) Foulkes’s studies of sleep onset, REM, and NREM dreaming, and (c) Rechtshaffen’s
characterization of the single-mindedness of dreams. In an integration of this work, he
proposes that, when the effort of self-reflectiveness is diminished (either during sleep or
wakefulness), the “microgenesis” of thoughts is stopped at an interim stage, producing the
relatively bizarre and affectively toned thought that is found in the “apex REM dream.” He
also reports previously unpublished research indicating that there are stable individual dif-
f erences in cognitive style that determine such self-reflectiveness and, hence, characteristic
levels of dream bizarreness.

Giora’s discussion of dreaming, microgenesis, and individual differences is embed-
ded in psychological and psychobiological research conducted during the three decades
preceding publication of his book (originally in 1991). He uses that research literature as
though it is a reservoir from which we have yet to draw the proper implications—and per-
haps he is right. However, some readers may not recognize Pribram’s hologram memory
model or understand its implications for the mnemonic processes that constitute dream-
ing (even though comparable connectionist models of dreaming are fairly familiar). Some
readers may not recognize Schilder’s conception of microgenesis or understand how it ex-
plains dream bizarreness (even though comparable cognitive studies of the phases of object
recognition are reasonably well known). Some readers may not recognize Witkin’s field
dependence-independence model (even though comparable conceptions of cognitive style
[e.g., thick/thin boundaries] are readily available). Whether we understand these incom-
mensurabilities as geographic, generational, or theoretical, the compellingness of Giora’s
attempt to develop the implications of this body of literature is powerfully affected by them.

Ironically, given the regularity with which Freud is the focus of criticism, psychoana-
lytic formulations provide Giora the means for transcending these commensurabilities. He
repeatedly uses psychoanalytic observations, and Freud’s own ambivalence, to introduce
arguments the full import of which are then explicated through others’ conceptually related
theory and research. An effective example, of considerable importance to Giora, is the in-
fluence of trauma on dream narratives, Giora points out that Freud, long after explicitly
“correcting” his view that parental seduction was involved in the aetiology of the neuroses,
continued to suggest that the neuroses had their origins in trauma, especially in “narcissistic
mortifications” of “a sexual and aggressive nature.” Giora’s reading of this discussion makes
Kohut and Bowlby seem less radically divergent from their Freudian roots than they have
been portrayed to be. Moreover, his reading makes Freud seem freshly pertinent for those
contemporary dream researchers who have given the relations between trauma and dream-
ing a rather high profile. Besides building a bridge to their work, perhaps Giora’s discussion