

# I Am Not Dying In A Nightmare

## Dreams and Psychosis in the Works of Thomas Ligotti

by D.W. Behrend

A dream, then, is a psychosis, with all the absurdities, delusions and illusions of a psychosis. A psychosis of short duration, no doubt, harmless, even entrusted with a useful function ... None the less it is a psychosis ...

- Sigmund Freud, "An Outline of Psychoanalysis"

... the horrific feeling of unreality is much more prevalent (to certain people) in what we call human "reality" than in human dreams, where everything is absolutely real.

- Thomas Ligotti, "Dream of a Mannikin"

Dreams are a form of madness. It is an ancient concept, and one that in many ways has stood the test of centuries. For all the work of Sigmund Freud and those who followed him, for all the advances made in the understanding of sleep and brain activity, dreams have retained their power to elate, to mystify, to disturb and to terrorize. They remain something chaotic and seemingly uncontrollable, divorced from our everyday existence. They provide us with a nightly glimpse into a world where the rules of "reality" do not apply. They make us madmen, if only for a few brief, unconscious moments, and they remain, in their way, bracingly "real."

Thomas Ligotti is one of the most celebrated writers of tales of horror (or "weird fiction" as some prefer to call it) working today. Since the mid-1980s he has developed a truly singular body of work that paints a bleak and forbidding – yet fascinating – picture of human existence. Ligotti draws on dreams and nightmares, mannequins and masks, decay and madness, to draw his readers into a fractured, disturbing world similar to our own yet distinctly and frighteningly different. In the stories of Ligotti, in fact, there is no

“real” world. Instead, what we call reality is nothing more than a series of elaborate constructs that mask a vast, overwhelming and incomprehensible cosmos that bears more resemblance to the madness of dreams and psychoses than to any sort of logical, “real” world. As critic and editor S.T. Joshi succinctly puts it: “The focus of all Ligotti’s work is a systematic assault on the real world and the replacement of it with the unreal, the dream-like and the hallucinatory.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus, it can be said that the works of Thomas Ligotti are about the manifestation of madness in “normal,” everyday life, and therefore it makes sense to examine his chilling tales in terms of psychosis. In *The Psychotic Core*, perhaps the most far-reaching and comprehensive look at psychosis written, Michael Eigen draws on Freud and others to offer an in-depth examination of the major aspects of psychosis. These are: hallucination, mindlessness, boundaries, hate, epistemology and reversal. Ligotti’s stories feature all these factors, to some extent or another. They work together within and across the writer’s eerie tales to create a fairly consistent picture of existence beset by madness. This discussion will focus on Ligotti’s use of dreams as a critical aspect of the madness that is at the core of human existence in his work.

Ligotti himself has written on the relationship between horror or “weird” fiction and dreams. He compares a successful horror story to the dreams that terrify us. In this way, fiction and dreams create something that is not possible in everyday reality, but that seems strikingly and often disturbingly real when we lose ourselves in the realms of sleep and story. Ligotti writes:

The horror story does the work of a certain kind of dream we all know. Sometimes it does this so well that even the most irrational and unlikely

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<sup>1</sup> S.T. Joshi, “Thomas Ligotti: The Escape from Life,” in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader: Essays and Explorations*, Wildside Press, Holicong, Pennsylvania, 2003, p. 136.

subject matter can infect the reader with a sense of realism beyond the realistic, a trick usually not seen outside the vaudeville of sleep. When is the last time you failed to be fooled by a nightmare, didn't suspend disbelief because its incidents weren't sufficiently true-to-life?<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the psychotic individual is convinced equally of the reality of his hallucinations. It is worth repeating here that, as Freud said on numerous occasions, dreams are a form of psychosis. Thus, if the horror story recreates a terrifying dream in another form, it can be said that the writer of weird fiction is creating nightmares for readers to experience while awake.

The nihilistic worldview expressed in Ligotti's stories is worth noting briefly. In these works, humans are essentially insignificant organisms at the mercy of a vast, cold and merciless universe. To live is to suffer, and the day-to-day "reality" people share is a vague and illusory construct that is shaky and prone to crumble when the powerful and incomprehensible ancient forces of the cosmos breach the paltry defenses human beings use to shore up their sanity amidst a menacing and painful existence. In Ligotti's fiction, then, the madness of the universe lies behind and within all things, awaiting a chance to manifest itself. Ligotti says that the universal human condition is madness and that only a thin veil of delusion and illusion keeps us from returning to that state. This, too, speaks directly to the work of Eigen, who draws on Freud to posit a similar conclusion. Freud, Eigen and others purport to describe the infant mind as out-of-touch with the exterior world, unmindful of boundaries between self and other, and prone to wish fulfillment through hallucination. As Eigen puts it: "It is as if Freud is saying that the human psyche is rooted in the same type of world the psychotic lives in, that, in some sense, psychotic experience has a certain primacy ... A basic madness thus informs human life, and sanity

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Ligotti, "Introduction: The Consolations of Horror," in *The Nightmare Factory*, Carroll & Graf, New York, 1996, p. xx)

(including neurotic sanity) is a positive and, possibly, a heroic achievement.”<sup>3</sup> It can safely be said that a basic madness, too, informs the fiction of Thomas Ligotti – and that in the end the heroic achievement of sanity proves unachievable.

Dreams clearly are part of that universal madness in Ligotti’s work. He consistently uses dreams (and, in the form of supernatural phenomena, what can only be described as waking hallucinations) to depict the omnipresent madness his characters find both within and without. In Ligotti’s fiction, dreams are not seen as the psyche’s nightly therapeutic work. Instead, dreams, which usually come as terrifying nightmares or eerie nocturnal visions that haunt characters during their waking hours, are yet another attack on our fragile sanity. In this way, Ligotti’s use of dreams speaks more to the traumatic dreams Freud discussed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. That is, Ligotti’s characters – all of whom have in one way or another have breached (or, more likely, been breached by) the horrifying mysteries of the cosmos – are suffering trauma (often recurrent) in their dreams. Freud of course would claim that these dreamers are stuck in a cycle of repetition because they have not properly processed some intense psychic trauma. Ligotti, on the other hand, sees dreams as a hostile force working to shatter sanity.

“Mrs. Rinaldi’s Angel” contains perhaps Ligotti’s most direct discussion of dreams. The story begins with the narrator discussing the intense nightmares he experienced during childhood. His mother – prone to superstition, he notes – finally brings him to visit an old woman reminiscent of an archetypal gypsy fortuneteller, witch or similar figure. The woman, Mrs. Rinaldi, purportedly can help the boy beat back these

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Eigen, *The Psychotic Core*, Jason Aronson Inc., Northvale, New Jersey, 1986, p. 6.

horrible visions “both crystalline and confused.”<sup>4</sup> In a dark and cluttered room, Mrs. Rinaldi tells the boy what dreams actually are in a disturbing monologue.

They are parasites – maggots of the mind and soul, feeding on the mind and soul as ordinary maggots feed on the body ... And so if these dreams have no world of their own to nourish them, they may come into yours and possess it, exhaust it little by little each night. They use your world and use it up. They wear your face and the faces of things you know: things that are yours they use in ways that are theirs. And some persons are so easy for them to use, and they use them so hard. But they use everyone and have always used everyone, because they are from the old time, the time before all the worlds awoke from a long and helpless night. And these dreams, these things that are called dreams, are still working to throw us back into the great mad darkness ...<sup>5</sup>

Here, then, Ligotti lays out his interpretation of dreams as humanity’s link to something ancient, mad and pre-human – or at least pre-human consciousness. If, as Freud and Eigen state, developing humans construct “sanity” to emerge from what is an essentially psychotic state, Ligotti seems to be saying that dreams are a manifestation of that earlier state. They work “to throw us back into the great mad darkness” – the fundamental madness from which our consciousness and sense of self have arisen. In this way, dreams threaten the very fabric of the comfortable “realities” we have built for ourselves. Mrs. Rinaldi’s discussion of dreams is reminiscent of something Freud wrote in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In that seminal work, Freud proposed an “original” function of dreams, predating their function as an avenue for wish fulfillment. “If there is a ‘beyond the pleasure principle’, it is only consistent to grant that there was also a time before the purpose of dreams was the fulfillment of wishes.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, Freud argued,

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Ligotti, “Mrs. Rinaldi’s Angel,” 1994, in *The Nightmare Factory*, Carroll & Graf, 1996, New York, p. 399. Ligotti’s phrasing here evokes the concept of reversal seen in psychosis (and other aspects of psychic life) as discussed in Eigen. It is worth noting that such reversals are commonly seen in all manner of dreams.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 401.

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1961, pp. 37-38.

there was an older, darker purpose to dreams – that of satisfying the human “compulsion to repeat,” which he believed was a deep-seated instinct, one that preceded wish fulfillment. In this way, both Freud and Ligotti see dreams as something more ancient and perhaps even sinister than simple flights of fancy leading to wish fulfillment in some form or another. Significantly, Freud also argued that the compulsion to repeat was at the root of why readers respond to uncanny phenomena, as he discussed in his essay “The Uncanny.”

Ligotti also uses dreams to raise disturbing questions about the sanctity of self and human identity. A particularly clever and fascinating use of dreams in this way can be seen in his story “Dream of a Mannikin,” which raises doubts about the identity – and even the “aliveness” of its narrator and one of the other central characters. In this story, Ligotti features a psychiatrist recounting a patient’s dream, within which we see frighteningly vivid images of numbness and loss of identity. The narrator is a psychiatrist speaking to an unnamed colleague who seems to have an unhealthy influence over the narrator. He tells her about the case of a Miss Amy Locher, a young woman referred to the narrator’s care by the unnamed person to whom he is speaking. Miss Locher, a secretary in the waking world, dreams that she works in a high-end fashion store, where she changes the clothes adorning the various mannequins, often talking out loud and telling the dummies that is “time to get dressed.” She then returns home to sleep, and to dream within her dream. In this dream, the mannequin dresser finds herself in her bedroom, but within a vast darkness. She instinctively knows something is wrong, that something is in fact behind her. She becomes vividly aware that she is in a dream, but cannot shake her feeling of terror as a hand clutching “filthy rags” appears beside her

and a voice tells her it is “time to get dressed.” Then, a powerful and disturbing vision appears before her:

... she notices that all around the room – in shadowed places – are people dressed as dolls. Their forms are collapsed, their mouths wide open. They do not look as if they are still alive. Some of them have actually become dolls, their flesh no longer supple and their eyes having lost the appearance of teary moistness. Others are at various intermediate stages between humanness and dollhood. With horror, the dreamer now becomes aware that her mouth is opened wide and will not close.<sup>7</sup>

The mannequin dresser then attempts to turn, finally ready to look at whatever or whoever is behind her. She awakens before she can see anyone, back in her own bed, returned to her secretary self. And yet she has not entirely escaped the dream world, for on the wall above her bed she sees the protruding face of a mannequin, which only slowly fades from view. In this dream vignette, which is only the beginning of the story, we see Ligotti toying with layers of reality and identity. Interestingly, as the dream builds in intensity, Miss Locher becomes acutely aware that she is in fact in a dream. Freud suspected that such a phenomenon occurred when the content of the dream became too threatening or disturbing to the dreamer’s psyche. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* he wrote “What, for instance, is the meaning of a critical remark found so often in dreams: ‘This is only a dream’? ... it is aimed at reducing the importance of what has just been experienced and at making it possible to tolerate what is to follow ... ‘it’s only a dream,’ appears in a dream when the censorship, which is never quite asleep, feels that it has been taken unawares by a dream, which has already been allowed through.”<sup>8</sup> Ligotti,

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Ligotti, “Dream of a Mannikin,” in *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*, Carroll & Graf, New York, 1989, p. 53. Ligotti frequently makes use of mannequins, dolls and dummies in his writing. As Jentsch outlined in his essay “The Psychology of the Uncanny,” a predecessor of Freud’s seminal essay “The Uncanny,” the use of such figures and the question of their degree of “aliveness” in literature often evokes feelings of unease in readers.

<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Avon Books, New York, 1998, pp. 526-527.

intentionally or not, draws directly on this concept to show the reader just how disturbing this dream is to the person dreaming it – as well as to the reader. As the story continues, it is the narrator, not Miss Locher, who will suffer the assault on the “real” world that threatens his sanity. When, late in the story, he stands before a store window gazing at a mannequin that looks just like Miss Locher, the reader sees his grip on the everyday, his anchor to reality, loosening. Dreams have played a key role in shredding the veil of the real world and pushing a character into madness.

For all of its frightening imagery and gradual disintegration of reality, “Dream of a Mannikin” seems not to propose any universal theory of dreams or madness, as does “Mrs. Rinaldi’s Angel.” In a third story, the powerful and disturbing “Nethescurial,” Ligotti goes further. In this story, he examines what happens when a person’s mind is completely breached by the dark and powerful forces Ligotti sees lurking within everything. If, as Ligotti’s work so often suggests, human sanity is under assault by this other, hidden world (which in fact is not “other,” but rather the reality that our constructs hide), what happens when the other side breaks through and the veils are torn away? Is this not psychosis? In “Nethescurial,” the narrator descends into madness – or perhaps, Ligotti might argue, finally sees the horrible reality of existence – after he is exposed to a manuscript describing idols and rituals connected with the ancient god after which the story is named. And this ancient force is anything but benevolent; it is the deification of an evil force that permeates all of creation. Our reality is only “a mere mask for the foulest evil, an absolute evil whose reality is mitigated only by our blindness to it, an evil at the heart of things.” That evil, here dubbed Nethescurial, also could be called the madness from which we all spring, and in Ligotti’s story it is, in effect, the source of

reality, permeating all things. As Ligotti writes: “Imagine the universe as the dream, the feverish nightmare of a demonic demiurge.”<sup>9</sup> After learning of this ancient force that lies behind and within all things, the narrator experiences a horrific nightmare. Then, as the narrator becomes increasingly aware of this inhuman, uncaring, cosmic force, he finds that his waking life is riddled with hallucinatory phenomenon. While walking through a park, he sees the other people there as pale, lifeless imitations of human beings and hears them chanting. “These were the voices I had been hearing as they chanted confused words in the depths of everyone’s thoughts, fathoms below the level of their awareness. The words still sounded hushed and slow, monotonous phrases mingling like the sequences of a fugue.” This passage conjures Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious, while at the same time depicting that commonality as insane. Here again, we see a reference to the madness within everyone.

As the story ends, the narrator desperately tries to convince himself that this is not happening. His description of what he sees is steeped in dream-like nightmare imagery and screams with hopelessness.

See, there is no shape in the fireplace. The smoke is gone, gone up the chimney and out into the sky. And there is nothing in the sky, nothing I can see through the window. There is the moon, of course, high and round. But no shadow falls across the moon, no churning chaos of smoke that chokes the frail order of the earth, no shifting cloud of nightmares enveloping moons and suns and stars. It is not a squirming, creeping, smearing shape I see upon the moon, not the shape of a great deformed crab scuttling out of the black oceans of infinity and invading the island of the moon, crawling with all its innumerable bodies upon all the spinning islands of inky space. That shape is not the cancerous totality of all creatures, not the oozing ichor that flows within all things. *Nethescorial is not the secret name of creation.* It is not in the rooms of houses and beyond their walls ... beneath dark waters and across moonlit skies ... below earth mound and above mountain peak ... in northern leaf and southern flower ... inside each star and the voids between them ... within

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Ligotti, “Nethescorial,” in *The Nightmare Factory*, Carroll & Graf, New York, 1996, p. 259.

blood and bone, through all souls and spirits ... among the watchful winds of this and the several worlds ... behind the faces of the living and the dead.

I am not dying in a nightmare.<sup>10</sup>

This powerful and chilling passage shows the narrator in denial of a nightmare. This can be interpreted literally within the context of the story – that the narrator is under siege by malevolent forces he has unwittingly come into contact with through his investigations of Nethescurial. On another level, the entire passage creates the feel of a mind slipping further and further into madness as it cannot create the proper constructs and defenses to process sensory input and function in the world at large. The desperate denial of what he is seeing seems to be a man's last efforts to cling to sanity as he is beset by psychotic symptoms – as the imagery and feel of dreams invades waking life and takes over. In the works of Thomas Ligotti, though, sanity once breached is soon destroyed and is not regained. The universe is at best vast and uncaring and perhaps malevolent and predatory – and dreams are just another aspect of that frightening universe. They are a vivid and dangerous aspect of the “fundamental madness” from which we have emerged, the fundamental madness that constantly threatens to break through and reclaim us all.

In the end, then, Ligotti sees dreams as things that are more “real,” more fundamental to our nature than the illusions of waking life. They are primitive and primordial, remnants of a time when human consciousness was nonexistent or at least far less complex, similar to what Freud theorized in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. They tamper with and can shatter identity. Ultimately, if allowed to entirely break through the barriers built to keep them out – the fragile constructs built around our “psychotic core”

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 259. Please note that the ellipses are part of the original text and no words have been omitted from this passage.

to form our sanity – they can consume us and send us hurtling back into the “fundamental madness” from which we have risen. In the nightmarish works of Thomas Ligotti, as in reality, dreams are psychosis, and they are a part of all of us.

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