

«CHUSE OR REFUSE»: DREAMS AS POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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Eric Hobsbawm suggests that «Renaissance to change and assent to change arise from the whole culture»¹. I think it is important to note that individuals too often both assent to and resist change at one and the same time. So, while we need to study the «whole culture», or as much of it, as it were, as we can, in order to understand resistance and assent, we also must look at individuals in their complexity with their potential for love-hate relationships to change.

Freud advised: look at the same thing again and again until it speaks to you². For some years I have been looking at the autobiographies of individuals from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in particular at their dream reports, and they have indeed begun to «speak to me»³. I have come to regard these writers as my «informants», as a cohort I am strangely in contact with. Clearly there are dangers involved in working this way, and it is of course possible that I am reaching conclusions from their words they would not voluntarily have accepted and/or actually doing violence to their ideas. I worry about this, but I want to put this worry aside and take the risk of telling you some of the things I believe I have learned (or learned out) from these «informants».

I first began looking for dreams while I was doing work on slavery, and was fascinated by dreams in which slave-owners dreamt of their slaves. I suspected dream reports might well enable me to learn something new about the internalization of social problems in the eighteenth century. I began on the assumption it would be difficult to find a large number of dreams, but I thought I would know how to make use of those I found. As I explored the materials with this goal, the number of dreams recorded began to overwhelm me. The great majority of autobiographies contain dream reports. Diaries, letters, newspapers, and even court cases included them. However, the more dreams I collected, the less sure I was of their significance. I came to a point

¹ Eric J. Hobsbawm, «From Social History to The History of Society» in *Historical Studies Today* ed. Felix Gilbert and Stephen R. Graubard (New York, 1972) 20.

² Sigmund Freud, *History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*, Std. Edn. XIV, 22. Freud cited this as the advice of Charcot.

³ See Louis Kaplan, *A Bibliography of American Autobiographies* (Madison, 1961).

where I felt all I might say was: «This is a sweet dream; this is a scary dream; this is a whopper; is this a dream?»⁴. However, the more I read them, the more I came to realize I was listening to ritual performances. Dream-reporting was very widely engaged in. Diaries almost always include dream reports; individuals often repeated these reports to friends and acquaintances, dreams were widely discussed and their significance weighed; and the individuals who came to write life accounts were more likely than not to include selected dream reports. But the autobiographies rarely included any dreams that were fragmentary or confused. While these might well appear in diaries (see those of William Byrd II for example⁵) only important dreams were selected for autobiographies. These were generally dreams whose importance had been «proven», i.e., dreams whose predictive accuracy could be demonstrated. Only rarely would a writer include a dream whose meaning was considered unclear, but which seemed to hold special meaning. These dreams were included as part of the portrait of the dreamer: they indicated that the person had a particular gift. Dream reports were thus widely regarded as conveying messages of significance, often of political significance. Dreams legitimated desires and decisions to act; they were a potentially powerful weapon available to the weak as well as the strong.

Perhaps from earliest recorded time and down through the period under review, individuals widely attempted to understand and/or act upon what we would call their subconscious desires through a concern with the meaning of their dreams. While there had always been some who doubted the significance of dreams, it was not until the Enlightenment period that dreams came to be fairly widely held suspect, but even then many of those who «knew» they «should not» take dreams seriously, continued to do so, or to hesitate very seriously about disregarding them. When Freud began to redeem the significance of dreams for Western culture, he was returning to this historical tradition, although inverting it in most significant ways. Dreams had almost always been seen as predictive in regard to the future; Freud saw them as most significantly related to the distant past of the dreamer. Dreams had most widely been understood to come from outside the individual; Freud understood them to be the production of the unconscious⁶. His interpretations reversed traditional ones in much the same way that traditional dream interpretation had suggested that dreams themselves should be approached. In 200 a.d. Artemidorus of Daldis taught that dreams often spoke in opposites⁷. Dream

⁴ There are books of this sort. See, for example, *The Oxford Book of Dreams Chosen by Stephen Brook* (Oxford, 1987).

⁵ William Byrd, *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-1712*, ed. Luois B. Wright and Marion Tinling (Richmond, 1941) 1709: April 8, 18; July 15, 1710: Jan 5, March 31, April 10, June 18, 21, July 21, Aug. 21, 29, Dec. 31; 1712: Jan. 16, 19.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, tr. James Strachey (New York [1905] 1953).

⁷ Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica or The Interpretation of Dreams*, tr. R.J. White (Park Ridge, 1975). For an excellent descriptive bibliography of the vast literature on dreams, see Nancy Parcial-Charles, *The Dream: 4000 Years of Theory and Practice: A Critical, Descriptive and Encyclopedic Bibliography* (West Cornwall, Ct., 1986).

interpretation was a concern of ancient, medieval and early modern writers. Popular dream manuals, providing set interpretations of emblems or symbols, were a staple of the early popular press, and were hawked by the chap-book dealers on the continent and in England. They made their appearance in America quite early, and were apparently widely read⁸. They were, however, rarely referred to by the people of the period, and none of the dream-reports made direct reference to these manuals. In fact, almost all of the elaborations provided by the contemporaries regard dreams as allegory, and if they made any overt references to tradition, it was to the Biblical one and not to any «outside» tradition of dream interpretation.

The writers in the cohort surveyed include blacks and whites, men and women, the poor and the «better sort», although white men of a middling level seem to make up the largest single group. They are a very varied group of people, but they certainly cannot be said to represent all the population. Those who felt the «need» to write autobiographies in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were perhaps those who felt «different», and this was often true of those who had undergone a religious awakening: Thus we find numerous Friends, Baptist and Methodists writing of their spiritual trials and experiences. However, many of them began life as Anglicans, and all lived in the wider mixed community, and so provide evidence relating to the «whole culture».

People who did not experience religious awakening wrote as well. Many apparently wrote to make money selling their «lives». Clearly self-advertisement was an essential part of what they were about.

Some seemed to write to make order of their disorderly ways. The most extreme need was perhaps felt by criminals awaiting execution, but other deviants, free to consider their pasts, wrote, perhaps magnifying their evil acts, certainly broadcasting them⁹.

One thread that seems to run through almost all the autobiographies is the awareness of significant change. Sometimes it is simply of change in the outside circumstances, of trials and sufferings, but often it is change in self: in self-development and self-perception. A good number of these individuals seem to write in order to «see» their new selves, or to get a hold on their changing selves¹⁰. But not all saw themselves this way. The criminals were the

⁸ See the excellent bibliography in Harry B. Weiss, «Oneirocritica Americana: The Story of American Dream Books», *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* (June-July, 1944): reprinted 1944. Merle Curti, «The American Exploration of Dreams and Dreamers», *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 27 (1966) 391-416.

⁹ See David E. Williams, «Rouges, Rascals and Scoundrels: The Underworld Literature of Early America», *American Studies* (1983) 5-19.

¹⁰ The literature on the self, and on the self in the eighteenth century is extensive. See Ormond Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1988); Marie-Paule Laden, *Self-Imitation in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1987); Karl Joachim Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual; Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (Chicago, 1978); John O. Lyons, *The Invention of the Self; The Hinge of Consciousness in the Eighteenth Century* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1978); G. Thomas Couser, *American Autobiography; The Prophetic Mode* (Amherst, 1979).

most likely to see themselves as *not* having changed: as having been essentially evil since childhood. Those who experienced conversion were most likely to feel they had gone from «bad» to «good», but even the nonreligious and the noncriminal described themselves variously as having had a «mad career» of constant change, or a «rambling turn of mind»¹¹.

Although they were widely concerned with their inner change, these descriptions are sometimes difficult to get a grip on, as the individuals include several who might now be considered insane (and in one case was then considered so), quite a few whose depressions were given a societal imprimatur as the «sin-sickness» of seekers after salvation, and many asocial «misfits» who robbed and violated almost anyone and everyone.

In the second half of the eighteenth century the change and disorder in society, the turmoil of the Revolution and the ongoing surge of popular action, affected most people. The private crises of individuals, dealt with in socially determined ways, were also integrated into the historical crisis of this period. By and large, the intention of these writers was not to provide us with a picture of their society, but willy-nilly, they have done so, albeit a partial picture.

One range of crucial events in most of these lives are «events» we no longer mark in such public ways in the West. These were the deaths of parents and siblings. The dying and death of family members served as markers in the lives of the living. They often brought on crises and were seemingly expected to. Individuals widely experienced religious crises at two periods of their lives: first, at a very early age, perhaps seven to nine, and very often this coincided with the death of a mother, father or sibling. After «falling away» to worldliness, they generally experienced a second crisis around ages 17-21. Again, it was common for the death of a parent or family member to have precipitated the crisis when life choices were also facing the individual. These were of course personal crises of soul – of concern for death and eternity – but their positive resolution involved the acceptance of new controls, social controls on emotions and behaviour. The sin-sick individual, whose «bad» behaviour might range from frivolous play and singing to excessive drinking, gaming and more clear-cut antisocial behaviour, often did become the «proper» or properly socialized person after «working-through» these crises. However, the new values adopted after a religious awakening were not always the «ruling ideas» of the society. As Rhys Isaac has made us aware, the «new light» ideas of the eighteenth-century revival were often mirror opposites of élite values¹².

The Baptist, while early leaders of this revolution in values, coopted themselves to the Revolution, becoming quasi-partners with the élite.

¹¹ John Robert Shaw, *A narrative of the life and travels of John Robert Shaw, the well-digger, now resident in Lexington, Kentucky* (Lexington, Ky, 1807); William Glendinning, *The Life of William Glendinning, Preacher of the Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1795).

¹² Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790: Community, Religion and Authority* (Chapel Hill, 1982) 161-180; David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World; Heresy to Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985).

The Baptists... rallied their supporters to the patriot cause, sending preachers to the army camps, and in time raising bodies of fighting men from among their membership¹³.

Methodism was very similar to Baptism in its rejection of gentry social values, and demanded very similar «new» conduct, but Methodist's values did not automatically lead them to follow the Baptists into rebellion. Methodists had seemed to be significantly more accepting of authority than Baptists, ostensibly remaining within the Church of England until 1784, and accepting the authority of the hierarchy. John Wesley had strongly urged his followers to remain loyal to the King and Parliament, and many American Methodists did. They «aroused the hostility of the newly constituted republican authorities by declaring themselves pacifists and refusing to be drafted into the American forces». However, as Isaac suggests, this «pacifism, may... have served as a subconscious means of popular protest against gentry-led republicanism»¹⁴.

The early life of Freeborn Garrettson dovetails neatly with the Revolution and provides a well chronicled opportunity for analyzing this process of value formation through life crises and societal crises, a process in which violence played a significant role. Garrettson, from a slave-owning Anglican family in Maryland, followed the above outlined pattern. He was first awakened at a very early age, in his case at nine, following his mother's death. He then «prayed to the Lord to make me a saint, and it was strongly impressed on my mind that I should be one...»¹⁵. As was also common, he believed he «fell away» and was «wordly» and «fond of pleasure» between 12 and 18. He then began a process that was to lead to his new «seriousness» and totally new path in life. It was initiated by several near-death experiences of his own (by near-drowning and having been thrown by a horse); by his brother's serious illness; by his father's death; and by trials about the path he should follow in life. Both drawn and repelled by the then socially unacceptable Methodists (whom his father had opposed), Garrettson came to a crisis in June of 1775. The very day he was to have gone to a review of Revolutionary troops, probably with the intention of volunteering, he was awakened by a thunderous «alarming» and «awful voice» calling «Awake, sinner, for you are not prepared to die»¹⁶. Instead of going to the army, Garrettson went to hear a Methodist sermon. The following week he experienced an inner battle: «Two spirits» tore his soul apart. Viewing them as a «good spirit» and the «devil» he violently argued with them, as «with two persons». While he had already decided which was the good voice and the proper choice, he wanted «time»,

¹³ Isaac, *The Transformation*, 261. On ambivalent army reaction to Baptist support, see James D. Essing, *The Bonds of Wickedness: American Evangelical Against Slavery, 1770-1808* (Philadelphia, 1982) 37.

¹⁴ Isaac, *The Transformation*, 261.

¹⁵ Freeborn Garrettson, *The Experience and Travels of Mr. Freeborn, Garrettson...* (Philadelphia, 1791) 11.

¹⁶ Garrettson, *The Experience*, 27.

apparently to participate in wordly ways, perhaps the war. Mounting his horse, and actually starting off, the Lord spoke to him again, saying: «I have come once more to offer you life and salvation, and it is the last time: chuse, or refuse». He cried out «Lord, I submit», and knew instant «faith and love»¹⁷. As a result of Garrettson's choice, he began a period during which he risked and experienced verbal and physical violence as well as legal prosecution and jail. That week, at the very first «family» prayer meeting that Garrettson initiated (his family comprised essentially of his black slaves), he was again visited by God, whom he heard give a clear order that would bring about a direct break with his previous life and values, and with any plans he might have had for financial success: «You must let the oppressed go free». Garrettson claimed that

till then I had never suspected that the practice of slave-keeping was wrong; I had not read a book on the subject, nor been told so by any – I paused a minute and then replied, «Lord, the oppressed shall go free»¹⁸.

Thus in June of 1775 Garrettson heard a revolutionary message as the word of God. While Dunmore's Proclamation offering freedom to rebels' slaves was still five months away (November 7, 1775) certainly Quakers in Maryland had talked and written about the evils of slave holding, and Quaker manumissions were numerous. John Wesley's anti-slavery work, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, had been published in Philadelphia in 1774. In fact, there had been what David Brion Davis identifies as «a rash of antislavery books, sermons, poems, plays, [and] pamphlets...»¹⁹ Nevertheless, these had not entered Garrettson's consciousness, and he fully believed that his new moral values had come to him in a flash, from God. This was political discourse at a incontrovertible level.

Garrettson immediately began a ministry through lay-preaching to his own slaves and any other people in the neighborhood who would come. Clearly other blacks were in the group of forty that first came to hear him (many of whom were «struck down») as an enraged slave owner came to his house the following week and beat Garrettson «affirming I would spoil all his negroes»²⁰.

Just as suddenly as he had become opposed to slavery, Garrettson became a conscientious objector: «I was determined I would have nothing to do with the unhappy war; it was contrary to my mind, and greivous to my conscience, to have any hand in shedding human blood»²¹. Again, it is clear that he

¹⁷ Garrettson, *The Experience*, 31.

¹⁸ Garrettson, *The Experience*, 36.

¹⁹ William Henry Williams, *The Garden of American Methodism: The Delmarva Peninsula, 1769-1820* (Wilmington, 1984) 112; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, 1975) 48; Davis, *The Problems of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966) 385-390; Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton, 1965).

²⁰ Garrettson, *The Experience*, 40.

²¹ Garrettson, *The Experience*, 42.

believed he had heard the word of God, and that it legitimated rejection in a mediating form. He did not become a Tory nor would he fight Americans: He was against all warfare.

Similar positions, as well as active Tory sentiments on the part of some, were to bring Methodists into direct conflict with revolutionaries. Some fled America, as did Thomas Rankin, and active Tory Martin Rodda, while others went into hiding, as did Francis Asbury²². Garrettson stayed, and stayed publicly active, and while «determined to have nothing to do with the unhappy war», he was working in an area of both pro-Tory and pro-Revolutionary ferment and was directly caught up in it – or more accurately, directly thrust himself into it, publicly proclaiming his refusal to sign the compulsory oaths and his refusal to bear arms²³. Again, he did this as a result of hearing a direct call. Prior to this call he had been tempted to abandon his public role, to settle down, marry and pursue his personal interests. But in his dreams he was attacked by the Devil²⁴. In March of 1776:

I dreamed I saw the devil come in at the door and advance towards me; I thought a good angel came and spoke to me saying: «Will you go and preach the gospel?» I replied, «I am unworthy, I cannot go». Instantly the devil laid hold of my hand, and I began to struggle to get from him. I saw but one way I could escape, and that was a very narrow one. The good angel said to me, «There is a dispensation of the gospel committed to you, and woe unto you, if you preach not the gospel». I struggled for some time to get from him, but in vain, at length I cried out, «Lord send by whom thou wilt I am willing to go and preach thy gospel». No sooner, had I thus submitted, than I saw the devil fly as it were through the end of the house in a flame of fire. I awoke, immediately every cloud was dispersed, and my soul was enraptured with the love of my dear Saviour²⁵

One of the things Garrettson interpreted his dream to mean was that he could not marry (although he had already proposed). Parallel with many of the other autobiographers of this period, God's message demands sexual abstinence. Instead of becoming a husband, he had to become submissive to Christ, but while submissive he had to maintain dangerous positions. Indeed, he took on the burden of advocating nonviolence in the midst of war, and particularly objected to the «hard usage of the poor afflicted negroes» while in the slave societies of Maryland, Virginia, Delaware and North Carolina. Garrettson often spoke «particularly» to blacks, and found that «While many of their sable faces were bedewed with tears, their withered hands of faith stretched out, and their precious souls [were] made white in the blood of the Lamb»²⁶.

In what might be seen as an ongoing dialogue between act and dream,

²² Williams, *The Garden*, 47.

²³ Williams, *The Garden*, 41.

²⁴ Williams, *The Experience*, 45, 48. Adele Hast, *Loyalism in Revolutionary Virginia: The Norfolk Area and the Eastern Shore* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1979) 165-170.

²⁵ Williams, *The Experience*, 50-51.

²⁶ Williams, *The Experience*,

Garrettson continued to meet with violence, both in dreams and daily life. He was attacked on at least four occasions in 1778 and 1779, both by individuals and by groups. A mob in Dover, Delaware demanded «hang him, hang him». He was «bashed» with a club, and threatened with a gun several times. (It is important to note that women were directly involved in this violence; they played an active role both in attacking Garrettson, and in defending him.) It is not surprising that his dreams «revealed to me what I was to suffer», but they also reassured him «that the Lord would stand by me, so that my enemies would not injure me». He recorded that on February 24, 1780:

I had a sweet and powerful time. After I went to rest I was strangely exercised in my sleep: I thought I saw an innocent creature chased almost to death, by a company of dreadful beings: after a while I saw a cloud about the size of my hand rising in the Well, which grew blacker and darker; till it appeared to cover the earth: I thought now, most surely the world is to be at an end. I saw after a while those cruel beings turn pale as death. I saw a person come up to the innocent creature, which they were chasing, and receive it²⁷.

The very next day, Garrettson was set upon by a crowd, taken to a magistrate, and sentenced to gaol for preaching. He told the judge of a case in Talbot County, where a judge, who had sent a man to gaol for the same crime, was soon near death and called to the same man to preach at his funeral and give spiritual support to his family. While this judge did not respond, the escort assigned to take Garrettson to jail was made nervous enough by this story that when a lightning storm arose, he took this as a sign of God's displeasure, and released Garrettson. That night Garrettson dreamt again:

I saw in the vision of the night, many sharp and terrible weapons formed against me; but none could penetrate, or hurt me; for as soon as they came near me they were turned into feathers, and brushed by me as soft as down²⁸.

The very next day armed men came to the place where he was leading a prayer meeting and the leader put a «pistol to my breast». Garrettson believed this to be the feather he had seen in his dream, and he was certain he would not be harmed. He exhorted his followers not to resist, and went willingly to gaol. He found prison a blessing: Many came to hear him preach from his confinement, and on his release, he played a very important role in a rapidly spreading revival.

Garrettson continued to court violent reaction. He stayed in dangerous areas, and spoke out in dangerous ways. In 1781, near where «Cornwallis was ransacking the country», Garrettson once again decried «the spirit of fighting and that of slavery which ran among the people».

Day and night I could hear the roaring of the cannon, for I was not far from York, during the siege, or taking of Cornwallis. Many of our pious friends were absolutely

²⁷ Williams, *The Experience*, 160.

²⁸ Williams, *The Experience*, 165.

against fighting, and some of them suffered much on that account. Some of them were compelled, or taken by force into the field, though they would sooner lose their own lives, than take the life of any human creature. It was my duty to cry down this kind of proceeding, declaring that it was not precedented (to compel persons to fight contrary to their consciences) in the oracles of God... I was, in a particular manner, led to preach against the practice of slaveholding²⁹.

Reading Garrettson's dream reports today one must comment on what would seem to be their suggestion of fear of homosexuality: Garrettson was in danger of being penetrated, and potential weapons turned into soft feathers. Garrettson did not read his dream in this way, but it did legitimate his deferring marriage and demanded that he reject the traditional masculine role of «fighter». However, Garrettson did face and even court danger in a new way that turned the concept of honor, so important in the South, «inside out» as it were³⁰. In the new code it became honorable to adopt nonviolent action. This was certainly a shaking of the «roots». For Garrettson, confronting violence with nonviolence had led to significant life turns and to the internalization of new controls on his own behavior. Garrettson emerged from this period as a major figure in the Methodist Church, and it is likely that his new role was directly related to his success in handling both internal and external violence. He had become submissive to a higher authority, that talked directly to him, but his dreams told him he could not be «penetrated».

The violence of the Revolutionary War involved and affected another of this cohort of autobiographers in a radically different fashion. John Robert Shaw, born in 1761 in Manningham, England, chose to join in this bloodshed and mayhem, ostensibly of his own free will. A sixteen year old runaway, it wasn't ideology or even love of adventure that brought him to the war, but the shame of «the ridicule of my acquaintances» should he return home³¹. In America he was witness to and participant in extremely violent acts that, inasmuch as he later became an American and a «patriot», he described as «barbaras», beginning with the defeat of the revolutionaries at Elizabethtown, New Jersey, in the Autumn of 1778, where «the barracks were set on fire and burnt down with about ten or twelve poor sick soldiers in them»³².

A few months after this, a most inhuman massacre took place near Tappan in New-Jersey. A farmer and his son living near each other, it happened that a small regiment of light horse (raised a short time before in Virginia, and known by the name of Lady Washington's regiment), quartered at their houses and barns in number about 300: the son being a true born American, and the father a detestable tory; the latter

²⁹ Williams, *The Experience*, 208.

³⁰ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982); Elliot J. Gorn, «Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch», *The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry*. *AHR* 90(1985) 16-43; Kenneth S. Greenberg, «The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel in the Antebellum South», *AHR* 95 (1990) 57-74.

³¹ John R. Shaw, *A narrative of the life and travels of John Robert Shaw, the welldigger, now resident in Lexington, Kentucky* (Lexington, 1807) 8.

³² Shaw, *A narrative*, 18.

went to New York and gave information of those unhappy soldiers, and offered to lead us to the place where they lay. Accordingly general Gray undertook the barbarous task... The 33d regiment, to which I belonged, was about three miles off when the cruel carnage began, but as we approached, the shrieks and screams of the hapless victims whom our savage fellow soldiers were butchering, were sufficient to have melted into compassion the heart of a Turk or a Tarter... Some were seen having their arms cut off, and others with their bowels hanging out crying for mercy.

Shaw knew this was «barbarity» but it was only the accident of capture that rescued him from these acts. Taken as a prisoner to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, he eventually succeeded in escaping, but feared being «turned in» and decided it was best to enlist in the American army, and did this by lying about his past by claiming he had been an indentured servant.

Shaw's development can be seen as an inversion of the two crises of rebirth of Garrettson, with two crises of declension during which Shaw sank into evil ways. The first occurred when he was 14, after two years as an indentured weaver's apprentice. He writes that an evil acquaintance «used every artifice and device in his power to draw me into vicious company» with whom he stole, drank and broke the Sabbath. The second was while in the British army, 1778-1782 (age 17 to 21), when the barbarous violence and riotous living changed his values. His way of life left him unwilling to answer the call of God, which he too heard in dreams³³. He went on to live a life of disorder: Drinking to excess, pretending to be a conjurer and a fortune teller, until through magic (water divination with a forked wand) he became a well-digger of skill and repute. Inasmuch as he used explosives to excavate, danger remained part of his work, his social life and his dreams. He dreamt of balls of fire and vast conflagrations, while in life he was badly burned several times.

The violence of the war period had deeply affected Shaw: He too had participated in communal action, but saw himself as a prawn pushed by outside forces. In the army he could only follow orders. When he succeeded in escaping from captivity, the Moravians «made» him return to his captives. A mob «forced» him to join the 1783 march to Philadelphia to protest the army's lack of food and clothing. His uncontrolled behaviour when drunk he blamed on a head wound he suffered after a fall (when drunk). He rarely felt that he was an independent actor.

Shaw became proud of his well digging, and proud of the family he eventually fathered, but he saw his life as out of control. He was very often drunk and may well have been an alcoholic. He reported being «rolled by doxies», as well as spending all his money on women and drink. A blast in a well burned him badly. A boy threw lime at him and blinded him in one eye. Ghosts and «balls of fire» pursued him in the night. The calls he continued to hear in dreams he understood as sent «in order to draw me from the vortex of vice, into which I was immersed»³⁴. He too feared the Devil was after him, and

³³ Shaw, *A narrative*, 14, 130.

³⁴ Shaw, *A narrative*, 108, 110, 131, 132, 156.

briefly became a Methodist. But religion was not to be his salvation, and he returned to his old ways. He closed his autobiography in 1807 with a strong admonition to youth «to labour incessantly in overcoming the natural propensity of human nature to evil», a propensity he had been all too familiar with.

Balls of fire also appeared in the dreams of William Glendinning (born in 1747 in Scotland), who travelled to America in 1767 «to indulge my rambling turn of mind». He too had two awakenings, one at 14, and the second at about 22, when after several years of «wicked» behaviour in America he was converted at a Methodist meeting. By then he had also seen a vision of «the world in flames», a vision repeated on three separate occasions. When his American world was actually enflamed in war, he fell into a deep depression, and by the war's end he was unable to function. He had «dismal dreams, of going over dreary mountains, and falling into bottomless abysses». He experienced «the miseries of the damned» and tried to take his own life. Taken from Virginia to South Carolina for treatment, he was housed in a slave cabin, where he believed he was visited by the Devil two or three times every week, for several years:

If I dropped into a slumber, I often would feel as if pitched off from the spot on which I lay, into the flaming gulf. Then would I feel as if the fallen angels had me in their arms, and fastening the chains of misery round me. Frequently, I felt as if rocks were melting round me; and at other times feel, as if I should be choaked with the smoke of the pit, before I would awake. In my dreaming moments, I saw multitudes of damned souls burning in the flaming gulf, while I appeared to be sunk lower than they, in the gulf of misery - even as low as *Lucifer* himself³⁵.

After five years of suffering, Glendinning recovered, or was «saved» and emerged from this period of darkness with better dreams and with a new view of the social scene. He wanted to become a Methodist preacher again, but was extremely critical of the Methodists, and of all Americans. He found the post-Revolutionary world «out of joint». He felt that Methodists were violating their ethics - slaveowners were being welcomed into the ministry, and evil was being supported. Whether it was his critique, or his lack of orthodoxy (his emphasis on the spirits he had conversed with) or his recent condition, the Methodists would not accept him back. His self-appointed role as prophet-critic was not welcome in the period when Methodists were becoming part of the mainstream consensus, «forgetting» their early attitude towards manumission and physical violence.

Dreams of balls of fire and of hell no doubt have played a role in many Christian lives at all periods, but there does seem to have been a significantly larger number of such dreams in the revolutionary period. In 1775, for example, John Taylor (1752-1833), who had become a Baptist in 1772, and was an «itinerant» preacher reaching out to people living beyond church establishments on the Kentucky frontier, had this vivid dream of hell:

³⁵ William Glendinning, ... *The Life of William Glendinning, preacher of the gospel...* (Philadelphia, 1795) 30.

I dreamed of being at a place of gathering of people, where was a dead man, a blustering man present said he could raise the dead man to life, a dispute arose between him and others, who insisted he could not do it. But at length the dead man did voluntarily rise up, when risen he looked very angry and turned his whole attention to me; with rage in his looks he informed he was sent from the dead to warn me never to preach any more – all this though a sleep, struck me with dreadful horror of mind, he farther reminded me, that I might treat his warning with neglect, for said he there are some who will not be persuaded though one rose from the dead. All this I realized while asleep, with dreadful anguish of mind – he farther added, I am not only sent from the dead to warn you never to preach any more but when you die you will go to hell – dam you. By this time it seemed as if the pains of hell had got hold on me while a sleep, in this dum agony I lay for sometime not able to make any reply, nor dare I do it, for he stood near me and looked as if he would tear me to pieces. At length I began to reason while asleep – he told me he was sent from the dead, this said I in my sleep does not assure me that he is a messenger of God, I farther reasoned, if he was a messenger of God, he would not be in such as rage of anger, I farther thought, if he came as his messenger, he would not use the language he did, either to curse or dam me. I then thought he looked more like a messenger from hell than from Heaven, and of course nothing he has said is true, from which I came to the conclusion, that satin saw that my preaching would be against his interest among man, and therefore strove to frighten me from it. And as to going to hell when I died, this was all from the father of lies too; and while my heart used an effort to go into a vow to God, that I would preach more than I ever had done, the struggle waked me with uncommon agitation, reaching out my hand to lay hold of the man, for I yet conceited he stood by me to resist me, but found it was a dream³⁶.

Taylor followed this recounting of his clear-message dream with a summary of the significant dreams in the Bible, finding that «the whole testament is very full of the doctrine visions from God this way». His own life was also full of dreams, and generally very clear ones. Dreams of fishes pouring in preceeded revivals; and individuals who saw him in their dreams converted, fulfilling prophecies³⁷. If Taylor was conflicted, as his dream suggests, he does not provide us with any simple explanation of his conflicts. He supported the war, and was proud of the «sons of '76»³⁸. However, he may well have been conflicted in regard to slavery. The evidence he has left us is fascinating but incomplete: Born in 1752, in Farquier County, Virginia, son of a hard drinker and a hard drinker himself, he «held the New Lights... in the utmost contempt...». When he was seventeen he attended William Marshall's preaching «with the same view, that I would have gone to a frolic...». Midway through the service «the word pierced my soul as quick and with as much sensibility as an eclectic shock». Over fifty years later he

³⁶ John Taylor, *A History of Ten Baptist Churches... in which will be seen something of a journal of the author's life...* (Frankfort, Kentucky, 1823) 33-344. Taylor is strangely lucid in this dream, although it is not a «lucid dream» in which the dreamer is aware he is dreaming. On lucid dreams see Jayne Gackenback, *Sleep and Dreams: A Sourcebook* (New York, 1986) 151-154, 268-274, 293-299, 333-335.

³⁷ Taylor, *A History*, 34, 35, 148.

³⁸ Taylor, *A History*, 48.

could still recall his emotion, and still associated the event with the black participants:

From that time I felt a particularly tender affection for all I could think were religious, though it might be an old African negro, and had the world been mine, I would have given all to have been like one of them, though with it a slave for my life³⁹.

After a long period in which he was in «a paradoxical religious phrenzy» he experienced God's grace during James Ireland's baptism of a group of blacks and whites in May of 1772. This came in a vivid, bloody vision in which he heard Jesus speaking to him «in his mind», saying:

Reach higher thy finger and behold my hands, and reach higher thy hand and thrust it into my side, and be not faithless but believing⁴⁰.

Ironically, Taylor became a slave-owner through the will of his uncle who was a teacher at Robert Carter's home - the same Robert Carter who was strongly influenced by the Baptist attack on slaveowning, and would begin manumitting his 422 slaves in 1791. Taylor, who married in 1782 after ten years as an itinerant preacher, set off west with «four black people, one man, and three smaller ones». At first all apparently lived together in a «sixteen feet square [log cabin], with no floor but the natural earth, without table, bedstead or stool...»⁴¹. Over the years Taylor's black family grew to twenty and his church experiences continued to involve blacks as well. He was part of the Cleder Creek Church that split over emancipation, and while he didn't follow the emancipators into the New Hope Church, his church sponsored Asa, a black preacher, and later «Uncle Phill», Marlick and James, all slaves who «mostly teach among their own color»⁴². By 1823, just prior to the writing of his autobiography. Taylor's Clear Creek church was in the midst of a very excited revival, which had been foretold in his dreams. Over one third of the awakened were blacks, and in this revival he believed he saw «master and servant [meet] on perfect equality...». Here, near the close of his life, he was reexperiencing the joy of black excitement much as he had at his first religious experience:

The poor blacks, whose voices generally exceed the whites, have learned many of those precious songs; they are now abundantly stirred up to a devotional spirit; they flock together, and in the dead time of the night, you may hear them at a distance praying to; and praising God with charming sound. And as you travel the road in day time, at their business, you hear them singing with such heavenly melody, that your heart melts into heavenly sweetness - while many in solemn pause say, «O happy day's long

³⁹ Taylor, *A History*, 288.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *A History*, 297.

⁴¹ Taylor, *A History*, 14, 10, 43. Two years later, when he employed a white man as well, he put up another cabin.

⁴² On emancipating churches in Kentucky, see James D. Essing, *The Bonds of Wickedness: American Evangelical Against Slavery, 1770-1808* (Philadelphia, 1982) 146-148, 161.

looked for, the comforter is come». *I have almost forsaken my home, at fifteen or twenty miles distance, to be among them*⁴³.

Prior to this awakening, Taylor had felt he was a failure, shamed by many in the church. On self-examination, Taylor could «see nothing of which I could accuse myself». He certainly never charged himself with having failed the blacks, or with not having fulfilled the message of James Ireland and Abraham Marshall, or John Sutton, all of whom had been very «significant others» in his life. Blacks had certainly been significant, and as an old man he still recalled that he had been ready to be a black slave, if he could have shared in the joy of salvation he witnessed among them.

John Churchman (1705-1775), who was a good deal older than Taylor, had also had a dream about bloody fingers, his at the time of the French and Indian War. In June of 1753:

I thought I beheld two armies set in array against each other, one of them well armed with swords and muskets; the other had no formal weapons for their defense; but a charge given them by their general to keep their ranks, and gently to march directly forward as he should lead, no man reaching forth his own hand to defend himself; they joined in battle, and when one of the unarmed soldiers was borne hard upon his oppoint, he reached forth his hand at arms length, when a sword took off one of his fingers, and the blood sprinkled on several of his fellow soldiers; whereupon knowing the orders given, I cried out, if that hand had not been so stretched out, this wound would not have been received, and so I awakened⁴⁴.

Churchmen did not make any direct connection to the war, but did understand the dream to be telling him about the behaviour of his colleagues and the proper behaviour for himself. A Friend had been wrong, he thought, to defend himself verbally. By doing so, he «brought reproof on himself and some others...»⁴⁵. However, in December of 1755, when thinking over the war, Churchman decided that the Quakers were in part responsible as «they were partakers in iniquity, encouragers of war and the shedding of innocent blood»⁴⁶. The dream had brought him a political message as well.

In December of 1761 Churchman saw a vision of Noah's ark, and a repetition of the flood. In his vision there was a dove sent abroad, but a raven as well. The raven «did not return; and it came into my mind, this is a ravenous bird, and seeks only for prey to satisfy his own stomach...». For Churchman it was then clear that there was a direct correlation with contemporary events. The flood was «the corruption and darkness which is so prevalent...» The dove stood for the innocent, while the raven was the emblem of the disobedient, «who chiefly aim at gratifying their own sensual appetites»⁴⁷. The flood

⁴³ Taylor, *A History*, 153-154, emphasis added. See also 79, 98, 156, 161.

⁴⁴ John Churchman, *An Account of the Gospel Labours and Christian Experience of a Faithful Minister of Christ*.

⁴⁵ Churchman, *An Account*, 133.

⁴⁶ Churchman, *An Account*, 1766.

⁴⁷ Churchman, *An Account*, 217.

would come because of their sensuality and disobedience. When the Society of Friends posthumously published Churchman's journal in 1770, they no doubt felt the dream was a proper commentary on the times.

The Revolution brought great change to the life of Sarah Hamilton (1745-1805), and her dream life provided her with «unfinished business» that had a very strong social and personal message that she understood and acted upon. Hamilton tells us little about her early life, but enough just to suggest that she too may have gone through an early period of crisis. At seven her father brought her from Frankfurt, Germany to Charleston, South Carolina, a move that was likely to have been difficult. At 16 she married, but her husband was killed during the Revolution, and she was taken in by a wealthy uncle. At this point she does tell us she was in very low spirits. A play (about Washington and a war-widow) rather than a revival meeting, was the catalyst for a disturbing dream. In it, she saw herself as surrounded by wealth and high fashion. She was given a vision of heaven, but could not see a way to get there, although she was promised a place «provided I conquered my enemies».

To begin her journey to this promised place, she was pushed into turbulent waters by a black, fell into a dismal pit, and was rescued by a man using a small ball of thread to pull her out⁴⁸. When the dream reoccurred two more times, Hamilton discussed it with friends and even at public gatherings. Some time after, and just prior to her planned marriage to a Georgia plantation owner, out of idle curiosity she attended a black's baptism. There she saw the man who was the saviour in her dream: He was the Baptist preacher. Seeing him, and recognizing many of the riches around her as elements in her dream, she had a breakdown. Neither priest nor minister could help her, but the Baptist preacher, and an English bible, worked a miraculous cure, leading her Catholic family to think she had been bewitched. Acting against the advice of all her family and friends she converted to the «lowly» faith of this preacher and his black and white congregation. She was empowered by this act, and immediately saw the effect of her words and acts: «... The next Lord's day morning: when I came down to the water side, I related the dealing of God with me, which account proved instrumental in God's hands of the awakening of fifteen souls»⁴⁹. However, while she might awaken other souls, she now became dependent on the charity of her new community, and was supported by the Baptist minister for three years, and later helped by a Presbyterian clergyman. Members of her old community, in unison with her father, tried to «steal» her back, to de-program her as it were, but did not succeed. She chose poverty, social ostracism and sexual abstinence over marriage to a rich and socially acceptable plantation owner. Her dream had given her the blueprint and the legitimation for this personal revolution.

The dreams of John White, a black former slave, also took him to hell, but

⁴⁸ Sarah Berkhouse Hamilton, *A narrative of the life of Mrs. Hamilton...* (Greenwich, Connecticut, 1806) 3-4.

⁴⁹ Hamilton, *A Narrative*, 12.

only as an observer. He saw himself as at the rim, given to witness the worldly wealth of those entering into the abyss. The social message was equally clear⁵⁰.

All these individuals had passed through crises of self and of society. Their world had been in flames, and they all came through, but the religious generally felt more in control than did the nonreligious. Religious conversion generally led to the absorption of new communal values, and led the convert to live in dialogue with a new religious community. The personal strength and the communal supports provided reinforcement for new social values, which often withstood violent threats. In fact, these dangerous situations were important ways of testing and strengthening commitment.

The new communities exerted fairly rigid controls, but they had been *chosen* by the new converts, often against the will of fathers. Here the Revolutionary generation was ironically claiming and exploring its independence by joining communities that curtailed independence and demanded «free-will» incorporation of rigid norms and repressive values (a vast expansion of these sectarian communities took place in 1775 and 1776 when a Methodist awakening swept Maryland and a Baptist revival shook New England)⁵¹.

For most people who wrote autobiographies in this period, dreams played an important role. They were very widely regarded as a formal communication, and they were almost ritualistically recounted, both orally and in writing. They brought messages about death and afterlife, but they also brought messages about life and how it should be lived. The dreams surveyed above, *as understood by the dreamers*, often attacked materialism, widely advised submission to Christ over aggressive sexuality for both men and women, and decried slave owning and participation in warfare. They were a form of political discourse, and the values they supported were by and large not the ruling values of the Revolutionary élite (They were also, as suggested, most often not the values of the dreamers' parents)⁵². When this cohort of people made significant changes in their lives, they more often cited dreams as having brought about their change than any other cause. Charismatic individuals affected many, and a few books, such as John Bunyan's, made a deep impact, but dreams came to everyone, and most people were still very open to listening to them for direction in their lives.

Today most critics would be certain that these dreams were «inner

⁵⁰ John White, *A Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels and Gospel Labors of George White, an African; Written by Himself and Revised by a Friend* (New York, 1810). For a more extended discussion of White's dreams, see M. Sobel, «Revolutionary Dreams and Nightmares Messages in the Night?», in *Languages of Revolution* ed. Loretta Valtz Mannucci (Milan, 1989) 37-50.

⁵¹ See Wesley M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790* (Gloucester, Mass. 1965) 138-166; Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982) 40-62.

⁵² See Robert M. Weir, «Rebelliousness: Personality Development and the American Revolution in the Southern Colonies», in *The Southern Experience in the American Revolution*, ed. Jeffrey J. Crow and Larry E. Tise (Chapel Hill, 1878), 25-54.

voices», the expression of subconscious desires of the dreamers. While some eighteenth century thinkers recognized that dreams had to be «owned» as part of the dreamers thoughts, popularly dreams were still most widely seen as messages from a source outside the dreamer – sometimes false, sometimes evil, and sometimes incomprehensible. Notwithstanding the great growth of enlightenment ideas, the great majority of those who have given us evidence of their lives and thoughts, although they may well have harboured doubts, retained an operative belief in the possibility that God could speak to them in the night. And this belief supported them in taking political and social actions that they might not otherwise have taken.

James Ireland (1748-1806), one of the great Baptist preachers of the Revolutionary period, a man who provided an extraordinary outreach to blacks and poor whites, felt that dreams had informed him all his adult life. He examined them carefully, and pondered their messages. Late in life he was not embarrassed to call himself «a Joseph, a great dreamer», and took great pride in his understanding of his dreams and in providing proof of their having been fulfilled. His dreams had been his political primers, and he had acted on them, especially when it came to protecting himself against enemies, for it had «pleased God graciously to condescend to give me information in the visions of the night, pointing out the persons and the way they were pursuing, by which I was prepared before hand»⁵³.

When Martin Luther King said «I have a dream...» he was continuing an ancient tradition that had been vital in the Revolutionary period. From Gilgamish on, political actors had explained what God would have them do and dreams and visions were their texts.

⁵³ James Ireland, *The Life of the Rev. James Ireland* (Winchester, Virginia, 1819) 192.

Endnote: This essay deals with a small part of an on-going study of dreams in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Above I have essentially dealt with what the individuals involved have told us they thought the dreams meant: the most simple and least «dangerous» level of dream interpretation. Clearly, these dreams can be seen to «expose» many more complicated levels of the dreamers, and I plan to deal with some of these possibilities. But no doubt, as I believe this analysis must also «expose» the analyst, I am loath to commit myself to what this material demands. And on the other hand, I can legitimate the above approach as I do believe it is enormously important to recognize that dream reports are texts that played a role in political life, and/or reflect the political situation in unique and significant ways. For an extraordinary presentation of dreams in early Nazi Germany see Charlotte Beradt, *The Third Reich of Dreams* (1966).