THE CRITICAL MUSE

The Well of Dreams

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On a hot, hot day in the deep strange-scented shade
of a great dark carob tree
Freud is kneeling by a well of dreams,
taking pleasure in their meaning, silently.
Lawrence is watching him, entranced:

someone is before him at his well –
and he, like a second-comer, waiting.

The poet-dreamer resents Freud’s intrusion
yet still he stands there, mesmerised:

he must wait, must stand and wait,
for the interpreter has reached the well before him.

What is it in this absorbed, absorbing man
that reminds him of his father?

He drinks enough, and lifts his head, dreamily,
as one who has drunken,
and looks around like a god, unseeing, into the air.

Oh, the power of his familiar strangeness!
Lawrence knows and feels
the honour of Freud’s visit,
humbled that his dream-well offers sustenance.
Yet why must he (son and lover) be obliged
to wait and watch
while this drunken, god-like being satiates himself
at his well, absorbed so deliciously
in his inviolable dreams?
The interpreter is slowly withdrawing now into secrecy and darkness. Lawrence hates the way he can disappear so smoothly, so inscrutably like an all-seeing, all-knowing god. On a sudden impulse – is it spite, or envy? – he chucks a book at the disappearing shape. As Freud writhes in undignified convulsion, the poet-dreamer sees his features clearly – and wakes, ashamed.

There is something deep within himself he must explain before he can expiate his pettiness: a patricidal rivalry, at this primal scene.

Note
‘It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so’ (Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1899). D. H. Lawrence’s ‘Snake’ was published in 1917, four years before his infuriated dismissal of Freud in *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*: ‘Long ago we watched in frightened anticipation when Freud set out on his adventure into the hinterland of human consciousness ... What was there in the cave? Alas that we ever looked! Nothing but a huge slimy serpent of sex, and heaps of excrement, and a myriad repulsive little horrors spawned between sex and excrement.’

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