

Journeys in oneiric expression

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Summary. Drawing on the technique of linking dreams to waking experiences through a shared community of impressions, this paper explores the symbolism of journeys and vehicles. The journey reflects the ups and downs of a story's unfolding, while the vehicle represents a pre-conceptual content that fuses perceptions related to skills, behavioral matrices, judgments of sublimity, and promises of affect—all formed by the Oneiric Subject (the waking "I" reappearing as the dream's "I"). Addressing the case of the driver, the paper introduces elements of the symbolism of persons, seen as segregated profiles—facets of personality, whether real or imaginary—belonging either to the dreamer or a third party.

Keywords: Dream, character, transportation means, journey, artefact, animal, building

1. Introduction

In our case, examples of dream rediffusions of a certain kind of waking experience — one whose nature is difficult to convey to those who haven't encountered it — are so consistent (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2016b) and at times so striking (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2017) that we are fully convinced of the validity of this principle. This conviction has led us to attempt, however imperfectly, to characterize what the dream is replaying. We have conceptualized an Oneiric Subject (the waking "I" who reappears as the "I" of the dream) who is sensitive to Barely Mentalized Contents (introspectable but more or less identified at the time, escaping "conscious" control, and of intuitive nature) that are emotionally stirring (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2022). We have proposed a model, the sensory-emotional model, whereby a primary consideration (such as a memory) may trigger a primary affect (such as remorse), leading to a secondary affect (such as fear) as a consequence: the fear of being overwhelmed by remorse. If the primary affect (here, remorse) is not contained due to weakened defenses, the subject will experience a profound impact, which the dream will represent through a bodily impact. In our example, this bodily impact might appear as a bite inflicted by an animal (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2016a). The secondary affect, often unnoticed during waking life, is faithfully rediffused in the dream, enabling us to trace back from the dream to the waking experience.

Certain dreams, especially confrontation dreams (e.g., facing an animal, tsunami, or person), lend themselves readily to this linking system. In these cases, the waking content symbolized in the dream is relatively easy to conceptualize as illustrated in the example above. But some images are more problematic; among them, vehicles.

We now believe we can propose some elements regarding dreams involving journeys and transportation means.

Unlike confrontation dreams, where the central issue is the fate of a threat or opportunity, journey dreams focus on the evolution of a process. The Oneiric Subject then sets their sights not on the outcome, but on the pursuit itself. The desire is for the activity, not its end. The vehicle, in turn, symbolizes a complex fusion of dimensions, including behavioral matrices.

This paper offers what we hope are advances on these so-called "processual" dreams, along with refinements and theoretical evolutions.

2. Method

We linked our dreams with the previous day's experiences according to the sensory-emotional paradigm (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2024b), hoping to identify the actual antecedents of dream images; in other words, to apprehend their symbolism. Unfortunately, linking dream and real-life experience is not always sufficient to establish a certain translation.

For example, in the dream of the curved-knife aggressor, I was moving toward a "good" knife to seize and attack the aggressor. This dream was long and filled with notable impressions, allowing us to be confident that it linked to a distressing moment experienced the previous evening. However, translating the dream's aggressor remains uncertain as there are three possible real aggressors: a malicious third party, an internal prosecutor blaming me for a fault (whom I feared might be misrepresented and spread by this malicious third party), and another internal prosecutor blaming me for failing to manage these inner turbulences.

The "good" knife is different. Whether right or wrong, but with a feeling of certainty, the "good" knife was linked to a specific psychological technique thought to restore my peace of mind. The idea of this remedy, toward which I deliberately turned, had appeared as an inspiration. This inspiration was apperceptionned (it was spotted) and so the dream paused on the image of the knife making it especially describable. (This type of "arrest on the image" linked to an apperception is not an exception).

Thus, this dream was not entirely instructive, since we couldn't translate the aggressor. But it did contain instructive phases, as we were confident, perhaps wrongly, about the translation of the knife.

We define a dream as instructive if at least 80% of its phases are instructive. This forms our base sample. We

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Submitted for publication: July 2025

Accepted for publication: July 2025

DOI: 10.11588/ijodr.2025.2.112174

also add instructive phases found in insufficiently instructive dreams, as well as “probative” phases, which alone are insufficient to produce new knowledge but become clearer when some symbolic knowledge is applied.

Out of 36 instructive dreams in our sample, 22 (61%) involved displacements. Among these, 14 (64%) followed an operative logic. These are typically displacements to grasp artifacts, movements within attack or defense maneuvers, escapes, or sports activities. These displacements are merely accessories integrated within a confrontation logic. Alongside operative displacement logic, there is the logic of proximity management, which is strategic due to the risk of bodily impact.

We will not focus on these cases, limiting ourselves to journey dreams involving vehicles; more precisely, mechanical vehicles (excluding animal-vehicles like horses due to insufficient experience). This yielded 8 instructive dreams, 9 instructive phases, and 7 probative dreams.

Furthermore, we believe that when translating the “good” knife as a “specific psychological technique,” we commit a linguistic shortcut. From an orthodox viewpoint, the Oneiric Subject navigates a universe of intuited evocations (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2024a), forming spontaneous appreciations such as “phew, a solution that will annihilate the threat.” (This perception involves a specific sense that cannot be fully unveiled—like how the sense of sight cannot be “seen”—but is known by its result plus an interpretation).

Here, the salvaging method is identified (a known and practiced psychological technique), which naturally leads us to mention it as part of the translation. However, in some cases, notably in situations involving firearms, the salvaging efforts are not characterized; only a kind of drive remains, such as “now, I will clean things up.” Moreover, the psychological technique in question will prove ineffective, the spontaneous appreciation will change, and the “good” knife in the dream will transform into a feather. The symbol clearly represents the psychological repercussion of the object, rather than the object itself.

Hence, an orthodox translation sees the artifact as expressing a spontaneous appreciation rather than a highly mentalized consideration; the link to the latter is a transposition. Such transposition is useful in psychoanalytic contexts but differs from the real meaning of the dream expression.

For simplicity and readability, we will disregard this orthodox translation here. Practically, we will say the “good” knife represents a psychological technique seen, rightly or wrongly, as effective.

3. Commented Results

3.1. Transportation Means

Among the 24 dreams recorded, we encountered:

- 7 times in a car and 2 times near a car in an inspecting posture
- 4 times in slippers or shoes (which we consider as vehicles)
- 2 times on skis, in an airplane, or on a boat
- 1 time in a coach, a train, a tractor, a rocket, or on the roof of an undetermined vehicle.

The vehicle appears to represent the “practitioner’s kit,” or more precisely, the perception that the Oneiric Subject has of it. This practitioner’s kit is a pragmatic content, of a pre-conceptual nature. It fuses elements concerning:

- The competence that the subject, rightly or wrongly, grants themselves. For example, I see myself in a dream aboard an inflatable boat on a rough sea, echoing a feeling of insufficient experience to manage in an environment I sense I do not master.
- A matrix that the subject takes on. When undertaking an activity, the subject feels framed by customs and usages. During the same day, depending on situations, they will take on the role of professional, parent, friend, neighbor, health-conscious individual, someone who must clarify a situation... and will be carried by the implicit assumptions that these roles involve; they will feel subordinated to a matrix (we provide a detailed example in paragraph 3.4).
- A judgment of sublimity attributed to the role. Generally, due to exaltation, certain roles are seen as admirable (the vehicle will then be a plane or even a rocket). A judgment of sublimity also appears relative to the subject matter. Descending in a dream expresses disdain if it is by terrestrial vehicle, echoing, for example, a “I must go down to the common.” (Here we see that, as in linguistics, the meaning of a symbol is also apprehended through context: descending is understood as a return to reality in the case of an aerial vehicle, as a normal phenomenon in skiing, or as the idea of sinking when one falls from a height).
- A primary affect, typically excitement (typically regarding the vehicle: its potential speed, its range of action...).

3.2. The Cabin Effect

The cabin is the counterpart to a building. Like the latter, it does not express a distinction between activities of the inner world and activities of the outer world (we have examples of intellectual elaborations replayed through dreams taking place outdoors). The shell, whether it is a cabin or a building, refers to the phenomenon of introversion (in Jung’s original sense). It indicates movements of retention and filtering, which can go as far as sealing oneself in.

This is the case, for example, with shoes that protect against shards of glass scattered on the ground. The shell also includes more subtle defensive mechanisms than mere sealing. For instance, in a dream, I am inside my car which is caught in a severe whirlwind. However, “I feel protected by the cabin,” echoing an inspiration: that of being able to resort to salvaging principles learned through education.

3.3. The Journey

For the sake of presentation, let us imagine a poker player. Rightly or wrongly, he perceives himself as a good player: he sees himself mastering the rules, knowing the tricks, accustomed to poker tables. The “practitioner’s kit” seems ready; thus, in his dream, he has a “good” vehicle. The cards are dealt, our player immerses himself in the game, the practitioner is at work, he is in the phase of the game where the pleasure lies in building his hand. In his dream, he moves.

He analyzes the situation and it does not seem to be in his favor: he anticipates difficulties and plans to act accordingly. In his dream, obstacles appear (bumps, holes, waves, wind, turns, slippery terrain, sidewalks, traffic...). Then, one might suppose, suddenly and without warning, a defeatist idea bursts into his mind: “But I completely miscalculated, the situation is not at all what I imagined, I’m going to lose, for sure.” Since this doubt was not anticipated, he may

dream of being caught in a sudden swerve, triggered without any identified cause.

Journey dreams can be pleasant, even exhilarating, but most often in our sample, the story is made of incidents. Besides anticipated obstacles and unforeseen doubts, we encountered:

- Skidding, slipping, swerving linked to a piloting error echoing a real misstep.
- Loss of control at dangerous speeds echoing real moments when the dreamer felt overwhelmed by events.
- Risks of collisions or crashes echoing conflicts (the opposing vehicle might represent another person with their own agenda, or another personal project incompatible with the initial one).
- Vehicle malfunctions echoing a negative self-perception.

All these breaks concern the unfolding of the journey and trigger defensive responses, sometimes reduced to mere attempts. Typically, in our sample:

- Operational manipulations of vehicle elements, echoing recourse to personal efforts.
- Careful driving, echoing greater concentration and reactivity during risky real phases.
- Detours echoing a change of approach.
- Extractions (abandoning the moving vehicle) echoing genuine disengagement (“I don’t need to handle this matter today” or “Enough! I’m done with this story”).

3.4. The Driver

Regarding our sample:

- Four times, I was onboard a vehicle without any mention of the driver, who was out of sight (a train, a rocket, a plane, an undetermined vehicle).
- Twice, I was merely approaching my parked car.
- Once, there were two people maneuvering (the meaning of the second person is ambiguous).
- Once, the driver was clearly a third party.
- Fourteen times, including four cases involving shoes and two involving skis, I was driving the vehicle myself.
- Three times, the driver was another version of myself, representing a part of the real Self to whom I had handed over the reins and whom I perceived as segregated.

In general, a person in a dream represents a real or fantasized personality facet of the dreamer or a third party (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2022). It can also, as we have several examples of, represent a community (professional peers, French society...) and perhaps even driving concepts such as Destiny, Nature, Life, God... The same person may carry different meanings depending on the dream. Their form (authority figure, attractive person, partner, toxic individual...) depends on a spontaneous appreciation occurring in waking life. This is distinct from an operation of disparagement or glorification, which typically converts into dream scenes of attacks or loving gestures. With their body and mind, the person corresponds to the shell just as the being, with its sensitivity and vitality, corresponds to the ego, which refers to something more structural.

Among our dreams involving a driver, one is particularly instructive. In the dream of the zealous female driver, “I am in a car driven by a woman who does not seem extremely skilled.” This dream rediffused three temporally disjointed moments from the previous day (we have other examples of dreams uniting disjoint moments) during which I intervened in the course of my professional function. I was therefore

in a car, echoing the assumption of the professional role, with a pragmatic perception of my power of action (this is a pre-conceptual perception that globalizes a generic vision of my competencies, the powers and limits attached to my responsibilities, the often implicit professional rules, and expected or inappropriate behaviors...).

Into this Barely Mentalized matrix, represented by the car, intruded the presence of a “segregated personal profile.” I made a highly mentalized decision to intervene in the manner of an intriguer. This quite unusual profile (hence its fragrance) was felt as segregated (distinct), seduced me (hence the woman aspect), and worried me somewhat due to my lack of experience in this matter (“she does not seem extremely skilled”). One might say there was a delegation of implementation to a particular actor profile, this guest leading the dance.

It is interesting to note that this dream has me travel the same road three times, in the same car driven by the same woman. One understands that the car and its driver remain unchanged since, in the three matters I had to handle, I intervened under the influence of the same role and with an identical posture. Yet, even though these three matters were completely different, the dream made me take the same road. The unfolding, however (no incident during the first trip, a recovered skid on the second trip, tension on the third trip) reflected the ups and downs of the previous day’s progress.

In other words, this dream clearly shows that, in the case of the processual dream, the Oneiric Subject is affected by the story of the unfolding (“it moves forward / it stops / it starts again / it skids”...) and not by the story on which the unfolding is based (“I solved this problem, then I faced this obstacle which left me inert, without response, for a time. Then I found this answer but it got me into trouble because...”). He is sensitive to a particular facet of the psychological life: the course of a process.

4. Broadening the Perspective

4.1. Dream Driving and the Metaphor of How One Runs Their Life

Some authors have suggested a metaphorical link between dreams of travel and the way one runs their life (Zwick, 2020). Obstacles and opportunities, accidents and smooth journeys are then viewed as key symbolic materials — expressions of a general psychological state, signs of substantial personal transformation and so.

However, the example of the dream featuring the zealous female driver, presented above, depicts three separate movements, each tied to the handling of a fairly trivial situation. Admittedly, due to our sensitivity, the episode left us discomfited. Moreover, it contributed to shaping our moral matrix, influencing our habitual way of approaching things (what Piagetians might refer to as assimilation). One can understand why such an episode would find its way into a dream. Yet the overt behavior here is mundane — merely incidental mishaps with little significance in the broader course of our life.

Of the 24 dreams in our sample, we counted 14 of this kind. The remaining 10 concern events that engage something more substantial in terms of life trajectory. This is the case, for instance, with the dream of the inflatable boat, which relates to a felt sense of a disabling inadequacy in a

particular area of life.

These observations lead us not to limit the interpretation of dreamed travel to a metaphor for how one runs their life. Instead, we should also consider cases in which the journey merely echoes a simple story — disturbing, but episodic and anecdotal — of an ordinary incident from waking life.

4.2. The Hypothesis of Continuity between Dreaming and Waking Life

Observing that the number of dreams involving bicycles decreased correspondingly with a dreamer's real-life cessation of using this mode of transport, Schredl (2020) concluded in favor of the hypothesis of continuity between dreams and waking life. However, noting that the dreamer dreams of car accidents despite never having experienced one in real life, Schredl (2020) questions the characteristics of the contents subject to this dream continuity.

Following Hall and Nordby (1972), he distinguishes between “overt behaviors” (what the person does while awake) and “covert behaviors” such as thoughts, feelings, and fantasies, the latter being sometimes the object of dream resumption through metaphorical transformation. He thus hypothesizes “that some transportation dreams, e.g., car trouble dreams, might be a metaphorical expression of the dreamer's waking life, e.g., the feeling of losing control. This would represent continuity on an emotional level.”

Our paragraph 3.3 justifies this orientation.

Furthermore, we believe we can go further: in our view, dreams concern only “covert behaviors.” Dreams about current events, which are characterized by apparent continuity in “overt behaviors”—the typical example being the wedding dreams of engaged couples—represent a particular case in which the “covert behaviors” triggered within “overt behaviors” metaphorically take their image. For example, a “covert” experience of definitive commitment can produce a wedding dream, just as a “covert” experience fueled by the real project of marriage could produce a wedding dream. Thus, a continuity principle focused on “covert behaviors” is not contradicted by apparent continuity in an “overt behavior.”

Another important point concerns the continuity of the dreamer. Concretely, this means characterizing the real subject appearing behind the “I” in the dream. We have addressed this question (Ruyneau de Saint-George, 2022) and proposed to see an Oneiric Subject as belonging to the logic of the Barely Mentalised Subject—a “I” that does not function like the usual “I.” It is distinctly different, as we see, for example, that the Oneiric Subject does not distinguish between a real and an imaginary object (which recalls the functioning of the brain's default mode network).

Ultimately, the current challenges seem to lie in characterizing the Oneiric Subject and in identifying the “covert behaviors” that are subject to strong dream continuity.

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