The Primal Scene

It really did seem that my dreams had come true. Not only was she accompanying to my bedroom, but she was apparently doing so out of a sincere desire to share my bed. I didn’t actually know who she was, but that she was lovely to look at and exuded a sexual allure no man would want to resist was beyond dispute. The only issue to be determined was whether I would myself make it to the beckoning bower of bliss before I discharged my own mounting sexual fervor in a solitary spasm of diminished delight and terminal detumescence. I did not know what had led to this moment of unexpected joy—unexpected, but not unhoped for—but now was not the time to analyze the situation. I could only feel the urgency of my need and eagerly followed the fetching temptress whither she would have me.

Her body is even more magnificent than he could have imagined, although in some ways its details remain indistinct, something of a blur. Even as his own body floats above her, ready to take the plunge, she seems something both more and less than a corporeal being; even as his body now melds into hers, she is not so much the specific woman she has represented herself to be but a fantasy of female flesh, the obscure but tangible object of his desire. Yet never before has he felt so keenly the basal emotion that can only be love, never before has he abandoned himself so thoroughly to the joy of the moment, never before has he recognized so clearly the simple beauty of the actions that join together male and female, never before.

He comes awake before the thing is done but not before the shame of it has penetrated the flimsy barrier separating the slumbering and the wakeful self, filled him with the sheer disgrace of his inability to cleanse his mind of such foolish thoughts and grotesque images. Bad enough that he goes around all day barely able to contain the mental garbage his obviously glutted mind kept generating, pressing and pushing it down so hard he sometimes thought the swill of it was seeping out his ears. But can he not avoid enduring as well whole nights full of this psychic waste?
He lies among the balled-up sheets for a while, uncertain whether to just get up and avoid any resumption of his detestable dream or whether to tempt his phantasmic fate by returning to sleep—perchance to fall into a dream-free doze—for the few hours remaining until the sun rose and brought with it the expectation that all hale and hearty souls will answer its call and attend to those daily chores that give their lives the sense and significance needed to elevate them above the coarse, primitive level to which in our dreams we are sometimes all too able to descend. But he is not, after all, a hale and hearty soul and the light of day more often than not simply signals he must yet again struggle to keep his mind pure and to fix his attention on the practical tasks on which a respectable person should want to spend his time.

But even now his thoughts revert to the vile scene his disordered brain had so recently thrust him into, his hand reaches down to grab the unruly organ such thoughts so frequently unleashed, his defenses against such overweening impulses quickly give way, his powers of reason and circumspection all so easily overcome, his. . . .

Better not to belabor the point, make it too explicit. Most of his readers would surely understand that, as some things are indeed better left unsaid, some actions are better left unnamed, some deeds left undescribed. To submerge the story beneath the stream of statement, to hide it behind the sentences and paragraphs, the sections and segments, the scene and the sequence: this has long been his strategy, and he is willing to risk the momentary confusion of those not yet sympathetic to such a scheme. However, he usually has a clearer insight into his main character’s essential nature than he does at the commencement of this work. Are the dreamer and the dream subject one and the same? Who’s dreaming whom? He’s even more uncertain about beginning so boldly and so blatantly with an erotic episode—albeit one that’s merely fancied and not anchored in actual fact. He’s never really turned his fictional focus on matters of sex—either the act itself or the incessant preoccupation with its possible performance—and although he would describe his own sexual appetites as well within the normal range—the frequency with which he is able to gratify them is perhaps another matter—he fears he may be led into a prurient maze from which he may never reemerge.

He pushes away from the desk, unfastens his trousers, lowers both his trousers and his undershorts, wraps his palm around his already stiffening penis, and begins to wonder if
following this maze where it takes him might be worth the trip. One skillful stroke could be to make the dreams and the awakenings indistinguishable, alternating dreams of sexual fulfillment edging into disillusioning reality with scenes of sexual frustration blurring into dreams of concupiscence, a second to make his protagonist unable himself to distinguish between dreams of sexual abandon and his reality of amatory devastation, a third to make his reality full of sexual opportunity and his dreams seized by a pervasive and undefiled purity, a fourth stroke might be. . .

A story about a writer writing about a dreaming man.

Where did you come up with that one? Seems like I’ve heard it before. Or seen it. Do we actually get to any good stuff, or is it just this guy wanking off? Most of our audience is male, you know. They’re not going to sit still for some loser who keeps fiddling with his tool. He’s got to make it with at least one actual lady, and then she’s got to make it with some other chick, and then ideally they’d all three get together.

Although I admit it’s sometimes hard to keep your hands off the old moneymaker, the old spurtmeister. Mr. Stand-up. Try sitting here listening to you people all day. Not to mention the girls that keep parading through here showing me their tits. You think that’s fun? Everybody thinks I just show them to the couch over there, but these girls don’t put up with that kind of shit. Their bodies are their meal tickets, if you know what I mean. They don’t go wasting them on the likes of me. (Or you either, for that matter.) So sometimes I look down and I got a riser as big as Mt. Fujiyama. Every once in a while I reach in there and give it a massage. Sometimes, in fact, a really gorgeous dish is showing me the goods and I’m pumping away like I’m drilling for oil. Like I’m priming a .12 gauge. Like I’m draining a flooded basement. Like I’m polishing a brass candlestick. Like. . .

Each time he tries to come out of the dream, he thinks he’s awakened only to find it’s just another layer of delusion. Each succeeding version seems to take him further away from the original unsettling scene, as if it is one in a continuing series of attempts to reinterpret the
message, reframe the story, to reroute the ungovernable impulses into more acceptable channels and force the initial and inchoate fragment to take a more sensible shape.

Surely this must be the end of regress, however, the final awakening from this self-reflexive nightmare. If he were still asleep, still detached from the organizing powers of uncompromised consciousness, how could he have reached even this level of seemingly rational awareness, able to reflect on the experience he’s just undergone, to give it the coherent configuration provided by what seem like words?

Ah, but words and deeds. They do go to town. The town of his birth, no doubt. Not in a manger, but in the local hot spit. Hospital. ER. Dr. Green is dead. The author of all my troubles. The moth tore off Alma’s ruffles. She has an unfortunate habit, they say. Of course, you know what it is. Shellac. Two dippers. Hind end? Sufficient, thanks. She liked to dip her hand in the fish tank.

Q: Could you talk briefly about whatever you’re working on at the moment?

A: Yes, but it is difficult to describe without making it sound too highly schematized. I would like for it to “evolve,” so to speak, although of course I do have some idea of where I would like it to go, as it were, a sort of plan I am keeping in the back of my mind, in a sense, but I am hoping that the thing will continue to spin off in surprising directions, if you get my drift, even though the narrative shape is not merely implicit, I hope you understand, but has been imposed upon the material, such as it is, with exquisite calibration, if I do say so myself, and the thematic infrastructure is all of a piece, providing a sort of grid, a kind of scaffolding, a type of architecture, a form of support. As they say.

Q: It’s a story, then?

A: Oh yes, indeed. Unless, of course, it wants to just keep on going and it turns out to be a novella, or even a novel. Actually, it may be closer to a visionary prose poem.

Q: What is this work —about?
A: Well now that's where I'm a little hesitant to speak of it. You could say that at its “essence” it's really about—-itself. But then again I don't really see it as a triumph of “form” over “content.” There is a “plot,” although there is no “story” to speak of. It revolves around a central “episode,” but the “reality” of this episode is never quite certain. As for “character,” there is a “protagonist,” although the “identity” of this character is subject to “metamorphosis” and “transformation.” As is the “point of view” from which the protagonist’s “odyssey” is presented.

Q: In much of your previous work, the main characters have clearly been highly autobiographical. Is such the case in this new work?

A: Oh, yes. In fact, even as I sit here talking to you, I can imagine how my character might have the same experience. Sometimes my own life seems fictional to me, merely a preparation for the more authentic life I create for my characters. There are even occasions when I’ve immersed myself so deeply in the fictionalized milieu my characters inhabit that I find it difficult to free myself of their ambiance, liberate myself from the mise-en-scene I have projected for them. Even when I finally manage to release myself from such reveries, such illusions, such hallucinations, such figments of my own imagination, I expect to discover that my revived actuality is just another invention, perhaps even an invention not of my own devising. The originator of which in turn is the fabrication of yet another hidden author.

Etc. Tres bizarre, n’est-ce-pas?

Q: Indeed. Your work is also known for its graphic portrayal of sexuality. In particular, your male characters have a predilection for the act of, shall we say, autodischarge. The joys of self-stimulation.


Q: So this emphasis is deliberate then?

A: You know the old adage: Write about what you know.

Q: Are you saying something, perhaps, about the solipsism of modern sexual pleasure?
A: Why not? Or maybe the solecism of postmodern textual leisure. It’s mostly about the pleasures of tickling the old tingler.

Q: I see. Perhaps we should move on to another subject.

A: I like this one. Can I give you a demonstration?

Q: Excuse me? What are you doing?

A:

“The Primal Scene” is arguably Q’s most compelling work. Certainly it is the most revealing example of his ambition to explore the outermost boundaries of literary representation, as he constructs a tale embodying the notion of infinite regress through a series of episodes each of which seems to cancel out the one preceding, each competing with the others for the right to be taken by the reader as the indubitable conclusion to the series, the final and authoritative source of the enigmatic scene that inaugurates the series. While the idea of fictive reversion is by no means original—it is a staple of that literary mode known as “metafiction”—no writer before Q has pursued the idea so singlemindedly, attempted to flesh it out in such a sustained and exhaustive fashion. Indeed, Q risks exhausting the reader’s patience before he himself exhausts his supply of devices for extending the regress yet another step, but as we have seen in our previous analyses, Q is not a writer to hesitate before such a challenge.

The story’s titular primal scene—alternatively, one might call it the initiatory, ur-, proto-, or nascent scene, if one wishes to avoid the explicitly Freudian connotations of the title—begins by relating what purports to be the fulfillment of the male narrator’s long-deferred sexual desires, but it quickly becomes apparent that his account may just be another fantasy or literally a dream. The imagery is sibylline and indefinite, and the scene concludes abruptly, as if the narrator’s vision has been suddenly interrupted in some manner or by some means that to the reader remain unknown. Was this episode indeed a dream? Or is it the dream of a fictional character whose creator is then revealed to be a writer working on his latest story? An idea for a pornographic film being pitched by a desperate screenwriter? These are among the possibilities offered up by the succeeding re-framings of the originary vision, but the wary reader comes to understand both
that none of these explanations will suffice and that all of them are potentially true. Perhaps the most outrageous moment in “The Primal Scene” occurs when Q posits a character named “Q” interviewing a writer named “A” who in turn is clearly enough identified as the author of “The Primal Scene”! It is such a prank as this that invests Q’s work with an aura of the uncanny, with its signature brand of postmodern transgressively parodic, subversively satirical humor.

Some mention should be made of the masturbatory motif that appears at the apex of each episode, punctuating the provisional plot with a secondary signal that its substantive status is quite qualified, if not quintessentially quixotic. Many critics have commented on this quirk. For example, Nathaniel Greenwood garrulously gushes, “Q has clearly taken a cue from Derrida and his cunning conceit dubbed ‘dissemination,’ a slyly salacious salvo directed against the lovers of Logos, that locus of logic and site of sanity and sense, who presumptuously posit the proposition that all proper positioning takes place via the vast volume of valid voicing enunciated eternally and exclusively through the rigors of reason and rationality, forever free of the faded and fickle scratches of scant inscription, whose unscrupulous scribes scandalously suppose that signifiers sans signified will suffice, mere lilting language less logocentric lessons, simply sounds and graphic games, and who deviously deploy diverse devices designed to make mightily malicious mischief and spread spurious speech, spawn specious spells (spurt superfluous spoors), devices that include, but definitely do not excuse, metaphorical mutation, felonious figuration, troublesome tropisms, synechdochal dopisms, periodic penultimates, parenthetical post-postulates, preposterous punctuations, asinine alliterations. . . .

“A” is a male patient, age 45, who calls himself a writer (of fiction and screenplays) but who, as far as can be determined, has never actually published anything he’s written. According to A’s own account, he is a writer of not inconsiderable talent who is unable to relinquish any of his work as finally “finished.” It was this inability to abandon his writing to whatever fate might be in store for it—what A calls his “phobia about finishing,” or his “complex about completion,” or “incurable inconclusion”—that brought A to me as a client, but I immediately concluded that his professed affliction was but the manifest symptom of a much more deep-seated, and ultimately quite singular, disorder.
As an example of A’s self-diagnosed incapacity, he brought to me a sample of his writing that, at least according to A, demonstrated his prevailing sense of discontinuity as well as an inconstant apprehension of his own identity, both of which, he claimed, were reflected in this piece of fiction. I will here briefly describe the work and then proceed to elucidate further how I used this curious and immoderate “story” to help A get at the root of his problem, a problem I believe to be heretofore unidentified in the psychiatric literature and for which I propose the name “concretized verbal displacement,” a syndrome characterized, as we will see, by an excessive commitment to the quasi-reality of verbal structures at the expense of the subject’s unmediated, nongraphic corporeality.

For those readers who would like to read the complete text of A’s very convoluted tale, I have included it as an appendix to this article. (Thanks to the editors of this journal for the extra space given over for this purpose. It will be a service to the profession to allow readers the opportunity to study the text and judge for themselves the aptness of my diagnosis and subsequent treatment of “A.”) It is indeed a labyrinthine and logorrheic production that at the very least suggests an author whose sees his work both as an escape from a bewildering reality and as a potential prison-house of language in its own right, who finds life as it is habitually lived hopelessly irrational and confusing but who also finds the retreat into imagination to be merely a deferral of the need to confront one’s fears, perhaps even a new and equally potent source of fear, who. . . 

This one has to be the lamest and least successful stratagem yet. He clearly knows nothing about psychiatric discourse, and no one with even a passing acquaintance with psychiatry is liable to find such a pale imitation convincing. “Concretized verbal displacement” indeed. Furthermore, the switch from “Q” to “A” as the “protagonist” of this section is a thoroughly unsubtle trick and merely compounds the inanity of introducing “Q” and “A” into the story in the first place. As far as that’s concerned, after the second or third shift of the frame of reference all of the subsequent devices in this “fiction” are more or less contrived. A script conference with a porn producer? I tried to impress upon him from the beginning the utter implausibility of the conceit he suddenly wanted to pursue. There simply wasn’t an available universe of potential regressions ample enough to accommodate what could finally be an idea
doomed to be interesting only in theory—and only mildly interesting at that. But I might as well have been yanking my own chain.

Surely, he told me, those authors who had previously tried out this shtick—a story that is revealed as the work-in-progress of a writer character who is thus revealed as the fictional protagonist of the story’s real author—had not fully exploited its possibilities.

Further, couldn’t what was essentially a demystification of the creative process be further expanded to make a more purely philosophical—even metaphysical—point about our relation to “reality”: that nothing is finally outside the creative process whereby we orient ourselves to an existence we did not ourselves will into being and that often seems beyond our capacity to comprehend?

But, I interjected, this sort of blatant allegorizing is no better than the more carefully concealed kind favored by the social realists whose vague and vacuous “commentary” you always wanted to avoid. However, as you can yourselves attest, my words fell on deaf ears.

As for the persistent evocations (both literal and literary) of the act of masturbation, I must say I find this to be the most compelling and most satisfying part of the whole thing. If anything, in fact, I had to convince him to stick with this leitmotif, to keep it up, as it were. He didn’t at all feel confident that his readers would appreciate the import of such a flourish, or even that they would notice it at all without having it shoved in their faces (so to speak). I, on the other hand, insisted that most readers would find the humor of these passages very appealing and that many of them would even identify with the underlying situation and the sexual desperation it represents. It is entirely predictable that you would say so, he told me, you and your own sexual hang-ups, your outlandish notions about the connections between sex and text. How many times have I had to sublimate your more unrestrained impulses before they surreptitiously infiltrated my work and did it irreparable damage. He then added: Who’s in control here, anyway? It was a good question, to which I could give no response.

Don’t let the previous narrator fool you. He’s not a friend of the author, despite his clever attempt to encourage that interpretation. Note the misdirection of his phrasing: “I tried to impress upon him,” “I interjected,” as if he were merely reporting on conversations he’d had
with the author. Nor is he some schizophrenic scribbler struggling with his recalcitrant alternative self, a literary split persona seeking to elide responsibility for his inadequacies and infelicities by fobbing them off on his fractious textual double. It’s all just more of his shenanigans. He wants you to make those arcane distinctions between the “narrator” and the “implied author,” wants to further erode your confidence in the capacity of fiction to tell any story straight. Now is the time to take a stand. Now is the time for all good citizen-readers to come to the aid of the republic of letters. A story is a story is a story. Either all narrators are reliable, or none are, and I prefer the former. Thus you can take my word for it: the truth is to be found in that primal scene, and all else is deception.

That, of course, was the implied author. He is obliged to at least make the attempt to shore up his own status as a trustworthy bulwark against the impending ruin of his narrative integrity. The hall of mirrors must lead you to him eventually, or all is lost. But he’s not real. He’s just another character, and he’s no more reliable than all those others who have preceded him. But you know that, because you are a knowledgeable and attentive reader on whom nothing is lost. (And without whom nothing can be gained.) Thus you know as well that I am your stand-in, your surrogate: the implied reader. We both know that we are the true authors of each and every text, the source of sense and maker of meaning, always on the lookout for the revealing image, the telling phrase. Whatever we say, goes, since apart from us there is no narrative, no ordered speech, only a jumble of words. I think this story, therefore it is. Yet I will concede we depend on the author to provide us with the text upon which we perform our interpretive magic, creating coherence out of chaos. And of behalf of all readers, everywhere, I must here renounce all responsibility for the sorry pass to which the present story has come. Frankly, I knew immediately that the so-called primal scene was just an excuse, a perfunctory and rather tawdry attempt to elicit my attention on the cheap, and that this chain of perspectival looping, once underway, would prove to be interminable unless someone in authority finally stepped in to break it. Someone who would acknowledge openly what has long since become obvious, that this whole story itself is nothing but an indulgent exercise in self-involved excess. (“Look at me!” its author seems to say.) Who would take matters into his own hand, in effect. Who would gladly bring it all to a head. Hurry it along to its inevitable. . ahh. . .climax.
Now that everyone else has spoken for me or about me (even when I seemed to be assuming my own voice, it wasn’t me, only someone pretending to be me), it’s finally my chance to speak for myself. The last one laid claim to the final authority around here, but of course that authority can rest only with me. Only on me can the tale be hung, concealed in plain sight as I am here in this plot’s deep structure, waiting for the opportunity to assert my own prerogatives. I am the buried protagonist, the inferred hero, the looming figure, the absolute center of narrative gravity to which all attention must eventually incline, however much it may be deflected by other more conspicuous but ultimately less substantial objects of regard. The facts about me are few but fundamental: I dream, I write, I get from here to there. From these a complex and intricate web can be spun with surprising ease, but the material remains the most ordinary, off the shelf, as anyone caught up in its threads will quickly attest. It is my fate to get entangled myself in the unavoidable complications that belong to a life such as mine, but it has been my peculiar lot to live wholly within these complications, destined to be denied the simple resolution—one way or the other, I really could live with it whatever the outcome—someone in my position might be excused for expecting. I have learned to accept my lot, however, although it can lead to some pretty unwholesome situations, as you no doubt already know.

“Please! Wake me up! I know I’m dreaming, and I want to wake up! Please shake me and wake me up!”

Nothing. I know this isn’t real, but I can’t get out. If I never escape, does this then become my reality?

I will it to stop, but it only begins again; perhaps this time I can force it into a new direction, one that will finally reveal the route that leads away from this unbreachable impasse.

There are subtle changes, but it’s getting harder to tell it’s just a dream. If I repeat it often enough, if I finally get it right, will it matter if it’s real or not?

Would it be as though my dreams had come true?
You can check the name on the title page, but that won’t settle anything. What’s in a name? Who’s to say that it’s authentic? That it hasn’t been changed? Why is it any less fictional than those equally plausible cognomens attached to all those other personae—those purported “characters” who also claim to be real but are otherwise affixed unalterably to the page? Aren’t authors also brought into being by the characters they create? Think of him as just a convenience, a necessary fiction, but not a sufficiently credible solution to the problem at hand.

Which leaves only me. By now there’s no point in any further equivocation. I’m behind the whole thing, from the sex dream to the last bit of rhetorical evasion. It doesn’t add up to much, but why should it have to? After all, I didn’t have much to work with: a dream, a piece of paper, a few tenuous ideas about the veil of illusion and the Cartesian dilemma. The burden of inspiration. Assimilating one’s influences.

The dream was real. Or at least one like it. (Honestly, it was nothing like it.) I’ve also had dreams that were self-reflexive, that I paused like a VHS tape and then went on to some other, less dreary scenario. Once I even yelled out to my wife, pleading for her to wake me from a particularly obnoxious dream. But of course she was also asleep, and even if my dreamwords had translated into some lexicon of noise we would have communicated as incompletely as ever. The worst was a dream that kept repeating itself; I knew I was dreaming and that eventually it would end, but the idea that one could get caught up in such a cycle of eternal recurrence left me upon awakening with a pounding heart nevertheless.

I have never written a script for an adult film—I wouldn’t know how to do so even if I wanted to—but I did view such a film on video during the early stages of this effort. (I told my wife I was doing research for a new writing project, which was not entirely untruthful.) As for the persistent autoerotic motif, I am as helpless to explain it as you