
The Dream, the Sphinx, and the Death of T.

Author(s): Alberto Giacometti and Barbara Wright

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Terrified, I noticed an enormous furry brown spider suspended over the foot of my bed, clinging to a thread that descended from a web right over the bolster. “No, no!” I cried, “I can’t possibly spend the night with a threat like that over my head, kill it, kill it”—though the idea of killing it myself, whether in a dream or awake, totally revolted me.

At that moment I dreamed that I woke up, but actually my dream continued. I was in the same place on the bed, and at the very moment that I was telling myself, “It was only a dream,” yet instinctively looking for the spider, I caught sight of something splayed out on a heap of earth and bits of broken plate or small flat stones—it was a yellow, ivory-yellow, spider, far more monstrous than the first one but smooth, apparently covered in smooth yellow scales, and with long thin legs that looked as smooth and hard as bones. Petrified, I saw my girlfriend’s hand reach out and touch the spider’s scales; she seemed neither frightened nor surprised. I screamed, and pushed her hand away,

and then, just as I had done in the dream, I begged for it to be killed. Someone whom I hadn't yet seen crushed it with a long stick or shovel, beating it violently. I averted my eyes and heard its scales crack and the strange sound of the soft parts of its body being squashed. It was only afterward, when I looked at the remains of the spider lying on a plate, that I read a name written very clearly in ink on one of its scales; it was the name of a species of arachnids, a name that now escapes me. I've forgotten it, all I can see now are the detached letters, the black color of the ink on the ivory-yellow, the sort of letters you see on stones and shells in museums. It was quite obvious that I was responsible for the death of a rare specimen belonging to the collection of the friends whose house I was staying in at the time. This was confirmed a moment later by the lamentations of an old housekeeper who came in looking for the lost spider. My first impulse was to tell her what had happened, but I could foresee the trouble that would cause and how angry my friends would be with me: I ought to have seen that it was a rare creature, read its name, and told them about it instead of killing it. So I decided to say nothing, to pretend I knew nothing about it, and to hide its remains. I went out into the garden with the plate and crossed it taking good care not to be seen—the plate in my hands might seem strange. I came to a bit of ground that had been dug up and was hidden at the bottom of a bank by a thicket, threw the remains into a hole, covered it with earth, and trampled it down, saying to myself: "The scales will rot before anyone can discover them." At the same moment I saw my host and his daughter on horseback, riding past me on the bank above. They didn't stop, but said something to me that surprised me, and I woke up.

All of the following day I could see that spider; it obsessed me.

The day before, late at night, I had seen some ivory-yellow traces of pus on a glossy white sheet of paper and realized that I had caught the illness I had been expecting for a few days. Observing this, I was a little worried by the apparently involuntary mental paralysis that had prevented me from forestalling the threat of the disease, which I could easily have done, but which I hadn't bothered about. I had no reason to believe that this was a kind of self-punishment; it was rather that I had obscurely felt

that the disease might be useful to me, might give me certain advantages, although I didn't know of what sort.

In bed that evening, and not long before the dream, my girlfriend had laughingly wanted to observe the symptoms of the disease.

I had been expecting to develop it since the previous Saturday. I had heard that the brothel called "The Sphinx" was going to be closed down for good, so at six in the evening I rushed off there, not being able to bear the idea of never again seeing that room in which I had spent so many hours, so many evenings, ever since it opened, and which I considered the most marvelous place in the world.

Going there for that last time, I was a little drunk, after lunch with some friends. One of the incidental remarks made at this lunch was that it would be interesting to keep a diary from day to day, and we discussed everything that might stand in the way of doing so. My first thought, which surprised me, was that I couldn't wait to begin such a diary, starting at that very moment, and in this connection Skira, to whom I had previously told the story of the death of T., asked me to write about it for the forthcoming issue of *Labyrinthe*. I promised him that I would, although I couldn't really see how it would be possible.

But since the dream, since the illness—which brought me back to that lunch—T.'s death had again become present in my mind.

That afternoon, on my way back from the doctor's, I wondered whether the fact that Skira's suggestion more or less coincided with my visit to The Sphinx, and all its consequences, was enough to bring back the memory of T.'s death and make me want to write about it now. Here I must mention that the pharmacy was on the Avenue Junot, practically next door to my doctor's house, and that as I was coming out of the store, carrying my tubes of Thiayzomides, the first thing that caught my eye was the name of the little café opposite: "Au Rêve" ("The Dream").

Walking home, I saw T., in the days before his death, in the room next to mine in the little house where we lived at the bottom of a somewhat neglected garden. I saw him in his bed, not moving, his skin ivory-yellow, his body huddled up and already strangely far away. Then I saw him shortly afterward, at three in the

morning, dead, his skeletal limbs flung outward, spread-eagled, abandoned, his enormous swollen belly, his head thrown back, his mouth open. Never had any corpse seemed to me so non-existent, pathetic remains to be tossed into the gutter like a dead cat. Standing motionless by the bed, I looked at his head which had become an object, a little box, measurable and insignificant. At that moment a fly approached the black hole of his mouth and slowly disappeared into it.

I helped to dress T. as smartly as possible, as if he had to make an appearance among the elite, at a reception, perhaps, or as if he were going on a long journey. Raising, lowering, moving his head as I would any nondescript object, I put a tie on him. He was strangely dressed; everything seemed to be normal and natural, but his shirt was sewn up at the collar, and he had neither belt nor suspenders, and no shoes. We covered him with a sheet and I went back to work until the morning.

When I entered my room the next night, I noticed that, oddly enough, there was no light. Invisible in the bed, A. was asleep. The corpse was still in the next room. I was oppressed by the lack of light, and I was just about to walk naked through the corridor leading to the bathroom which passed the dead man's room, when I was suddenly overwhelmed by panic and, even though I didn't believe it, I had the vague impression that T. was everywhere, everywhere except in the wretched corpse on the bed, the corpse that had seemed so nonexistent. T. had become infinite and, terrified that I might feel an icy hand touch my arm, it was only with an immense effort that I was able to go down the corridor. Then I went back to bed and, with my eyes open, talked to A. until dawn.

I had just experienced, in reverse, what I had felt a few months earlier about living people. At that time I was beginning to see heads in the void, in the space surrounding them. The first time I became aware that as I looked at a head it became fixed, immobilized forever in that single instant, I trembled with fear as I had never trembled in my whole life, and a cold sweat ran down my back. I was no longer looking at a living head but at an object, just as I might look at any other object. But, no, it was different; I wasn't looking at it as if it were any other object,

but as if it were something alive and dead at the same time. I screamed in terror, as if I had just crossed a threshold, as if I were entering a totally unknown world. All the living were dead, and this vision kept recurring, in the Métro, in the street, in a restaurant, with my friends. There was a waiter at the Brasserie Lipp who froze, leaning over me with his mouth open, without the slightest connection with the preceding moment, or the following moment, his mouth open, his eyes staring in total immobility. And at the same time that men underwent a transformation, so did objects: tables, chairs, clothes, the street, even trees and landscapes.

When I woke up that morning I saw my towel for the first time; it had become weightless, in a stillness I had never yet known, and seemed to be suspended in a dreadful silence. It no longer had any relation to the seatless chair or to the table whose feet no longer rested on the floor, barely touching it; there was no longer any relation between these objects, which were now separated by infinite chasms of emptiness. I looked at my room in dread, and a cold sweat ran down my back.

A few days after having written the above text in one sitting, I felt I wanted to go back to it and revise it. I was in a café on the Boulevard Barbès-Rochechouart, where the prostitutes have strange legs, long, slim, and tapered.

A feeling of boredom and hostility prevented me from rereading it, and in spite of myself I began by telling the dream differently. I tried to describe the elements that had particularly affected me in a more precise and striking manner: for instance, the volume and bulk of the brown spider, the density of its hairs which seemed as if they ought to be agreeable to the touch, the position and exact shape of the outspread web, the expected and feared appearance of the yellow spider, especially the shape of its scales, their resemblance to flat, rippling waves, the strange mixture of its head, and the angles of its right front leg. But I wanted to convey all this in a purely emotional way, and make some parts of the description hallucinatory, without looking for the connection between them.

I stopped, discouraged, after a few lines.

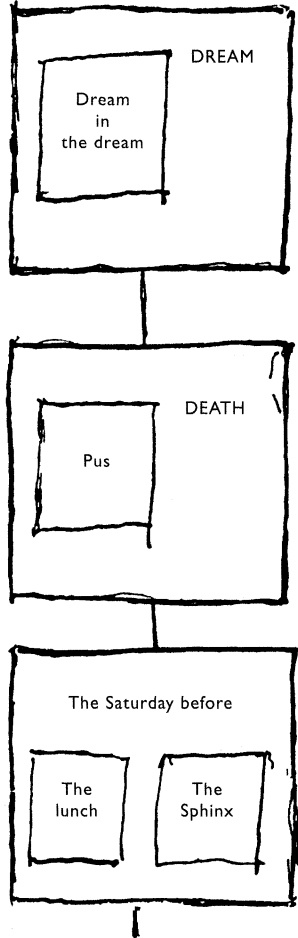
Some black soldiers were passing by outside in the fog, the fog that had given me such pleasure the day before.

There was a contradiction between using emotional terms to convey what had hallucinated me, and the sequence of events I wanted to describe. I was faced with a confused mass of times, events, places, and sensations.

I tried to find a possible solution.

At first I tried to represent each fact by a couple of words which I placed in a vertical column on the page, but this didn't work. Then I tried to draw little compartments, also vertically, which I would gradually fill in so as to get all the facts on the same page simultaneously. But the time factor troubled me, so I tried to find a way to convey the whole thing chronologically. I kept coming up against the backward and forward movement of the narrative, though, and this worried me. Throughout my story, time went backward, from the present to the past, but it also returned, and had ramifications. In the original draft, for example, I hadn't been able to find a place to insert the episode of the Saturday lunch with R.M. before I went to the doctor's.

I had told my dream to R.M., but when I got to the part about burying the remains I saw myself in a different field, which was surrounded by thickets at the edge of a forest. Shaking the snow off my feet, digging in the rock-hard earth, I was burying a piece of bread that I had hardly even got my teeth into (theft of bread in



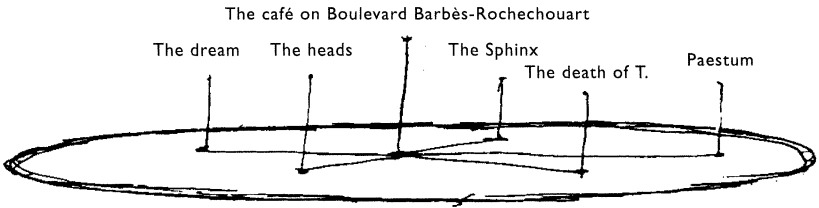
my childhood), and I saw myself running through Venice, my hand clenched over a bit of bread that I wanted to get rid of. I crossed Venice looking for isolated districts and in one of them, after several unsuccessful attempts on the most obscure little bridges over the gloomiest of canals, finally, trembling nervously, I threw the bread into the stinking water of the most remote branch of the canal, enclosed within black walls, and I ran away, still in a state of panic and barely conscious of myself. This led me to want to describe the state I was in at that moment. And also to describe my journey to the Tyrol, Van M.'s death, see note, (that long, rainy day when I sat alone next to a bed in a hotel room, a book by Maupassant on Flaubert in my hand) as I watched Van M.'s head transform (his nose becoming more and more accentuated, his cheeks hollow, his almost motionless mouth barely breathing and, toward evening, as I was attempting to sketch his profile, I was suddenly terrified that he was going to die); and my stay in Rome the previous summer (the newspaper I saw by chance which contained an advertisement inquiring about my whereabouts), the train to Pompeii, the temple at Paestum.

But also to describe the scale of the temple, and that of the man who appears between its columns. (The man between the columns becomes gigantic, but the temple doesn't get any smaller; actual size no longer plays any part—the opposite of what happens at Saint Peter's in Rome, for example. The empty interior of that church seems small—especially in photographs—but the men look like ants. Saint Peter's doesn't get any bigger; it is all a question of scale.)

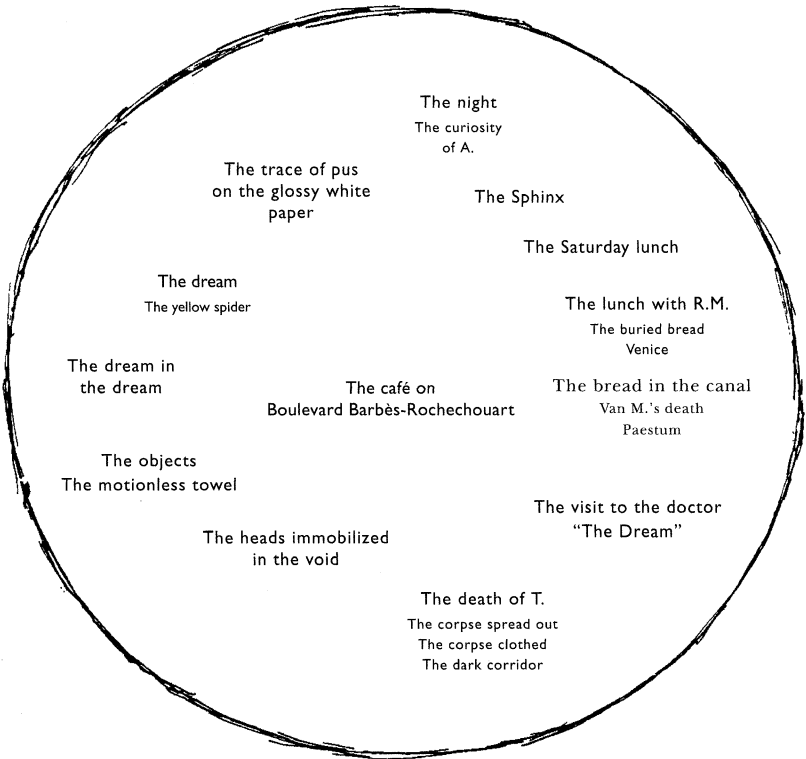
This led to a discussion of the scale of heads, and of objects, and of the affinities and differences between objects and human beings, and I ended up talking about what was foremost in my mind at the very moment that I was telling this story at that Saturday lunch.

Sitting in the café in the Boulevard Barbès-Rochechouart, I was thinking of all this and trying to find a way of expressing it. Suddenly, I had the feeling that all these events existed simultaneously around me. Time was becoming horizontal and circular, it was both time and space, and I tried to draw it.

Shortly afterward, I left the café.

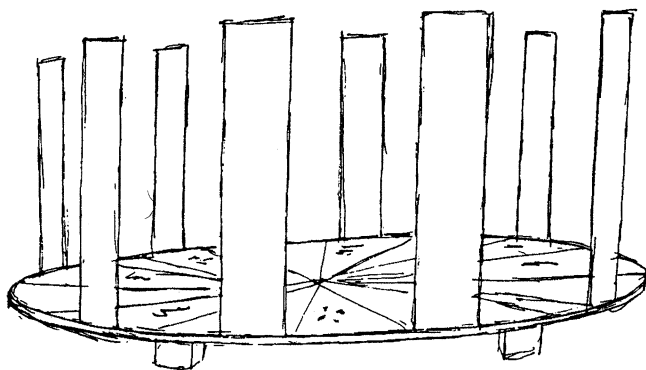


This horizontal disk delighted me, and as I walked along I saw it almost simultaneously under two different aspects. I saw it drawn vertically on a page.



But horizontality was what I was after, I didn't want to lose it, and I saw the disk become an object.

It was a disk about two meters in radius and divided by lines into sections. On each section was written the name, date, and location of the event it corresponded to, and on the circumference of the circle there was a panel facing each section. These panels were of different widths, and separated by empty spaces.



The story corresponding to each section was written on each panel. It gave me a strange kind of pleasure to see myself walking on this time-space disk, reading the story written on the panel in front of me. I was free to start wherever I liked, to start, for example, from the October 1946 dream and end, after walking the whole way round, a few months earlier, in front of the objects, in front of my towel. I was very anxious to get each fact on the disk in its proper position.

But the panels still have nothing on them; I don't know enough about the value of words or their mutual relationship to be able to fill them in.

Note: This journey on which I embarked in 1921 (the death of Van M. and the events that surrounded it) was something like a gap in my life. Everything changed, and the journey obsessed me continually for a year. I never stopped talking about it, and I often wanted to write about it, but was never able to. Only today, because of the dream and the bread in the canal, has it become possible for me to write it for the first time.

—Alberto Giacometti

Translated from the French by Barbara Wright