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Mixed Metaphors and Dreaming

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The colourful aspect of our usual speech resembles the language of our sleep and dreams. "A tempest in a teapot," "between a rock and a hard place," "flogging a dead horse," "whistling in the dark": these expressions, despite their familiarity, could easily be the familiars of that less than familiar world, the world of dreams. For dreams also speak in images. Indeed, metaphors and images are their mother-tongue, and it is only when we awaken from a dream that we attempt to shrink its pictures into words of a one-thousandth of their value.

For all their similarity to dreams, however, metaphorical expressions and colourful sayings differ from them in an important respect. The sayings with which we spice up ordinary conversation are answerable to the subject matter we suppose ourselves to be discussing. Dream images, on the other hand, refer to themselves and to the other images in the dream. While usual speech exploits the occasional picturesque phrase, the densely expressionistic language of our nights uses little else. Dreams do not exploit images; they *are* image.

"He cut off his nose to spite his face" but it did not get the "bee out of her bonnet." When we overload a sentence with metaphors, the sentence starts to dream. The extra metaphor dislocates the narrowing, referential properties of the first metaphor. As if in a house of mirrors, the mind wanders through a labyrinth composed of images which reflect nothing but each other. No wonder the mixed metaphor is the school-marm's nightmare.

Perhaps the way out of our labyrinthine confusion about dreams is to let go our hold of the Ariadne thread of grammatical rules by imagining that stance also to be a metaphor. When we stop judging the crooked by the straight, the poetic by the grammatical, the Platonic by the Aristotelian, we see that metaphor *as* metaphor must always be mixed. Only an additional metaphor can restrain the literalizing tendency of a solitary metaphor and keep it asking of itself: "Why just one referent and not one-hundred-and-one?"

But why is it that the language of dreams is so much richer than the language of daily parlance? Perhaps it is because our dreaming eyelids flicker at a speed one-thousand times faster than that of our tongues. Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. Dreams are a veritable tongue-twister of polyvalent images and mixed metaphors. By the time we have whispered one into the tape-recorder or written one into the notebook beside our bed, we are already miles behind it. Not even the raving lunatic can keep pace with the images which dream on the tip of his tongue.

Dreams seem a bewildering word-salad of psychotic confusion when they are played and re-played at too slow a speed. The turntable of our dream recall and interpretation turns at a speed many rotations per minute slower than the turntable of our actual dreaming. When we work with dreams, therefore, we must speed up our turntables. Only when the metaphors are spinning fast enough to overcome the gravity of any one referent will they orbit in their proper constellations and transmit to us the music of the spheres.

To solve the riddle of dreams we must hold our tongues just right, for the riddle's answer is that the dream is a tongue-twister. Each dream puts Peter in a particular pickle. *Glossolalia*. Speaking

in tongues. Each dream tangles our speech in an incredible mix of metaphors. But as we work over our dreams, repeating them again and again, we gradually come to master the enunciation of their metaphors and cure ourselves of the lisping and stuttering of ham-handed interpretations.